



Gabbard, D. (2020): *Silencing Ivan Illich revisited. A Foucauldian analysis of intellectual exclusion.* Myers Education Press.

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Gabbard's book was originally published in 1993 as *Silencing Ivan Illich*, but then fell out of print after the publisher Austin & Winfield went out of business in 1995. It is not clear to me what the precise differences between the 2020 *Revisited* and the original version from 1993 are, but it appears that Gabbard not only added a helpful additional Preface, but in addition, re-examined his arguments. While looking high and low for the original book – and being unable to find it, I was delighted to find the new one. Scholars interested in Ivan Illich's controversial and brilliant work should be thankful to the new publisher, Myers Education Press, for the thought-provoking book at hand.

Gabbard's central thesis can already be found in a nutshell in the book's title. It is that Illich as the author of the classic *Deschooling society* (1971) had been 'silenced' for having committed the heretical act of denying the benevolence of state-enforced, compulsory schooling. Illich's *Deschooling society* is a stunning, controversial and counter-intuitive critique of the US public school system and compulsory education in general. Illich's thinking on education appears to be as relevant today as when his book was written close to 50 years ago. Gabbard provocatively states that in his perception, the "entire system of compulsory schooling was created to spread lies on behalf of state and corporate power" (4). Based on the "messianic principle of inclusion", in order for an author's discourse to enter the archive of educational discourse, the rules of formation governing their discursive practice must constitute the school as an inherently "benevolent institution that can deliver either the single individual or society as a whole, or both, into a state of secular salvation" (71). Illich's violation of this principle led to his exclusion from "educational discourse by the 1980s" (3).

In this book review, I will eventually critique Gabbard's core thesis, but not before I reconstruct the book's main contents and give it a fair – and by the way, fairly positive – hearing. In line with Gabbard's central argument (that Illich has been silenced and excluded and is thus largely forgotten), it would be wise to assume that the kind reader of this book review may be unfamiliar with Ivan Illich. Hence, I begin with some introductory remarks about his life and work.

Introductory remarks on Illich's life and work

Although it is tempting to go into much greater detail when it comes to Illich's fascinating life and work, I shall keep these introductory remarks to relatively broad strokes. Ivan Illich was born in Vienna in 1926 to a German, Jewish mother (who had converted to Protestantism) and a Croatian, Catholic father. In 1941, at the tender age of 15, being considered half-Jewish, Illich escaped the Nazis by fleeing from Vienna to Florence. After initially reading Histology and Crystallography at Florence University (under a false identity under Fascism) – and playing a small part in the Italian resistance, he studied in Rome and Salzburg and earned graduate degrees in History, Philosophy, and Theology (Illich & Cayley, 2005). Illich was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1951 (Cayley, 1992).

Illich arrived in New York in 1951 with the original plan to study the history of medieval alchemy at Princeton. However, he was moved by the plight of Puerto Rican migrants, and instead became a parish priest in Washington Heights (in Manhattan) and a culturally-sensitive champion of the newcomers (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Kahl, 2002, Madar, 2010; Todd & La Cecla, 2002). In 1956, Illich was appointed Vice-rector of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico. Rather than furthering his impressive career within the Catholic Church, Illich eventually felt compelled to speak out critically about the Church, for instance on the perceived contradiction of the Vatican's pronouncements on birth control and its relative silence about the atomic bomb. In addition, Illich's publicised position for a clear separation of Church and state led to him being declared *persona non grata* by the bishop, and he was told to leave Puerto Rico (Cayley, 1992; Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Illich's leaving Puerto Rico led to one of the most intellectually productive periods of his life. He relocated to Cuernavaca, Mexico, and founded and led the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) at Cuernavaca from 1961 to 1977. The purpose of CIDOC was to subvert the "contemporary crusade" for international development and discourage the sending of volunteers to 'developing countries' (Cayley, 1992, p. vii). Together with Paulo Freire, he was involved

in the founding of a similar centre in Petropolis, Brazil, but withdrew from it in 1967 (Mitchum, 2002). The subversive activities at CIDOC were dangerous, with Illich having been “shot at and beaten up by chains” (Cayley, 1992, p. 13).

In a series of concise books from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, Illich provides a devastating critique of institutions and envisioned: the ‘disestablishment’ of systems of education (*Deschooling society*, 1971); transport (*Energy and equity*, 1974); medicine (*Medical nemesis*, 1976); and work (*The right to useful unemployment and its professional enemies*, 1978; and *Shadow work*, 1981) – arguing against the concept of humankind as primarily a homo oeconomicus – and homo educandus. Illich’s provocative and counterintuitive theses include: that schools are the enemy of learning; cars are immobilising; modern medicine makes people sick; and the justice system generates crime (Illich, 1973).

