

## Editor's letter

Unusually for him, Ivan Illich was not able to convey the argument he presented in *Gender* in a short lecture.<sup>1</sup> This failure was not because his argument was woolly-headed or mistaken. Illich understood perfectly well why *Gender* became the object of uncomprehending vitriol and why it could not be effectively summarized. As he said, “the category of the human being is such a profound certainty of post-Enlightenment thought that my claim that this is a recently engineered social reality is simply unacceptable.”<sup>2</sup> The human being is no more questioned as a social category today than it was forty years ago, when Illich wrote *Gender*. Neither the emerging debate on AI nor the ongoing debate on the construction of gender or sexual identities puts the human into question. Just as artificial intelligence presupposes human intelligence, so also it is a human being who identifies as nonbinary.

By questioning the category of the human being, Illich was able to bring into view a historical archipelago of social arrangements from across the world. Before their erasure by successive waves of Colonization, Development, and Globalization, these social forms were heterogeneous — in one, the moon was female whereas in another the moon was male, in one the cow was sacred but a delicacy in the other. For all their differences, these distinct societies had one thing in common. In none were men and women considered to be variants of the same humankind. By giving the

1 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Anansi Press: Toronto, 1992). p.178.

2 *Conversation*, p.179.

name *Gender* to the fault line by which such societies were riven yet joined, Illich wanted to show that women related to men as “primarily, emotionally, conceptually, the *other*.” In the mirror of this past, the conviction that men are the same as women because they are human beings is but a recent assumption. The idea that sexual and other identities are socially constructed is widely accepted today. That is not surprising. What is surprising is the continued reluctance to also accept the human being as a social construct, as a spectral frame on which identities are mounted.

“If gender existed, in the sense in which I use the term,” Illich says, “there were, in popular culture, no human beings.”<sup>3</sup> His strongest evidence for this historical proposition was patterns of tool use in pre-modern, pre-capitalist, prescientific societies. The instruments a woman wielded were forbidden to a man and vice versa. The anthropological literature he consulted overwhelmingly confirmed that tools and activities were not indifferently available to all members of a society but neatly divided between men and women. Though men and women did not do the same things or use the same tools, their activities were complementary. One planted the seed that the other harvested, one tended the granary while the other manned the fire. Whereas the male/female duality of our sexed societies presupposes the commensurating category of the human being, the man/woman duality of gendered societies implies “men as belonging to beings who behave in one way and women as those who behave in the other.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, because they are different kinds of being, men and women constitute a dissymmetric though complementary pair. It was over many years of discussions with Barbara Duden, that Illich would formulate,

3 *Conversation*, p.180.

4 *Conversation*, p.180

refine, and deepen his insights into “the entirely new view of the physical, bodily existence of men and women”<sup>5</sup> entailed by taking the human being as self-evident.

It was a question from Norma Swenson of the Women’s Health Collective in Boston — “Professor Illich: have you ever seen a human body?” — that shook Illich into the realization that the human body was an abstraction. Much of Illich’s work from the 1980s until his death was devoted in one way or another to questions concerning the body and the flesh. For instance, one could argue that his thinking after *Gender* comprised two intertwined strands — one devoted to the historicity of the word and the other to matters of the flesh. The first strand is obvious in his *ABC: the alphabetization of the popular mind* and *In the Vineyard of the Text: a commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon*; the second strand weaves in and out of many of his essays that are not yet published in English.<sup>6</sup> In this issue of *Conspiratio*, it is questions concerning the body/flesh that give focus to the thematic articles.

Javier Sicilia is a poet and a novelist. The translation of his article does not do justice to the fluid prose and sorrowful tenor of his original text in Spanish. Sicilia insists on the distinction between body and flesh. The “brilliance of aliveness” of which Illich spoke in a different context,<sup>7</sup> is what Sicilia invokes with the flesh. The human body, he says, is not the flesh but rather the cultural form that flesh takes. This insight and argument allow him to do nothing less than to rethink the entire modern experience. Biopolitics was the name Michel Foucault gave to that logic of management, which since the 18<sup>th</sup> century aimed to govern populations

5 *Conversation*, p.174

6 Ivan Illich, *La Perte des Sens*, (Fayard, 2004); *La Perdita dei Sensi* (Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 2009).

