Outflanking the Bureaucratic Production of Urgency: Ivan Illich and Stanley Hauerwas on Crisis and the Cultivation of Patience

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Introduction: The Politics of Panic

That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened by the consequences of greed and irresponsibility by some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shudder. Our healthcare is too costly, our schools fail too many and each day brings new evidence that the way we use energy strengthens our adversaries and threatens our planet. These are the indicators of crisis [. . .]

– Barack Obama, Inaugural Address

Ours is a world fundamentally determined by the politics of panic. It seems that *time* itself has fallen prey to the capitalistic logic of scarcity, a scarcity carefully managed by politicians and bureaucratic experts for the cultivation of both wealth and power. Recent market woes have only served

to fuel this pathological urgency, rendering the creative cessation of consumptive patterns economically perilous; the willful pause for reflexive contemplation socially subversive; and the life-giving power of "free time" implicitly bound to the therapeutic satisfaction of "needs" shaped by marketers and polling data. In these trying times, we have no time to wait; we have no time to think; we have no time to "waste." Or so we are told. As Slavoj Žižek wryly puts it, "It is as if authentic community is possible only in conditions of permanent threat, in a continuous state of emergency."[1]

In short, ours is a world in constant *crisis.*

As the philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich points out, *crisis* now all but univocally denotes *acceleration*. It "evokes an ominous but tractable threat against which money, manpower, and management can be rallied."[2] Writing over 30 years ago, Illich prophetically denounced what he considered the culturally perverse and socially debilitating effects of our "Epoch of Speed." This rapid-fire commodification, professionalization, and eventual elimination of human flourishing results from a malformed perception of value, relationality, and freedom proffered by a host of modernized institutions – the school, the hospital, the prison, the corporation, the nation-state – all of which seem to require the formative power of *crisis* to legitimize their own place of prominence. For Illich, there is something monstrous, alienating about this frenetic cooption of time.

However, he maintains that *crisis* need not be fatalistically bound to this understanding. In the deeper sense of the word, *crisis* implies an instant of choice, a moment of decision when new possibilities and social formations are suddenly revealed.[3] In a similar vein, theologian Stanley Hauerwas argues for a conception of time outside the narrowing logic of use and waste, strategic efficiency and managed results. Time, in his view, is a gratuitous excess that must be endured, even suffered. Faithfully abiding in time is both a practice and a skill.[4]

In this paper, I will trace Illich's critique of contemporary manifestations of *crisis* and then, following Stanley Hauerwas, suggest that an alternative perception of time capable of resisting the politics of panic is best rooted in the practice of patience.

Speed and Consumption in a Market-Intensive Society

Ivan Illich – not to be confused with the dying man of Tolstoy's literary masterpiece – remains among the boldest social critics of the last century. Born in Vienna in 1926, Illich was a Catholic priest and an early champion of the ecological movement. He is most known for his research conducted at the controversial Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) at Cuernavaca in Mexico, which he co-founded in 1966. The heart of his social and political critique is most clearly laid out in three widely influential books from the 1970s: *Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality,* and *Medical Nemesis*. In each of these works, Illich attempts to identify and analyze the processes through which our market-intensive industrial society has radically eroded the conditions necessary for social wellbeing and convivial living. In particular, Illich identifies several key features comprising our contemporary political and economic landscape.

Modern society is constituted by endless cycles of production and consumption. Diverse modes of life have been increasingly "enmeshed into a new web of dependence on commodities that flow out of the same kind of machines, factories, clinics, television studios, think tanks."[5] To more efficiently facilitate this process, modernity has ushered in an unprecedented age of institutions, bureaucracies, and organizational experts whose economic policies and political ideologies have thoroughly succeeded in bifurcating the world into nice, neat categories: public/private, secular/religious, managerial/therapeutic.[6]

Illich notes that "To satisfy this dependence, more of the same must be produced: standardized, engineered goods, designed for the future consumer who will be trained by the engineer's agent to need what he or she is offered. These products, be they tangible goods or intangible services, constitute the industrial staple. Their imputed monetary value as a commodity is determined by state and market in varying proportions."[7] Undergirding this modern economic apparatus is a peculiar salvific mythology preaching affluence and progress through scientific technology and perpetual industrial growth. However, despite the optimistic appeal of this meta-narrative, Illich argues that such processes ultimately expose an insidious tendency not only to undermine their own intended purposes, but also engender in

their "clients" a sense of helplessness, addiction, alienation, impotence, and paralysis.

