# On the other shore of today's Nile: Ivan Illich & the prospect of Exodus in a technogenic world

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> Given present conditions, I believe that the future survival of fundamental truth-seeking, the production of knowledge and genuinely 'owned' university teaching, together understood as part and parcel of the total way of life, may well only be assured through cultural migration, and the creation of new, subversive and marginal institutional embodiments.
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> — Richard H. Roberts[1]

> I do think that if I had to choose one word to which hope can be tied, it is hospitality. A practice of hospitality recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand. On the other hand, radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community.
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> — Ivan Illich[2]

'I speak as a xenocryst,' declared the man on the stage; the man with the mysterious accent and the hawklike nose, a nose which had seen him pulled out in front of his class in Vienna, aged thirteen, as the teacher told the other boys: this is how you spot a Jew![3]

At seventy, his handsome features were now rendered strikingly asymmetric by a large growth on the right side of his jaw. When this tumour first made itself felt, Ivan Illich had consulted several kinds of doctor, but decided not to pursue a conventional treatment. Some say the operation to remove it would have threatened his speech, others that a regime of sedative medication was the threat he could not abide. Whatever the case, he chose not to cross the threshold into the world of the cancer patient and instead he went on travelling, teaching and gathering his friends to think and laugh together. The new feature on the side of his face he called 'my mortality', and when the pain was bad he countered it with the opium pipe that travelled with him. In this way, he saw out the last decade of a century among whose sharpest observers he had been,

to die peacefully in his sleep, during an afternoon nap, in the Bremen home of his friend Barbara Duden in December 2002 at the age of seventy-six.

The AP newswire, which carried the announcement to the world, stated that no cause of death had been given.[4] Since a death certificate requires such things, for the purpose of producing population statistics, the doctor completing the formalities declared the cause to be heart failure.[5] Nonetheless, because some of those who loved him could not reconcile themselves to his refusal to seek treatment, because cancer occupies a high position in the demonology of the modern West, and because one of his most famous books had been a study of the counterproductivity of modern medicine, an alternative fact established itself as early as some of the newspaper obituaries, to be cemented in so authoritative a source as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: Ivan Illich had died of his refusal to seek treatment for cancer and (by implication) his stubborn, foolish, prideful and dogmatic adherence to the now unfashionable ideas for which he had once, a long time ago, been famous.[6]

Back then, he had been treated as an authority in his own right, albeit an iconoclastic one. The 1970 edition of *The Great Books Today* – an annual supplement to the *Britannica Great Books* series – took as its theme, Revolution, and opened with a "symposium" composed of contributions from the anarchist thinker Paul Goodman, the conservative William F. Buckley Jr., the grand old historian Arnold Toynbee, and Ivan Illich, whose biographical description noted that he had recently been 'granted by his religious superiors a suspension from his priestly functions'.[7] The story of his inquisition at the Vatican had been reported in vivid detail in the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine.[8] In the years that followed, the short, sharp books he later called "my pamphlets" were excerpted in the *New York Review of Books* and on the front page of *Le Monde*.[9] In the course of *Deschooling Society*, *Tools for Conviviality*, *Energy & Equity* and *Medical Nemesis*, he developed a critique of the systems of industrial society, the unexamined mythology on which these systems rest, their liturgical function in the formation of a newly helpless kind of human being, and the unacknowledged tendencies by which they end up producing the opposite of their stated goals.[10] Beyond a certain point, schooling systems increase ignorance and healthcare systems make us sicker, just as prisons produce criminality.

In the age of the *Limits to Growth* report, Illich challenged audiences to look beyond the quantitative account of limits which presses the case for technocracy, and to engage in a reflection on the desirability of chosen limits, the ways in which they serve to create the conditions of possibility for lives worth living and worlds worth living for. Half a century later, the challenges which Illich brought can speak to our times and trouble the 'new gods' of techno-religion, not least the assumption that 'overcoming limitations' is always and obviously a desirable objective. To make this clearer, I want to draw attention to a group of relatively unknown texts, written after the years of his fame and as yet unpublished, which constitute an enquiry into the transformation of the university in 'the age of systems'.[11] Within these texts, Illich left us clues to the formation of counterforces in such an age and the ways in which Christian practices might inform the kinds of resistance that are possible today. This is what brings me to the Saturday in March 1996 when Illich stood before a gathering of some of the world's leading Catholic philosophers in Redondo Beach, Los Angeles and declared himself 'a xenocryst'.

