Postscript: *"Tools for Conviviality: Argument, Insight, Influence" Three Decades Later*

Of Ivan Illich's many books, *Tools for Conviviality* is the most insightful and concise presentation of what may be called his political philosophy of technology. This paper was originally prepared for a symposium celebrating Illich's 65th birthday and 5th year as visiting professor in the Pennsylvania State University Science, Technology, and Society Program. The symposium was initiated by Rustum Roy and organized by Leonard Waks, who after the event gathered selective talks for publication as a symposium on "Ivan Illich's Philosophy of Technology" in the Society for Philosophy and Technology annual publication *Philosophy and Technology*, volume 8 (1991). The symposium included papers that dealt with Illich's criticism of schooling (*Deschooling Society*, 1970), dominating techniques (*Tools for Conviviality,* 1973), healthcare (*Medical Nemesis*, 1976), and urban planning (*H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, 1987).

Illich's argument is a second generation deepening of one of the three philosophical approaches to technology that emerged in the 1950s during its "classical period". "Classical" here refers to an originary recognition of modern engineering and technology as a historically unique, scienceassociated form of designing, producing, and using artifacts, which began with the Industrial Revolution and has since progressively transformed itself and the world. Efforts to think critically rather than promotionally about this mutation in productive life can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Robert Owen (1771-1858), and Karl Marx (1818-1883) and led eventually to a privileging of "technology" as a socio-cultural determinate. This concep-

tual focus on technology first emerged in the 1950s, primarily in England, Germany, and France.

For purposes of orientation, consider three key texts: Alan Turing's "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (1950), Jacques Ellul's *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle* (1954), and Martin Heidegger's "Die Frage nach der Technik" (1954).[1] Each represents a different approach, not just to technology but also to philosophy.[2] Each has become a classic reference in one or more traditions in the philosophy of technology insofar as it can serve as a pivot from which we can look forward and backward. Turing did conceptual analytic work on computing and information technology to explore ways that thinking itself can be replicated by machine learning. Ellul developed a theory of society transformed by technological thinking into social life dominated by the optimization of means valued as an overriding good. Heidegger advanced a phenomenological reflection on *Technik* as disclosing the world as *Bestand* or resource through a historical spirit of *Gestell*. Each thus initiated the more or less distinctive traditions of analytic, social-political, and ontological philosophies of technology that continue to cast shadows across the present.

An Ellul-Illich relationship is acknowledged by both. It's not difficult to find references by Ellul to the work of Illich. *Le Systeme technicien* (1977), which revisits and critically extends the argument of *La Technique* (1954), makes pointed use of *Tools*. Illich's book, Ellul wrote, "has an excellent view of

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1   Alan Turing. (1950) "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" *Mind*, New Series, 59, no. 236 (October), pp. 433–460. Jacques Ellul. (1954) *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle*. Paris: A. Colin. English version, John Wilkinson, *The Technological Society* (New York: Random House,1964). Martin Heidegger. (1954) "Die Frage nach der Technik" In *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen, Germany: Neske, 13–44. English trans. by William Lovett, "The Question Concerning Technology." In *The Question Concerning Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 3–35.

2   Carl Mitcham. (2023) "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Classic European Philosophy of Technology." In Shannon Vallor, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 19-34.

the technological system when he shows that 'the functioning and design of the energetic infrastructure of a modern society impose the ideology of the dominant group with a force and penetration inconceivable to the priest … or the banker" (chapter 4, note 22). And Ellul later acknowledges that "Illich sees [the] connection between technologies perfectly when he shows the correlation between teaching and technological growth, or between the latter and the massive organization of 'health'" (chapter 6, note 4).[3]

In November 1993 Illich made a pilgrimage to Bordeaux to pay personal homage to Ellul. In Illich's words, "Ellul continually recaptures the fundamental intuitions of his earliest work, always clarifying them more. His tenacity, humility, and magnanimity in the face of criticism make him an example one must bow to." Illich went on to remark how discovering Ellul's concept of *Technique* in the 1960s enabled him "to identify — in education, transportation, and modern medical and scientific activities — the threshold at which these projects absorb, conceptually and physically, the client into the tool; the threshold where the products of consumption change into things which themselves consume; the threshold where the milieu of technique transforms into numbers those who are entrapped in it; the threshold where technology decisively transforms into Moloch, the system."[4]

