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The Conditional Human

European Conference "Lifelong Learning - Inside and Outside Schools"
25. - 27. February 1999, University of Bremen.
Opening Session

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European Conference "Lifelong Learning - Inside and Outside Schools"

25. - 27. February 1999, University of Bremen.

25. 2. 99, 3.30 - 6.00 pm Opening Session

Vortrag von Johannes Beck, Silja Samerski und Ivan Illich:

DER VERHÄLTNISMÄSSIGE MENSCH - THE CONDITIONAL HUMAN

PART ONE: Johannes Beck, THE ADAPTED INDIVIDUAL

Honoured and dear guests:

I greet you and welcome you to this conference. In the hours that follow three of us, all friends, will speak. Our theme is the creation of what we will call conditional, or relative man. Silja Samerski is a geneticist and philosopher who studies one contemporary form of life-long learning, the genetic counselling of pregnant women. Ivan Illich, who has taught at the University of Bremen since 1991, is interested in the history of the sense of proportion, and how it came to be lost in the modern world. And I am concerned with discovering a form of education that can resist the spirit of the age. For, even in the face of the threatening prospect of life reconstituted as a series of learning modules, resistance will persist.

Despite being your host, I am extremely skeptical about the subject of this conference. It's not that I doubt the banal fact that each of us, after his lights, continues to learn as long as he lives. Rather my skepticism applies to the world-wide implantation and propagation of the idea of "life-long learning." This is an absolutely novel and anti-pedagogical doctrine. It ordains that everyone must "learn" continuously, because this is what their life, so-called, now demands of them. Neither the good intentions of the pedagogues enlisted in this enterprise, nor the generous research funds now devoted to it can dissuade me from my skepticism. My friends and I believe that it is necessary to seek critical distance from this new phenomenon, and its practice. We do so in full awareness that our critique will seem comical from the more "responsible" standpoint of mainstream sciences and academic disciplines.

The doctrine of lifelong learning overturns traditional ideas of education. In future pedagogues will play second fiddle in the concert of learning. "Life" itself, it is said, will take the first violin's chair, and we will dance to its melody. Nevertheless, I hope that as we sit together during the next few days you will not diminish, or define away your criticisms of this new approach. May our conversation be like a deep and refreshing breath, and not just another "module of life-long learning."

The particularity of the German word "Bildung" shows how difficult it is to make ourselves understood. It is generally rendered in this English version of my text as education; but, in fact, it can hardly be translated into another language. Nor can it be replaced by words like learning, qualification,

information, knowledge, or upbringing. Conversation becomes even more difficult when internationally disseminated plastic words are mixed in. These are words like creativity, competence, or communication. They invade and occupy our talk, displacing personal experience and suffocating precise meaning. Even members of the Mafia can be described as informed and qualified, as good communicators, innovators and team players, and as capable of learning and decision-making. So can gene cloners and atom splitters, presidents of corporations and the poets who write their advertising.

The ideology of life-long learning turns education into a form of positioning, an unending quest for relevance. Education no longer refers either to the acquiring of specific abilities or to an inner formation but to an unlimited and non-specific process. This process can readily be seen at work in everyday life. So let me now offer several examples: An older gentleman wants to take a train downtown. In the train station he can no longer find a ticket seller. Instead, there stands on the platform an automat at which he is to "serve himself." He fumbles helplessly with it. His money disappears into the box, but the box doesn't give him back a ticket. He seems to have done something wrong. Should he now ride illegally, pay a higher price by buying his ticket on the train, complain at the - today regrettably closed - administration office, take the course on how to use automatic ticket machines from the train company, or just stay home? He can't decide between these possibilities. He wants to go and see his daughter today. But just now he is very nervous, as he knocks tentatively on the slit where the money disappeared. A young woman observing his attempt to pay rescues him and his ticket with the push of a button and the words, "we're never finished learning!"

Not many hours later, this helpful person will be in need of help and advice herself. After she rides downtown on the train with the automat-trainee, she buys a computerized hair-styling device. The new appliance comes with a 50-page manual. It explains in red letters on the very first page that failure to follow the directions may put her in mortal danger. The rest of the booklet is incomprehensible to her; but, from the customer service department of the manufacturer, she at least learns a sequence of buttons to push. By this means she is able to style her hair without scorching it.

When she suggests a course in the use of instruction manuals at her local adult education school, she finds herself teaching it.

