



1972

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Recommended Citation

Curtis Seltzer, *Deschooling Society*, 2 *YALE REV. L. & SOC. ACTION* (1972).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yrlsa/vol2/iss1/11>

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Deschooling Society

Ivan Illich
New York: Harper & Row, 1971

Reviewed by Curtis Seltzer



Curtis Seltzer is a 25 year old rambler with some roots in Wendall Depot, Massachusetts, and some others in West Virginia. He has but one course to teach and has taught it in three states at three colleges in three fields over the past two years. He is presently employed.

I began reading *Deschooling Society* over a cheeseburger in Andy's Grill one night in Institute, West Virginia. I had to make an 8:20 colloquium, so I fought against the urge to dawdle and the alluring jingle of the pinballs. Instead of yielding to lethargy or sport, I struck up a conversation with a young, white woman — a second-year Upward Bound student, one of 11 children of a Lincoln County family. Her people live up a hollow; they got in-door plumbing a couple of years ago. Lincoln County is a coal county; the land is wealthy, the people are poor. Poorness is integrated in West Virginia: black and white, young and old, urban and country, men and women, Baptist and backslider.

"Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed; the more treatment there is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat-race for productive work."

She told me about her two older brothers who had been dropped out of the consolidated high school in town by teachers who deliberately disfavored kids from "the country." There exists in this small town high school a rigged track system whereby the kids from the country get shunted onto the bottom track, the kids from the fringe areas into the middle, and the kids from town onto the top. The teachers and school administrators who fix the system are vulnerable. They live in town and mingle with the bourgeoisie. The people up the hollow have no power; the people in town, only a little. "If only those teachers would show some encouragement to us, it would make such a difference. Instead they're prejudiced against us, like white folks are prejudiced against black," she said.

In order to come to college, she had to leave home, abandon her brothers and sisters, attend college with a strong minority of black students, join Upward Bound where black students predominate, support herself through scholarships and part-time work, and obtain a court order to restrain her father from carting her home where she "would do nothing except take care of my seven younger brothers."

When I told her that I was reading a book about abolishing the school system, she said she understood.

* * *

Illich argues that schools have institutionalized certain values, mental frameworks, problem-solving

gimmicks, and patterns of behavior which, having permeated society, "lead inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery." The spiralling consumption of institutional goods and services, helter-skelter growth, success measured in body-counts (graduating seniors or NLF dead), national conscription (compulsory schooling), standardization of values and certification requirements have become institutionalized in American schools and have been insinuated into society. Rather than look for the causes of the Vietnam War under a capitalist rug or in the camouflage nets of Presidential lies and "tragic mistakes," Illich believes that responsibility falls on those who were most completely socialized into school-think.

To be schooled-over is eternally to confuse certification with knowledge, to assume learning results from school instruction, to believe that school equalizes the life-chances of rich and poor, to think that more money produces better schools and more schooling produces better people, never to figure out that production (schooling or bomb-making) produces a consumer's market requiring use and growth, and to believe that the expansion of economic or educational institutions gets at the sources of poverty or school-dumbness. A schooled-up person believes that prisons can win the hearts and minds of prisoners, that welfare institutions promote the well-being of their inmates, that doctors prevent sickness, that policemen promote public safety, that Social Security comforts the aged, that the Department of Defense makes the citizenry secure and that schools make students learn.

Illich thinks that modern institutions create "modernized poverty." Institutions are granted monopolies over specialized services and control the social imagination and standards of feasibility and value. Modernized poverty — whether it is economic, educational, or political — "combines the lack of power over circumstances with a loss of personal potency." More dollars, more administration and more programs simply increase the destructiveness of the institutional monopoly.

Those of us who have been incompletely schooled-over can see Illich's point:

"Institutional goals continuously contradict institutional products. The poverty program produces more poor, the war in Asia more Vietcong, technical assistance more under-development. Birth control clinics increase survival rates and boost the populations; schools produce more dropouts; and the curb on one kind of pollution usually increases another.

The ethos of nonsatiety is . . . at the root of physical degradation, social polarization, and psychological passivity. Not just some part, but the very logic, of conventional wisdom is becoming suspect."

