

Editor's letter

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of *Tools for Conviviality* in which Illich argued that technology could go through two phases, or in his word, watersheds.¹ The first watershed is crossed when an instrument becomes effective in realizing the purpose for which it is designed. Thomas Edison said he failed thousands of times before inventing a light bulb that worked. One of Illich's enduring contributions remains his specification of the perverse effects when instruments cross a second watershed. Beyond a certain scale, tools turn counter-productive, means become ends, the cure becomes worse than the disease.

The thematic articles inspired by *Tools* and included here begin with a two-piece set by Carl Mitcham. The first is a reprint of his hard-to-find article,² which is accompanied by a postscript he wrote for this issue. In the latter, Mitcham locates Illich's thought in reference to three streams in the study of the philosophy of technology that emerged after the 1950s. He names Alan Turing, Jacques Ellul, and Martin Heidegger as signposts for those wanting to trek through this scholarly literature. Crucially, he suggests that Illich's concerns are orthogonal to both Turing and Heidegger, while parallel to and

1 Illich used the word 'tool' in his book for a reason. "For thirty years now, I've tried to figure out how to use ordinary language in that slightly obscene way that makes people see something new without them knowing exactly why." David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1992) p.109. For my purpose here, not much is lost if one uses tools, instruments, and technologies as synonyms.

2 Carl Mitcham, "Tools for Conviviality: argument, insight, and influence", in *Europe, America, and Technology: Philosophical Perspectives*, Paul T. Durbin (Ed.), (Kluwer Academic Publishers: Netherlands, 1991). pp.17-56.

yet distinct from those of Ellul.

In his earlier essay, which is a model of learned commentary on a text, Mitcham details the argument, insight, and influence of *Tools*. Sadly, his overall conclusion from 1991 remains just as valid in 2023 - *Tools* was then a “young argument” and remains so today. Moreover, it also continues to have “exceptionally limited influence” among scholars of the philosophy of technology, even though it had a significant influence on discussions about alternative technologies.

This uneven effect is not surprising. The university, as Illich once noted, emerged from cleaving matters of the mind from matters of the heart, separating facts from “values.” Illich’s pamphlets and studies on the historicity of social axioms exemplify the co-ordination of thought and life. They presuppose the inextricable bond between seeking truth and living well. In that sense, it is perhaps practitioners of philosophical history that are closest to the spirit of Illich’s investigations. In the manner of Michel Foucault, such genealogies of the present are impelled by the kind of curiosity that puts into question who one is. It is therefore also unsurprising that Illich’s thirty-year-old claim about the historicity of the category of the tool should have been recently elaborated by two such practitioners of philosophical history—Giorgio Agamben and Nicholas Heron.

In 1988, Illich told David Cayley that in the fifteen years since he wrote *Tools*, he had been taking notes on the history of the instrument.³ When he wrote *Tools*, Illich had assumed the self-evidence of this category. Technology was still understood as means to achieve desired ends. Both smartphones and solar panels could be understood as devices made to achieve some purpose. Accordingly, in *Tools*, Illich only distinguishes dominant from convivial tools. No artifact falls outside the category of purpose-built devices. Perhaps it

3 See, David Cayley, *Illich in Conversation*, (Anansi Press: Toronto, 1992), pp.105-111.

was his confrontation with dominant tools and their counterproductive effects that prompted Illich to think about adequacy of the tool as a category. Whatever the reason, during the 1980s, Illich came to question whether everything usually classified as an instrument could be adequately understood as means for some end.