Illich’s surprising and radical critique focuses on elements of modernity that appear to have undeniable benefits: education, health care, transportation, communication, labour-saving machines, economic development. In Illich’s perspective, experts have come to exert a radical monopoly on such basic human activities as health, learning, and agriculture, leading to a war on subsistence that robs societies of their vital skills and know-how. Economic and institutional development result in paradoxical counterproductivity and, especially in emerging economies, in modernised poverty.

In Illich’s later years, he transformed himself once again from a social critic to a historian and peripatetic professor. Illich eventually embarked on an intellectual journey into the Middle Ages, notably into the 12th century which was to serve the purpose of bringing the strangeness of the present into dramatic relief (Illich, 1993). In the 1970s, Illich’s books were bestsellers and his lectures jammed auditoriums. His publisher Marion Boyars (2002, p. 46) recalls that many major universities invited Illich, and on one occasion in Dublin, “all lecture halls were used for the eight thousand people who had to listen via radio linkup” – his books sold like “hotcakes”. But by the 1980s, Illich’s celebrity had largely faded. Especially unpopular was his 1982 study *Gender* that was vilified by feminists, as it controversially claimed that the feminist pursuit of equality would lead to new disadvantages for the majority of women, while favouring only a minority of them. In the 1980s and 1990s, Illich wrote about the historicity of materials (*H₂O and the waters of forgetfulness*, 1985), literacy (*ABC, the alphabetisation of the popular mind*, 1988) and the origins of book-learning (*In the vineyard of the text*, 1993). He constantly travelled between Bremen (Germany), Penn State (U.S.) & Cuernavaca (Mexico). Before his death in 2002, he suffered terribly due to a disfiguring cancer. He refused surgery, as he was concerned that it might affect his intellectual capacity, and rather self-medicated (Illich & Cayley, 2005).

A critical discussion of Gabbard’s Silencing Ivan Illich Revisited

After this introductory excursion into Ivan Illich’s exceptional life and work, let us return to Gabbard’s book and its full title that states that it is a Foucauldian Analysis of Intellectual

Exclusion. Gabbard uses a perspective and methodology on Illich that he picked up from the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, with particular reference to the latter’s *Archaeology of knowledge* (1982) approach and the inseparability of power and knowledge. Discourses – including educational ones – are governed by particular sets of rules that determine what can and cannot be said. Adopting Foucault’s theoretico-active methodology (that blurs the lines between theory and practice and sees theory and practice as similarly inseparable as knowledge and power), Gabbard sets out to understand the discursive forces and relations of power and knowledge responsible for the ‘marginalisation’ of Ivan Illich from educational discourse.

Influenced by Foucault’s observation that a book’s “unity is variable and relative” and it being “a node within a network” (cited in 20), Gabbard makes the rather peculiar decision to somewhat camouflage the two works by Illich that he chooses to focus on – *The celebration of awareness* (1970) as “Text One” and *Deschooling society* (1971) as “Text Two” – and not discuss Illich as an author upfront (this is the diametrically opposite approach to the one taken in this book review). Gabbard’s thin book (originally based on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Cincinnati) is of similar brevity as Illich’s *Deschooling society* and consists of six chapters: (1) To explain an exclusion; (2) Theoretico-activism; (3) To deny the pastoral; (4) Practices of exclusion; (5) An analogous exclusion; and (6) The archive and other transgressions.

Gabbard convincingly combines some of Illich’s and Foucault’s thoughts on the Church and its influence on modern institutions. The Church has lost much of its previous pastoral power, and this power has undergone a major transformation and become dispersed through a multitude of institutions. Gabbard observes with Foucault that religious salvation in a world after death has to some extent been replaced with a different type of salvation: health, wealth, standard of living, and security. And in *Deschooling society*, Illich (1971, p. 10) writes that schooling has become the “world religion of a modernised proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age”.

In *Deschooling society*, Illich perceives modern schools as manipulative institutions that possess a radical monopoly and counter-proposes convivial institutions – the latter being an idiosyncratic conceptual choice that is further explored in his *Tools for conviviality* (1973). It refers to institutions fostering a sense of interrelatedness between individuals who spontaneously and voluntarily participate in them. Convivial institutions aid in shaping a different sort of social experience and social reality. Consumerism and an unreflected belief in ever-increasing industrial productivity and ‘progress’ are opposed. Gabbard reinterprets Illich’s ambiguous battle cry of ‘deschooling’ as a transformation of schools into convivial institutions, rather than getting altogether rid of them.