A xenocryst is a mineral foreign to the rock in which it is embedded. The term calls back to Illich's earliest university studies in Florence in the 1940s, where he took courses in chemistry and crystallography. Through its etymology, it invokes the stranger whose presence could inspire the hostility we call 'xenophobia' or set in motion the dance of hospitality. Illich had often been the stranger, not only as the child of a Jewish mother in Nazified Vienna, but as the exotic young priest in Washington Heights, New York who told a colleague, 'I wish like you I had been a slaughterhouse butcher, because I could be closer to the other priests.'[12] Now, as an old man, he found himself a stranger once again in a hall full of professional philosophers making careers within the academic-industrial complex. Among the other speakers were such luminaries as Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor.[13][1]

In such a setting, Illich presented his contribution as an 'extravagance', a term he loved for its root meaning, 'to wander outside'.[14] In the works of Saint Augustine, he would tell a later audience, 'the word *extra-vagare* [suggests] to take leisure; to look at how you live today, here, from the outside.'[15] This was the spirit in which Illich spoke. Of course, 'to wander outside' is also 'to go beyond', with a suggestion of transgression, and Illich was alive to this; yet he is a curious transgressor, one who has a reverence for

boundaries. You might say that it was this reverence which compelled him to step outside and speak about 'how you live today, here'.

This paradoxical relationship to boundaries is made vivid in the last in the litany of exotic words by which Illich chose to declare himself to his audience of Catholic philosophers: 'I am,' he says, 'a *Zaunreiter*', a hedge-straddler, 'which is an old name for witch.'[16] Speaking in front of a Catholic association for the first time since he promised Pope Paul VI 'to abstain from talking to groups of priests or nuns', he more or less challenges them to put him to the stake, or at least makes clear that he stands with those who met that fate. With this term, too, he is calling back to his early studies and the doctoral thesis he wrote at the University of Salzburg on Arnold Toynbee and the philosophy of history. The role of historian was one to which he returned in the 1980s, due not least to his close collaboration with Barbara Duden, herself a major German historian of medicine and gender. The hedge which Illich presents himself as straddling is the one which encloses the garden of Catholic philosophy, into whose trees 'more than two dozen generations have … carefully grafted pagan Greek and Roman shoots'. So he stands with one foot in this already hybrid enclosure and the other 'heavy with mud clots and scented by exotic herbs through which I have tramped', quite literally, in that he had walked and hitchhiked the length of South America.[17]

In identifying as a Zaunreiter, Illich declares himself a liminal figure, one who belongs to the *limen* or threshold. Here we might turn for a moment to a book written by Illich's friend Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*.[18] In Hyde's account, the Trickster is not only the archetypal 'boundary-crosser' but also, in stories from many cultures, the one responsible for the creation of a boundary. In an early essay, 'The Rebirth of Epimethean Man', Illich invoked the less-remembered brother of Prometheus, that heroic boundary-crosser of Greek myth.[19] This is a story recalled by Hyde in a footnote: 'We could treat Prometheus as a trickster if we always joined him with his brother.'[20] In drawing attention instead to their separation, both Hyde and Illich gesture towards an unhappy split between these twin functions – the making and taking down of boundaries – which lies deep in the roots of the Western tradition.

In his pamphlets of the 1970s, Illich analysed what he termed the 'threshold of counterproductivity': the point beyond which increasing the intensity or the amount of

a given thing begins to produce the opposite of the intended effect.[21] Returning to the study of history, he wrote of 'the war on subsistence' and the destruction of the 'vernacular' domain: the capacity of households to meet their own and each other's needs, outside of the market economy, which had been central to human life in all cultures until quite recently, but whose dismantling was necessary in order that people would submit to the new logic of industrial society.[22] A household is constituted by a threshold, a door which may be opened or shut, which marks a limit and is a precondition for the possibility of hospitality.

There is a further sense in which Illich straddles a boundary, a point on which he elaborates in the Los Angeles talk and other writings of this period: he had been born into a world of tools, but had witnessed its transformation into a world of systems.[23] A tool can be taken up and put down, according to the user's own intentions, and the boundary between tool and user remains clear. A system envelops the user, in a previously unimaginable way, so that the boundary loses its clarity: the user becomes a component within the system, dependent on and formed by *its* capacities and needs. The new technologies Illich had lived to see were 'so built that they co-opt and integrate their user's hands, ears, and eyes … No one can easily break the bonds forged by years of television absorption and curricular education.'[24] Both form us into a new kind of dependency, unknown to earlier generations.