A certain unemployed carpenter finds himself in different but related circumstances. At the employment office he is told that it's his own fault that he has been classified as unemployable. After all, he can't show evidence of a single effort at professional development. His objection that it took him many years of study and apprenticeship to become a carpenter in the first place makes no impression. His claim to experience is stored in the file that will accompany him for the rest of his life under the heading: unwilling to take further training.

There remains the story of the young woman who, after a long interval, goes to a doctor for a checkup. Regrettably he diagnoses breast cancer. But he tells her that her failure to follow a preventive checkup schedule makes her partly responsible for her condition. Now the likelihood of successful surgery is

60% He can guarantee nothing. The decision she must now learn to make lies with her alone. She must remember, though, that her health insurance covers only medically recognized treatments.

I could go on presenting these scandalous vignettes of lifelong learning for hours. They deserve to be interpreted individually, and Silya Samerski will do this later by examining cases of genetic counselling. My concern here is with what these stories have in common. What underlying principles do they reveal?

My cast of characters are faced with new "teachers" in and out of schools. Moderators, animators, facilitators and networkers will be their lifelong companions. The pattern from which these helpers are cut is celebrated as the society of knowledge, information, and risk. Whether they are decent and forbearing or pushy and aggressive, these new teachers stand behind the perpetual learners, ever ready to re-orient them. As they say in advertising jargon: they help their clients to help themselves. Many manufactured commodities now require an educational supplement, which their consumers are either unable or unwilling to supply. Their new teachers help them to adapt. To put it plainly: circumstances are not to be adapted to people, but people to circumstances.

This is not in itself something new. The modern destruction of the human has been proceeding for 500 years through the school, the military, the reformatory. The stopwatch and the ruler, the factory, the ghetto and the market all contributed to the industrial production of a conditional and dependent humanity. Children came to be understood as incomplete creatures in need of training. They were to be made into useful people by external compulsion, the pedagogical rites of schooling, and propaganda. Training procedures were to extend even to the colonization of the interior world. The history of modern nation states and their industries is the triumphant record of the success of these civilizing procedures. Such regimentation has always inspired opposition. There have been popular revolts, some hopeful, some merely desperate; and there have been those who have been unwilling to cede their responsibility to one another to institutions. Conventional pedagogical methods never entirely subdued this resistance. However, it is possible that this difficulty has now been circumvented, as training has become effective without resort to obvious compulsion or organized control. Reluctantly, I have been trying to sketch out this educational reform. What was once enforced by compulsion has now become a need. One is now dealing with clients whose acceptance of the available options is accompanied by a feeling of inner certainty. Manufactured choices carry the duress and inevitability of nature. A globalized ahistorical society presents itself as without alternatives. Boys and girls, men and women, in this regime, are merely "the human factor." They make their appearance as resources and as risks. As factors, they are required to adapt themselves responsibly to a situation that doesn't correspond to them. They must answer to the unanswerable. They are supposed to see themselves as independent agents and producers on the one hand, and as clients and debtors on the other. As such they invest in themselves in order to increase their marketability. To this end they must allow themselves to be animated and counselled. They must regulate themselves, act decisively, and bear the risks of their decisions. They are self-produced and self-producing; and this superabundant selfhood constitutes something radically new.

Modern citizens who want to pursue a successful career face a situation that is without clear boundaries or limits, and this prevents them from recognizing an alternative to their self-directed "lifelong learning and decision-making." Their comings and goings, their progress and well-being, their flourishing and ruination depend on their adaptation to diverse systems. In particular, they have to learn to function and compete in symbiosis with current economic conditions. A tolerant acceptance of these conditions is no longer enough. One has to learn to identify with them. In the mills of the new economy, where positioning is all, the grit is supposed to grind itself so fine that it becomes grease for the gears.

Whoever can't or won't lubricate the wheels ought to know what's in store for him. Outside the door, behind the mill pond, looms the slag heap of those who have been made redundant. Those degraded into social burdens and those without prospects serve as object lessons. They demonstrate the crucial importance of positioning and incite others to endless learning. The fascist dictum, "You are nothing, the People is everything!" has now been revised to, "You are your position."

Who benefits from this arrangement is an open secret. It is announced on billboards and t-shirts, on the stock exchange and in department stores, on television and in the streets. Being there is everything! An endless supply of learning materials cheerfully promotes things as they are. The perpetual learners overtax their limited energies in pursuit of the goal. But only a few reach for it at the right moment. The rest reach in vain, only to find the goal receding. Still it holds them. Contemporary people suffer the torments of Tantalus, rather than those of Sisyphus.

