

*The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West*  
By Todd Hartch, Oxford University Press, 2015

Reviewed by Peter Escalante

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Ivan Illich, idiosyncratic Catholic priest, dissident theologian, and philosopher, is known primarily for his series of short phenomenological essays illuminating various aspects of modern life. Like Giorgio Agamben's philosophical archaeology, Illich's method seeks to reveal the deep imaginal underpinnings of modern life. It is easy to get the impression from these essays that Illich was a calmly panoptic intellectual, though a passion for justice obviously warms his writing.

His life was tempestuous and often frustrated but always self-directed, perhaps even self-willed, and by no means merely incidental to his intellectual work. Even his death was a gesture of a piece with his life-work; he died of an extremely painful and disfiguring facial cancer. Illich in fact wrote his sophisticated essays in much the same way, and for much the same sort of purpose, as Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista movement in Mexico in the late twentieth century, and as the anti-slavery Catholic priest Bartolome De Las Casas wrote his remonstrances in the sixteenth century. Thus this well-written and very attentive biography is long overdue and a welcome arrival.

Illich's writing is relentlessly biographical, steadily eschewing the temptation to become merely a chronology of his life or an exegesis of the essays, or to take too forward a position of its own regarding Illich's remarkable itinerary. This is very helpful, because, as Hartch makes very clear, Illich's writing is not difficult to understand; rather, it can be extremely difficult to recognize his role, and only close attention will reveal his true motives.

Hartch rightly notes that Illich was a Christian priest and a missionary of the Catholic Church. The great and perhaps insuperable difficulty of Illich's mission was that the Catholic Church as he conceived it was dramatically different from the institution that goes under that name, and thus he was not a missionary of the ordinary sort and was in fact perhaps wholly unrecognizable when compared to other Catholic missionaries.

The book is an extended consideration of this project and this predicament. Hartch examines Illich's willingness to position himself outside the hierarchical, institutional bureaucracy of the Roman Catholic Church, but still within not only charism but even the office of minister and missionary (despite his radical critique of institution and mission as actually existing forms), his cultivation of convivial associations, and his teaching, which constituted a single missionary and reforming motive.

Hartch illustrates Illich's critique of the modern West and of the clerical bureaucracy that he regarded as its matrix and exemplar, as not simply a cry of protest but also a prophetic call

toward convivial communion. In Illich's own eyes, he was a missionary not "from" the West but rather to the West, and sent from the Catholic Church that he distinguished sharply from the institution that exists in hierarchical form. This is a really remarkable insight into Illich and illuminatingly unifies his life and works. Although the book is very responsibly and consistently biographical, for this reason I think it can also serve as a very fine introduction to the rest of Illich's life, work, and thought.

The book ends by recounting his many failures and frustrations, many of which were due to the unrecognizability of both his mission as mission and his church as church. In the extremity of the near-unrecognizability of his mission, and in the radicalism of both his analysis and his personal risk, Hartch sees Illich as assuming the mantle of prophet. As is often the case with prophets, his short-term failures seem to be spectacular. In particular, the reformed convivial and conciliar church, whose way Illich hoped to make clear through his ferocious critique of Roman Catholic missions, never appeared; what grew in the field he cleared were seeds planted by Protestant missionaries, whose churches, although plural and more populist, were nevertheless as institutionalist in their way as the Roman Catholic Church. And within Rome itself, those inspired by more hopeful readings of the texts of Vatican II were immediately re-circumscribed within the official institutions. Most painfully, perhaps, Illich ends up with fewer and fewer interlocutors, finding himself largely alone. But Hartch sees Illich's mission as leaving lasting testimony for those who wish to hear it.