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**Title:** New Educational Society. The Illich's Utophy

**Year:** 2011

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Saurén, K.-M., & Määttä, K. (2011). New Educational Society. The Illich's Utophy.  
Pulso: Revista de Educacion, 2011(34), 29-42. <https://doi.org/10.58265/pulso.5007>

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# New Educational Society. The Illich's Utophy

## La Nueva Sociedad Educativa. La Utopía de Illich

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to consider the power of school system based on Ivan Illich's (1926 – 2002) thoughts. This article is based on a doctoral research in which Ivan Illich's work on modernized poverty was analyzed systematically by an immanent reconstruction concentrating on his most essential books published in the 1970s. This article, however, focuses on his book *Deschooling Society* (1971), and represents systematic analysis of its school-related criticism. Furthermore, the researchers' interpretation on the interconnectedness of Illich's core concepts is introduced as the ultimate result. Illich's purpose is to show that the society is extorted into a form of school and that we all are dependent on institutionalized services from professionals, in the same way that students are dependent on teachers complying with a curriculum. Along with his criticism, Illich has proposed an alternative model of school system: learning Webs that enable learning on the learner's own terms without a predetermined plan. From the perspective of the science of education, the essential elements of Illich's work include a demand for the liberation of education, preservation of autonomy, and increasing reliance on self-learning.

### Key words:

Ivan Illich, deschooling, school, curriculum, education

### Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre el poder del sistema educativo basado en las ideas de Ivan Illich (1926-2002). Este artículo está basado en una investigación doctoral en la que se ha analizado y reconstruido de forma sistemática el trabajo de Illich sobre la pobreza modernizada, a partir de sus libros más importantes publicados en los años 70. Este artículo, no obstante, se centra en su libro *Deschooling Society* (1971) y constituye un análisis de su crítica a la escuela. Además se aporta como resultado final la interpretación del investigador sobre las relaciones entre los conceptos clave de Illich. El propósito de Illich es mostrar que la sociedad está forzada a una determinada forma de escuela y que dependemos de servicios institucionalizados por profesionales, de la misma forma que los estudiantes dependen de que los profesores acaten el currículum. Al mismo tiempo que hace esta crítica, Illich propone un modelo alternativo de sistema educativo: el aprendizaje en red que posibilita el aprendizaje según los intereses del que aprende, sin un plan predeterminado. Desde la perspectiva de las ciencias de la educación los elementos esenciales del trabajo de Illich incluyen una exigencia por una educación libre, por preservar la autonomía y por aumentar la importancia de aprender por uno mismo.

### Palabras clave:

Ivan Illich, desescolarización, escuela, currículum, educación

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## 1. Introduction

Iván Illich (1926-2002) is one of the most critical and extensive educational theorists and practitioners in 20th century. He was born in Wien but because of his Jewish background he was obliged to quit his education during the Nazi reign in Austria 1941. Illich studied theology in the Gregorian University of Rome, Vatican and graduated as the doctor of philosophy in the University of Salzburg (Wright, 2003, 185). Before starting his critical writing, he worked as a priest in a Puerto Rican church in New York and came into contact with adult education and communal development (Finger, & Asún 2001, 8).

This article is based on a research in which the purpose was to focus on Ivan Illich's criticism on the consumer society (Saurén, 2008). Concepts such as the power of professionals, modernized poverty, and schooled imagination are at the core of his thoughts. However, Illich uses these concepts in an explicit manner without defining the connections between them. The aim of the research was to reveal the meanings of these concepts and to find out to which these concepts actually refer and what Illich ultimately means by them.

In this article, Illich's criticism towards the school system is on focus. For Illich, schooling removes education from the sphere of common use, making us dependent upon the teacher as priest, prophet, or pastor. This separation is predicated on a sacrifice of the child to a sovereign decision over and against life. It has been suggested (see Lewis, 2009) that removing the sacredness of education embodied in the rituals of schooling, and thus releasing education back to the common, should be the mission to the today's radical educators. Therefore, this article concentrates on systematic analysis on Illich's school-related criticism presented in his book called *Deschooling Society* (1971) where his purpose is to show that the society is extorted into a form of school and that we are all dependent on institutionalized services from professionals, in the same way that students are dependent on teachers complying with a curriculum. The core concepts of his criticism are dissected. As a result, the connections of these concepts are illustrated in order to present the author's interpretation of Illich's work.

