

The Eclipse of Tools

Review by Diego Ferraris*

Jean Robert, The age of systems in Illich's later thinking

*Of all the things which wisdom provides to
make us entirely happy,
much the greatest is the possession of friendship.*
Epicurus

1.

The age of systems in Illich's later thinking, (*L'età dei sistemi nel pensiero dell'ultimo Illich*, Hermatena, Bologna, Italy 2019)¹ is the first work in Italian that explicitly addresses the richness and the range of investigations Ivan Illich conducted during the last twenty years of his life.² Jean Robert argues that though the press runs and circulation of the later Illich texts were far less than of those during his 'pamphleteering' years, Illich was, in fact, more prolific during his later

* Translated by Sara Tommasina

1 Jean Robert wrote the book in French around 2016 but could not find a French publisher. Thanks to his friend Aldo Zanchetta and the attentive and careful translations of Maria Adele Cozzi, Robert felt the Italian edition was the definitive version of his book. Robert was also able to collaborate with his beloved friend and colleague Javier Sicilia for a Spanish edition which was published in 2022 by Itaca Press under the title, *La edad de los sistemas en el pensamiento del Illich tardío*. For this review, I avoid directly quoting Robert too much or referencing page number but paraphrase his text because Conspiratio readers are unlikely to have access to the Italian edition. I am told there is an English edition under consideration for publication soon.

2 The fact that this long tract of investigations by Ivan Illich has been scarcely recognized so far raises the question of the reception, diffusion, and "readability" of his later works.

Diego Ferraris, die.ferraris@gmail.com
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years.³ Robert should know: he wrote from a privileged position of being close friend and interlocutor of Illich during these years.

Robert's book is a testimonial of an intellectual friend from a situated standpoint and written in dialogue with Illich. His considerations and interpretations of Illich's work has two connected aspects. The first draws on his own memories and knowledge to give us an unprecedented biographical glimpse of Ivan Illich, while the second narrates the intellectual work Illich engaged in his later years. For example, Robert is able to speak authoritatively not only about the extraordinary experiences at CIDOC (*Centro Intercultural de Documentación*),⁴ between the 1960s and 1970s in Cuernavaca, México, but also about the living room conversation Illich anchored in Bremen, Germany, and State College, United States. Equally, Robert presents in simple and direct prose the many theoretical questions Illich explored and sought to put into public discussion during those years. In his fluid prose, Robert invites the reader to deeply understand and critically engage with Illich's concerns, hypotheses, and studies.

3 In 2005, a group of friends supervised by Barbara Duden, published a bibliography of the 'complete' work by Illich. The bibliography opens with his 1951 doctoral thesis in German: *Die philosophischen Grundlagen der Geschichtsschreibung bei Arnold Joseph Toynbee* (The philosophical fundamentals of historiography in Arnold Joseph Toynbee). The works written between the 1971 and the 1976 (works which Illich called 'my pamphlets') take up the first four pages of the bibliography. The works published after 1976 occupy page 5 through page 26. Quantitatively, the work of this second group is five times the first. But there is another quantitative difference: many of his books of the 1970s had print runs in the hundreds of thousands, whereas the subsequent works did not exceed a few thousand. Most of the published articles of the later years appear in little magazines or were unpublished papers (mainly collated by Silja Samerski, then of the University of Bremen).

4 "Pilgrimage destination for many intellectuals from all the world"; "a secular place where to think"; "an institute of free and advanced studies" are some of the descriptors Robert uses for CIDOC. "CIDOC was a free university, without exams or diplomas, where the concepts and the thoughts of the industrial society of the '70 years was confronted and everyone was allowed to be student and occasionally a theater" (Robert, 2019: 15).

Robert's book is also the last instance and exemplar of his own considerable literary productions. His own work was consistently devoted to a wide-ranging and fundamental critique of hyper industrial capitalistic society, one that was forged alongside, but distinct from, that of Ivan Illich.⁵ Jean Robert wrote this book moved by a similar deep worry concerning the present. Grounded in what, thanks to María Zambrano, we can name his "visceral reason", Robert has written a book about Illich but also one that is about what they shared—the feeling of perplexed worry in having to confront the complexity of living in a hyper technological world, a sexist and, increasingly, "disincarnate" world. In this sense, Robert's book is written by a co-conspirator of Illich,⁶ a friend whose reflections are also aimed at animating the efforts of a far-flung group of persons interested in and inspired by Illich's thought.⁷ Like Illich, Jean Robert was also convinced that friendship outside the confines of the university or schoolroom was the ground from which truth might bloom in fullness.

