

Ivan Illich.
DESCHOOLING SOCIETY.
New York:
Harper & Row, 1971.
116 pp.

Ivan Illich has a radical solution for today's educational problems: do away with the schools entirely. He wants to disestablish schools and create instead "an educational network or web for the autonomous assembly of resources under the personal control of each learner" (p. 70). Illich sees the deschooling of society as the first step in the liberation of man from the manipulative institutions of society. His book consists of a blistering attack upon schools as we know them and a set of proposals for a new institutional framework aimed at promoting action, participation, and self-help.

Illich's attack upon schools centers on what he sees as their manipulative aspects. Like the military, mental hospitals, and nursing homes, schools are social agencies which specialize in the manipulation of their clients. By a "school" he means "the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum" (pp. 25-6). The budgets may vary from country to country, but the invariant structure or "hidden curriculum" is fundamentally alike throughout the world. The student must attend, he must be taught by a teacher in school, and he must learn the packaged commodities or "subjects" of the curriculum. All of this conveys to the student that whatever is of value can only be learned through a graded process of consumption in the school. School thus serves as a kind of initiation ritual for modern

society and promotes a dependence upon specialized institutions.

The result of schooling, says Illich, is the alienation of learning from living:

School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people lose their incentive to grow in independence; they no longer find relatedness attractive, and close themselves off to the surprises which life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition. (p. 47).

At a time when more and more billions are being spent on schools, "everywhere nature becomes poisonous, society inhumane, and the inner life is invaded and personal vocation smothered" (p. 113). Illich demands that we give up our faith in schools as a source of salvation and look for alternatives. He suffers this loss of faith because of his view that "learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation" and that most learning is "the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (p. 39).

His alternative to schooling is to set up "convivial" (i.e. non-manipulative) channels for learning that are self-activating and self-limiting. These can be distinguished into four kinds of learning exchanges or reference services having to do with: things, models, peers, and educated elders (p. 76). The "Reference Services to Educational Objects" would try to break down the barriers that obstruct our understanding and use of both ordinary things (e.g. dismantling a machine in a garage) and of special things made for educational purposes (e.g. computers). Illich's experiences among the poor in New York City and in Latin America have convinced him that we must stop producing for consumption and the creation of new needs and start working toward a "durable-goods economy" in which items are made for "self-assembly, self-help, reuse, and repair" (p. 63).

Along with this built-in accessibility to common things, Illich would make more accessible the specialized tools of modern technology. He would set up storefront depots with books, tape-recorders, T.V. sets, films, printing presses, etc. staffed by custodians or guides to facilitate use and understanding. Big corporations would be encouraged to make their daily operations "more accessible to the public in ways that would make learning possible" (p. 86). This greater accessibility of objects would be complemented by "Skill Exchanges" whereby teachers of skills could be contacted. By removing the institutional trappings (e.g. certification for teachers), Illich feels we could make skills more available. He advocates free skill centers open to the public and suggests the establishment of a "bank" for skill exchanges with "edu-credit cards" provided to each citizen at birth (cf. pp. 14, 90).

A third channel for learning would be that of "Peer-Matching". Here people with the same interests could meet and learn from each other. Illich thinks the computer could be used to get such people in touch with one another and that abandoned school buildings would make for convenient meeting-places. The final reference service would be to "educated elders" which he differentiates into two groups: 1) the administrators and counsellors needed to operate the four networks (Illich assures us not many of these would be needed); and 2) the intellectual leaders or masters, those individuals who possess "superior intellectual discipline and imagination and the willingness to associate with others in their exercise" (p. 100). These would become known through the reputations acquired among peers and disciples.

It would be somewhat petulant to chide Illich for the lack of concrete details in many of his proposals. Obviously the man feels deeply about the world's problems and thinks that drastic changes are in order. At least he does out-

line his own alternatives to schooling. I share his distaste for the manipulative aspects of modern society and can recognize them in our schools. My main quarrel is with his premise that learning is "the human activity which least needs manipulation by others" and hence that most learning is "the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (p. 39).