## 2. Methodology and the Research Questions

The original data was comprised of Illich's most essential books that were published in the 1970s: *Celebration of Awareness*, *Deschooling Society*, *Tools for Conviviality*, *Disabling Professions*, *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies*, and *Limits to Medicine. Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* as

well as Illich's article called *Political Interversion* (in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*, edited by Illich and Verne). All these texts focused on the same issue – modernized poverty – but the approaches and emphases of the books differ from each other (see also a wider collection of Illich's writings at <http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich.html>). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to study Illich's work in more depth and detail. However, it is worth noticing that these texts are written in a different time and context and thus, the interpretation made by the researchers takes place here and now. The significance of systematic analysis comes from the possibility to approach the same research target in a variety of ways because the meaning of the text is different in different times (Varto, 1992). This article concentrates on Illich's book *Deschooling Society* (1971) and represents a systematic analysis of its school-related criticism.

The research method was systematic analysis which is merely text-orientated and philosophical in nature rather than empirical (Jussila, 1992). Systematic analysis aims at dialogue between the research problem and source data; and therefore, the research problem is specified along with the research process. (Jussila, 1992).

In this research, the texts were approached by an immanent perspective where the purpose is to use the concepts that are introduced in the texts in order to understand the message. Therefore, the aim was not to interpret the text itself, but to reveal the core message in Illich's thoughts and the connections between the various concepts. Neither was the aim to criticize or evaluate the other researchers' interpretations of Illich's thoughts, but to reconstruct the message of modernized poverty by leaning strictly on the texts that comprised the data. In practice, this procedure means that the data cannot be interpreted or explained by other, already existing theories. In an immanent reconstruction, the open dialogue between the text and the researcher's intuition is the prerequisite of a successful analysis because the arguments always have to be found in the text under study. Shortly, the aim of an immanent reconstruction is to reveal the original author's system of thoughts that he/she has written into his/her texts. Apparently, this kind of method does not produce anything new as such; instead, the researcher makes a new interpretation of the original message. (Jussila et al., 1992).

In this research, the aim was to restrain in Illich's message and to construct a logical system of thoughts of it without any external theory. It is worth noticing that the right interpretation requires re-realizing the author's original message. From this perspective, the aim was to find *the thought and mind of the text* from the data (see also Varto, 1991: 39).

This article answers the following research questions:

- 1) How and why has Illich criticized the school system and compulsory education?
- 2) What kind of society and education does Illich model in his texts?

The third research question refers to the authors' interpretation on the interconnectedness of Illich's core concepts:

- 3) How are the core concepts of Illich's criticism towards the school connected with each other?

## 3. Results

### 3.1 The Definition of School

Illich has made a point to define the concept of *school*, as its meaning has become self-explanatory. Illich's (2004) definition centers on *the phenomenology of school*, where defining factors are teachers, students, students' age, and duty to attendance. At the same time, the phenomenology of school creates a *myth* that students learn because only a teacher is capable of teaching. According to Illich (2004), the phenomenology of school is maintained by thinking that those who teach others have to be able to identify learning difficulties as well as to motivate people in learning new skills. Illich argues that this phenomenon is a form of professional dominance.

The phenomenology of school molds imagination and familiarizes students with the power of professionals, leading to a situation in which people accept or even prefer a professional service over a friendly one. At that point, people don't trust their own abilities anymore (Illich 2004). In his works, Illich (2002) labels this phenomenon as *counterproductivity*, which occurs when service exceeds its supply level in a way that the autonomy of the client starts to be at risk. According to Illich, this level is outreached in schools resulting in the erosion of autonomy. The phenomenology of school provides a composition in which school is seen as institution, teachers as dominant professionals, and students as consumers. Students' autonomous attempt to get information is undermined in this composition, leading to the central function of school being to execute *school ritual* as well as to adopt the role of *educator*. Thus, the core criticism in phenomenology of school is the succumbing to the power of professional the school provides (Illich 2004). Illich (2004, 2005) considers problematic the sacred atmosphere created by the professional teacher. Illich (2004) complains that children learn to bend when it comes to their values, and that they adopt prevailing norms without questioning

them, because the feedback from triple power has impelled them to obey. This combination enables school to promise rewards in the future: good position in society and economic success. School also creates a belief that everything is measurable.

### 3.2 Schooled Imagination

Illich (2004) writes about schooled imagination as a phenomenon that confines individuals' freedom. When referring to the production of schooled imagination, Illich considers the school system as a dominant institution that intimidates its clients to succumb to evaluation by professionals. The composition of the exercise of power maintained by school is evidenced by people's relationship with society, and the hidden curriculum in school creates a myth suggesting that increased production leads to better life. This development Illich sees as dramatic because the society in which needs are being met with pre-packed and foreseeable *institutionalized services* leads ultimately to worldwide pollution and frustration (Illich 1970).