2.

Of course, a book review is not an extended commentary on a book. It can only spark the reader's curiosity and interest in reading the text. Robert's book comprises seven chap-

5 Among the many publications of Jean Robert in French, German, Spanish, English and Italian, I recall here *La trahison del opulence*, with the collaboration of Jean-Pierre Dupuy, (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1976); *Le temps qu'on nous vole. Contre la société chronophage*, (Paris, Seuil, 1980); and with Majid Rahnema, *La puissance des paupers*, (Actes Sud, 2008).

6 I use here the term "conspirator" to invoke Illich's use of *Conspiratio* which was the kiss by which the first Christians commingled their spirits and sealed their mutual communion.

7 It is a network of persons across Mexico, Italy, France, Germany, India and Japan, who, inspired by their personal encounter with Illich or his texts, are realizing through seminars, meetings, and publications, a critical renewal of his ideas.

ters, a rich introduction, and an intensely meditative epilogue. Robert says that his introduction is “like a map, a compass, a kind of instruction manual” to the contents of the book. He proposes that the range of Illich’s investigations should be understood as composed of two distinct projects. The first comprised a critique of the “counterproductivity” of service institutions of the industrial age—education, medicine, transportation—mainly conducted under the aegis of CIDOC. The second project was elaborated from the 1980s onwards, partly with Barbara Duden, to explore the historicity of bodily perceptions and to examine the foundational axioms of the Western mind. Conducting in the “mirror of the past”, to quote Illich, this was an attempt to historicize “the certainties that ground the topology of the modern mind”. In this sense, his later work is a kind of “philosophical archeology.”⁸

Two new intuitions inspired these later investigations, says Robert. First, at the end of writing *Medical Nemesis*, Illich began to see that the experience of the physical body is determined by the social body, which is to say, that bodily experience is the result of the entanglement of the conceptual and the perceptible. The second intuition Illich attempt to flesh out during these years was the hypothesis that the age of the instrument or tools had a beginning because, Illich felt, it was coming to an end.

Robert invites us to take these intuitions seriously. He strenuously argues that the society in which we are living since the 1980s is in the middle of one of the biggest transformations of Western culture. Robert insists that we are in the midst of an “epistemological collapse” whose character may

8 “Philosophical archeology” is an open field of the contemporary investigation. Exponents of this style of thought include Immanuel Kant, Michael Foucault, Enzo Melandri, Paul Ricoeur, and Giorgio Agamben. Philosophical archeology is a form of questioning the present to show its “emerging moments”. Illich, used the metaphor of a crab walking backward into the past with its eyes fixed on the present to describe his style of philosophical archeology.

be described as the end of the age of the tool. Robert recounts Illich's suggestion that the very idea of an instrument or tool or technology is the result of theological reflections on the nature of the sacraments in the 12th century. Illich argued that tools are "distal"—separate and distinct from the user—and subordinate to the personal intentions of the user. Robert argues that Illich's investigations into the historicity of the tool or instrument was prompted by his discovery, with Duden, of changes to body perception in the late 20th century. Just as the integrity of bodily experience was transmogrifying into a systemic understanding of self, so also the perceptual category of the instrument was mutating into that of a system. Robert's quotes Duden to underscore this connection:

Before 1980, medicine was promoting a picture of a body which was in constant need of treatments. After this period, the picture transformed itself into one of a "human being" able to auto regulate himself as part of a complex cybernetic program" (...) Medicine, which induced its patients to see themselves as iatrogenic constructions, now asks them to make decisions which transform them into subsystems of the biomedical system.

3.