Some current discourses on the importance of positioning attempt to persuade by frightening those they address. These discourses originate in science and politics, economics and the trades. They show remarkable consistency, at least throughout Europe. What they manifest is "a great pedagogical coalition" devoted to spreading a preoccupation with positioning. This coalition has no interest in pedagogy. Indeed it sabotages every form of education in which the well-being of young people is put before the petty interests of those in power. This sabotage involves public ridicule of any teacher who wants something better for his students than the status quo.

The great pedagogical coalition wants to absorb the very personality of its subjects, and this attempt to create an entirely functional and accountable person seems to justify every means. The engineers of the cognitive, genetic, information and learning sciences are coopted. Concepts like solidarity, autonomy, learning, decision, consensus, and even Bildung are taken over. The future is colonized. Countless experts in the science of child-rearing make themselves unnecessarily subservient to this coalition, in the hope of gaining advantages. Teachers who put the interests of future generations first are not permitted to contribute. But, insofar as these teachers are convinced that what counts today is a stubborn and communal commitment to authentic education, they continue to resist the coalition's sabotage. Real education still consists, as it always did, in a patient and steadfast search for truth, and in the unfolding of capacities that are good and beautiful in themselves. It takes place in a thoughtful shaping of our surroundings, in conversation, and above all in hospitality. Whoever loves such education will not sacrifice the present to an endlessly postponed future.

Of course, I don't know, honoured listeners, in which huts or palaces, or through which peaks and valleys of the educational landscape you are currently passing. On that will depend the viewpoint with which you encounter the one I have outlined. Regardless of your standpoint, I am confident that a process as unprecedented as the one I have tried to sketch will elicit resistance and contradiction. In place of the unreasonable demand for lifelong learning, I propose a form of study that is limited and communal. Only within such limits can we discover or recover a personal word and a personal voice. This can happen if we refuse to allow ourselves to become mouthpieces, components or resources within a static system.

Silja Samerski: Part II

„Individual Initiative“

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In mid 1998, the Association of German Industrialists (*Bundeverband der Deutschen Industrie*) published a policy statement about „Individual Initiative“ which is presented as the key to German Leadership in Europe. The Association highlights "flexibility" as its prime concern, next to competitiveness, foresight, sense of community and personal responsibility. More is demanded from each one than the mere willingness to accept relocation or retraining. Everyone must recognize himself or herself as a unit of an information system. The Association predicts, that "each one will henceforth evaluate his behavior and his habits in view of the demands of a new age and will be on a constant lookout for new chances". This, the document continues, obligates each one to a steady consumption of information, which means "lifelong learning".

To meet this need ever more lifelong learning opportunities must be opened, and ever new counseling services are needed to enable potential clients to select the appropriate options. The underlying assumption is clear: Birth and Investment, terminal care and vacation opportunities are constantly being improved. (Vaginal or cesarean? Securities or bonds? Chemotherapy or Kervorkian? Couple of Single? these are anguishing alternatives). At every turn we are faced with unprecedented opportunities. About each we need to be informed, because each opportunity also implies unsuspected options. And to face these options, we need context sensitive guidance; guidance that, at its best, will be provided as a counseling service.

The idea of basic needs for specialized guidance in coping with everyday matters was, until recently, something unheard of. The very first counseling agency in Germany dates back to the twenties: it appeared as vocational guidance for elementary school graduates. With the Weimar Republic, breast-feeding consultations came in vogue and right thereafter occupational orientation for young men seeking advancement and marriage counseling for couples seeking progeny. But these forms of pre-war

avuncular advice-giving must never be misconstrued as ancestors of the consumer guidance now gently foisted on individuals pretending to empower them for self-management and self-orientation. With an extreme, but characteristic example I want to open the rag-bag of assumptions that underlies the need for life-long guidance to learning opportunities.

I will start with the need for information and guidance in women with child. Mrs. K. is in her mid thirties. She has just quickened. Her belly has swelled. She is told to be in her 5th month. Her gynecologist has alerted her to the need for a decision, a decision she must make. He also provided her with information that, at this advanced stage of pregnancy, every examination carries some risk. Further he warned her that, without examinations, she risks giving birth to a moron. He stressed that that it was not his job to decide for her, that she alone was able to decide at this point. For further options, he referred her to the Genetic Counseling Service. You should know that in Germany the Counselor must be a physician with an additional specialization of 5 years in genetics. Now Mrs.K. faces the geneticist who sits across the table and who has taken cognizance of her file. She wants to know from him, what to do?