Illich (2004) has assessed that school leads to the endless myth of consumption. This myth is based on the thought that development, including education, inevitably produces something valuable. Illich (2004) has condemned us for learning to appreciate only measurable learning. It is important to notice that, according to Illich, this model also schools teachers' imagination: It causes teachers to value only learning that results from curriculum-consonant teaching, and it directs teachers to view students unilaterally. This describes how teachers drift into a *professional role* in relation to students, and students become *customers*. This is how the phenomenon of schooled imagination results from a structural composition that destroys individuals' autonomy (Illich 2004).

School shapes people's relationship with themselves and society by schooling our imagination into line with curriculum. School defines a place and boundaries for everyone in society. When citizenship is executed by consumption, poverty arises from two directions: as lagging behind from the ideal of consumption and psychological inability (Illich 2004). According to Illich (2004, 2005), this consumption-centered industrialized powerlessness will touch all of us: Life becomes dependent on consumables and institutionalized commodities, resulting lack of citizens' independent acts and experience of modernized poverty. Prevailing autonomy and actualization of society requires us to understand the difference between hope and anticipation: «In its fullest meaning, hope consists of relying on the belief of the benevolence of nature, and anticipation means leaning on outcomes that people have planned and intended» (Illich 2004: 105).

### 3.3 Creating a New Educational Relationship

The first step toward an educational society is the liberation of teaching, which would allow competent and skillful people to contribute their know-how. When creating a new educational relationship it is worth remembering that access to information and information distribution don't guarantee learning (Illich 1978). According to Illich (2004), a prerequisite for the renewal of learning is to understand that individual learning and societal equality cannot be increased by school rituals. Illich (2004: 47) estimates that even many of those so-called revolutionaries for an alternative school system are actually victims of school because they believe emancipation to be a result of institutional continuum».

A new kind of research paradigm, which aims at establishing institutions that serve unique, creative, and autonomous operations, is needed for realizing educational society (Illich 2004). According to Illich (2004) a better schooling option would offer freedom or even urge children to encounter each other in a way that would motivate them to find company for new learning attempts later on, «The opposite of school could be an institution that would enhance opportunities for people with the same kind of interests to encounter at a certain time, and they would have the same hobby regardless of how much they have in common otherwise» (Illich 2004, 92).

As a starting point for a new research paradigm, Illich (2004: 72) has planned learning Webs in which learning would be neither time-nor place-bound. Nor would learning be conditional on age and previous studies in the learning net model, and learning would take place without curriculum. With learning Webs, Illich wishes to present a model of educational society where learning and encountering are autonomous events. (Illich, 2004).

Illich (2004) wants to show that the opposite of school is possible and that we can rely on independent learning instead of hiring teachers to bribe or force students to study. Illich (2004) thinks the problem is that not only upbringing and education are schooled, but that all of social reality is schooled. Therefore, society also needs *deschooling* in order to enable these learning encounters: «Educational change and encountering with other learners seems frightening as school has given us fear that makes us discriminating» (Illich 2004: 18). One central idea in Illich's educational utopia would be freedom; no one would be obligated to continue encountering. New educational relationships strive for change where focuses on appreciation would change. According to Illich (2004), turning to educational society would change the following matters:

- *Enrichment of meaning is more valuable than of structures* – the habits of the heart are more significant than rituals.
- *The unpredictable result of individually chosen personal encounter is more valuable than professional teaching* – to increase the appreciation of autonomous choices and self-access learning.

Illich (2004) believes this kind of new trend, which favors content, meaning, and autonomous choices, leads to personal surprise and human beings' liberation from institutionally chosen values. This relates to Illich's criticism of the school system, as preserving individual autonomy lies at the center of forging independent and hopeful life. The precondition for an educational change and new research paradigm is to understand the relationship between school and its environment.

In order to create a new educational relationship we have to try to understand the changing world and the threat that social changes produce as well as the challenges resulting from financial and technological development. To be able to affect schools and education taking place at schools we have to ask: What makes school a school? Illich (2004) claims that at the center of the renewal of the educational relationship is the new and renamed research paradigm. Illich (2004: 47) proposes that «every one of us is responsible for freeing ourselves from school and that only we have the power to do it». Thus, the following questions appear interesting: What would there be instead of schools? How would it be possible to build a whole new school system, and what kind of school system would enable individuals to grow into autonomy and freedom? According to Illich (1970: 17), crucial to change is: «to live the future and to stop using dictatorship and authorities as well as to reject the rationalization of bureaucratic machinery by changing the focuses of forces».

