

Tools for Conviviality

Ivan Illich

Extrait du livre *Tools for conviviality* paru en 1973.

Convivial reconstruction

The symptoms of accelerated crisis are widely recognized. Multiple attempts have been made to explain them. I believe that this crisis is rooted in a major twofold experiment which has failed, and I claim that the resolution of the crisis begins with a recognition of the failure. For a hundred years we have tried to make machines work for men and to school men for life in their service. Now it turns out that machines do not “work” and that people cannot be schooled for a life at the service of machines. The hypothesis on which the experiment was built must now be discarded. The hypothesis was that machines can replace slaves. The evidence shows that, used for this purpose, machines enslave men. Neither a dictatorial proletariat nor a leisure mass can escape the dominion of constantly expanding industrial tools.

The crisis can be solved only if we learn to invert the present deep structure of tools; if we give people tools that guarantee their right to work with high, independent efficiency, thus simultaneously eliminating the need for either slaves or masters and enhancing each person’s range of freedom. People need new tools to work with rather than tools that “work” for them. They need technology to make the most of the energy and imagination each has, rather than more well-programmed energy slaves. I believe that society must be reconstructed to enlarge the contribution of autonomous individuals and primary groups to the total effectiveness of a new system of production designed to satisfy the human needs which it also determines. In fact, the institutions of industrial society do just the opposite. As the power of machines increases, the role of persons more and more decreases to that of mere consumers.

(...) People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others. Prisoners in rich countries often have access to more things and services than members of their families, but they have no say in how things are to be made and cannot decide what to do with them. Their punishment consists in being deprived of what I shall call “conviviality.” They are degraded to the status of mere consumers.

I choose the term “conviviality” to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that, in any society, as conviviality is

reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members.

Present institutional purposes, which hallow industrial productivity at the expense of convivial effectiveness, are a major factor in the amorphousness and meaninglessness that plague contemporary society. The increasing demand for products has come to define society's process. I will suggest how this present trend can be reversed and how modern science and technology can be used to endow human activity with unprecedented effectiveness. This reversal would permit the evolution of a life style and of a political system which give priority to the protection, the maximum use, and the enjoyment of the one resource that is almost equally distributed among all people: personal energy under personal control. I will argue that we can no longer live and work effectively without public controls over tools and institutions that curtail or negate any person's right to the creative use of his or her energy. For this purpose we need procedures to ensure that controls over the tools of society are established and governed by political process rather than by decisions by experts.

Radical monopoly

By radical monopoly I mean a kind of dominance by one product that goes far beyond what the concept of monopoly usually implies. Generally we mean by "monopoly" the exclusive control by one corporation over the means of producing (or selling) a commodity or service. Coca-Cola can create a monopoly over the soft-drink market in Nicaragua by being the only maker of soft drinks which advertises with modern means. (...) Monopolies of this kind have been recognized for a century as dangerous by-products of industrial expansion, and legal devices have been developed in a largely futile attempt to control them. Monopolies of this kind restrict the choices open to the consumer.

(...) By "radical monopoly" I mean the dominance of one type of product rather than the dominance of one brand. I speak about radical monopoly when one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition.

Cars can thus monopolize traffic. They can shape a city into their image—practically ruling out locomotion on foot or by bicycle in Los Angeles. They can eliminate river traffic in Thailand. That motor traffic curtails the right to walk, not that more people drive Chevies than Fords, constitutes radical monopoly. What cars do to people by virtue of this radical monopoly is quite distinct from and independent of what they do by burning gasoline that could be transformed into food in a crowded world. It is also distinct from automotive manslaughter. Of course cars burn gasoline that could be used to make food. Of course they are dangerous and costly. But the radical monopoly cars establish is destructive in a special way. Cars create distance. Speedy vehicles of all kinds render space scarce. They drive wedges of highways into populated areas, and then extort tolls on the bridge over the remoteness between people that was manufactured for their sake. This monopoly over land turns space into car fodder. It destroys the environment for feet and bicycles. Even if planes and buses could run as nonpolluting, nondepleting public services, their inhuman velocities would degrade man's innate mobility and force him to spend more time for the sake of travel.