The existence of instruments presupposes the conceptual and hence palpable distinction between means and ends. A student who wants to learn physics and therefore enrolls in college believes she is using college to achieve her purpose. But what of a student who gets a college degree to increase the value of his human capital? The similarity between the two is only superficial. The one who sees himself as an instance of human capital manages himself as an economic entity. He behaves like a program designed to increase his self-worth. A programmed being responds to stimuli. He selects courses that maximize life-time earnings given economic trends. If the study of entomology results in higher net earnings than etymology, that is the credential he obtains. In this sense, programmed beings are not purposive beings who transfer their intentions to their tools.⁴

In his *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle says that there can be no community between artisan and tool any more than there can be a partnership between soul and body or master and slave.⁵ In each of these pairs, the second is an integral part of the first element. As incredible as this notion appears to us today, for Aristotle, the potter's wheel was an indivisible part of the potter and not something of a different kind or category. When and how did Western culture take as axiomatic that schools, hospitals, guns, spades, and chairs all belong to one

4 See the chapter titled "The Age of Systems", in David Cayley: *Rivers North of the Future*, (Anansi Press: Toronto, 2005).

5 *Eudemian Ethics*, 1241b, in *The Complete works of Aristotle*, (ed.) Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

category—that of technology? And, are we living through the demise of the instrument, of technology as such?

It is precisely Illich's hypothesis on the rise and fall of the "age of the instrument" that is the subject of Jean Robert's last book titled *Letà dei sistemi nel pensiero dell'ultimo Illich* (*The Age of Systems in the thought of the late Illich*). The second article of this issue is the introduction from the recent English translation of the book, made possible by his lifelong partner Sylvia Marcos. In it, Robert outlines its chapters in broad strokes to explain the ongoing rupture between the instrument and the system. He shows them as non-comparable categories even if they are routinely confused by those living through the disappearance of tools. Robert's book has also been favorably reviewed in this issue by Diego Ferraris who consulted the original and definitive Italian edition.

Illich once said that the blind spot of the much-claimed multi-volume *History of Private Life* was that it was prepared on the assumption that the distinction between the private and public spheres was ahistorical. He argued instead that this more recent distinction had replaced an older one between the household and the commons. At the Illich gathering in Umbria last year, Giovanni Riganelli presented a riveting account of how Lake Trasimeno and its environs was transformed from a commons to property over the 11th and 12th centuries. Before then, the fish, fowl, and game found there were *res nullius* (nobody's things; no-things). With a historian's reticence, Riganelli limits himself to recording the steps by which what was once freely given was transformed into property and a taxable economic resource. His account also indicates some of the factors that continue to enforce the regime of property to this day. Only last year, the shoreline of Lake Trasimeno received a make-over. The state authorities saw fit to construct a tarmacked path around the lake to make it into an accessible tourist attraction. What was once open

for use by locals to repair and dry their fishing nets or to simply sit around and discuss the day's events has now become policed public property.

The capture of the commons by property occurs, suggestively, around the same period as the emergence of the instrument as a category. Both Giorgio Agamben and Nicholas Heron have recently elaborated Illich's account of the nexus, in the 12th century, between sacramental theology and the instrument.⁶ But there has been no equivalent philosophical history of the demise of the instrument. Incidentally, Illich knew very well what he did not speak of at length, which accounts for his allusive remarks on "the age of systems."⁷ For the emergence of systems from the ruin of instruments entails the demise of the enfleshed being.

This is what the next three articles attempt to point out, in different ways. Neto Leão argues that the world of systems is the consequence of a third watershed in addition to the two Illich already described. The exacerbation of symbolic counterproductivity becomes so complete, argues Leão, that it can no longer be perceived as such. The age of systems names the condition of people unable to understand themselves ex-

6 Consult for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: an archaeology of duty*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); specially, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); and Nicholas Heron, *Liturgical Power: between economic and political theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

7 Cayley notes that though Illich was at the center of much of the discussion on systems theory, he never wrote on the topic and made only "suggestive, but often sparse remarks" on it. David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: an intellectual journey*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2021), p.251. For proof of Illich's generosity in propagating ideas he could not have fully agreed with, consider what Francisco Varela has attested. "In January 1972, with a fresh copy of the manuscript, I was invited to Mexico by Ivan Illich, to his CIDOC center in Cuernavaca. I gave him the manuscript the day I arrived, and I will never forget his reaction the following morning: 'This is a classic text. You have managed to put autonomy at the center of science'...It is hard to express what finding receptivity in people of this quality meant to me at the time." See "The Early days of Autopoiesis," in *Emergence and Embodiment: new essays on second order systems theory*, (eds) B. Clarke and M.B. Hanson, (Duke University Press 2009), pp.62-75; quotation on p.72.

cept in accordance with what technique has imputed to them. The age of systems is one in which an outside to itself cannot be imagined.