Robert's book can be read as if it is a sonata made of seven variations on the two theses he explores. The heart of the book is in the chapter 4, *Systems...in the heads*, where Robert reconstructs Illich's analysis of the history of the "tool". "The Greek word *organon* designated the tool", writes Robert, but "the hammer was an *organon* and so was the hand which held it." For the Greeks, the artifact was an "organic tool", and each was appropriate to particular or specific hands—the ax fit the farmer's hand as the sword fit the hand of a free born man

(*kaloskagathos*). However, in the 12th century, a new notion of the “instrument” arose in the context of scholastic debates on the nature of the sacraments. The sacraments were thought instruments, in the sense of separate and distinct from the hands that administered them. This conceptual separation of the hand from the tool is what defines the tool as an *instrumentum separatum*. It is the concept of the instrument that makes possible, for example, armies of farmers brandishing swords and knives.

The three chapters that precede this central argument not only lead up to it but can also be read as a self-contained intellectual biography of the early life of Ivan Illich. These chapters allow the reader to approach the central theme of the book by understanding the context of its origin and its importance within the overall arc of Illich’s work. The first chapter exposes the hypothesis that Illich is an unrecognized but yet great historian of technology *per se* and offers a synopsis of Illich’s biography from the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, Robert argues that the groundwork of Illich’s later contributions to the questions of institutional counterproductivity and Development lies in his immersion in Latin American culture during this period.

According to Illich, the history of the modern world is inseparable from the idea of scarcity: which is the story of the war of the State and the market against the subsistence of the people. The economy generates shortage whenever the autonomous ability of people is replaced by the sale and purchase of commodities which are, by definition, scarce. The spread of the economy entails replacing the vernacular abilities that are deeply rooted in the culture by the dependence on industrial goods and services. Robert devotes the second chapter to Illich’s time as a famous pamphleteer during the 1970s. Illich became world renown for defending the necessity of political

limits to the growth of institutional goods and services,⁹ and for his work in CIDOC¹⁰ to dissuade Church volunteers from spreading the cult of consumerism to Latin America. Despite the passage of time, Illich's critique of industrial society has not lost any of its power or validity.

In his third chapter titled *Pilgrims and new visions*, Robert discusses Illich's work during the 1980s and early 1990s inspired by Karl Polanyi's critique of modernity as a disembedding of the economy from its cultural and social matrix. It was also during this period that Illich came to appreciate the power of historical excavations to bring to light all that was lost by developing a world-wide economic market. The roots of his critique of the contemporary ecological catastrophe lie in this deeper engagement with Westernization as seen through the eyes of Polanyi, says Robert.

As I have already indicated, it is with the fourth chapter that Robert goes to the heart of the questions that orient his book. The incorporation of the user into the tool describes not only the system as a socio-technical artifact but also a fundamentally different perception of the body. Unlike an axe or a pencil which is separate and distinct from any body that might use it, a computer system is one that no body can put down because it is linked to a vast interconnected web. Moreover, interaction with such systems like the iPhone and Tik

9 Illich was taken as a militant intellectual in the 1970s and his radical critique of industrial society and of Development in the so-called Third World was widely publicized in pamphlets like *Deschooling Society*, *Medical Nemesis*, *Energy and Equity*, and *Shadow Work*, among others.

10 "In 1961, Illich founded the *Centro de Formación Cultural* (CIF-Center of Cultural Formation), in Cuernavaca, Mexico, officially organized to prepare missionaries and laypersons for volunteer work in Latin America. (...) Illich never tired of telling his pupils, over and over again, that in the countries where they were to eventually carry out their missionary duties, they would not be met with a pastoral vacuum to be filled: on the contrary, they would find expressions of faith which, though perhaps often disconcerting for them, were nonetheless very deep. Their pastoral approach was consequently to be "vernacular" and respectful of those very expressions; whenever faced with things they could not comprehend they were to hold their peace.

Tok also mold self-perception and require people to function as subsystems. A good example of the transformation of the instrument to the system is the idea of an immune system. When people think of themselves in terms of a medical immune system, their body and flesh become a subsystem of the bio-medical world system, says Robert.

4.