A remarkable problem in education provided in schools is, in Illich's (2004: 1) opinion that «students are being schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new.» In order to liberate learning, a common physical environment has to be in service for spontaneous learning (Illich 2004). Illich (2004) justifies the development of a new learning habit with his estimation that people receive most of their information outside school. A new educational relationship and learning habit presumes simultaneous changing of the attitude toward education, learning aids, and quality of everyday life.

The challenge for school in changing society can be condensed into the question: How would it be possible to create a new educational relationship between human beings



and environment? Illich (2004) has wanted to show that developing the opposite of school and relying on autonomous learning can be possible. According to Hart (2001), Illich was ahead of his time, as *the worldwide learning Web* would enable equal learning possibilities for all, regardless of age and previous education.

### 3.4 Pedagogy of Hope and Equality

Illich (2004; 1978) thinks that development should aim at educational society as the school system incapacitates and prevent human beings from controlling their own learning. The concept of *modernized poverty* connects loss of personal power with the inability to manage situations (Illich, 2004). Illich (2004) believes that schooling society won't achieve equality but educational society could.

Illich's thoughts are rooted in a movement that criticized the school system in the 1970s. The turn of the 1960s and 1970s was a prime time for educational criticism, and this period can be referred to as the new wave of sociology of education. Postman and Weingartner (1970) can be seen consistent with Illich's criticism of the school system, as they assessed the essential duty of school to «raise eager consumers, consign thoughts, values, and information that died three minutes ago, and raise smoothly operating bureaucrats». This is how consumer culture appears as an important factor in the socialization process, and consumer fantasy turns into lifestyle (Halton, 1997). Reimer (1971), on the other hand, has asked: *What is school?* By answering that school is an institution where age, presence, teachers, and curricula are defining factors, Reimer conforms to Illich's proposal of phenomenology of school. In the Nordic countries, Norwegian Nils Christie's book *Hvis skolen ikke fantes*, was published in 1971; it discusses deschooling and is partly comparable to Illich's criticism of the school system

Illich's criticism illustrates that structural changes inside the school are not enough because actual change for equal learning is founded on the replacement of schools with *learning Webs*. This proposal can be seen as representing ambition to increase people's possibilities for equality and societal change peculiar to radical education. Tradition and transmitting it are important with regard to school, but this chain cannot create independent and free thinkers (Varto, 2005).

Illich (1971) uses the word «network» to designate specific ways to provide access to the resources. Illich thinks that what are needed are new networks, readily available to the public and designed to spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching. He introduces four kinds of networks with practical examples:

- 1) Reference Services to Educational Objects—which facilitate access to things or processes used for formal learning. Some of these things can be reserved for this purpose, stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, and showrooms like museums and theaters; others can be in daily use in factories, airports, or on farms, but made available to students as apprentices or on off-hours.
- 2) Skill Exchanges—which permit persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and the addresses at which they can be reached.
- 3) Peer Matching—a communication network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage, in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry.
- 4) Reference Services to Educators-at-large—who can be listed in a directory giving the addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, para-professionals, and free-lancers, along with conditions of access to their services. Such educators, as we will see, could be chosen by polling or consulting their former clients. (see Illich, 1971).

Illich's criticism of the school system highlights the question: How difficult is it actually to think of learning without guidance and schools, as learning occurs every moment without any guidance? Illich's thoughts have roused different kinds of opinions, but presumably it's clear for all of us that our future is being defined at schools every day. Postman (1985: 5) states: «Children are living messages that we send beyond our time to the future».

#### 4. Conclusion: The Interconnectedness of the Core Concepts

The systematic analysis addresses the text by interpreting the image of the world to which the concepts refer (e.g., Ricoeur, 1981). The aim of this research was to reveal the goal and meaning hidden in Illich's criticism by means of like-mindedness. The connection between the core concepts and the power of professionals and criticism towards the school system are illustrated in Figure 1. In systematic analysis, not only are the figures used in order to describe the author's scheme of things, but they are also helpful in elucidating the interconnectedness of the various concepts. (See Figure 1.)

Illich's criticism towards the school system and the power of authorities can be understood through naming and revealing the phenomenon of 'modernized poverty'.

Illich thinks that revealing the power of authorities is a prerequisite for a meaningful life. Although, Illich's criticism could easily be considered as an anarchic utopia, its adaptability originates in the possibility of the new research paradigm. A new kind of awareness is needed: a suitable model of life for the people can lie in a free combination of two opposite trends. As an illustrative example of these trends is the phenomenon of modernized poverty and the model of meaningful society as its opposite as it is shown in Figure 1.