Nicola Labanca makes the parallel case that systems thinking presupposes no fundamental differences between artifacts, humans, and animals. He relies on Giorgio Agamben's explanation of human potentiality in philosophy to argue that dominant instruments have diminished human potential. It is vastly more difficult to redirect an interstate highway than a country path. But the age of systems is even more destructive, says Labanca. It is not merely the potential to do this or that act which has been diminished. Rather, systems negate the very human potential or capacity to act. When integrated into systems via feedback loops, humans cannot step outside them. And then, just like machines which "cannot not do", people functioning as system subunits cannot not comply.

What Labanca uncovers from systems theory and cybernetics, Samar Farage brings into view from everyday life. She uses the smartphone as an exemplar of how people have been refashioned as nodes in a system. The smartphone was deliberately designed to collapse the distality between the user and the tool. Not only does it fully capture the social imaginary (my phone is the world) but its features are also specifically designed to create addicts who can neither put down nor put away their phones. Systems-cybernetics dismissed the idea of free will and action in theory. Smartphones suspend willed action in practice. The bleak prospect of an incurable addiction prompts the all too human question of what can be done.

The remaining articles in this issue pick up this question. Whereas Philippe Mesly outlines a theory of technique that reconnects human will to the world while preserving the distinction between the two, Giovanna Morelli calls us to remember and renew the culture of proportion, of conviviality, as the only way out of the impending morass. Curiously

Henry Zhu, a denizen of the digital spheres of virtual games and cryptocurrency, thinks it possible to recover something resembling the commons and conviviality. He believes the internet could function the way sidewalks of New York city as described by Jane Jacobs once did—publicly financed spaces put to common use.

It is also this sensibility and the discomfort with it, that is evident in the two books jointly reviewed for this issue. In *The Virtuous Cyborg*, Chris Bateman argues that we cannot escape our cyborg condition and must therefore find ways to become virtuous as such. In *Scorched Earth*, Jonathan Crary warns that the internet complex can only lead to the thoroughgoing despoliation of the earth and its inhabitants.

This issue of *Conspiratio* is bookended by an essay and a translation. In his essay, David Cayley responds to Mitcham's article published in the previous issue titled "A Competition of Corruptions." Cayley takes issue with Mitcham's argument for preferring "Asian Nihilism" to "Mediterranean disembedding" in the light of Illich's thesis that the modern world is the manifestation of *corruptio optimi pessima*. Attilio del Vinco's short statement in Italian was translated by Neto Leão. It invokes the stuff of tools, which were once and still are at hand, if only each of us would still re-member and could joyfully refuse the seductions of systems.

As a practical matter concerning *Conspiratio*, we are thinking of reducing the number of issues from two to one each year starting in 2024. This is part of finding the path forward for both *Conspiratio* and related efforts. The theme for the next issue intended for September 2, 2024, is *Nature*, broadly construed. It is not clear that 'Nature' has any denotative content and yet few contemporary arguments can be made without invoking it. The Anthropocene confers scientific credibility to the irreparable changes human activity has had on nature. Sustainability and greening the economy

have taken center stage in the techno-economic imaginary. In society and culture, some humans dream of a post-human future, others replace their organs, while yet others reshape their bodies, all in the attempt to escape natural limits.

I invite articles to clarify whether and how 'Nature' is indispensable to the search for the good and the true. The deadline for articles and other submissions for the upcoming issue of *Conspiratio* is May 1, 2024. If all goes well, I should be able to announce a meeting in which these articles can be publicly discussed prior to publication. That could mark the first step towards joining thought and life in the effort to think after Illich.

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