Illich identifies the crossing of this historical threshold with a shift in the 'root-metaphor' of Western culture.[25] For eight centuries, this culture had centred on the book: the portable codex, laid out for silent reading, which came into being with a set of innovations around the year 1150 and transformed the cultural imagination and self-understanding of Western Christianity, even before the printing press enabled its proliferation as an object. From the ways in which binding agreements were made to the examination of the conscience, the book became the reference point for a world. In religion, education and magic alike, it served as a power object: a tool of liberation or indoctrination, salvation or subversion. And then, in the course of a generation or so, the power left it, as the culture reoriented around a new focal object: the screen. Its glow became the hearth around which a household gathers, the stargate before which we congregate in darkened theatres. By the century's end, its black mirror stood on every

desk; soon afterwards, in miniature, it found a place in all our pockets. Books continue to be written and published, read and cherished, but these activities now take place somewhere off to the side. The age of 'bookish reading' – an expression which Illich borrowed from George Steiner – is at an end.[26]

The crossing of this threshold is marked most clearly in the transformation of the institution which mirrored the material object of the book.[27] The university came into being in the same historical moment as the portable codex and, for all its reforms, the centrality of the book was a constant of scholarly activity. Then, starting with the post-Sputnik surge in research funding in the United States, it was transformed into something quite different: an engine of technological advancement and economic growth.[28] On his way to Bremen to deliver a keynote address on the twentieth anniversary of the founding of a new university in that city, Illich fell into conversation with a professor of solid state physics whose research had contributed to the design of the high-speed train on which they were travelling. Why was it, they wondered together, that so many of their colleagues and members of the wider public went on pretending that he and his associates were 'scientists whose labors occasionally bring forth something useful like the brakes of a very fast train?' This was, they both agreed, 'plain, pious nonsense':

> The university in Germany, no less than in the U.S., has become a service for sale, ever more ready to hire itself out to governments or multinationals. It makes itself important through communal navel-gazing. Pedagogues and astronomers, gene researchers and sociologists, all work to process data and present them for verification to a management committee of peers, that is, like-minded data producers.[29]

Here, in the early 1990s, Illich anticipates the development characterised more recently by the philosopher Justin Smith-Riu as 'the STEMification of the humanities', in which even the remaining disciplinary redoubts of humanist scholarship ape the research methods and rhetoric of their better-funded counterparts so as to justify their continued existence.[30]

The university today is an industrious operation. If, as a guest, you should offer the observation that the Western tradition long considered leisure to be the precondition for learning, that our word 'school' descends from the Greek σχολή meaning 'vacation', the locals will frown at your unworldliness and get back to business. Stories abound of the graduate student who is finally let in on the secret: no one actually ever *reads* the whole book![31] Who has time for that? All of this is accompanied by an exponential increase in the volume of published research, most of which will never be read by anyone besides the peer reviewers. Produced in service to the quantitative measures of output out of which careers are made, academic publication begins to resemble the 'proof-of-work' required of computer processors to accumulate cryptocurrency assets. Once the activity of scholarship has been so transformed, it is only logical that the human components should be replaced in due course by AI bots.

What then, for those of us who will not go willingly into the role of components within an information processing system? In his Bremen speech, Illich described faculties 'split between those who would assign to the university the task of higher information management and facility of communications, and those who treasure the university mainly as the milieu of freedom allowing us to create niches of intense face-to-face inquiry, controversy and conversation.'[32] The moment in which such a split could figure as a fork in the road for the university as institution has surely passed, but Illich's description of it deserves attention. The alternative to the default path of university as information system is not a retreat or an attempt at preservation, creating some kind of scholarly Skansen, an island of old-fashioned bookishness among a rising tide of screen-age data production. Rather, he sees in the activities of his dissident friends an 'attempt to reform the university in a way more radical than anything ever seen before.'[33]

This turn in Illich's argument suggests a principle with wider application and a path which leads beyond the paralysis of technologically induced pessimism. Even as he mourns the passing of the age of bookish reading, 'the enormous beauty and wealth of the bibliophilia of my nurture in youth and pleasure in adult teaching', he seeks to draw attention to the arc of what is ending: that it had a beginning, and that in that moment, other things were ending or being pushed to the margins.[34] It is the particular gift of a

time of endings that these earlier losses come more clearly into view and may even present themselves as dropped threads to be picked up and woven into an ongoing story.