First of all, a critical shift has occurred in that the interrelationship between "needs" and the means of their satisfaction are no longer freely determined by persons and communities. Instead, they have fallen under the monopolizing control of professional management. In other words, we "consumers" and "clients" have been artificially molded into these roles as more and more "needs" are imputed to us through advertising, brand loyalty, political campaigning, and a lifetime of education in school systems designed to form "productive citizens." In a fascinating essay entitled "Toward a History of Needs," Illich pushes the issue further. He demonstrates that because the *genuine* needs of individuals are not adequately met by organizations, these same institutions therefore substitute fabricated needs that they alone can fulfill.[8] As a result, they create an insatiable "demand" that not only guarantees their own perpetual existence, but along with it a modernized form of poverty defining those not yet dependent upon their goods and services.

This process has had two devastating consequences. On one hand, the drive for constant growth re-centers society entirely upon exchange-value, thus relegating more convivial modes of production to the margins.[9] On the other hand, this process leads to what Illich calls the "pathological" absurdity of modern society; namely, that contemporary social purposes tend to produce antithetical results. He writes, "Our major institutions have acquired the uncanny power to subvert the very purposes for which they were originally engineered and financed. Under the rule of our most prestigious professions, our institutional tools have as their principle product paradoxical counterproductivity."[10] Illich explains that

> Only up to a point can commodities replace what people make or do on their own. Only within limits can exchange-values satisfactorily replace use-values. Beyond this point, further production serves the interests of the professional producer—who has imputed the need to the consumer—and leaves the consumer befuddled and giddy, albeit richer. Needs satisfied rather than merely fed must be determined to a significant degree by the pleasure

> that is derived from the remembrance of personal autonomous action. There are boundaries beyond which commodities cannot be multiplied without disabling their consumer for this self-affirmation in action.[11]

Beyond a certain threshold, hospitals endanger health, schools impede learning, prisons aggravate crime, etc. Or, for a clearer case-in-point, just think of the DMV.

At its heart, such a system is deeply dehumanizing.[12] For while needs and corresponding consumption have multiplied many times over, autonomous and creative human action has atrophied. Human "life-span has become a chain of needs that have been met for the sake of ulterior striving for satisfaction."[13] Consequently, we have neither the time nor the means to handle tools, build or create, or even make home-cooked meals.

What then is the guiding force affording momentum and legitimacy to this debilitating social orientation? For Illich, the answer is undoubtedly *speed*.

The "age of disabling professions" is also an age of urgency, velocity, and instantaneousness. Faster is now better. Time is now money — measured, packaged, and sold to the highest bidder. Gone is duration—the lived experience of temporality. In its place the time of the clock. As a matter of history, in Illich's view, the concept of speed as "space over time" was an invention of the late-Middle Ages. Prior to Galileo the very notion of miles per hour would have been unintelligible.[14] The modern era was … well, rushed, with persons racing "from home to factory, through schools and jobs, from work to vacation, forever suffering time-scarcity on a tight schedule run by the clock."[15] Our present, postmodern world, marks a new historical epoch: that of the megahertz and unemployment. "Transformations in production, switching from employees to computers, from classroom to the internet, from clerks to credit cards, have not prepared us for this new culture [. . .] based on the speed of light."[16]

This speed acts as the undercurrent that sustains our modern social structures. "It comes out of a bodyless lust that lies deeper than the major assumptions on which the modern world is built – the need for an appro-

priate institutional treatment for crime, education, the pursuit of health, or insurance. Today's Pantheon is inhabited by these gods, who govern the modern world. But one finds *speed* in the dark zone beneath them, where the Greeks placed the Titans, the mighty ones who gave birth to divinities."[17] The incessant creation of needs, constant technological production, and rapid expansion of global capital whiz along at a blinding pace, pushing the system to the brink of crisis. The blur makes it all seem inevitable, irreversible, and unstoppable.