Deschooling society, in its most radical interpretation, means the ‘disestablishment of schools’ – an interpretation from which Illich has explicitly distanced himself. A less radical meaning is the abolition of compulsory schooling, in particular in the U.S. (that Illich was largely referring to in his

attention-grabbing book title). Illich later clarified: "I never wanted to do away with schools" (cited in Cayley, 1992, p. 64). Illich was aware that the title of his book may sound "like treason to the enlightenment" (Illich, 1971, p. 24). However, it is his argument that "it is enlightenment itself that is now being snuffed out in the schools", and deschooling would be "at the root of any movement for human liberation" (1971, pp. 24, 47). *Deschooling society* can be reflected upon in the context of Illich's broader critique of development and the paradoxical counterproductivity of institutions.

In Illich's perspective, the 'schooling of society' leads to two undesirable consequences: (1) a public dependency on the commodity of education that convinces the poor of their inferiority, thus justifying their inferior socio-economic status and stimulating underdevelopment, and (2) the modernisation of poverty. Gabbard (45-46) cites Illich: "educational disadvantage cannot be cured by relying on education within the school"; and the school as the institution that specialises in education "discourages and disables the poor from taking control of their own learning".

Gabbard distinguishes three principal positions when it comes to the school system. The first one is that of meritocrats. By forcibly exposing all individuals, mandatory public schooling provides us with an equal opportunity to acquire 'enabling functions' and display merit "that can be applied to serve the interests of society as a whole" (70). The various levels in a stratified society are justified "on the basis of the high degree of merit displayed by those at the top of the hierarchy and the low degree of merit displayed by those at the bottom" (58). Meritocrats, in Gabbard's analysis, are particularly inclined to 'silence' Illich's discourse as it threatens "the very existence of the sorting mechanism itself" (92).

The second position is occupied by social reconstructionists. In the words of Gabbard (70):

"The rule that governs the social reconstructionist's discursive formation states that: In order to properly speak of the school, one must conceptualize it as an agency that, in order to fulfill its proper mission, gives rise to an increased awareness among individuals of the radical changes that need to occur within society in order for a truly egalitarian society (secular salvation) to emerge, for only with such awareness can individuals become 'empowered' to enact those necessary changes" (70).

The social reconstructionists, while not opposed to mandatory schooling, "are vehemently opposed to the school serving the role of a sorting mechanism which reproduces a society that is stratified along the lines of socio-economic class" (92). The third and final position is that of Illich – again, to quote Gabbard:

"The school, as an institution, is not capable of leading anyone to secular salvation. To the contrary, secular salvation can only be achieved if humanity abolishes its dependence on institutions such as the school for the fulfilment of authentically human values" (70).

The final two chapters of Gabbard's book are amongst my favourite parts. They deal with Illich's issues with the Catholic Church (chapter 5), provide a wider historical context of compulsory schooling in the U.S and discuss the works of other scholars that Gabbard perceives as similarly marginalised as Illich (Everett Reimer, Jerry Farber, and Paul Goodman – all worthwhile adding to one's reading list – chapter 6). Chapter 5 reconstructs Illich's disenchantment with what he perceived as the North American Church's cultural imperialism in its pastoral activities in Central and Latin America. While being America's youngest Monsignor, Illich began to reject the pastoral image of the institutional church and denounce its "'savior complex'" (76). Gabbard cites Illich's *Celebration of awareness* (86): "Men and money sent with missionary motivation carry a foreign Christian image, a foreign pastoral approach, and a foreign political message. They also bear the mark of American capitalism".

Amongst many other insightful observations in the final chapter, Gabbard traces "the first manifestation of the sort of messianic discourses that have continued to project a pastoral image of the school throughout the history of American society" (94) to the Massachusetts Law of 1642. The book is concluded by a call to depoliticise the classroom. An advantage of a pedagogy grounded in theoretico-activism would be that teachers are enabled "to maintain an acceptable distance from the discourses to be analysed / taught" (112). Interestingly, Gabbard believes that "proper pedagogical practices rely on the integrity of the teacher" (112).