In the case of the university, its beginnings lie in the shift from monastic to scholastic reading practices, made possible by those mid-twelfth century innovations in the technology of the book. Prior to that point, to read was almost always to read aloud, an embodied activity in which words were savoured on the tongue and shared with hearers, and study took place within a setting structured around rhythms of communal prayer and work. With the birth of scholastic reading and the first universities, a previously unthinkable split opened within Western culture, one for which Illich could find no parallel elsewhere. In all high cultures, there have been institutions centred on reading: the madrassa, the yeshiva, the ashram. Yet only in the West and from the twelfth century onwards do we find an institution which 'succeeded in prying loose the acquisition of knowledge from advancement in sensual self-discipline.' On this side of the threshold, 'the social pursuit of higher learning acquired growing independence from personal commitment to spiritual formation.'[35] Two sets of habits, whose mutual dependence and complementarity had been assumed, now became severed. 'Higher education has come to be the refinement of the habits of the mind, while military service, schools, the conjugal family and later the media have taken over the sad remnants of the "heart's" formation.'[36]

Never before and nowhere else had it been thinkable that a person could pursue knowledge without also seeking wisdom, or that knowledge could be treated as a commodity to be produced, acquired and stockpiled, rather than an experience of knowing that leaves the knower changed. From the perspective of other human cultures, such a severance appears perverse and dangerous – and, arguably, the history of the West over the past eight centuries offers confirmation of that judgement.

Yet to contemplate such a judgement is not to reject the inheritance of those centuries or propose some far-fetched return to a lost monastic age; it is rather to widen our imagination concerning what might be done now with that inheritance. What Illich sees among his friends is something at once historically new and resonant with what was lost at the inception of the university:

> Those who want to nest in niches that are propitious for the cultivation of the ascetical complement to intellectual pursuits … feel secure enough in the humanistic tradition, and free enough in front of all church authorities, to set out on their journey into embodied truth. They believe in the potential strength of friendship to find the courage for cultivating the renunciation of artificially captivating symbols for the sake of a growing awakening of the senses.[37]

This could not be a 'continuation' of any earlier tradition: 'The asceticism which can be practiced at the end of the 20th century is something profoundly different from any previously known.'[38] Along with Steiner, Illich could dream that:

> Outside the education system which has assumed entirely different functions there might be something like *houses of reading*, not unlike the Jewish *shul*, the Islamic *medersa*, or the monastery, where the few who discover their passion for a life centred on reading would find the necessary guidance, silence, and complicity of disciplined companionship.[39]

Illich practiced something like this with his friends, setting up house together on the edge of campus, wherever he landed for a season as a visiting professor, and gathering friends and strangers around the long table where meals and conversations unfolded. Already in the 1990s, they detected a new hunger, on both sides of the Atlantic, for what such a house could offer:

> Our students show an amazing interest in the practice of *philia*, the more so, the more clearly they understand the sadness of having lost all moorings. They follow with surprising attention our doubts about the possibility of ethics in the absence of shared forms of hospitality, and after the loss of respect for the art of suffering.[40]

Thirty years later and further into the technological transformation of the university, I have had the good fortune to be part of a spreading rumour of such houses, small schools and communities of learning oriented to the scale of gathering around the table. They do not look large enough to be a threat or a successor to existing institutions of higher education, nor do they offer the kinds of social status and economic security which the

late twentieth-century university could promise. They do not look large enough to be taken seriously, which may be a virtue in an age of rising authoritarianism and all-seeing technologies of surveillance. Putting our faith in what the world deems foolish, we may hide in plain sight.

Illich chose his language according to his audience. To that gathering of Catholic philosophers, he spoke of ascesis as 'the acquisition of habits that foster contemplation' which, for the believer, means 'the conversion to God's human face'. In our time, he went on, 'such conversion means Exodus.' And in a passage which gestures towards the ecological and cultural devastation to which recent centuries have brought us, he spelt out the nature of the Exodus he saw ahead and the kind of attention to the technologies of our age which this would call for:

> On the other shore of today's Nile lies a still unexplored anthropogenetic desert that we are called to enter. Understanding the characteristic features of new artifacts has become the necessary preface to this step: to dare chaste friendship, intransitive dying, and a contemplative life in a technogenic world.[41]