From this point on I will read to you from the protocol that I took at this interview. The geneticist begins the interview by establishing the frame within which he can be of service:

"Let me start with a few remarks.... counseling has nothing to do with providing advice... we can discuss, you will get what is important and will decide what is right for you. Mind you, there are no scientific reasons for or against genetic tests, that's something which must be weighed. You came for counsel and all I must limit myself to say: 'that's something you must find by yourself'".

I have protocolled three dozen such sessions. What I just read is a typical opening. The next step is a quickie course in textbook wisdom about possible malformations that I can spare you. Then the counselor explains that all pregnant women face a base-risk. Tests could place Mrs.K. into a narrower population which in view of some characteristic is "threatened" by a higher than average risk. For Mrs.K. as for any woman submitting to this procedure, this "threat" brings the interview to its critical point. If she understands that the probability of an event occurring in a population -- say, a fetal malformation -- cannot predict anything that will occur in her case, the woman will patronizingly laugh at the pop-statistician, get up and go home. Most women however do not respond in this way. Information about the statistical risk attributed to a population has turned into a felt threat for the counseled person.

The interview sets this trap. While the counselor opens a computer printout he says:

"Mrs. K., now let us come to your case."... "You might know that the Downs Syndrome appears in one of 435 pregnancies. However, mind you, the Downs Syndrome is not the only chromosomal deviation. Deviations appear with a frequency of zero point six percent. But it is entirely up to you to consider this rate high or trivial; something you act upon or something you forget right away."

At this Mrs. K. slouches and stammers:

"What does all this mean?"

And the physician insists:

"It's up to you to know which position you take. If you take the position 'oh indeed, what you tell me, is a risk' then you can ask for a test. And its results might lead you to draw the consequence, which means, interrupt this pregnancy."

"You must decide, Mrs.K. You understand that I can tell you what is feasible, not what ought to be done. We don't bear any consequence."

That's it. Mrs.K. is in thorough distress. Does she risk a miscarriage? Would she ever consent to a procedure that provokes the expulsion of a dead fetus? Can she face the sense of guilt if she were to give birth to a handicapped child? The counseling session has resulted in context-sensitive learning and brought forth a conundrum. And, more than that: it has created the need for a decision, the decision to stay or not to stay pregnant. It has shifted the full burden of the decision and of all its sequels on the woman.

All this takes no more than an hour and a half. I cannot tell you what happened next, because after the interview I lost track of Mrs.K. I don't know if she pondered on probabilities; if she went to the cafeteria and recovered her common sense or if she went into a rage about the indignity to which she had submitted. In some instances the irritation of the counseled began to show up much before the session's end; occasionally I saw women get up, confused but unaffected.

Now, why did I tell the story of Mrs.K.? I decided to tell it, when Johannes Beck told that of the passenger struggling with the automate. I was struck by the analogy between the ceremony of consultation in which Mrs.K. "learned" to face the quickening in her belly in the very same way in which the old man had to face the buttons and levers beneath the screen. And I told it, because I was touched by the difference between the two situations. The traveler wanted a ticket, and found nobody at the counter. Mrs.K. was expecting a child. She went to her physician who transformed her confident hope into a tested fact. Then she was referred to the counselor, a Geneticist. From him she learned what she was supposed to need at this stage of her life: she learned that giving birth was a matter of her choice. That she had to face a risk, to evaluate its level, choose between options. Continuing pregnancy became a matter for choice. A matter to decide. A decision no one but she could make. That offspring ought to be the result of a calculus of risks, chances and opportunities of a mother.

To conclude, let me tell you about a friend: one who refused to learn. When she conceived the hope of being with child, she chose rest instead of tests and guidance. She well knew about the high risk into which age and family history placed her pregnancy. But she also knew that -- no matter how surprising -- she was waiting for her child.

Peter came, is slow and thrives. His mother delights in him, the way he is. She is happy to have excluded any "decision" about his coming,

PART THREE, Ivan Illich

ENGLISCHE VERSION DES VORTRAGSMANUSCRIPTES VON
IVAN ILLICH (com autor vor dem Vortrag geschrieben)
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Peter's mother is happy that his arrival had never become a question of "decision". When she felt pregnant, she kept her own counsel, gave birth to her child and still enjoys the surprise. That is, what Silja Samerski just told us. Deliberately her friend eschewed guidance.