Toward a Critique of Crisis

Though a bit exaggerated, Illich's thought nonetheless anticipates much of where society has moved. For our world certainly groans with the pangs of crisis. On a national level, the events of 9/11 induced the Patriot Act, terror alerts, airport searches, and a war on a concept throwing our country into a constant state of emergency. In addition, we have only just started to come to grips with the depth of the ecological crisis created by systems of economic expansion and unbridled consumption. And now, with the collapse of our financial institutions, we face yet another global catastrophe. Crisis fills the air. It sets the agenda. It demands immediate action all the time, for time itself is now a resource none of us can afford to waste.

On a slightly less serious note, it's worth pointing out that while most people do not spend their every waking hour thinking about such things, nonetheless this atmosphere of crisis has taken other more subtle forms. Consider the dramatic narratives we tell about ourselves and our world: *ER*, *House*, *Prison Break*, and of course the heart-pounding *24*: don't miss it! Or consider our schizophrenic era of decorative taste where the Pottery Barn or Crate & Barrel suggest that no home is complete without the most current (seasonal) trend. Perhaps the easiest example of this artificial production of urgency is the weekly sale adverts that litter the Sunday paper. For the human-made-consumer patterns of living, of desire, of enduring time blip from page to page filled with frantic imperatives to buy … now! As William Cavanaugh suggests, "This is why shopping itself has taken on the honored

status of an addiction in Western society. It is not the desire for any thing in particular, but the pleasure of stoking desire itself that makes malls into the new cathedrals of Western culture. The dynamic is not an inordinate attachment to material things, but an irony and detachment from all things. [. . .] Scarcity is implied in the daily erotics of desire that keeps the individual in pursuit of novelty."[18] Even the calendar is now punctuated with strategic annual spending cycles (a.k.a. holidays); with each season blooms another newly created "need."

In the face of varying modes of crisis, speed sets the tone.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Illich has an uncanny ability to trace the consequences of these societal trends. Consider the following excerpt prophesying our present condition.

> I can only conjecture on how the breakdown of industrial society will ultimately become a critical issue. [. . .] I believe that growth will grind to a halt. The total collapse of the industrial monopoly on production will be the result of synergy in the failure of the multiple systems that fed its expansion. This expansion is maintained by the illusion that careful systems engineering can stabilize and harmonize present growth, while in fact it pushes all institutions simultaneously toward their second watershed. Almost overnight people will lose confidence not only in the major institutions but also in the miracle prescriptions of the would-be crisis managers. The ability of present institutions to define values such as education, health, welfare, transportation, or news will suddenly be extinguished because it will be recognized as an illusion.
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> The crisis may be triggered by an unforeseen event, as the Great Depression was touched off by the Wall Street Crash. Some fortuitous coincidence will render publicly obvious the structural contradictions between stated purposes and effective results in our major institutions. People will suddenly find obvious what is now evident to only a few: that the organization of the entire economy toward the 'better' life has become the major enemy of the *good* life. Like other widely shared insights, this one will have the po-

> tential of turning public imagination inside out. Larger institutions can quite suddenly lose their respectability, their legitimacy, and their reputation for serving the public good. It happened to the Roman Church in the Reformation, to the royalty in the Revolution. The unthinkable became obvious overnight: that people could and would behead their rulers.[19]

This could just as easily be an editorial in last month's *Washington Times* or the *New Yorker*. Illich published this in 1973, 36 years ago.

