Learning from Illich
(but not only from him ...)

Huw Thomas,
School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University
This paper’s rationale

Rather than assuming the value of planning and then deriving the specification of a ‘model citizen’, what if we ....

set out what constitutes a dignified existence and see what kind of planning is compatible with and supportive of that.

This – the approach of Ivan Illich - may be a useful corrective to a rather ‘gung-ho’ valorisation of planning that is current.
(UK) Planning – bloodied, but fighting back

• After decades of criticism from Left and Right, business interests, residents’ groups, politicians, journalists ... and academics, ...

• Signs of a reaction among planning academics:
– Positive cases made for planning (Campbell, 2002; Healey, 2010; Rydin, 2011)
– Rehabilitation of once-suspect notions, such as the public interest, and professionalism (Campbell and Marshall, 2000; Vigar, 2012)
– (Broadly) sympathetic accounts of planners under pressure (eg Jupp and Inch, 2012; Clifford, 2016)
Rehabilitating planning

This paper’s claim:
1. that an understandable desire to rehabilitate planning and planners should not lead us to overlook the limitations of practices of planning to date and the difficulties of a radically new approach
2. that Ivan Illich offers a useful reminder of key limitations and perhaps pointers for the future
3. But his approach appears deficient in a crucial respect. The paper seeks to point out how this can be addressed.
Planning and its subjects

• Since start of modern planning, concern for what constitutes a proper way of living (‘how people should live’), individually and collectively, has been part of debates and discussions about planning, though increasingly often implicit rather than explicit

• Involves process (how to plan) and outcomes (how individual developments and disposition of developments might open or close options for ways of life)

• Planning has, in practice, been the state activity of bringing about a desired way of life
How to plan: model planning citizens

Different approaches to planning have embedded in them different ideals (models) of how the non-planning public should act when engaged with the planning system.

These arise from the practice (and theory) of planning; there are also models of people that inform what planning and planners identify as achievable and desired ends.
Examples of ‘model planning citizens’

- Rational- comprehensive: utility maximisers/‘rational’ agents
- Advocacy (and equity) planners: self-interested and relatively passive
- Collaborative planners: deliberative, open, engaged, trusting
A more radical approach: insurgent planning

Associated with Friedman (2011), Sandercock (1997, 2003) and others this approach focuses on capacity development within communities, while taking different rationalities/world-views seriously.

For planners it means acquiring certain ‘literacies’ (Sandercock, 1999) which leaves them ....
T(technically literate)
A(nalytically literate)
M(ulti-culturally literate)
E(cologically literate)
D(esigners)

Yet, while these may not be ‘heroic’ planners, they remain very skilled people, and are still identifying as planners, as people who come in from ‘outside’ in order to ....
• act as sympathetic intermediaries between government and these community members (if latter are left unchanged); or to

• train/educate community members to be actors in government (ie planning) processes – on the terms of the process as it is

Either way, the system and its values is left unchallenged, and people have to accommodate to it, in one way or another.
Ivan Illich, 1926 - 2002

- Well-known social critic in late 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s
- Published over a dozen books, largely in 1970s and 1980s.
- Arguably, a ‘guru’ (Winkler, 1987 : 450)
Relative neglect for at least 20 years

Why? Some unsystematic speculations:
- he was of his times, and ideas of others overlapped, and were developed further
  - politically (Ward, 2004)
  - academically – eg Johnson (1972) on professions
- he was an activist and polemicist; not a career academic; wanted no ‘school’
- a ‘silencing’ (Gabbard, 1993)
- terminal case of intellectual celebrity syndrome (Winkler, 1987)?
- his prognosis for industrialised societies – when delivered - was wrong
- perhaps he didn’t fully appreciate the social as well as intellectual implications of positionality – he was white, educated, male, Catholic, European...and had a forceful personality
What Illich argued

Explicitly
- An analysis of contemporary industrialised societies, their bad effects on people, and a prognosis.

Implicitly
- A normative account of what constitutes a proper life for a person, and in what kinds of circumstances this can be supported and sustained.
Industrialised societies

Illich is critical of all societies where maximising production of goods, and increasingly services, is elevated to the *de facto* main objective and measure of success (societies of accumulation).