During my whole life I have stood up for children who try to reject schooling. I do so, having understood with Peter Berger that the ritual of schooling is an artificer of the myth that makes legitimate competence dependant on previous curricular inputs. I encourage children to reflect on their reasons for dropping out. Paul Goodman encouraged me to believe that children know this. My stamina in supporting the disestablishment of school I owe to the example given to me by Gene Burkart and Aaron Falbel, who carry on the work of John Holt with half a million US families who -- without sectarian motives -- shield their children from school.

I follow the example of Johannes Beck: intercourse with friends is for me an occasion to discover what we are good at, and that we know what we do. At the University I cultivate Rhetoric and Exegesis, and stay as far as I can from sermonizing. If after class someone tells me "yea, I got this, however ..." I delight. If he were to thank me for what he has learned from me, I would find fault with my presentation.

So far I treated the babble about "learning for life" as a mere slogan used by unemployed teachers on the lookout for jobs in industry, commerce and politics. Or, on a more pretentious level, as an attempt to restyle school administrators as architects of learning opportunities. For a long time I did not want to face the full truth: Being sent up for life into a thicket of learning opportunities seemed equivalent to inescapable propaganda for the limitless adaptation to a technogene world, propaganda for a grotesque and disgusting belief in the plasticity of man. I took the whole thing as a phantasy of pedagogics gone wild. Was certain that a person with common sense could eschew the thing and joke about it.

In conversation with Silja I lost this gullibility. I discovered an even more despicalbe aspect in the lifelong learning that you promote. Only through her protocols of three dozen guidance sessions I came to accept that any such gibberish nonsense was actually practiced. I came to understand that a pregnant woman has a claim, ney, an obligation to learn about the probable future of her child, because she had to make a responsible decision on giving birth, and would remain the sole responsible for the consequences of her option. Obligatory life-learning became my Great Beast.

Why? With the escalation of learning opportunities all limitations on "blaming the victims" are removed. You will be blamed for the child you have or that you aborted just as for the badly worded insertion that did not get you a job. Either you eschew the learning package, and whatever happens, is your fault. Or you learn, and you become the one responsible for the choice you have made and you, you alone, bear the consequences.

With the proposed booming of learning opportunities, the offer of guidance cannot now but swell. And you are responsible for having accepted the learning-offer or not. And the first thing you have to learn, is weighing your chances on choosing what to learn. At this leverage point the guidance counsellor enters. He is in charge of the ceremony in which the counselled is simultaneously faced with probability profiles and with the demand, that she alone decide. Samerski has described to you how this ceremony is provided by law to a pregnant women. Other such events might be less obviously disgusting but structurally they are the same. Guidance is now provided at ever more turns in each life, and above all for "decisions" that promise to enhance the earning chances of a self-directed individual.

The consequence of this is momentous. So far the disabling power of the Pedagogues extended only to the legitimation of knowledge and skills. Knowledge and competences, to be valuable, had to be acquired under their technical supervision and evaluated by their scientific standards. Now this disabling power extends beyond knowledge and skills, and affects deliberation. Freedom, choice, options are all so re-defined, that -- to be appropriately taken -- they presuppose guidance services. And this is the main point that our Trio wants to make:

Life-long learning that is socially accepted as the legitimate way to enable each one to adapt at each moment to new chances created by new technical or organizational at first sight only confirms what the hidden curriculum of schooling equally teaches: Self-capitalization in its value depends on the ritual within which it is acquired. Life-long learning at first sight goes beyond schooling mainly by the extent to which it fosters the sense of helplessness in the absence of a pedagogic nurse. No school system ever promised anything like the constant update for the individual compatibility of self-guided individuals with society understood in analogy to an operating system.

But, at a second look, something is very new new, unprecedented in its anti-democratic and in its immoral consequences. This is the tie-in of guidance with the use of each of the learning-modules offered. It is the demand that, forever and ever, at each turn of the road we seek guidance to choose between options characterized by complex statistical probability profiles. He who submits to this demande, degrades his deliberation to a throw of dice; makes himself into a chance, betrays himself. I focus on this disgusting eventuality to encourage one or the other to follow the example of Peter's mother; to seek friends with whom he can move beyond the shadow of guided learning,