

**Barbara Duden**

# **A Symposium for Ivan Illich**

A report on the on the symposium for Ivan Illich,  
University of Bremen February 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of 2003.

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## A Symposium for Ivan Illich

On Friday 7th and Saturday 8th, 2003, we gathered in the library hall of Bremen University to say farewell to Ivan Illich. For this week-end Ivan had planned to conduct his second seminar this winter term. Two months after he had died in early December 2002, over hundred-and-fifty friends and students came to celebrate in his spirit. Colleagues and friends recalled his lectures over the last ten years; friends played lute, tabla and the ney, the turkish flute, and on Friday night everyone assembled for bread, wine and olives in the University cafeteria lit up with hundreds of candles. Ivan's absent presence was dearly felt. We had buried him, yet his warmth towards each one of us over those years had kindled an atmosphere of trust between his friends. Decidedly, this farewell to Ivan was not an academic memorial to a great scholar but the celebration of awareness of his friends, a feast with and for Ivan.

Johannes Beck and Barbara Duden set the tone. She told about Ivan's extraordinary astrological constellation which Annis Fromm, the widow of Erich Fromm, once had cast in an image. Ivan, she had said in view of his stars, is like a broad leaf-less bush with hundreds of birds squatting on its branches. So here they were, Ivan's "birds", his lame ducks and migrant birds, tippet grebes, paradise birds, eagles and cranes. Nils Christie from Norway, Fjedor Shanin from Moscow, Uwe Pörksen from Freiburg, Christine von Weizsäcker from Bonn, Hanns Steger from Erlangen. For four months every winter Ivan had taught at the university, and he saw public teaching, next to being an author and a scholar, as his most important task. Doggedly he turned the institutional space allotted to him into a room of his own, a room for curious inquiry and lively conversations. He lectured in a way that defied the strict confines of academic disciplines, fostering trains of thought that were not limited to exercises of the brain, but would embrace the whole person, body and spirit, mind and heart. Tongue in cheek Silja Samerski and Matthias Rieger remembered scenes of Ivan's peculiar, sometimes slightly confusing manner of lecturing. He did not keep to his papers, would not stick to the linear development of a thesis, but rush off telling stories, anecdotes, parables. His style of lecturing was rabbinic: by telling a story he would encourage unexpected insights, shedding at once light in different directions. He would not stick to a well ordered structure of argument, that lent itself to be easily repeated and memorized. Instead, as a teacher he guided his audience to surprising turns and twists of thought. Some memo-

ries during the celebration in Bremen voiced the intense fun it was to listen to Ivan's lecturing - you would never know in advance where you ended up, you could not foresee the perspective Ivan was trying to lead into. A student, a nurse and psychologist said, that in her academic field, clinical psychology, she could never understand the context which would make a thesis or fact meaningful. Facts in clinical psychology are taught as unrefutable, they dress up as objectifiable "knowledge". Here, with Ivan, said this student, she came to realize, that in listening she could trust, follow her nose and hunches, turn them over in her mind again and again. Ivan's ruminations demanded to be dwelt on and pondered over and over.

Uwe Pörksen, a friend of Ivan's from the early 1980s, in his speech asked the question: "Why is it that Ivan as an author has almost been forgotten?" Pörksen read sentences from his earlier work, sentences brimful, that would force the mind of the reader to let go some cherished certainties. Pörksen stressed the contrast between Ivan's teaching in the habit of metaphorical oral allusions and the clarity of his written texts. As an author Ivan carefully sought how to carve an argument to turn the apple cart. In his earlier work Ivan exercised the art of pamphlet writing, an art brought to excellence in the eighteenth century. The titles of his earlier work: "Deschooling Society", "Planned Poverty: The End Result of Technical Assistance", "Medical Nemesis", in one line encapsuled the judgement implied. The pamphlet, so Pörksen, is a special form of writing, willing to attack by illuminating the matter under consideration from just one clear stance. Pamphlets rouse from apathy, stir the mind. At the height in the 1970s of public belief in the promises of progress, development and expert-knowledge, Ivan would prognosticate the devastating effects of these certainties. At that time he was widely read. Pörksen asked if the demise of his public appreciation as author could be explained by the radical change in times. Ivan's pamphlets then were prophetic, making visible the conundrum of progress which then was latent but for many still unnoticeable. Now, today, the crisis cannot be overlooked any more, it is apparent: the crisis of the educational system, of the health system, of energy consumption. Ivan's diagnosis was untimely, Pörksen said, in the wake of the 70s too early; now, in the new millenium, what he saw then has become real, and all the more discomfoting to his readers.

Pörksen continued: "Ivan was the most serious and the funniest person I have ever met." What made him an important author were the scope and the earnest of his inventory of the destructive effects of modernity, and the unparalleled provocation to rethink one's time and points of

view. Ivan with all his stylistic capacities pleaded his readers to grope for ascetical ways of living and acting, and to rely on trust, friendship, maturity, and hope for surprise." In the course of the debate after Pörksen's presentation Nils Christie spoke up, sociologist and humanist from Norway, and a sharp critic of "crime control as industry", of the rising number of prison inmates. Did Ivan offer an alternative? Was his task mainly to unravel illusions? Did Ivan's writing, next to analysing the inherent destructive power in secularized promises for salvation via progress, offer a way out? Pörksen contended that Ivan had nothing to offer but a clear-sighted diagnosis of contemporary illusions. Nils Christie claimed that in his own life he nurtured alternative ways of living. Ivan, Christie said, knew about the catastrophe into which our age was moving. The answer he had to offer was trust in friends, hope for surprise, reliance on mutual respect and love.

Wolfgang Sachs, who has known Ivan for more than three decades, and had collaborated with him on the critique of the age of development probed Ivan's stance. Was he, as a young priest, primarily an anticlerical who turned against the Church because institutionalization destroys love and charity? From whence did stem Ivan's intuitiv sense of the deadliness of administration, bureaucracy, expert-systems? Ivan has been a puzzle to me, Sachs said. And he recalled a scene in 1973, when they were discussing the promises of development, the arrogance of an optimization of the human condition. Sachs defended the thesis, that Illich very early saw about the counterproductivity of service institutions. He saw that the interventions to alleviate pain, to better health, to generalize education would not only undermine the very goals of the effort, but ultimately would destroy people's capacities to enjoy their living and suffer their destiny. Ivan, Sachs said, was the most outspoken visionary of the loss of the world, a visionary of the subtle yet powerful aggression against all self-relying forms of living. Living in an age that crossed the threshold into a designed, fabricated, money-saturated and man-made world, Ivan wrote the necrologies to that loss of the world. He stood where intellectuals shy to stand: in a radical denial of contemporaneity. He resisted to see his own epoch through the perspective of his epoch's certainties. Instead, Ivan moved back in time, trained himself to perceive the modern world through the eyes of former times. To quote Ivan: "As scholar, as author and as teacher I want to understand globalized modernity from a historical perspective and in this way gain a critical stance towards modern certainties (...) Repeated experience has taught me, that only who can take a past reality as something real, could foster the wish to perceive his own times in a historical perspective.

Only then you feel empowered to seriously reflect the stance you want to take viz-a-viz the times you live in."

Six years ago on the celebration of his seventieth birthday at Bremen University, Ivan had spoken of Hugh of St. Victor, his teacher, a monk in the twelfth century. In a letter Hugh had compared himself to a donkey loaded with baskets - the baggage of his friendships collected in the course of a life-long pilgrimage. The baskets were not heavy, but lightened by the content.