

## Rebirth of Epimethean Man

Our society resembles the ultimate machine which I once saw in a New York toy shop. It was a metal casket which, when you touched a switch, snapped open to reveal a mechanical hand. Chromed fingers reached out for the lid, pulled it down, and locked it from the inside. It was a box; you expected to be able to take something out of it; yet all it contained was a mechanism for closing the cover. This contraption is the opposite of Pandora's "box."

The original Pandora, the All-Giver, was an Earth goddess in prehistoric matriarchal Greece. She let all ills escape from her amphora (*pythos*). But she closed the lid before Hope could escape. The history of modern man begins with the degradation of Pandora's myth and comes to an end in the self-sealing casket. It is the history of the Promethean endeavor to forge institutions in order to corral each of the rampant ills. It is the history of fading hope and rising expectations.

To understand what this means we must rediscover the distinction between hope and expectation. Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers desire on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim. The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope.

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Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force.

The original Pandora was sent to Earth with a jar which contained all ills; of good things, it contained only hope. Primitive man lived in this world of hope. He relied on the munificence of nature, on the handouts of gods, and on the instincts of his tribe to enable him to subsist. Classical Greeks began to replace hope with expectations. In their version of Pandora she released both evils and goods. They remembered her mainly for the ills she had unleashed. And, most significantly, they forgot that the All-Giver was also the keeper of hope.

The Greeks told the story of two brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus. The former warned the latter to leave Pandora alone. Instead, he married her. In classical Greece the name "Epimetheus," which means "hindsight," was interpreted to mean "dull" or "dumb." By the time Hesiod retold the story in its classical form, the Greeks had become moral and misogynous patriarchs who panicked at the thought of the first woman. They built a rational and authoritarian society. Men engineered institutions through which they planned to cope with the rampant ills. They became conscious of their power to fashion the world and make it produce services they also learned to expect. They wanted their own needs and the future demands of their children to be shaped by their artifacts. They became lawgivers, architects, and authors, the makers of constitutions, cities, and works of art to serve as examples for their offspring. Primitive man had relied on mythical participation in sacred rites to initiate individuals into the lore of society, but the classical Greeks recognized as true men only those citizens who let themselves be fitted by *paideia* (education) into the institutions their elders had planned.

The developing myth reflects the transition from a world in which dreams were *interpreted* to a world in which oracles were *made*. From immemorial time, the Earth Goddess had been worshipped on the slope of Mount Parnassus, which was the center and navel of the Earth. There, at Delphi (from *deiphys*, the womb), slept Gaia, the sister of Chaos and Eros. Her son, Python

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the dragon, guarded her moonlit and dewy dreams, until Apollo the Sun God, the architect of Troy, rose from the east, slew the dragon, and became the owner of Gaia's cave. His priests took over her temple. They employed a local maiden, sat her on a tripod over Earth's smoking navel, and made her drowsy with fumes. They then rhymed her ecstatic utterances into hexameters of self-fulfilling prophecies. From all over the Peloponnesus men brought their problems to Apollo's sanctuary. The oracle was consulted on social options, such as measures to be taken to stop a plague or a famine, to choose the right constitution for Sparta or the propitious sites for cities which later became Byzantium and Chalcedon. The never-erring arrow became Apollo's symbol. Everything about him became purposeful and useful.

In the *Republic*, describing the ideal state, Plato already excludes popular music. Only the harp and Apollo's lyre would be permitted in towns because their harmony alone creates "the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom, the strain of the unfortunate and the strain of the fortunate, the strain of courage and the strain of temperance which befit the citizen." City-dwellers panicked before Pan's flute and its power to awaken the instincts. Only "the shepherds may play [Pan's] pipes and they only in the country."

Man assumed responsibility for the laws under which he wanted to live and for the casting of the environment into his own image. Primitive initiation by Mother Earth into mythical life was transformed into the education (*paideia*) of the citizen who would feel at home in the forum.

To the primitive the world was governed by fate, fact, and necessity. By stealing fire from the gods, Prometheus turned facts into problems, called necessity into question, and defied fate. Classical man framed a civilized context for human perspective. He was aware that he could defy fate-nature-environment, but only at his own risk. Contemporary man goes further; he attempts to create the world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking himself to fit it. We now must face the fact that man himself is at stake.