For Illich, the logic of crisis can take one of two forms. On one hand, crisis can mean *acceleration*. In the face of threat or emergency—real or imagined—it can mark that moment where politicians, bureaucrats, bankers, economists, and assorted social engineers take over and liberties are suspended. Wiretaps, torture, governmental monopoly, illicit contracting, and billion-dollar bailouts have all been justified in the name of crisis. Enter the mangers and society steps on the gas. Illich writes, "Crisis understood as a call for acceleration not only puts more power under the control of the driver, while squeezing the passengers more tightly into their safety belts; it also justifies the depredation of space, time, and resources for the sake of motorized wheels, and it does so to the detriment of people who want to use their feet."[20]

When the imminent and necessary solution to crisis has become: "Consume, before it's too late!" should we not realize the state we're in? When fiscal irresponsibility is responded to with a salvific mantra that says buy what you don't need, with money you don't have, to impress people you don't know, to support industries that feed upon your oversaturated and addicted desires, with the explicit intention of extracting wealth from your indebtedness; should we not be a little disturbed?[21]

Or as Žižek argued a few months ago, "Faced with a disaster over which we have no real influence, people will often say, stupidly, 'Don't just talk, do something!' Perhaps, lately, we have been *doing* too much. Maybe it is time to step back, think and *say* the right thing. True, we often talk about doing something instead of actually doing it – but sometimes we do things

in order to avoid talking and thinking about them. Like quickly throwing $700 billion at a problem instead of reflecting on how it came about."[22]

Herein, Illich's critique becomes particularly interesting. Instead of tacitly accepting such an solution, Illich advocates a different perspective. "Instead [crisis] can mean the instant of choice, that marvelous moment when people suddenly become aware of their self-imposed cages and of the possibility of a different life."[23] In this view, crisis marks a rupture in our predominant social imaginaries.[24] It jars and disrupts our preconceived understanding of the nature of things. It's a bit like a fracture webbing through a tinted window, illuminating cracks in ideologies and their grand tales of illusion. Crisis exposes fatalism, clearing imaginative space for the possibility that it might look otherwise than this. It signifies the chaotic splaying of narratives all vying for the monopoly of popular opinion. Yet "[i]t is the power of surprise that weakens control, that shakes up the established controllers, and brings to the top those people who have not lost their bearings."[25]

More concretely, Illich maintains that the moment of decision facing Western society depends upon a "Copernican revolution in our perception of values."[26] Institutions and individuals alike have long ignored reflecting upon the limits necessary to encourage health, sustenance, relationality, and ultimately human flourishing. "At present, we see consumer goods and professional services at the center of our economic system, and specialists relate our needs exclusively to this center. In contrast, the social inversion contemplated here would assign use-values created and personally fostered by people themselves to the center."[27] Current events have spun Western culture into a bit of an identity crisis. Consumer spending habits are being radically redefined. Individuals are seriously re-evaluating their needs. In fact, *The Economist* reports that so-called "consumer psychology" is moving toward thrift, restraint, skepticism, and conservation.[28] All of this suggests that a new discursive space is being created which could facilitate a sustained dialogue on the nature of social values, priorities, and responsibilities.

Unfortunately, such a reflexive pause takes time that urgency cannot allow for. Thus I suggest that inching toward such alternative social imaginaries requires a willful resistance to the politics of panic.

Patient Resistance: Learning to Endure Time Convivially

Obviously, such a revolutionary plea for concrete and structural alternatives to our present situation is well beyond the scope of this short essay, not to mention the limits of my own knowledge and expertise. Instead, I want to argue that a simple yet necessary step forward begins with a shift in our perception of time from one clogged by an endless chasing of needs to one of rooted in the lived experience of conviviality. I will bring this essay to a close with a few brief remarks on Stanley Hauerwas and the cultivation of patience.

In an essay called, "Taking the Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial," Hauerwas offers several comments on what living in the face of crisis could possibly look like.