The interdependence of the school system and the society is pivotal. The pernicious tracking systems which are used to structure schools reflect the class, sex, and race backgrounds of students. It serves as a pre-induction social for channeling people into society's class system. There are tracks within tracks within tracks. In the primary grades, individual classrooms are broken down into reading groups.¹ From then on schools are internally tracked by so-called

ability grouping, and, of course, every school system has its "good" schools and its "bad" schools.² The function of tracking is to preserve the prevailing order by: 1) limiting economic and educational mobility between rich and poor, male and female, black and white; 2) indoctrinating those tracked-down with a personal-inadequacy rationalization for their condition; 3) over-skilling the advantaged and under-skilling the disadvantaged; 4) legitimizing the managerial prerogatives of those with lengthy school records; and 5) hitching school curricula to the job market so as to regulate who gets what skills and thereby maintain skill shortages (and guaranteed high incomes). Just as oligopolies rig consumer markets through price-fixing and other manipulations, similarly schools, corporations, and government have colluded to rig social mobility through skill fixing.³ Compulsory attendance, tracking and monopoly schooling constitute the structure of a "hidden curriculum" which teaches the real lessons of American life to rich and poor.

Rather than equalizing social opportunity, schools reinforce inequality and provide the rationalization for things and people staying put.

"Black children in particular do *increasingly poorly* as they move through school. First grade black children have a median verbal test scores of 45.4 (where the national average is 50). By the twelfth grade, their median verbal test score is down to 40.9 (not to speak of all the black students who never made it to the twelfth grade)."⁴

The phenomena of kids being made dumber by schools has not been considered as a logical result of the tracking system. Things would not go smoothly in this country if the school system leveled the social system.

Illich argues that poor nations as well as impoverished people are "hooked on school, that is, they are schooled in a sense of inferiority toward the better-schooled." Schools function to take from the poor and give to the rich. Poor people and poor nations are exploited doubly: public funds are increasingly allocated for the education of the few and public minds accept increasing social control. "School has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age." Because learning — or even certification — is not equally available to all, because schools are not compensatory institutions rectifying societal handicaps, because schools thoroughly advantage some and thoroughly disadvantage many others, for these reasons Illich labels them "false public utilities. . . , a perfect system of regressive taxation where the privileged graduates ride on the back of the entire paying public."

My quick recapitulation of Illich's thinking does neither him nor his ideas justice. It took me a very long time to read a very short book. I found each page spinning my mind into dozens of dreams, ironies, and puzzles. It's a sinewy book, rangy in its own way.

Inasmuch as the system of schooling is irremediable, evermore vicious and beyond restructuring or radical reform, what alternative learning arrangements can we look to? Illich's thinking expands our definitions:

"The. . . alternative. . . is an educational network or web for the autonomous assembly of resources under the personal

control of each learner.

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known."

He believes that everyone — regardless of age — has inherent access rights to four kinds of "opportunity webs or networks involving things, models, peers, and elders."

Illich proposes:

" . . . four different approaches which enable the student to gain access to any educational resource which may help him to define and achieve his own goals:

1. Reference Services to Educational Objects — which facilitate access to things or processes used for formal learning. Some of these things can be reserved for this purpose, stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, and showrooms like museums and theaters; others can be in daily use in factories, airports, or on farms, but made available to students as apprentices or on off-hours.
2. Skill Exchanges — which permit persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and the addresses at which they can be reached.
3. Peer-Matching — a communications network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage, in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry.
4. Reference Services to Educators-at-Large — who can be listed in a directory giving the addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and freelancers, along with conditions of access to their services. Such educators. . . could be chosen by polling or consulting their former clients."

Education would be voluntary. The nature of one's education could be formless or form-fitting. It could be entirely incidental and *ad hoc*. It might avoid reading, writing or arithmetic entirely. Nothing would be required. Learning-arrangements would be small-scale, personal, non-manipulative and explicit. Such arrangements would be democratic — learning of, by and for the people. The societal complement would be a "durable-goods economy. . . precisely the contrary of an economy based on planned obsolescence." The goods produced would be designed for ". . . self-assembly, self-help, reuse, and repair." Institutions would be convivial rather than manipulative, promoting participation, self-help, spontaneity, independence, limited consumption, institutional self-limitation, doing and action.⁵

It feels good to write that out, to imagine taking hold of such freedom. But as Illich admits, "The educational institutions I. . . propose. . . are meant to serve a society which does not now exist." His learning-alternatives are possible only in a deschooled society, only after the revolution. It may be no coincidence that some of the most effective parts of the book deal with Brazil. His characterization of the educational system may be intended largely as a warning to the Latin American left not to follow the example of the United States. But from the point of view of social action in America, it looks as if Illich has pulled a utopian rabbit from a non-existent hat. By presupposing a good world and then using that world as a precondition for good learning opportunities, we are twice removed from reality. He avoids two pertinent questions: 1) How do we get to

that world? and 2) Is it possible to infiltrate, subvert, capture or crumble the school system as part of bringing that world about?