7 Ivan Illich, “The Institutional construction of a new fetish: Human Life,” in *In the Mirror of the Past*, (Marion Boyars, 1992). p.227.

and persons in the name of protecting and fostering life. Biopolitics seems to have nothing to do with the profiles, avatars, and fleshless bodies that populate the worlds on screens. Yet, argues Sicilia, both these and more must be understood as efforts to deny the flesh in the name of the body. The flesh of men or women is disciplined in the name of productive bodies in the factory and educable minds in the schoolroom. The bodies that sports icons and celebrities display on screens to excite their envious followers demand mortifications of the flesh. The methods of political propaganda are justified by paradoxically invoking an unsullied public mind. Sicilia then gives his remarkable insight a profound meaning. He argues that the incorruptible and amortal body of contemporary culture and politics is but a corruption of the resurrected or glorious body promised in Christian theology. The depths to which some subject themselves — whether through social distancing, plastic surgery, or transhumanist fantasies of being freed of the flesh — can only be understood, says Sicilia, as an eversion of the heights of incarnated love (*agape*) announced two millennia ago.

There is much more to discover by slowly reading Sicilia's article. It is followed by Barbara Duden's equally rich article, translated from German. Her path-breaking work on the historicity of women's bodies is evident in her two books available in English. In *Disembodying Women*, she argued that historically "the human fetus, as conceptualized today, is not a creature of God nor a natural fact, but an engineered construct of modern society."<sup>8</sup> The article she graciously permitted us to publish here goes much farther. After carefully specifying the object of her inquiry as the iconology of anatomical graphics, she argues that the fetus is a figment of the innova-

8 Barbara Duden, *The Woman beneath the Skin* (Harvard University Press, 1991); *Disembodying Women: perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Harvard University Press, 1993); p.4

tions in a-perspectival graphics supervised by Samuel Thomas Soemmerring in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Strictly, the fetus is unseeable. From no standpoint can a person see what they are shown through techniques of visualization. Such techniques of a-perspectival visualizations only show you, with great precision, what the designer wants you to see. Duden's argument that the fetus represents a "paradoxical combination of individuality and type" shocks us out of our complacency. She invites us to disbelieve our eyes to see clearly again. Duden presents two further arguments in her article that surprised me. The unseeable fetus, she says, "is the Archimedean point for turning to a new gender relationship." In these visual depictions, the fetus appears outside the womb, without umbilical cord or navel. Previously, a mother expected her child whose existence could not be conceived as separate or separated from hers. Now, the fetus introduces a necessary rupture between mother and child that transmogrifies them both. The multibillion-dollar surrogacy industry depends on the technogenic certainty that mothers are womb-bearing carriers of a life. Just as the free-standing fetus decisively transforms the relationship of the woman to herself, so also it transmutes the relationship between men and women. In the shadow thrown by the fetus, the dissymmetric complementarity between two genders necessarily mutates into the sexual and other differences presented by a human life. The fetus as an instance of technogenic human life elucidates not only Sicilia's distinction between the flesh and the body but also Illich's claim about the historicity of the human.

The third article in this collection is a translation of Ivan Illich's last lecture given in October 2002, in Lucca, Italy. It has taken two decades to craft a publishable English version. Illich gave his talk at the request of Aldo Zanchetta, who produced a video of the event and shared it soon after. Some years later, a transcription of Illich's Italian speech was

available. It took many hands and many viewings to get the translation right. We publish it here with the kind permission of Valentina Borremans. In this statement, Illich reaffirms his distance from all things religious. However, what he emphasizes are the dangers posed by the rising tide of information to our ability to understand the world, to think for ourselves, and to make judgments grounded in the common sense. Today, our sensual apprehension of the world and ourselves is being crowded out by meaningless data as an internet of bodies (communications between and about iatrogenic bodies) is layered on top of an internet of things (communications between things). Illich argues that this data flood washes away the ground of personal judgment, erodes the common sense by which the course of one's life takes shape and is given meaning.

Excessive exposure to information can burn out the heart, as David Cayley points out in the fourth article. Cayley was not aware of Illich's last talk when he wrote, but his article on Illich's broader reflections on the show and on language can also be read as a serendipitous commentary on it. He recalls for us a lesson from Illich. The first universities built in 12th century Europe rapidly became the loci for a division between heart and mind, the site where the intellectual pursuit of truth was separated from the ascetical-mystical pursuit of wisdom. Echoing Illich, Cayley recommends that we repair this breach by finding ways to resist and renounce the clouds of information that threaten to suffocate us.

In different ways, both Robert Kugelmann and Silja Samerski show us the ongoing consequences of ignoring the effects of the amortal human body that constitutes the core of the modern experiment. In the early 1990s, Kugelmann's book on stress as the manifestation of "engineered grief" left a lasting impression on Illich. I asked Kugelmann what he had learned about stress over the ensuing years. His article for this issue is, in part, a response to that question. He writes it is not just grief,

but rage, frustrated desires, anxiety, and fatigue that are now re-engineered as stress. The passions that roil up from living out of joint with the times are named stress. In this way, they are harnessed to programs that make us resilient, that help us adapt to and cope with the very conditions that cause them. In the encouragements to manage our stress-levels, I must think of “it” as something other than “me.” Techniques of relaxation, of eating nutritionally balanced foods, of engaging in optimally calibrated exercises, and obeying exhortations to be grateful, mindful, and positive are all methods to manage the flesh in the name of the stress-free body. Paradoxically, though not surprisingly given Sicilia’s argument, the prominent cultural examples of stress-free bodies are the vampire and the zombie, says Kugelman. Accordingly, to be stress free is to adopt a “corpse-like body image”, to become part of the “un-dead.”