First, it means learning to think the world differently. Crisis often acts as a hegemonic force that has a bad habit of dominating personal and communal worldviews. It does so by demanding our constant and complete attention.[29] Allowing crisis to wield the formative power of determining our lives, our decisions, our daily comings and goings only results in a type of moral formation which renders us ultimately incapable of acting and speaking truthfully in/to a world reeling in vertigo. This paralyzing subjugation of the everyday to the relentless demands of such a totalizing vision of the "now" exposes a fundamentally *totalitarian* logic. The task then is stepping outside the pace of crisis, thereby enabling the in-breaking of newfound possibilities. Hauerwas maintains that sidestepping the noise and the distraction clears the space for thinking and talking, listening and remembering. But that takes time. It takes patience. It takes a willingness to fall out of step with the rhythm.

Second, as crisis punches holes in our collective imagination, this patient perdurance will help sustain the reflexivity necessary for persons and communities to reassess their needs, their desires, and their habits. For it can take such a rupture to arouse our saturated apathy and to afford that raw exposure, finally (and painfully) laying bare the depth of our complic-

ity with systems of violence, voracity, and consumption. Patiently enduring such realization can fracture our buffered indifference and invoke both confession and lament. It is no coincidence that etymologically speaking "patience" connotes "long-suffering." Hauerwas is quick to remind that we are not without resources at our disposal to endure such an investigation. Circumventing the distraction means for Hauerwas pressing ever deeper into those narratives and practices that make the world intelligible. In his words, "These resources, these practices of patience, are not simply 'there' but arise within the narrative of God's patient care of the world [. . .] Put simply, our ability to take the time to enjoy God's world, when we are well as when we are sick, depends on our recognition that it is indeed God's world."[30]

Finally, generating convivial alternatives to consumption requires recovering the value of the trivial. According to Hauerwas, the urgency of crisis excludes most of lived experience, or at least most of what makes lived experience worth enduring.[31] Unplugging from cycles of market dependence is not easy, nor is it very fun. Often it comes at the cost of much work, discomfort, even suffering. For Hauerwas, the willingness to take the time to care for the everyday trains us to be patient enough to resist false choices. Such practices as reading books, feeding the hungry, raising children, visiting the sick, learning instruments or languages, prayer, all of these are types habitual formation in the skill of suffering time.[32] This formation "bind[s] our past with our future by providing us with continuity of self." This just might clear space for new conversations capable of enabling us to think afresh about the conditions that constitute the good life.[33]

NOTES

[1] Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p. 23.
[2] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 2.
[3] Ibid., p. 3.
[4] Hauerwas, Stanley. "Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 1988).
[5] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs*. p. 4.
[6] See Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 45.
[7] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs*. pp. 4-5.
[8] Ibid., p. 24. "The Age of Professions will be remembered as the time when politics withered, when voters guided by professors entrusted to technocrats the power to legislate needs, the authority to decide who needed what, and a monopoly over the means by which those needs should be met."
[9] Ibid., p. 9. The constant drive towards development has resulted in the systematic displacement of use-values. "After these years, plastic had replaced pottery, carbonated beverages replaced water, Valium replaced chamomile tea, and records replaced guitars."
[10] Ibid., p. 40.
[11] Ibid., p. 42.
[12] Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society* (New York: Penguin, 1971), p. 114. "It forces the few largest consumers to compete for 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 non-satiety is thus at the root of physical depredation, social polarization, and psychological passivity."
[13] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs*. p. 46.
[14] Cayley, David. *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), pp. 181-182.
[15] Illich, Ivan. "Prisoners of Speed," in *Speed? What Speed?* (8 Nov. 1996), p. 10.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 13. Emphasis added.
[18] Cavanaugh, William T. "Consumption, the Market, and the Eucharist," *The Other Journal* (4 April, 2005).