Dougald Hine
a school called HOME
Östervåla, 10 March 2025

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[1] Richard H. Roberts. *Religion, Theology & the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, xi.
[2] Ivan Illich, Jerry Brown & Carl Mitcham. Land of Found Friends. *Whole Earth* No.90, Summer 1997, 26.
[3] Ivan Illich. Philosophy ... Artifacts ... Friendship. Unpublished manuscript, dated 05.10.01, collection of David Tinapple.
Lee Hoinacki. *Dying Is Not Death*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2007, 104.
[4] AP News. Sociologist Ivan Illich Dies at 76. 2002-12-04.
[5] Personal communication with Silja Samerski.
[6] Aaron Cooley. Ivan Illich: Austrian philosopher and priest. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2015. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ivan-Illich
[7] Robert M. Hutchins & Mortimer J. Adler (eds). *The Great Ideas Today: 1970*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1970, 28.
[8] Francine du Plessix Gray. The Rules of the Game. *The New Yorker*, April 25, 1970, 40-92.
[9] Ivan Illich. Why We Must Abolish Schooling. *New York Review of Books*, July 2, 1970, 9-15.
Ivan Illich. La Crise d'Energie et la Justice Sociale. *Le Monde*, June 4, 5 & 6, 1973.
[10] Ivan Illich. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
Ivan Illich. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
Ivan Illich. *Energy and Equity*. London: Marion Boyars, 1974.
Ivan Illich. *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*. London: Marion Boyars, 1974.

[11] These texts are as follows:
Ivan Illich. ASCESIS: Introduction, etymology and bibliography. Unpublished manuscript dated 1989 in collection of David Tinapple.
Ivan Illich. Text and University: On the idea and history of a unique institution. Keynote address given at the 20th anniversary of the University of Bremen. Unpublished manuscript dated 1991 in collection of David Tinapple.
Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship.
Ivan Illich. The Cultivation of Conspiracy.
[12] Francine du Plessix Gray. *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism*. New York: Knopf, 1970, 244.
[13] Taylor would end up playing a crucial role in lifting Illich's later work into public view, when he wrote a foreword to *The Rivers North of the Future*, the posthumously published book edited from David Cayley's late interviews with Illich. In his foreword, Taylor records that Illich's account of 'the corruption of Christianity' had 'helped both to inspire and to refocus' his own efforts towards the book that became *A Secular Age*. But when Cayley had attempted to interest Taylor in Illich's work, earlier in the 1990s, the philosopher had dismissed him as a counterculture throwback, and it seems their encounter in Los Angeles did not disabuse him of this impression. (Personal communication with David Cayley.)
[14] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship, 1.
[15] Ivan Illich. The Personal Decision in a World Dominated by Communication. *Conspiratio*, Spring 2023, 100. This would turn out to be Illich's last talk, given at the Scuola per la Pace, Lucca, Italy, on 2 October, 2002.
[16] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship, 1.
[17] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship, 1.
Neto Leão. Not a clergyman, just a man. Conspiratio, Spring 2022, 140-151. This article includes a discussion of Illich's four-month journey from Santiago, Chile to Caracas, Venezuela in 1959.
[18] Lewis Hyde. *Trickster Makes This World*. London: Canongate, 2008.
[19] Ivan Illich. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, 105-116.
[20] Lewis Hyde. *Trickster Makes This World*, 356.
[21] Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*. London: Marion Boyars, 1976, 211-220. This expanded edition of *Medical Nemesis* contains the fullest statement of Illich's thinking on counterproductivity.
[22] Ivan Illich. *Shadow Work*. London: Marion Boyars, 1981.
[23] Ivan Illich & David Cayley. *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005, 157-168.
[24] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship. 2.
[25] Ivan Illich. *In the Vineyard of the Text.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 3.
[26] George Steiner. The End of Bookishness. *Times Literary Supplement*, vol.8, 16 July, 1988, 754.
[27] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 4.
[28] Ivan Illich. The Cultivation of Conspiracy. In Lee Hoinacki & Carl Mitcham (eds), *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002, 235.
[29] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 1.
[30] Justin Smith–Riu. Notes on the Political Economy of the 21st-Century University. *The Hinternet*, 21 September, 2024. https://www.the-hinternet.com/p/notes-on-the-political-economy-of.
[31] William Deresiewicz. Here Come the Allodidacts. *The Hinternet*, 9 February, 2025. https://www.the-hinternet.com/p/here-come-the-allodidacts. See Frank's story, near the end of Deresiewicz's article, for an example.
[32] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 11.
[33] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 12.
[34] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 10.
[35] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 9.
[36] Ivan Illich. ASCESIS, 1.
[37] Ivan Illich. Text and University, 11.
[38] Ivan Illich. ASCESIS, 2.
[39] Ivan Illich. *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 3.
[40] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship, 4.
[41] Ivan Illich. Philosophy … Artifacts … Friendship, 1.