Human and Institutions
Part 1
(stub)

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1. DIALECTICAL HUMANISM

Henri Lefebvre characterized his thinking as "dialectical humanism." "Dialectical" because he considered himself part of the Hegelian lineage that, according to his own *Dialectical Materialism*, first put Kant in motion. The "humanism" part was meant as a corrective to a strand of "*Marxist dogmatism*" that "*parenthesized man's nature*" as a laborer or producer above all else— as the animal that hammers out goods from natural resources. Insisting that we humans also make "history and situations," and even human nature itself, Lefebvre was uncorking the same humanism that once flowed through the quills of Renaissance writers like Pico della Mirandola, who trumpeted humans as the only creature "*of indeterminate and indifferent nature*," left to define themselves and their place within Creation. According to Mirandola, God sort of ran out of essences while working on the plant and animal kingdoms, and so plopped Adam down in the middle of the world, and said unto him "*we give you no fixed place to live, no form that is peculiar to you, nor any function that is yours alone. According to your desires and judgment, you will have and possess whatever place to live, whatever form, and whatever functions you yourself choose. All other things have a limited and fixed nature prescribed and bounded by our laws. You, with no limit or no bound, may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature.*"

But there's another larger sense of "dialectical humanism," owing neither allegiance to Hegel or Marx for its dialectics nor to the Renaissance or Enlightenment legacy for its humanism. I'll explain. Critics often rebuff Enlightenment humanism for leaving us with a specific "image of Man," the Eurocentric-bourgeois-self-interestedly-rational-individualistic-subject. And this is true enough. However, in so far as it was a humanism— and I think it was— the Enlightenment was as much a *negative* moment, taking the axe to the era's most oppressive institutions. This is the more enduring definition of humanism. In its social effects, humanism is not so much a doctrine about the essencelessness of humans. Humanism is the *historical* understanding that our systems and institutions— originally created by and for the benefit of humans— can and will eventually come to dominate their creators, and so must be continually renegotiated and readjusted to the current and complex needs of humankind. No matter how initially benevolent or helpful, institutions will ossify. Their helpfulness will aggregate into power imbalances or abstract control. Then, *pro bono humani generis*, they will have to be once again cut down— resized or subjugated— to suit what Protagoras called "Man, the measure of all things." During the Enlightenment, humanist opposition was largely aimed at altar and crown. Condorcet, an arch-lumière later dying in the Terror, explicitly targeted these two as "superstition" and "despotism" in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*: "*Nous avons vu la raison humaine se former lentement par les progrès naturels de la civilisation ; la superstition s'emparer d'elle pour la corrompre, et le despotisme degrader et engourdir les esprits sous le poids de la crainte et du malheur*"— "*We've seen human reason slowly formed by natural progressions of civilization as we've seen reason overtaken and corrupted by superstition, and spirits dulled and degraded by despotism under the weight of fear and misery.*"

The Enlightenment critiques of church and monarchy were very successful— fortunately for us— and now constitute much of the common sense of the Eurocentric West. However, in turn and as should be expected, these critiques themselves produced in their positive moments systems and institutions that eventually ossified into dogma and domination, such as scientism and neoliberalism, just to name a few. And so in turn and as should be expected, these overly systematized systems and overinstitutionalized institutions brought on incisive critiques of the Enlightenment heritage. And when and if these critiques institutionalize their power, and later harden and

sharpen and bully us around, the cycle will hopefully begin again. These cranks of the wheel, resulting from the dynamics of *power* in the most generic sense, are what makes humanism dialectical, and so much the better. When humanism is misunderstood as something non-dialectical or static, it's either associated with a codified set of beliefs or institutions— of the kind that stuck to Renaissance or Enlightenment humanism, to be overcome by a "post-humanism"— or with a sort of rigid anti-institutionalism, a hostility to all institutions and institutionalized power *as such*. This hostility is evident in a lot of explicitly anarchist thought. It's also detectable, I'd argue, in the work of Croatian-Austrian thinker and reformer Ivan Illich, in missives like *Deschooling Society* and *Tools of Conviviality*, although in ways subtle enough that they need to be, in the parlance of classroom exposition, "unpacked."

