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The Right To Useful Unemployment: And Its Professional Enemies



Synopsis

In this postscript to *Tools for Creativity*, Illich calls for the right to useful unemployment: a positive, constructive, and even optimistic concept dealing with that activity by which people are useful to themselves and others outside the production of commodities for the market. Unfettered by managing professionals, unmeasured and unmeasurable by economists, these activities truly generate satisfaction, creativity, and freedom.

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Customer Reviews

Ivan illich is the author of *Celebration of Awareness*, *Tools for Conviviality*, *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, *Energy and Equity*, *Limits to Medicine*, *Shadow Work*, *Gender*, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, *Disabling Professions*, *Deschooling Society* and *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978-1990*.

anything for Illich is worth reading!

too dirty

Ivan illich's views are MUCH needed in our society today. I am partially employed and 'usefully unemployed' for decades, allowing me the freedom of expression to expend untold hours of work in

running local municipal campaigns, help with my children's children, and the time to THINK and savor the small unnoticed events in life. This has required not wealth, but a commitment from me to the "Degrowth" economics of consuming less and sharing more.

The book falls short of a lot. Intellectual bantering. Not worth the price. It is an OK book, very thin. But never really drives the point home.

Illich makes what would otherwise be dry reading into an emotional and thought-provoking journey. He has great perception to see interactions in society. Every moment I spent reading it was worthwhile. Just as much fun was deconstructing his arguments to see how he reached the conclusions and deciding whether I agree. I am eager to read "Tools for Conviviality." Illich proposes that sometime in the last 50 years society passed through a threshold where "modernized subsistence" was achieved and all our modern real needs were met. At this point we reached the maximum, and coincidentally the ideal level, of individual satisfaction through a balance of autonomous action and consumption of mass-produced commodities (goods and services primarily in medical, transportation and educational areas). But then society passed through this threshold and, as a result individuals have been experiencing lower and lower overall satisfaction with life with our ever increasing use of mass-produced commodities. Illich argues that society would have stopped at the threshold value had there not been created at that moment the distorting force of the Dominant Professions. Dominant Professions that impel society to produce a surfeit of mass-produced commodities. Dominant Professions are a professional class with the power to impute the need for unneeded commodities upon the citizenry. By using the language of the Professional, they trick us laymen to go beyond our real needs by creating in us needs that we would not otherwise have - imputed needs. They do this for the sake of sustaining and furthering their authority and profession and in the service of the people who control the tools of mass production. The Dominant Professionals not only control the distribution and supply of the approved commodity that satisfies our imputed need, they also make it illegal or impossible to satisfy our need using a non-approved commodity. The Professional's commodities are of course mass-produced. Thus, society has passed the threshold because of the Dominant Professions. To get back to that threshold value we need to dismantle the authority of the professional class. Those are the arguments. The fun part is decomposing the arguments. Stop reading now if you want to figure it out for yourself without being biased by my analysis. First, Illich imagines us a citizenry of such simpletons we can't determine how much we need to sustain ourselves in this late industrial society.

By calling every need an "imputed need" if it is beyond "modernized subsistence", Illich can blame the Dominate Professionals for causing society to progress past where it would otherwise have stopped, fully satisfied. I disagree. It is the ever expanding desires of individuals that keep us wanting more long after we knowingly achieved subsistence. We are never satisfied enough to stop wanting more. These are not imputed needs from an external Professional class that we need to defend ourselves against, this is our own natural behavior which we chose not to rein in. Illich also tells us that we know the maximum benefit to life that industry can ever provide. Fortunately, this is not true. For example, if average longevity hasn't changed during the past 50 years it doesn't follow that industry has been ineffective. This assumes a constant population base whereas the size of society is increasing and more people are living to about the same age. And there is ample evidence that the mass-produced commodities are the cause for improvement in life. Examples Illich sites in the book as examples of autonomous actions replaced by commodities that induce "modernized poverty" include; peasants living in homes they built from and upon the refuse of others moved to pre-fabricated houses, indoor light from fires and candles replaced with electricity, infant mortality reduced by the presence of trained physicians. Furthermore, individual human longevity is not limited by a theoretical physical law we know of in the same way the speed of light is. Thus, because the record has not been broken in the past 50 years it does not follow that it cannot be broken during the next 50 years. If we followed this logic long-jump competitions were no longer necessary after the 1968 Olympics. Illich proposes that we are faced with a new choice - "modernized subsistence" - resulting from the invention of modern industrial capabilities. However, each age - in it's own time "modern" - stone, bronze, iron or last week in the post industrial age, the commodities that determined the maximum attainable life and the minimum amount of resources needed to stay alive, e.g. the subsistence level, were dependent on what was available. Because installation of a society-wide commodity will always impede the liberty of an individual to use another technology or no technology at all - whether it is the rules of the road, language, or inoculations, there is no non-zero level of commodity use required that will simultaneously preserve for every individual the liberty to act and the same objective measure of "modernized subsistence". Simply said - your actions count towards yourself and the whole. Illich's asserts we know what "modernized subsistence" looks like from empirical observation. In fact, Illich gives his opinion of a current and real country that has at its disposal the appropriate intensity of production to approximate "modernized subsistence." Subsistence is a minimum level to support life. "Modernized Subsistence" supports "Convivial Austerity." What Illich proposes is his ideal society: his idea of the ideal life for the individual that alienates the liberties he cherishes least and mandates the

commodities he values more. Illich shows our beautiful tendency to romanticize the past; when it seemed that the world reached its apex coincidentally with our arrival on the planet. Language was real, technology was benign, and people were pure until that moment when a kernel -born only in our consciousness - metastasized and corrupted the balance of powers that would have otherwise been. Reality is that language is always evolving, applied technology is never benign and people run the gamut from altruistic to evil. And this has always been the case. Illich's arguments and desires for a better world are wonderful food-for-thought. They also are unfortunately an impractical model for society.

The book rates 5 stars for its writing. The premise is interesting and forms a decent basis for analyzing a human societal condition but he moans too loudly about what its effects are and mis-predicts what's been happening. In fact there are more of us, both in number and as a proportion of humankind who are "usefully unemployed". The "professional enemies" of this right/art are increasingly ridiculed/ignored despite their mostly effective power grab - the power they grab finally corrupts them so near absolutely that they become impotent therefrom and the doctor who gets his portfolio value higher and his golf handicap lower is made poorer if not thereby then therewith. More people let their awareness of "rat race" "cognitive overload" and other nomenclatural descriptions of our riches affect their activities and we are increasingly info-source as well as info-sinks. There isn't really less reading going on but it's clear that there's more writing being done, and that's leading to an understanding that it's the act of expression that matters whether one finds audience for such as this or not. I'm as enriching as I am enriched from building musical instruments and making music with them even though only a handful get used by others and almost nobody hears what I play. The book overlooks this phenomenon's burgeoning. Love.

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