Over the last three chapters Jean Robert shows his fluency at synthesizing complex ideas in a clear and simple way. In a few pages he presents a synopsis of Illich's analyses of three major questions: the passage from vernacular gender to economic sex; the historicity of the bodily perceptions; and the history of the alphabet and writing. In each of these chapters, Robert shows how Illich described the modern age as a break from the past, which then allows the reader to become distant from her own taken-for-granted assumptions. According to Illich, sex understood as the genital differences between fundamentally identical human beings has replaced gender understood as the principle of distinction between beings called men and women. Sex is a necessary aspect of industrial society built on unisex assumptions. When men and women are considered the same and put into economic competition with each other, then one side loses by being confined to the realm of unpaid housework. The ideology of equality together with the idea of endless economic progress undermines the specific domain of the female gender and keeps women in a subordinate economic position.¹¹

The last two chapters are broadly concerned with

11 The clarity and incisiveness of Jean Robert's thought in these pages is not merely due to his intimate knowledge of Illich's thought. They also owe much to Robert's deep and continuous conversation he had with his life partner—clinical psychologist, anthropologist, and committed intellectual—Sylvia Marcos. She was also the one who led the discussion among decolonized feminists on *Gender* which was published as *Mirandas feministas a la obra de Jean Robert* (2020).

historical mutations in body and self-perception in Western culture. Illich's work with Barbara Duden inspired him to investigate the transformations in the understanding of the gaze across the centuries. That the eye is now understood as a tool for seeing is intimately related to techniques of visualization. Today we are surrounded by visual objects we are shown but cannot see—whether planet earth, the fetus, or coronavirus. The suffocation of the felt and lived body by graphic and textual visualization of the medicalized body removes us from our experience.¹²

In the last chapter, Robert sketches the *Cultural history of the alphabet* as presented by Illich who wrote about eight texts on the theme, of which only two were widely published books.¹³ This chapter is a true invitation to face up to the challenges of the present, to invent an ethic of the gaze suitable for the digital age in accord with the “ethic of the reading” that emerged in the age of the book. Robert eruditely reconstructs and exposes Illich's thesis about the origin of the alphabet and about the different historical stages of the transformation from the murmuring sea of orality to the bookish culture of the text. With Illich, Robert argues that the text is fundamental to the mold which has formed European culture and has sparked the Westernization of the world.

5.

Robert invites us to the critical historical standpoint of Ivan Illich, a stance which I, along with Fabio Milana and Giorgio Agamben, understand as “archeological”: an exploratory thought which questions the present by putting into

12 As Robert writes, images of the body constructed by the medicine silences the self-perceived body. It is to distinguish the described body from the felt body that Illich and Duden contrast the Greek *soma* against the Latin *corpus*.

13 I refer to *ABC: the alphabetization of the mind* with Barry Sanders; and *In the Vineyard of the Text*. The remaining are essay length writings on the topic including the little known *Die Schule ins Museum. Phaidros ind die Folgen* (1984).

discussion the presumed universality of categories and ways of being. Thanks to his insiders' reconstruction of the second phase of Illich's intellectual efforts, Robert clarifies that Illich first exposed the counter-productivities of institutional modernity by focusing on "what tools do", and later focused on "what the tools say." It is this latter focus that allowed Illich to intuit and formulate the 'age of tools' as having a beginning and now coming to an end.

In a world in which tools or instruments that were once understood as distinct and separate from the user and the human body are now integrated into them to constitute systems (without an outside), it is difficult to distinguish between what technologies do and what they say. The system announces its imperatives without differentiating between the real and the symbolic. When integrated into systems, people are shaped in both action and self-perception which implies they cannot avoid being used by the system.

However, Robert also emphasizes the reflections of Ivan Illich and his collaborators on how a counterattack may be practical against the ongoing social cybernetic takeover of personal autonomy and modes of self-defined existence. Robert invites us to reflect on the historical advent of this new period which, in his opinion, can be refused by the act of saying NO. The radical NO to being treated as and feeling as a subsystem requires building alternative collectives—concrete, autonomous, and anti-capitalistic—such as the communities organized by *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* in Chiapas, Mexico. Saying NO starts from yourself, from one's own interior silence and close relationships; saying NO means to think concretely and without nostalgia about what it means to bid "farewell to tools." Robert believes the task of our time is to think and elaborate a suitable social ethic in a world without tools because it is only by living with and for each other that we become human.