The closest he comes to linking the sorry state of what is with his vision of what could be is to say:

"Each of us is personally responsible for his or her own deschooling, and only we have the power to do it. No one can be excused if he fails to liberate himself from schooling. . . The disestablishment of our present professional structure could begin with the dropping out of the schoolteacher."

Such a strategy lays but another track. Those who grasp the privilege of dropping-out are likely to be those who can make it somewhere else. The free-school movement often serves as a siding for an overcrowded system.

The Office of Education reported that in 1970 there were 38,000 teachers who couldn't find jobs, and that by 1975 there will be a surplus of 55,000 teachers.⁶ A teacher drop-out strategy doesn't make mention of a teacher glut, unemployment or budget cut-backs. For every drop-out there will be a hungry teacher forced in. Nixon's tightened job market is prophylactically dropping-out future teachers, particularly those working-class white and black students who have used teacher education as their foothold up. With the teacher market sagging like a distended horse belly, there has been, at West Virginia State College, a noticeable shift from Teacher Education to Business Administration and Law Enforcement. One less teacher, one more cop. Two less teachers, two more businessmen. Our students learn the calculus of Nixon's economics fast. Paulette, the 19-year-old woman from Lincoln County, is thinking of dropping-out. Abolishing the job market or abolishing the schools, each has the same practical consequence for her; she stays put.

A book as optimistic about man's potential as this one is, is fundamentally a book pessimistic about ever doing things differently and realizing that potential. Although Illich asserts that the ". . . disestablishment of schools will inevitably happen — and. . . surprisingly fast," he really is waiting for some post-revolutionary Congress to pass a law to constitutionally disestablish the school monopoly.

"The first article of a bill of rights for a modern, humanist society would correspond to the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution: 'The State shall make no law with respect to the establishment of education.' There shall be no ritual obligatory for all."

He is dealing with the here-after, not the here-and-now. By not talking about how we can make a "modern, humanist society," I infer, that Illich thinks people are incapable of acting collectively to change their lives. Deschooling will happen inevitably; but historical inevitabilities have a way of coming up dry.

There are 60 million or more people in this country ensnared in the school system, forced into being pushers or addicts. To wait for great numbers of students and faculty to be sufficiently alienated and "immiserated" to the point of abandoning the schools amounts to the same as waiting for dealers and junkies to swear off the heroin scene because it dehumanizes them. Both addiction and education have political and

economic roots; people don't drop-out from things made compulsory by politics and economics. Deschooling schools and deschooled society are sensible goals, but schools will not be deschooled until society is. That implies to me making political use of the schools for as long as it can be done.

This summer I took my final course from an institution of higher education. It was entitled, "Survival Techniques in the Educational Bureaucracy." I withdrew failing. A mixed omen.

1 Children, followed in a recent study from kindergarten to second grade, in the higher reading groups were also those with small families, high incomes, employed fathers, families with both parents present, more adequate clothing, and light skin (for blacks). Ray C. Rist, "Student Social Class and Teacher Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, Aug. 1970 as noted in a New University Conference pamphlet, "Down the Up Stair Case, Tracking in Schools," by Richie Rothstein, available from the Chicago Teacher Center, 852 West Belmont Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60657.

2 "In Chicago, the few integrated high schools have the most tracks; the all-white schools have no Basic (lowest) track and the all black schools can't find kids to qualify for Advanced Placement classes;" quoted from the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Bantam ed., 1968), p. 7 and 128-9 in Rothstein's "Down the Up Stair Case."

3 See Paul Lauter and Florence Howe's, *The Conspiracy of the Young, The Making of Jet Pilots* (1970) or their article, "How The School System is Rigged For Failure," (1970).

4 "Down the Up Stair Case" at 9.

5 Illich does not assume that all people will be equally motivated to use these networks. All things never being equal, I would expect that upper-middle class people would generally be more motivated than others if the Illich plan was implemented tomorrow in competition with the regular school system. Up to a few years ago Mississippi did not have a compulsory school attendance law. The intended effect was to discourage poor and black children from coming to school. Economic imperatives were stronger than learning imperatives for these children.

6 *New York Times*, July 19 (1970) as reported in "Down the Up Stair Case."

Information Technology in a Democracy

Alan F. Westin, ed.

Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1971

Reviewed by Kas Kalba

Despite the current vogue that the long-haired, "consciousness" lawyer enjoys on television and among peers, and irrespective of rising applications and enrollment at law schools, a serious argument can be made that the "public" lawyer — this country's principal policy maker in the past and today's angry supplicant for the poor, the unrepresented, the politically oppressed — is off track, if not headed toward extinction.

One of the reasons the argument can be raised is that books such as this reader by Alan Westin (author of *Privacy and Freedom*) are not likely to be read in very many classes at very many law schools. Defensive of its individualistic roots, contemporary legal education continues to dismiss systems analysis, information systems and computer programming as irrelevant gobbledygook. Yet knowledge of these and related software techniques could be critical, the Westin reader implies, to the maintenance of democracy in an ever-more-complex society of "data-over-load and decision-impasse."

Why should legal activists or other professionals interested in social change become familiar with data banks, cost-benefit analysis, program budgeting or management science (not to be confused with "scientific management")? First, these technologies are likely to be part of the problem. Second, they are also likely to be part of the solution.

Information technologies often create new bureaucracy. One senses this tendency in Robert Gallati's story of the New York State Identification and Intelligence System: "Five years ago we were six people; now we are six hundred." And new bureaucracy with new

information can mean new intrusions into both personal and political freedoms. Gallati again: "If we wish to be scientific, it is obvious that we must have information — lots and lots of data about oodles and oodles of persons and things."

Several of the authors suggest concrete remedies for protecting the citizen against information-laden "expert" or technocratic decision making, but Donald Michael in "Democratic Participation and Technological Planning" is the most vivid. "Imagine," he posits, "terminals scattered around the urban area in the center cities, the suburbs, and the contiguous rural centers. Each of these could be linked to the same data banks and computers that the urban planning and governing agencies tie into." And, "The laws could be so written that it would be illegal to deny these 'citizen terminals' access to any of the data that the agencies use." On the other hand, Westin himself deals most fully with the privacy concerns. The problem, he assesses, is as much in the law as in the technology. "American law has no clear cut definition of personal information as a precious commodity." In the future, such a definition will be indispensable as will be institutional procedures for the safeguarding of the individual in the collection and storage of information by government and private agencies.

These are fairly standard qualms about information technologies. The more novel point the collection of articles raises is that these technologies have the potential to make government operations more accessible, to change power relations within a bureaucracy, and possibly even to deal with the problems of large

numbers of individuals more efficiently and personally than the queuing methods of old. Dependence on creative precedent, the individual-case approach, or legislative challenge may be sufficient to establish an alternate value base but it is not enough to press for the kind of heavy inroads that have to be made into societal problems. In short, it is romantic to limit consciousness expansion to word-of-mouth, while, as Thomas Conrad writes, there is nothing "inherent in systems analysis which makes it useful only for elitists or totalitarians. To the contrary, there are basic intellectual strains and ethical strains in system analysis which are of vital usefulness to radical social critics. There is the questioning of basic goals, and the demand that instrumental values be derived from final values and from an understanding of the world, through empirical reason rather than received dogma from the past."

But before information technologies can be utilized by the legal activist, they will have to improve. As Russell Ackoff states (in what is perhaps my favorite selection in the reader, titled "Management Misinformation Systems"): "Contrary to the impression produced by the growing literature, few computerized management information systems have been put into operation. Most have not matched expectations and some have been outright failures." One factor behind this low success rate is that, almost ubiquitously, information systems try to increase data flow to the decision maker rather than to filter irrelevant data or to render existing information more susceptible to interpretation. The decision maker becomes overloaded with facts; "complexity" grows. Another

problem with current information systems is that methods devised in the private sector (by Whiz kids *et al.*) are indiscriminately applied to public agencies, where organizational demands may be quite different. Systems approaches developed for guiding rockets are not likely to be suited to guiding the delivery of welfare services. Nor should information systems devised in an environment where implementation follows decision-making relatively easily be uncritically adopted, as they often have been, by urban agencies caught in the plexus of multiple objectives and politicization.

Indeed in the latter case, where co-ordination and implementation can hardly be taken for granted, improvements in *communications* rather than novel *information* systems may be required. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this is not an area that the Westin reader explores, despite its overall breadth. Remote video terminals, made possible by cable television and other broadband technologies, could facilitate the decentralization of social services and provide important links in community development. They could also bring data collection directly into the home.

The lawyer of the future — pollution fighter and civil libertarian alike — will be better equipped to pursue his objectives in more than a token (however valiant) way with the tools of systematic inquiry and legal design. Some understanding of basic concepts of information systems, and some warning of the pitfalls of information technology may point the way.