

THE LOSS OF WORLD AND FLESH

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and

Ivan Illich (2002): "Verlust von Welt und Fleisch", in Freitag 51, 13. Dezember 2002, S. 18

On Monday, December 2nd 2002, Ivan Illich died. For several years he had been ready to die, still, his death came as a surprise. Ivan was in the midst of preparations for his seminar on the "corruptio optimi", the corruption of the best. This seminar was scheduled at the University of Bremen for the upcoming weekend, and Ivan had hoped with friends and students to reflect on his ideas on the ecclesiastical origin of uniquely Western certainties. These historical investigations on the perversion of the Gospel run like a red thread through the last decade of his teachings in Bremen. With the help of his friends he had hoped to finish the manuscript on this subject within the next months.

On Thursday, December 5th, we buried him in the cemetery of Oberneuland in Bremen. During the preceding days many people came to his Bremen home for the death-watch and to bid him farewell. At the beginning of the funeral service in St. Johann Wolfgang Sachs read the following text, in which Ivan bemoans the loss of the art of dying. It is a letter of congratulation, which Ivan wrote in 1992 to Hellmut Becker, then director of the Max-Planck-Institute for Educational Research in Berlin.

At the end of January 2003 Ivan had hoped to run this winter's session second seminar. Johannes Beck now prepares a convocation for February 7/8th at the University in Bremen. Then we will try to further spin out threads from Ivan's thinking.

Barbara Duden and Silja Samerski, Bremen

Ivan Illich

THE LOSS OF WORLD AND FLESH

Formerly one left the world by dying. Until then one lived in it. Both of us belong to that generation that still had been born "into the world", but who are now threatened to die without a foothold in it. Unlike any other generation we have lived through the break with the world.

Formerly, the drop-out set off on a pilgrimage to Santiago; begged for *stabilitas* at the entrance of the monastery; joined the lepers. The Russian and Greek world also offered the possibility to become not a monk but a holy fool, and for the rest of life cadge with dogs and beggars in the atrium of a Church. But even for those extreme world fugitives, "the world" remained the sensual frame of their passing existence. The "world" remained a temptation especially for the one who wanted to renounce it. Most of those who pretended to have left the world soon caught themselves in cheating. The history of Christian asceticism is that of a heroic attempt of sincerity in the renunciation of a "world" to which every fiber adhered. When dying my uncle Alberto still had served to him the *Vin Santo* harvested in the year of his birth.

Today this has changed. The 2000-year epoch of Christian Europe is gone. That world has passed, into which our generation was born. Not only to the young but also for us, the old, it has become incomprehensible, impalpable. The old have always remembered better times, but that is no excuse for us, who were alive during the regimes of Stalin, Roosevelt, Hitler and Franco, to forget the farewell to the world we lived through.

I remember the day when I became old once and for all. I cannot forget the dark clouds of March in the evening sun and the vineyard on the Sommerleite between Pötzleinsdorf and Salmansdorf near Vienna, two days before the "Anschluss". Until that hour it had been a certainty for me that some day I would give children to the old tower on the Dalmatian Island. Since that lonely walk this seemed impossible. Then, as a twelve year old boy, I experienced the disembedding of the flesh from the warp and weft of history, even before a command was issued from Berlin to gas all fools in the Reich.

To talk to each other about this break in the experience of world and death is a privilege of the generation who knew what had been before. Hellmut, I think I am writing to someone who also knew that. When, very young, destiny made me into a colleague, counselor and friend of women and men several generations my elders. Thus I learned to let myself be shaped and cultivated by people who were too old to take part in the experience of that disembodiment. On the other hand without exception our students are offspring of the epoch after Guernica, Dresden, Bergen-Belsen and Los Alamos. Genocide and Human Genome-Project; the death of the forests and hydroponics; heart-transplants and medicide on insurance -these all are equally tasteless, without smell, impalpable and un-worldly. We, who are just old enough and yet young enough to have lived through the End of Nature, the end of a world proportionate to the senses, should be able to die like no one else.

What has been composed can decompose. The past can be re-evoked. But Paul Celan knew that only smoke remains from the world-dwindling that we have experienced. It is the virtual drive of my computer that serves me as the symbol for this irretrievable disappearance, and through which the loss of world and flesh can be envisaged. The worldliness of the world is not deposited like ruins in deeper layers of the ground. It is gone, like an erased line of the RAM drive.

This is why we, the seventy years old, can be unique witnesses, not only for names but also for perceptions that no one knows any more. Yet, many who have stood in this break have been broken by it. I do know some who themselves tore their threads to an existence before the Atom bomb, Auschwitz and AIDS. Deep in their hearts in the middle of their existence they have become *viejos verdes*, old greens, who pretend it were possible to have fathers in the manageable show that became a "system". What had been propaganda in the Nazi Period and could be undermined by hearsay, is now being sold - as a Menu with the computer program or with the insurance policy; as counseling for education, bereavement or cancer treatment; as group therapy for those affected. We old ones belong to the generation of pioneers of that non-sense. We are the last of that generation who helped to transform the systems of development, communication and services into a worldwide need. The world-estranged disembodiment and programmed helplessness which we have propagated, by far exceeds the waste that

in our generation has been deposited in heaven and on earth, in ground waters below and the stratosphere above.

We were in key positions when TV removed daily life from people. I myself have fought that the university TV station should, rain proof, broadcast from every village square of Puerto Rico. I did not know then how much this inevitably would reduce the range of the senses, and how much the horizon would be barricaded by administered presentation furniture. I didn't think that soon the European weather report from the evening show would color the first light of dawn seen through the window. For decades I have been too free and easy in handling inconceivable abstractions, like: one billion people in a bar chart. Since January my statement of account at the Chase Manhattan Bank is decorated with a graphic chart that allows me to compare at one glance my expenses for food and drink and office-material. Hundreds of minutest ingratiating services in information, administration and counseling deliver to me an interpretation of my *conditio humana*. When, more than twenty years ago, I discussed that topic with you, Hellmut, I could not imagine that the integration of the educational enterprise into life-long everyday life would be so smooth and slick.

Sensual reality sinks deeper and deeper under the foils of commands on how to see, hear and taste. The education into an unreal construction begins with schoolbooks whose text has shrunk to subtitles for graphic boxes and ends with the grip of the dying on to encouraging test-results about their condition. Exciting, soul-capturing abstractions have extended themselves over the perception of world and self like plastic pillowcases. I notice it when I speak to young people about the Resurrection from the dead: their difficulty consists not so much in a lack of confidence then in the disembodiment of their perceptions and of their life in constant distraction from their *soma*.

In a world, which is inimical to death, you and I prepare ourselves not to come to a mortal end but to die in the intransitive sense. On the occasion of your seventieth birthday let us celebrate friendship in which we shall praise God for the sensual glory of the real world through our good-bye from it.