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Life today in New York produces a very peculiar vision of what is and what can be, and without this vision life in New York is impossible. A child on the streets of New York never touches anything which has not been scientifically developed, engineered, planned, and sold to someone. Even the trees are there because the Parks Department decided to put them there. The jokes the child hears on television have been programmed at a high cost. The refuse with which he plays in the streets of Harlem is made of broken packages planned for somebody else. Even desires and fears are institutionally shaped. Power and violence are organized and managed: the gangs versus the police. Learning itself is defined as the consumption of subject matter, which is the result of researched, planned, and promoted programs. Whatever good there is, is the product of some specialized institution. It would be foolish to demand something which some institution cannot produce. The child of the city cannot expect anything which lies outside the possible development of institutional process. Even his fantasy is prompted to produce science fiction. He can experience the poetic surprise of the unplanned only through his encounter with "dirt," blunder, or failure: the orange peel in the gutter, the puddle in the street, the breakdown of order, program, or machine are the only take-offs for creative fancy. "Goofing off" becomes the only poetry at hand.

Since there is nothing desirable which has not been planned, the city child soon concludes that we will always be able to design an institution for our every want. He takes for granted the power of process to create value. Whether the goal is meeting a mate, integrating a neighborhood, or acquiring reading skills, it will be defined in such a way that its achievement can be engineered. The man who knows that nothing in demand is out of production soon expects that nothing produced can be out of demand. If a moon vehicle can be designed, so can the demand to go to the moon. Not to go where one can go would be subversive. It would unmask as folly the assumption that every satisfied demand entails the discovery of an even greater unsatisfied one. Such insight would stop progress. Not to produce what is possible would expose the law of "rising expectations" as a euphemism

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for a growing frustration gap, which is the motor of a society built on the coproduction of services and increased demand.

The state of mind of the modern city-dweller appears in the mythical tradition only under the image of Hell: Sisyphus, who for a while had chained Thanatos (death), must roll a heavy stone up the hill to the pinnacle of Hell, and the stone always slips from his grip just when he is about to reach the top. Tantalus, who was invited by the gods to share their meal, and on that occasion stole their secret of how to prepare all-healing ambrosia, which bestowed immortality, suffers eternal hunger and thirst standing in a river of receding waters, overshadowed by fruit trees with receding branches. A world of ever-rising demands is not just evil-it can be spoken of only as Hell.

Man has developed the frustrating power to demand anything because he cannot visualize anything which an institution cannot do for him. Surrounded by all-powerful tools, man is reduced to a tool of his tools. Each of the institutions meant to exorcise one of the primeval evils has become a fail-safe, self-sealing coffin for man. Man is trapped in the boxes he makes to contain the ills Pandora allowed to escape. The blackout of reality in the smog produced by our tools has enveloped us. Quite suddenly we find ourselves in the darkness of our own trap.

Reality itself has become dependent on human decision. The same President who ordered the ineffective invasion of Cambodia could equally well order the effective use of the atom. The "Hiroshima switch" now can cut the navel of the Earth. Man has acquired the power to make Chaos overwhelm both Eros and Gaia. This new power of man to cut the navel of the Earth is a constant reminder that our institutions not only create their own ends, but also have the power to put an end to themselves and to us. The absurdity of modern institutions is evident in the case of the military. Modern weapons can defend freedom, civilization, and life only by annihilating them. Security in military language means the ability to do away with the Earth.

The absurdity that underlies nonmilitary institutions is no less manifest. There is no switch in them to activate their destructive power, but neither do they need a switch. Their grip is

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already fastened to the lid of the world. They create needs faster than they can create satisfaction, and in the process of trying to meet the needs they generate, they consume the Earth. This is true for agriculture and manufacturing, and no less for medicine and education. Modern agriculture poisons and exhausts the soil. The "green revolution" can, by means of new seeds, triple the output of an acre--but only with an even greater proportional increase of fertilizers, insecticides, water, and power. Manufacturing of these, as of all other goods, pollutes the oceans and the atmosphere and degrades irreplaceable resources. If combustion continues to increase at present rates, we will soon consume the oxygen of the atmosphere faster than it can be replaced. We have no reason to believe that fission or fusion can replace combustion without equal or higher hazards. Medicine men replace midwives and promise to make man into something else: genetically planned, pharmacologically sweetened, and capable of more protracted sickness. The contemporary ideal is a pan-hygienic world: a world in which all contacts between men, and between men and their world, are the result of foresight and manipulation. School has become the planned process which tools man for a planned world, the principal tool to trap man in man's trap. It is sup-posed to shape each man to an adequate level for playing a part in this world game. Inexorably we cultivate, treat, produce, and school the world out of existence.

The military institution is evidently absurd. The absurdity of nonmilitary institutions is more difficult to face. It is even more frightening, precisely because it operates inexorably. We know which switch must stay open to avoid an atomic holocaust. No switch detains an ecological Armageddon.

In classical antiquity, man had discovered that the world could be made according to man's plans, and with this insight he perceived that it was inherently precarious, dramatic and comical. Democratic institutions evolved and man was presumed worthy of trust within their framework. Expectations from due process and confidence in human nature kept each other in balance. The traditional professions developed and with them the institutions needed for their exercise.