The Ellul-Illich connection is further recognized by Jean Robert, one of Illich's close philosophical friends, who describes Ellul and Illich as authors working "on parallel tracks in their efforts to name the post-industrial *Erewhon* and to devise concepts to understand its elusive new threats." In their later works, argues Robert, both thinkers departed

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3   Jacques Ellul. (1977) *Le Systeme technicien.* Paris: Calmann-Lévy. English trans. Joachim Neugroschel as *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980).

4   Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich. (1995) "Statements by Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich," *Technology in Society*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 131-138.

from their early

> analyses of "the technological society" and of "convivial tools," respectively, and proposed the word "*System*" to name what lies beyond the age of instruments. Both understood that a unique historical mutation had rendered obsolete the very concepts that had previously allowed them to be unusually acute analysts of the late Technological Age. Both saw the mutation of the technological society into the system as a betrayal of the vocation of the West, by the West. This vocation is a call to freedom. Tools are compatible with freedom if they are available to both be taken up and put down. This double possibility can only be preserved when tools are strictly limited in power, size, and number.[5]

llich's thinking on technology not only ran on a parallel track with that of Ellul, but he also contributed to the sociological philosophy of technology engendered in Ellul's work. Illich's contribution is at least two-fold, corresponding to the shift Robert identifies, from tools to systems. The key concept in the analysis of tools was counterproductivity. As Illich spelled this out in *Medical Nemesis*,

> paradoxical counterproductivity … is now surfacing in all major industrial sectors. Like time-consuming acceleration, stupefying education, self-destructive military defense, disorienting information, or unsettling housing projects, pathogenic medicine is the result of industrial overproduction that paralyzes autonomous action. In order to focus on this specific counterproductivity of contemporary industry, frustrating overproduction

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5   Jean Robert. (2023) "Beyond Tools, Means, and Ends: Explorations into the Post-Instrumental Erewhon, in Glen Miller, Helena Mateus Jerónumo, and Qin Zhu, eds., *Thinking through Science and Technology: Philosophy, Religion, and Politics in an Engineered World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), p.244

must be clearly distinguished from two other categories of economic burdens with which it is generally confused, namely, declining marginal utility and negative externality. Without this distinction of the specific frustration that constitutes counterproductivity from rising prices and oppressive social costs, the social assessment of any technical enterprise, be it medicine, transportation, the media, or education, will remain limited to an accounting of cost-efficiency and not even approach a radical critique of the instrumental effectiveness of these various sectors.[6]

Later, in a turn from social criticism to historical archeology, Illich sought to walk backward into the past in order to look with new eyes at what he had first seen in *Tools*, finding there the counterproductive influence of a Christian ecclesiology: technological system as secularized church. This was, again, an insight shared with Ellul, but whereas Ellul stressed the manifestation in social relations, Illich found it operative in the body, in our somatic self-experience.

Indeed, insofar as the concept of counterproductivity is anchored in the frustrations of bodily capacities and distortions of felt perceptions, life becomes literally senseless. Accordingly, Illich's body history offers a challenge to thinking about technology either in terms of Turning's mind as symbol processing machine or as Heidegger's *Gestell* mythologized techno-lifeworld. Grounded in bodily presence, Illich's work on the text and the alphabet refused the identity between speech, text, and symbol processing favored by the Turing machine. Similarly, by historicizing the very category of instrument, Illich undermines the ontologizing of the engineering stance in Heidegger.

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6   Ivan Illich. (1976) *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health.* London: Marion Boyers. p.215

Put another way, Ellul the Protestant anarchist seeks to live by faith alone; Illich, a Catholic anarchist seeks to recover the body and the self-accepting askesis of convivial pleasures. While Turing promises life attached to speed thinking programs and Heidegger the mystery of presocratic *Gelassenheit*, Illich invites us to share a meal and breathe together the earthy air of friendship.