[19] Illich, Ivan. *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 111.
[20] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs.* pp. 2-3.
[21] This appeal acts to both distract our attention and also mask the degree to which such an agenda will only serve to entrench market dependence and consumption. Illich notes in *Tools for Conviviality*, "It would be a mere exercise in geomancy to predict which series of events will play the role of the Wall Street Crash as catalyst of the first crisis of, not just in, industrial society. But it would be folly not to expect in the very near future an event whose effects will jam the growth of tools. When this happens, the noise that accompanies the crash will distract attention from seeing it in proper perspective" (p. 113).
[22] Žižek, Slavoj. "Don't Just Do Something, Talk," *London Review of Books* (10 Oct., 2008), p. 2. Emphasis original.
[23] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs.* p. 3.
[24] Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp.171-172.
[25] Illich, Ivan. *Tools for Conviviality.* p. 113.
[26] Illich, Ivan. *Toward a History of Needs*. p. 16.
[27] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[28] "Consumer Psychology: From buy, buy to bye-bye," *The Economist* (2 April, 2009),
http://www.economist.com/business/displayStory.cfm?story_id=13415207&source=hptextfeature
[29] Hauerwas, Stanley. "Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 1988). In this essay, Hauerwas addresses a crisis of a slightly different nature: living in a world defined by the nuclear bomb. "Those who argue that every aspect of our lives must be determined by the bomb seem to be making this kind of suggestion – namely, that we live in a totalitarian situation where the bomb determines every decision we make" (p. 255). Importantly, he goes on to argue that the alternative is not blind indifference or tacit consent to the status quo. "I am not suggesting that the bomb should make no difference for how we live our lives; rather, I have tried to suggest that when we allow it to make *all* the difference, we lose the power to stand against the forces that built the bomb in the first place. For our lives become determined by the kind of urgency that robs us of the freedom to enjoy the time God has given us to make peace possible" (p. 258).
[30] Hauerwas, Stanley & Pinches, Charles. *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), p. 177.

[31] Hauerwas, Stanley. *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 1988), p. 258.
[32] Ibid., p. 265. In particular, Hauerwas maintains that the practice of raising children, even in the face of crisis, is one of the boldest moves of resistance to the totalitarian hegemony of power. "Nothing is more hopeful or peaceful than the willingness to open our lives to children. Having children is activity in its most paradigmatic form, as the having of a child is its own meaning. Moreover, having children is our most basic time-full project, not only in the sense that children are time-consuming, but because through children our world quite literally is made timeful. Children bind existence temporally, as through them we are given beginnings, middles, and ends. They require us to take time and, as a result, we learn that time is possible only as a form of peace. [. . .] For it may be that finally the most radical stance possible for any human is the willingness to have a child in the face of injustice, oppression, and tyranny. Having children is the ultimate defeat of all totalitarians" (p.262).
[33] It is important to note that for Hauerwas there is a deep, inseparable connection between these practices and the virtuous community that sustains them, namely the Church. For in that community Christians embody daily the deeper narratives that give the world intelligibility. Ultimately those narratives are rooted in the Triune God beyond the narrowing confines of crisis. Christians can have an alternative perspective of time, suffering, and urgency precisely in that Christian imagination is shaped *eschatologically*. Trust enables hope and the hope that perseveres through trial produces patience (Rom. 5.3-5). So how should we react to crisis? "The only response can be theological – namely, that Christians believe that only as we learn to follow him who is God's peace can we make the peace that surrounds us more fully ours. Such a theological appeal, however, is not extranatural but rather the means through which we come to see the naturalness of peace. Without such convictions our peaceful activities – such as having children – can justify as well as become terrifyingly violent" (264). As Hauerwas writes in his commentary on *Matthew*, "Great injustice is perpetrated in the name of justice. Great evil is done because it is said that time is short and there needs to be a response to this or that crisis. Christians live after the only crisis that matters, which means that Jesus has given us all the time in the world to visit him in the prisons of this world" (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006, p. 212).