In these circumstances, a variety of institutions, working through trained individuals (‘professionals’), mould the majority of people to serve the machinery of production, and produce legitimising ideology.
Effects on people

• made dependent: their independence is undermined so that the professionals can manage their lives

• become increasingly passive: their usefulness to powerful interests is as consumers and only via industrialised processes as producers (independent production becomes marginal)

• they come to fear responsibility, and each other
Underlying this analysis there is:

- a ‘long-view’ of the significance of (Western) modernity (cf Foucault)
- an awareness of the way states typically support powerful economic interests (cf Marx)
- an (essentially normative) assertion of what it is for individuals to develop as healthy, mature people (cf Fromm, Eriksson, Sennett).
Prognosis

• the system creates demands and aspirations that it cannot satisfy; this will be its downfall:
  - some are created by advertising and culture
  - others as by-products of the production and consumption of goods and services
  - medicine, transport and education highlight these contradictions
Illich’s answer – some provisos

• In fairness to Illich he was quite often writing about countries being subjected to ‘development’, where he felt that what was being offered was destructive and manipulative
• And some good things might still be salvageable
• At other times he was writing about the US and similar countries – in the latter he specifically said that the clock could not be turned back (eg re ‘myths’ of religious or folk beliefs)
Illich’s answers: conviviality

- A non-manipulative society
- Encourage, facilitate (even require?) individuals, households and collectivities to assume more responsibility for much of what materially and otherwise sustains their lives – housing, food, health, education, inter-personal relations ...
- Crucially, to understand these as things to be achieved, not consumed/given
- Limit technology to that which is relatively straightforward to understand and repair – eg bicycles
- All underpinned by a critique of a productivist ethos (life has meanings beyond accumulation)
Implications for planning

• No need to treat Illich’s ideas as a blueprint for a utopia
• Use them as a reminder of some vital concerns/tests for any kind of reconstituted planning
Even if you resist buying in to Illich wholesale there are points to take away ...

• every project of planning and its polity will have a conception of the kind of citizen it needs and is fostering – at least be explicit, as Illich is.

• be sensitive to the limitations and opportunities for planning arising from the way other areas of social life (schools, work, etc...) are operating – clearest in relation to Illich’s concern – dependence/autonomy, but point has general validity.
If one is tending to be sympathetic …

• Value self-help and self-organisation; value doing rather than being served
• Beware of all intermediaries and facilitators, especially those of the state
• Beware of ‘smart’ solutions because …
  - they may increase power of experts
  - they may avoid rather than confront political and ethical choices
• Reject uni-dimensional conceptions of life
• The planning task would be to help get from where we are to something like a life as described on the earlier slide.
• Specific actions:
  - Less prejudice against self-build, esp if low-impact
  - Land reform
  - Re-writing planning’s history – eg Colin Ward’s work
• But planning as a professional activity would have no place in an Illich-inspired society
Planning and the state

• Illich criticises the industrial state ...
• But only *implies* what will take its place – a loose kind of confederation of smallish communities; strong enough to co-ordinate certain activity perhaps (eg infrastructure) and maybe secure some rights; but always having to justify its existence
• No role for planning as we have known it in the last 100 years in this picture.
Where Illich falls short ...

- Illich professes a ‘radical humanism’, which focuses on the significance of individual autonomy
- This could be interpreted as a form of libertarianism, i.e. radical individualistic liberalism
- For some, this will be as unattractive (and ultimately self-defeating) as liberal individualism itself
An alternative ...

• We need a view of individuals and their well-being (a model of what a person can be)
• Such a view can only be generated within an established, settled communal way of life – MacIntyre’s ‘well-ordered society’.
• There are and will be different conceptions of what this should involve
• But coherent arguments about what kinds of lives we want people to have will be lodged within such perspectives and governance must support – or rather, not interfere in - at least some of the ways of life which give rise to them.
References

• Clifford, B (2016) ‘Clock-watching and box-ticking’: British local authority planners, professionalism and performance targets *Planning Practice and Research* DOI: 10.1080/02697459.2016.1178038
• Johnson, T (1972) *Professions and Power* Basingstoke: Macmillan
• Sandercock, L (1997) *Towards Cosmopolis* Chichester : Wiley


Some important texts by Illich (with date of first publication)

• *De-schooling Society* (1971)
• *Tools for Conviviality* (1973)
• *Limits to Medicine* (1975)
• *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its professional enemies* (1978)
• *Gender* (1983)