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Surreptitiously, reliance on institutional process has replaced dependence on personal good will. The world has lost its humane dimension and reacquired the factual necessity and fatefulness which were characteristic of primitive times. But while the chaos of the barbarian was constantly ordered in the name of mysterious, anthropomorphic gods, today only man's planning can be given as a reason for the world being as it is. Man has become the plaything of scientists, engineers, and planners.

We see this logic at work in ourselves and in others. I know a Mexican village through which not more than a dozen cars drive each day. A Mexican was playing dominoes on the new hard-surface road in front of his house--where he had probably played and sat since his youth. A car sped through and killed him. The tourist who reported the event to me was deeply upset, and yet he said: "The man had it coming to him."

At first sight, the tourist's remark is no different from the statement of some primitive bushman reporting the death of a fellow who had collided with a taboo and had therefore died. But the two statements carry opposite meanings. The primitive can blame some tremendous and dumb transcendence, while the tourist is in awe of the inexorable logic of the machine. The primitive does not sense responsibility; the tourist senses it, but denies it. In both the primitive and the tourist the classical mode of drama, the style of tragedy, the logic of personal endeavor and rebellion is absent. The primitive man has not become conscious of it, and the tourist has lost it. The myth of the Bushman and the myth of the American are made of inert, inhuman forces. Neither experiences tragic rebellion. For the Bushman, the event follows the laws of magic; for the American, it follows the laws of science. The event puts him under the spell of the laws of mechanics, which for him govern physical, social, and psychological events.

The mood of 1971 is propitious for a major change of direction in search of a hopeful future. Institutional goals continuously contradict institutional products. The poverty program produces more poor, the war in Asia more Vietcong, technical assistance more underdevelopment. Birth control clinics increase survival

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rates and boost the population; schools produce more dropouts; and the curb on one kind of pollution usually increases another.

Consumers are faced with the realization that the more they can buy, the more deceptions they must swallow. Until recently it seemed logical that the blame for this pandemic inflation of dysfunctions could be laid either on the limping of scientific discovery behind the technological demands or on the perversity of ethnic, ideological, or class enemies. Both the expectations of a scientific millennium and of a war to end all wars have declined.

For the experienced consumer, there is no way back to a naive reliance on magical technologies. Too many people have had bad experiences with neurotic computers, hospital-bred infections, and jams wherever there is traffic on the road, in the air, or on the phone. Only ten years ago conventional wisdom anticipated a better life based on an increase in scientific discovery. Now scientists frighten children. The moon shots provide a fascinating demonstration that human failure can be almost eliminated among the operators of complex systems--yet this does not allay our fears that the human failure to consume according to instruction might spread out of control.

For the social reformer there is no way back, either, to the assumptions of the forties. The hope has vanished that the problem of justly distributing goods can be sidetracked by creating an abundance of them. The cost of the minimum package capable of satisfying modern tastes has skyrocketed, and what makes tastes modern is their obsolescence prior even to satisfaction.

The limits of the Earth's resources have become evident. No breakthrough in science or technology could provide every man in the world with the commodities and services which are now available to the poor of rich countries. For instance, it would take the extraction of one hundred times the present amounts of iron, tin, copper, and lead to achieve such a goal, with even the "lightest" alternative technology.

Finally, teachers, doctors, and social workers realize that their distinct professional ministrations have one aspect--at least--in common. They create further demands for the institutional

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treatments they provide, faster than they can provide service institutions.

Not just some part, but the very logic, of conventional wisdom is becoming suspect. Even the laws of economy seem unconvincing outside the narrow parameters which apply to the social, geographic area where most of the money is concentrated. Money is, indeed, the cheapest currency, but only in an economy geared to efficiency measured in monetary terms. Both capitalist and Communist countries in their various forms are committed to measuring efficiency in cost-benefit ratios expressed in dollars. Capitalism flaunts a higher standard of living as its claim to superiority. Communism boasts of a higher growth rate as an index of its ultimate triumph. But under either ideology the total cost of increasing efficiency increases geometrically. The largest institutions compete most fiercely for resources which are not listed in any inventory: the air, the ocean, silence, sunlight, and health. They bring the scarcity of these resources to public attention only when they are almost irremediably degraded. Everywhere nature becomes poisonous, society inhumane, and the inner life is invaded and personal vocation smothered.

A society committed to the institutionalization of values identifies the production of goods and services with the demand for such. Education which makes you need the product is included in the price of the product. School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is. In such a society marginal value has become constantly self-transcendent. It forces the few largest consumers to compete for the power to deplete the earth, to fill their own swelling bellies, to discipline smaller consumers, and to deactivate those who still find satisfaction in making do with what they have. The ethos of nonsatiety is thus at the root of physical depredation, social polarization, and psychological passivity.