Illich rejects manipulation in both the manner and the matter of education. Thus, he opposes compulsory attendance as well as an obligatory curriculum. He wants to replace all this with free choice, greater accessibility of things, skills, and people, and autonomous learning. But are there no pre-requisites for autonomy? Are not differences in ability, background, and interests reflected in the kinds of choices we make? Is what we choose to learn as important as the fact that we have a choice?

Putting these questions in terms of Illich's alternative networks, we might ask the following: Can we (or should we) try to prevent "smarter" or more aggressive learners from monopolizing the best skill banks or the most desirable masters? Will society treat all learning exchanges equally, or will it emphasize some (e.g. nuclear physics) over others (e.g. needlepoint)? Will all learners be rewarded equally? If not, then how do we avoid setting up yet another "market" for learning (e.g. the doctor gets paid more than the mechanic and hence his skills are seen as more valuable)? This is to make the point that Illich has by no means eliminated factors like unequal abilities or social pressures which have caused so much of the present manipulation of learners.

Even more important, he has not considered what components of learning are necessary for social welfare and autonomous choice. Most would agree that a child should learn a language, patterns of logical thinking, his cultural background, recent developments in science and math, in addition to

Reviews

developing a strong moral sense and hopefully some amount of aesthetic awareness. How are these to be taught in Illich's new framework? Do we allow the student to choose *not* to learn these things? Or to learn them from anyone he pleases? Has society no stake in all of this?

I have the feeling that Illich does not discuss such primary components of learning because his system presupposes them. That is, he presupposes that people are capable of making intelligent choices and that the only real problem is that of increased accessibility and communication. I submit that the equipping of persons for intelligent choice is the first problem and that it can still be best accomplished through the schools. Rather than disestablish schools, therefore, we should be *re-establishing* them, taking a fresh (and critical) look at what they are for and how we can best accomplish their objectives.

This attempt to re-define objectives is a solid opportunity for bringing together the interested parties (students, teachers, parents, politicians) and letting them see that the institution is meant to serve not to manipulate. With some agreement on objectives, the next task would be to decide how one can measure attainment of them and then to open up for students the time, means, personnel, and occasions for learning. Perhaps a set of exams could be set and the students allowed to prepare in any way they see fit, so long as they can pass. This would encourage autonomous learning while preserving the primary components of learning. Passing such exams could well be followed by use of one of Illich's new channels for further learning.

Illich likes to compare the impending demise of schools with that of the Church, and suggests that for both institutions the time has come. I prefer to look for a possible reformation that would retain the essential purpose of the institution (i.e. the schools should

convey the primary components of learning), while doing away with the outmoded framework. What is needed in the schools (and likely in the Church as well) is a manipulation of the institution by the clients. To be effective this requires communication and informed use of things, skills, and persons. All of which could well precede, but certainly cannot be replaced by the new channels of learning Illich proposes.

Brian Hendley
University of Waterloo

Anthony Burton.

THE HORN AND
THE BEANSTALK:
PROBLEMS AND
POSSIBILITIES
IN CANADIAN EDUCATION

Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and
Winston, 1972.

Anthony Burton's is a happy book. To read it is to feel the genuineness of the author's excitement and optimism about humanity and his insistence that an increasingly technocratized Canada can be rehumanized. In some ways it calls to mind Theodore Brameld's notions of cultural renaissance and the part education might play in the dynamics of social change. *The Horn* is happy too because of its immensely personal literary style which occasionally, at least, approaches the poetic and in so doing excels much of the rad-chic lit of the past few years.

Burton has tasted of the Cuenavaca mushroom and had a high from it; and yet *The Horn* and *The Beanstalk* is fundamentally where most of us are: in Canada and the 1970's. He writes of Reimer, Reich, and Roszak in a sensitive but unfawning way. One