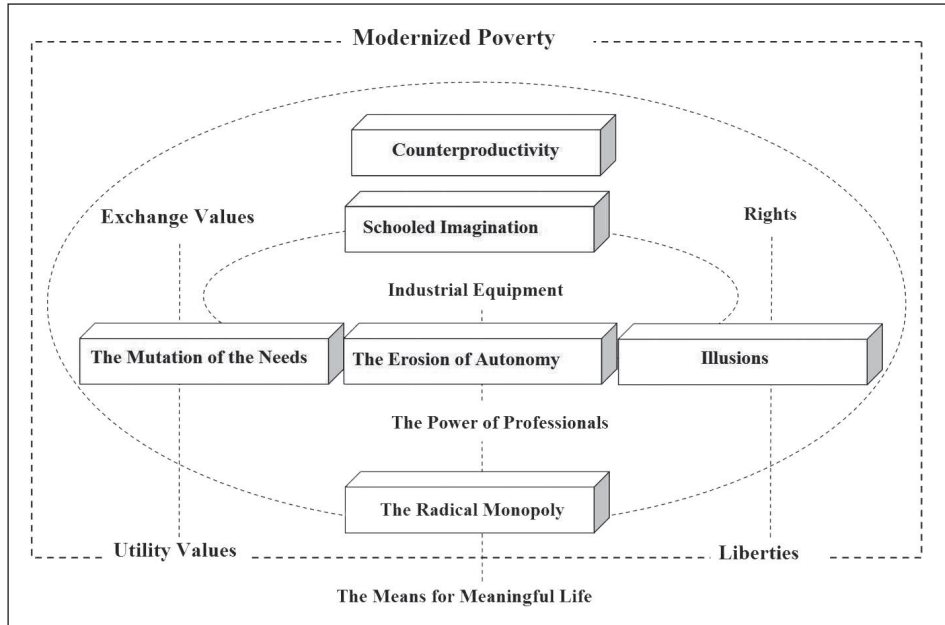


Figure 1. The Core Concepts and their Interconnectedness (Saurén, 2008, 153).

The most important guideline for science and researchers that can be interpreted from Illich's work is that the meaningful life can come true when we realize that the meaning conquers the form. Instead of keeping up and controlling the strict limits, we should tolerate surprises as well.

## 5. Discussion

When interpreting Illich's criticism, it is worth remembering his relationship with the church. In 1959, Illich was nominated as Monsignor (Wright, 2003), which is an honorary title for a person distinguished in ecclesiology in Roman Catholic Church. What it comes

to his relationship with religion, Illich has defined himself as a conservative religious practitioner (Cayley, 1992, 12). However, Illich's criticism towards the church and patriarchal religion resulted in losing the patronage from the church and he had to resign from the church. (Zaldivar, & Uceda, 2010.) Before establishing the Center for Intercultural Documentation CIDOC in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 1961 (see also his Cuernavaca Speech in 1968), he worked as a vice rector in a Catholic university in Puerto Rico. Since 1979, Illich lived in Mexico, Germany, and the United States of America and spent his time writing and teaching in several universities (in Kassel, Berkeley, Marburg, Oldenburg, Bremen, and Pennsylvania). (Finger, & Asún 2001: 9).

According to Erich Fromm (1970), Illich's thoughts stand for *humanist radicalism*, where radical refers more to questioning than invalidating and denying. In his work, Illich has wanted to explicate *illusions* that exist in institutions of industrialized society. He has pointed out that we can't just think of our path toward humanity when the way to humanism goes through actions: «We have to live and work, we have to set an example of the time we wish to create» (Illich 1970, 15). David Cayley (1992) is of the opinion that Illich has been an exception among scholars when claiming that *the habits of the heart* are equally important in scholarship than are *the habits of the head*.

Illich has been criticizing the disappearance of communalism, the world's becoming uniform, and the power that technology has over human beings. A significant problem when it comes to an individual's autonomy is, based on Illich's work, adopting the role of customer, *schooled imagination*.

School is challenged to carry out teaching so that learning would advance self-direction and that school structure wouldn't violate autonomy. When discussing development of education, the need for innovations is being emphasized in order to keep track of demands of globalization. This involves an interesting discrepancy: Its purpose is to program creativity to serve *schooled imagination* restricting individual autonomy and which can approve only products of professional creativity. From this point of view, it is easy to understand why Illich has demanded the dismantling of schools, as changing school from its inner structures wouldn't change the larger structure, on which the existence of school is based. Eventually, the always current and most salient question is: *What makes school a school?*

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