

Those Misconceptions Are Not Illich's

By Michael Macklin

I have no intention of becoming an apologist for Ivan Illich nor am I in complete agreement with his position. However, I do believe that Illich has made an extremely valuable addition to the current education debate and that this contribution is not a "diatribe" as Birchall has suggested in his article "Some Misconceptions in Ivan Illich."¹

Birchall's argument is based on a serious misreading of some of Illich's writings coupled with a misconception of what Illich is about in his attack on the schools. Since Illich has made a formidable contribution to the social philosophy of education, it would require a strong argument to substantiate the accusation made by Birchall in his opening paragraph, that Illich is not even a thinker. I hope to show that not only has Birchall failed to mount such an argument but that the thesis Birchall does present is based on a further misconception of the reality of school in modern industrialized countries—a reality that Illich has grasped and presented in his writings.

1. Institutionalisation

It is necessary, at the outset, to give Illich's definition of schools. It is open to argument whether the definition he gives is accurate but it is not open to argument that when Illich speaks of school he means the "age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum."² For this reason, he claims that schools tend to be basically manipulative; that is, they include, as part of their defining characteristics, the manipulation of some groups of people by other groups. This manipulation arises not so much from the institution as a material entity but from the people it involves. This is not to deny Illich's point that many institutions are out of control of their nominal operators. The very success of institutions, such as schools, in selling their services and achieving a monopoly has rendered the operators as impotent to change the basic operation of their institutions as it has those who are manipulated by them. However, Birchall is obviously not interested in pressing an attack in this area so it would be best to pass to what he considers are more important issues.

2. Compulsoriness

The centre of Birchall's argument is contained in his syllogism

- (i) Constraints are opposed to freedom.
- (ii) Freedom is a necessary condition of education.
- (iii) Constraints are opposed to education.

To make his argument watertight, Birchall further suggests that "Illich is operating with an assumed definition of freedom as *free from all constraints*." (p. 415) Unfortunately, Birchall does not show us where such a definition is assumed in Illich's argumentation. Actually, Illich does not operate with such a simplistic definition at all. On the contrary, he even suggests that constraints are

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1. Brian Birchall, "Some Misconceptions in Ivan Illich," *Educational Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall 1974), pp. 414-425.
2. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1971), pp. 25-26.