2. ILLICH'S CRITIQUE AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF TOOLS

Illich was certainly a humanist in our sense. His work is one prolonged rebuke to the size and might of institutions—politics, economics, education, transport, medicine— that he believes have come to abstractly dominate humanity, and many of his critiques are well-landed. Take *Deschooling Society*, his critique of the Western educational of model of universal, compulsory, disciplinary instruction and its effects on society. For one, you know that a society is really under the ideological sway of an institution when its value cannot even be questioned, as was the case with the Catholic Church was during the high middle ages. Today, school is a good as a matter of course. But precisely *what* good does it accomplish, and how, and for whom? Defenders will claim that schools are essential to engendering a freer, more democratic and egalitarian society. Which sounds well and fine. Though after just a moment's reflection it does seem funny that an institution whose every last mechanism is specifically design to stratify its captive populations— through grades, classes, tests, echelons, spatial segregation, disciplinary matrices— will somehow achieve its very opposite, egalitarianism. As Illich points out, the end result is that the initially disadvantaged grow further apart from the initially advantaged, only now their inferior social rank has been institutionally certified enough to follow them for the rest of their lives. Are parents so eager to enroll their children in *good* schools among other *good* students so that their children might finally get a better understanding of ring theory or the fall of the Roman Empire? No. The primary purpose is get a leg up on the very "invidious distinctions" that these schools create, and in no way to overcome. After all, in the United States, we're talking about a public school system that is still funded by local property taxes, a model that is so explicitly about class reproduction it almost makes you admire its chutzpah. Equally curious is how an institution run on a model of involuntary bureaucratic authoritarianism is supposed to ready our children for democracy and civil liberty. This isn't to say that kids should run free and that school should not be about socialization— children are brats, I'd keep mine chained in the cellar— but at no point in our K-12 is autonomy promoted over obedience, or productive independence over regimentation. Illich writes: "*Children are protected by neither the First nor the Fifth Amendment when they stand before that secular priest, the teacher. The child must confront a man who wears an invisible triple crown, like the papal tiara, the symbol of triple authority combined in one person. For the child, the teacher pontificates as pastor, prophet, and priest-he is at once guide, teacher, and administrator of a sacred ritual. He combines the claims of medieval popes in a society constituted under the guarantee that these claims shall never be exercised together by one established and obligatory institution—church or state.*" This may be a bit shrill but still it stands: *solidarity with the teen rebels.*

Maybe it would be justifiable if schools accomplished what they purportedly are made to do: to supply children with knowledge and with know-how. But is that really what they're for? The majority of high school students can spend four years in a Spanish class, with brains primed for language acquisition, and *not* learn Spanish. This is quite a feat when you think about it. And any kid who *does* manage to learn Spanish could probably have done better in two months by working after school at a bodega. The same dynamic is replicated in nearly every subject matter too. Struggling students learn nothing in school because they're trampled underneath a curriculum that doesn't work for them. Gifted students learn nothing in school because they're always ahead of the curriculum anyway and wasting their young lives in class. And all the students in between *might* learn something in school, but without control or alternative, we don't know how the school itself is helping or hampering. This is the critical test for Illich: do our institutions serve us or do we serve them, and at what point does the switch happen? When they serve us, enhancing social being and collective powers, Illich calls them "tools for conviviality" as opposed to manipulative and domineering tools, which is how he would characterize a number of our modern institutions.

Illich sees much of the problem as the encroachment of industrial forms into social life, into areas— he names education, medicine, law enforcement, elderly care— which require a higher degree of familiarity and prudence and that might scale poorly to mass production, efficiency, and the conditions of anonymity. And he has a point, scaling does present difficulties. Love and friendship don't work on an economy of scale; this

should raise some doubts for any facet of life requiring care and attention. In this respect, there may be something of a "natural scale," as Illich says, based on the limitations of human familiarity (even Facebook limits us to 5,000). However, there's something iffy about how Illich formulates conviviality. Drawing a contrast with manipulative institutions that addict and constrict rather than liberate and enable the user, Illich writes that "*Telephone link-ups, subway lines, mail routes, public markets and exchanges do not require hard or soft sells to induce their clients to use them. Sewage systems, drinking water, parks, and sidewalks are institutions men use without having to be institutionally convinced that it is to their advantage to do so. Of course, all institutions require some regulation. But the operation of institutions which exist to be used rather than to produce something requires rules of an entirely different nature from those required by treatment-institutions, which are manipulative.*"

Here, the divide seems to be between networks which motivate selfguided action and bureaucracies with either formal or deliberative decision-making. In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich seems uneasy with the very premise of the Industrial Revolution, that machines can and should toil in place of the human body: "*We must come to admit that only within limits can machines take the place of slaves; beyond these limits they lead to a new kind of serfdom*"— later explicitly saying "*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.*" Finally, Illich imagines his natural scale and convivial society as a kind of "homeostasis," in which tools enable rather than constrict humanity: "*There are two ranges in the growth of tools: the range within which machines are used to extend human capability and the range in which they are used to contract, eliminate, or replace human functions.*"

The problem with this from the perspective of dialectical humanism is that *all* tools— including the social tools of institutions— *simultaneously enable and constrain.* Whether they are centralized or decentralized in form, industrial or artisanal in size, managed or self-guided in their employment, there isn't a homeostatic way of deciding what will or will not be convivial in the way that Illich dreams of. Illich is subtle enough, though, that it's difficult to know exactly how he lands. After all, he speaks of the "marginal disutility" of tools and institutions; that at some point in their development and not in their essence, the bad of institutions overtakes the good until left unchecked, the institutions secures a monopoly over its particular mode of power, as with our educational system over the regulation and dissemination of knowledge-power— and the socialization and occupation of the young. Rather than judging institutions for their value or performance, we look at institutions as historically-situated institutionalized power— and not just one mode of power, but usually a "polymorphous" (to borrow a term from Michael Mann) complex, in which its primary powermode disguises the operations of the others, as school's educational role disguises its ulterior roles as a class filter, babysitter, and will-breaker.