It is now time to critique Gabbard's central thesis that was stated at the outset of this book review. It occurs repeatedly in various passages throughout the book. Due to Illich's violation of the messianic principle that governs messianic institutions, he was excluded "from two communities" (89): "Insofar as Illich was once a monsignor with the Catholic church and was once a major author within the discursive community of education, there is a certain analogy that can be drawn here" (75). As a consequence, "Illich has not been heard from within the archive of educational discourse for many years" (89). What evidence does Gabbard provide for the discursive exclusion of Illich? He provides an anecdote about Illich's office neighbour at Penn State University, Leonard Waks, who recounts that a typical reaction when Illich met somebody new was saying: "'Oh yeah, I've heard of you. But I thought you were dead'" (73). Gabbard further states:

"this is hardly an empirical measure of the validity of my assertion that Illich's discourse has been silenced within the educational community, but I believe that it gets the point across. How could a person whose writings 'burst' upon the education scene with such vitality have become so marginalized just twenty years later?" (73)

There are so many problems with Gabbard's exclusionary thesis that it is easiest to start with his minor claim. Chapter 5's argument of an "analogous exclusion" is contestable. While I do not dispute the inquisition-like interrogation that the Vatican had planned for Illich in 1969 and that Illich bravely refuted, it was Illich himself who decided to

stop working as a priest and give up all titles, advantages and privileges that he was entitled to. However, it was the Church that did not accede to that request, and much later, when Illich taught for the University of Kassel (Germany), a cheque was made out to "Monsignore Ivan Illich" (Paquot, 2017, p. 32). In addition, Illich (1985) continued to refer to himself as both 'Christian' and 'theologian'.

Gabbard's much more central claim of course regards Illich's exclusion from the archive of educational discourse. A Google Scholar search on 17 May, 2020, discovered 7,650 citations of *Deschooling society*, whereby 1,050 of these citations have been made in or after 2016. In contrast, Gabbard's book has thus far zero citations – this will undoubtedly soon change, as the book has only been available for a couple of months. When it comes to Illich, there is even a specially-dedicated open access journal, *The International Journal of Illich Studies*.

Gabbard's exclusionary thesis also appears to ignore that Illich was a man of many interests with his other works also continuing to attract an immense number of academic citations: for instance, *Medical Nemesis* has thus far garnered 5,741 citations. In my analysis, it was not so much a discursive exclusion based on *Deschooling society* violating a messianic principle that moved Illich away from the limelight. Rather, it was his controversial book *Gender* that led to Illich falling out of favour with a large portion of the public. On a more general note, authors oftentimes become fads and then become forgotten, and there is nothing nefarious about it necessarily. But being forgotten, silenced or excluded is not Illich's fate.

A related problem is that Gabbard's discussion is fairly U.S.-centric and provides a very limited review of the literature that focuses on some admittedly interesting articles (many come from the compilation of critical articles, entitled *After deschooling what?*) and some select books. Also, as with many other native English speakers, Gabbard shows the unfortunate tendency to ignore the academic literature in other languages. This is highly problematic, considering the multilingualism of Illich himself and also the reception of his work in Spanish, French and German, to name but a few languages that Illich was astonishingly fluent in. To only provide a few counter-examples that provide evidence against Gabbard's exclusionary thesis from the German and French literature, there are five books on him that have been published from the 1980s onwards: (1) a collection with contributions by prominent academics discussing various aspects of Illich's work, edited by Pfürtner (1985); (2) and (3): two very different books on Illich's life and work, a largely positive one by Kaller-Dietrich (2008) and a highly critical one by Kohn (2012); (4) Bachmann (2013) in her book discusses the differences and commonalities between four 'revolutionary' pedagogues: A. S. Neill, Freire, Holt and Illich; and finally, Paquot in 2012 wrote a book in French on Illich as thinker and rebel that was translated into German in 2017.

Illich himself of course continued to be a highly popular professor till the end of his life, and in 1985 (when, according to Gabbard, he had already become 'silenced'), published a book on education in German: *Schule ins Museum. Phaidros und die Folgen* (which I loosely translate as 'The

musealisation of school. Phaidros and the consequences'). Finally, browsing through the *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching* shows that three prominent educational thought leaders discussing Illich in positive terms (Biggs et al., 2019; Brookfield et al., 2019; Siemens et al., 2020).

All in all, there is more than sufficient evidence against Gabbard's core thesis of discursive exclusion. This is not to deny that Illich never entered the educational mainstream. A more accurate assessment, however, may be that Illich, together with other 'alternative' or 'revolutionary' pedagogues, continues to be discussed by scholars and practitioners who are interested in exploring alternatives to contemporary educational systems. In conclusion, Gabbard should be congratulated on his original choice of combining Foucault and Illich, two 20th century titans of critical thinking that very much deserve our further revisiting and reflection. I highly recommend *Deschooling society* and other works by Illich – and Gabbard's book thankfully adds a noteworthy interpretation to the canon of Illich studies.

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