In her article, Silja Samerski emphasizes the continued importance of attentively reading Illich’s *Medical Nemesis* and related essays. There was little in the mindset and the methods of management that were made manifest by the Covid-19 pandemic that Illich hadn’t predicted over a quarter century ago. Only those ignorant of his warnings could have been credulously caught up in the fevered world-wide overreactions to a lethal viral infection. People readily accepted the rules and regulations promulgated to save the body from the infirmities of the flesh because they were successfully trained to mistake the iatrogenic body for the felt flesh. Even more significant to furthering this illusion, says Samerski, is the active pursuit of health. Almost thoroughly alienated from the flesh, in their desire for health, people demanded to be tagged by population level statistical indicators of health. Appropriately, Samerski quotes Illich who, in 1995, warned that “every encounter with the medical system leads to an epistemic transformation” of self-understanding.

Giovanna Morelli is an Italian philosopher and close

reader of Illich. Babette Babich is a widely published American philosopher who has included Illich in her studies on the philosophy of technology. Whereas Morelli unearths the figure of incarnation in most, if not all, of the published books and writings of Illich, Babich connects those writings to figures — of earth, water, air, and fire — that shape what she calls the elemental body in Illich's thought.

The article by Toby Everett is pitched in a slightly different key. He traces the *Conspiratio*, the mouth-to-mouth kiss of peace of which Illich spoke, over the centuries in Christian thought and practice. Through this he offers a historical corrective to a few of Illich claims. Yet, he is sympathetic to the larger point Illich makes. Everett underscores the promise of what he calls “incarnational peace,” as *disruptive* of “the people's peace.” Illich wrote of a people's desire to be left in peace not only in his 1980 essay.<sup>9</sup> He also alludes to this idea in his talk published in this volume. Everett also suggests that the incarnation “...*deepens* the people's peace.” The following article by Carl Mitcham may be read as taking issue with that suggestion. In speaking of “Mediterranean disembedding”, Mitcham acknowledges that the Christian message to not slavishly conform to social conventions animated the destruction of the people's peace. Given Illich's own formulation that the corruption of the best is the worst, Mitcham asks why we should attempt to recover or return to a path already proven to have disastrous consequences. Why, he asks, shouldn't we reject the very source of such disembedding and, for instance, seriously consider Buddhism as an alternative founding?

The set of thematic articles ends with a spartan poem by Kostas Hatzikiriakou. It resounds with the theme of this issue.

This issue also includes new voices, one of which is

9 Ivan Illich, “The Delinking Peace and Development” in *In the Mirror of the Past* (Marion Boyars, 1992), pp.15-26



Barbara Hallensleben from Zurich. She not only recently organized a meeting at the University of Fribourg celebrating the thought and life of Ivan Illich but has also written a commentary to the essay by Illich titled “Towards the Post clerical church” of which Fabio Milana traces the provenance. This essay was previously published in the *Ellul Forum*, a magazine worth reading for those interested in the thought of Illich. A section of its most recent issue includes essays on the pandemic from the perspective of Illich.

Given the size and heft of this issue, I have held back on book reviews but have included two translations. The first by Neto Leão and Nilo Coradini de Freitas, renders into Portuguese, Illich’s essay “Twelve years after Medical Nemesis: A Plea for Body History” from *In the Mirror of the Past*. As I have previously pointed out in these pages, there are a growing number of Illich readers in Brazil, in no small measure due to the efforts of Leão and his partner Isabelle Cedotti. The second translation is only available in the online version of this issue. Hernando Calla translated into Spanish, David Cayley’s “Questions about the current pandemic from the point of view of Ivan Illich”, which was published in the first volume of this periodical. Calla excels at his craft and is looking for support to translate Cayley’s book *Ivan Illich: an intellectual journey*.

As Carl Mitcham reminded me, 2023 is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Illich’s *Tools for Conviviality*. We thought it appropriate to devote the next issue of *Conspiratio* to the question concerning tools. There is much in the air about technology — from ChatGPT to electric cars and voyages to Mars. I urge readers to send in articles on the broad topic of technology. The deadline for submissions is September 30, 2023.

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