When values have been institutionalized in planned and engineered processes, members of modern society believe that the good life consists in having institutions which define the values that both they and their society believe they need. Institutional value can be defined as the level of output of an institution. The

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corresponding value of man is measured by his ability to consume and degrade these institutional outputs, and thus create a new--even higher--demand. The value of institutionalized man depends on his capacity as an incinerator. To use an image--he has become the idol of his handiworks. Man now defines himself as the furnace which burns up the values produced by his tools. And there is no limit to his capacity. His is the act of Prometheus carried to an extreme.

The exhaustion and pollution of the earth's resources is, above all, the result of a corruption in man's self-image, of a regression in his

consciousness. Some would like to speak about a mutation of collective consciousness which leads to a conception of man as an organism dependent not on nature and individuals, but rather on institutions. This institutionalization of substantive values, this belief that a planned process of treatment ultimately gives results desired by the recipient, this consumer ethos, is at the heart of the Promethean fallacy.

Efforts to find a new balance in the global milieu depend on the deinstitutionalization of values.

The suspicion that something is structurally wrong with the vision of *homo faber* is common to a growing minority in capitalist, Communist, and "underdeveloped" countries alike. This suspicion is the shared characteristic of a new elite. To it belong people of all classes, incomes, faiths, and civilizations. They have 'become wary of the myths of the majority: of scientific utopias, of ideological diabolism, and of the expectation of the distribution of goods and services with some degree of equality. They share with the majority the sense of being trapped. They share with the majority the awareness that most new policies adopted by broad consensus consistently lead to results which are glaringly opposed to their stated aims. Yet whereas the Promethean majority of would-be spacemen still evades the structural issue, the emergent minority is critical of the scientific *deus ex machina*, the ideological panacea, and the hunt for devils and witches. This minority begins to formulate its suspicion that our constant deceptions tie us to contemporary institutions as the chains bound Prometheus to his rock. Hopeful trust and classical irony (*eironeia*) must conspire to expose the Promethean fallacy.

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Prometheus is usually thought to mean "foresight," or sometimes even "he who makes the North Star progress." He tricked the gods out of their monopoly of fire, taught men to use it in the forging of iron, became the god of technologists, and wound up in iron chains.

The Pythia of Delphi has now been replaced by a computer which hovers above panels and punch cards. The hexameters of the oracle have given way to sixteen-bit codes of instructions. Man the helmsman has turned the rudder over to the cybernetic machine. The ultimate machine emerges to direct our destinies. Children phantasize flying their spacecrafts away from a crepuscular earth.

From the perspectives of the Man on the Moon, Prometheus could recognize sparkling blue Gaia as the planet of Hope and as the Arc of Mankind. A new sense of the finiteness of the Earth and a new nostalgia now can open man's eyes to the choice of his brother Epimetheus to wed the Earth with Pandora.

At this point the Greek myth turns into hopeful prophecy because it tells us that the son of Prometheus was Deucalion, the Helmsman of the Ark who like Noah outrode the Flood to become the father of a new mankind which he made from the earth with Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora. We are gaining insight into the meaning of the Pythos which Pandora brought from the gods as being the inverse of the Box: our Vessel and Ark.

We now need a name for those who value hope above expectations. We need a name for those who love people more than products, those who believe that

No people are uninteresting.

Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.

Nothing in them is not particular,

and planet is dissimilar from planet.

We need a name for those who love the earth on which each can meet the other,

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And if a man lived in obscurity

making his friends in that obscurity,

obscurity is not uninteresting.

We need a name for those who collaborate with their Promethean brother in the lighting of the fire and the shaping of iron, but who do so to enhance their ability to tend and care and wait upon the other, knowing that

to each his world is private,

and in that world one excellent minute.

And in that world one tragic minute.

These are private.\*

I suggest that these hopeful brothers and sisters be called Epimethean men.

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Ivan Illich was born in Vienna in 1926. He studied theology and philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome and obtained a Ph.D. in history at the University of Salzburg. He came to the United States in 1951, where he served as assistant pastor in an Irish-Puerto Rican parish in New York City. From 1956 to 1960 he was assigned as vice-rector to the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, where he organized an intensive training center for American priests in Latin American culture. Illich was a co-founder of the widely known and controversial Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and since 1964 he has directed research seminars on "Institutional Alternatives in a Technological Society," with special focus on Latin America. Ivan Illich's writings have appeared in *The New York Review*, *The Saturday Review*, *Esprit*, *Kuvsbuch*, *Siempre*, *America*, *Commonweal*, *Epreuves*, and *Tern PS Modernes*.