In the last two years, Ivan Illich has become one of the major gurus of radical movements in education. His book "Deschooling Society" is widely available and widely read. Since his visit to Australia in 1972, learning centres and webs (his alternatives to schools) have been set up in several capital cities. His theories have influenced the current educational policy of the Australian Union of Students, as well as many individual academics, teachers and school and university students. It is therefore important to critically examine his ideas and the political consequences of their practice.

Illich was born into a middle-class Catholic family in Vienna in 1926. After studies in science and psychology he entered the Catholic priesthood, specialising in philosophy, and later obtained a doctorate in history. His career in the Church, which began in the New York Puerto Rican parish of Spanish Harlem, was characterised by a series of clashes with the institution. Dismissed from his position as the vice-chancellor of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, because of his criticism of the Puerto Rican authorities, he founded, in 1961, the Centre for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This began as a Church-sponsored centre for missionaries, but Illich's criticism of Church policy in Latin America led to withdrawal of Church support, and to Illich's obtaining a suspension from his priestly duties, in 1968. Since then Illich has run the centre as a secular institution for cultural and educational studies, and many of his published essays are the result of his work there. He has evolved a wide-ranging critique of advanced industrial society, which is mainly expounded in his educational writings. (1) He has also written fairly extensively on the Church and relations between the developed and under-developed world. (2)

Illich is an inspiring writer. His powerful and evocative criticisms of schools and industrial society touch a chord of response in the reader, especially the disillusioned student or teacher. Unfortunately, those of his writings so far published are in the form of short essays, rather than of a systematically developed work. This means his work appears repetitive and sometimes ambiguous, and this difficulty is increased by his style, which tends to be polemical and assertive rather than analytical.

Illich sees advanced industrial society as one entity, making no distinction between capitalist and socialist economies. Since most of his examples, however, are taken from the United States, I will deal with his theories as they apply to advanced capitalist countries. Illich sees these as characterised by an ever-expanding consumer economy, controlled by impersonal bureaucracies which manipulate public tastes and wants in order to sell the goods produced. Illich, however, does not concentrate on the sphere of material production, but on the bureaucracies and institutions which produce services and "facts" for consumption: health and welfare institutions, transport systems, and, above all, schools. All of these require individuals to discard their ability to think and act for themselves and to passively accept as valid only those facts and services which come from the appropriate institution. He calls the attitudes of passivity, acceptance and consumerism, "institutionalised values," and the institutions which require and promote them, "manipulative." The main concern of manipulative institutions is the creation of more clients who will become addicted to them,
and thus any claims they have of alleviating social inequality are completely false. They actually increase social inequality by creating more addicts. Schooling confuses “teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence and fluency with the ability to say something new.” (3)

“Imagination is ‘schooled’ to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life ... health, learning, dignity, independence and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of schools and other agencies.” (4) Acceptance of these values “leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarisation and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernised misery.” (5) This misery is global in that advanced industrial countries are in the process of selling their institutions and values to the under-developed world in the name of modernisation.

Schooling is the central social ritual which creates institutionalised values, and mass education systems are the largest of all the “manipulative” institutions:

“School initiates the Myth of Unending Consumption. This modern myth is grounded in the belief that production inevitably produces something of value, and, therefore, production necessarily produces demand. School teaches us that instruction produces learning.”

“Once we have learned to need school, all our social activities take the shape of client relationships to other institutions.” (6) Illich believes schools shape industrially advanced societies, contrary to Marxist claims that other institutions are more fundamental. (7) They have become “the world’s fastest-growing labor-market” and society’s major employer, if students are counted as employees. It is the very size and nature of schools which Illich sees as leading to a crisis in schooling, since the system has become too costly for economic rationality: it is a high investment which produces too many failures and drop-outs. These academic failures have, however, succeeded in learning the “hidden curriculum,” the institutionalised values taught by schools. On a world scale, schools define success, and therefore failure and frustration, for a vast majority which never enters them, and whose governments would be (and are) crippled economically by the cost of school systems.

Illich uses examples from under-developed countries, mainly in Latin America, to illustrate his claim that schools are both unnecessary and damaging. In rural village communities, the concepts of “childhood,” “school,” and “teacher” may not exist, but people still learn. Young people learn from others who have particular skills, in the family or in the village. The only qualifications of a “teacher” are that he knows his skill and that people are satisfied with his ability to impart it to others. Illich is highly critical of school accreditation because it proves only that its holder has learned institutionalised values, but gives him or her wealth, status, and power over others, regardless of actual ability or usefulness. Illich tends to suggest that the family, the city, or the slum in advanced industrial society could form a learning environment like that of the village, if schools were abolished and neutral, or rather, “convivial” opportunities for learning were set up in their place. He sees schools as the worst single feature of industrial society and the first and essential area for social change:

“Neither ideological criticism nor social action can bring about a new society. Only disenchantment with, and detachment from, the central social ritual, and reform of that ritual, can bring about radical change.” (8)

Illich’s formula for how this disenchantment is to occur is difficult to draw out. At times he recommends agitation for legal reforms to make school certification illegal and cut off their public finance. (9) At other times he predicts that an ecological and social disaster (the result of the misuse of resources and physical pollution by manipulative institutions) will make schools, and other institutions, inoperable. He does not suggest how radicals could prepare for such a crisis, except by refraining from reforming schools. (10) In the meantime, Illich sees each individual as being responsible for his own demystification, and tends to talk in terms of individual voluntary poverty, asceticism and rejection of manipulative institutions, rather than any collective action. (11)

Convivial institutions are defined by their ability to be used and controlled according to individual wants and needs, in contrast to the addictive nature of manipulative institutions. The former at present include telephone link-ups, subway lines, mail routes and public markets or exchanges. These exist “to be us-
Illich would see schools replaced by learning webs -- arrangements of various resources, including books, tapes, access to skilled persons, and matching services for those interested in the same areas of learning -- which could be used voluntarily by anyone of any age. He sees a necessity for giving "disadvantaged" groups guaranteed access to such resources, and suggests a system of educational credits, which would accumulate interest if used late in life.

Illich performs a valuable task in castigating radicals for being over-preoccupied with the quantity of schooling available, and with the explicit curricula content. He compels us to examine the nature of the schooling process, and its part in the general socialisation process. Most schools do effectively prevent students from taking initiatives or making decisions of any importance, and encourage and reward obedience, conformity and lack of initiative, and these processes persist even if curricula are made more "relevant" or radical.

However, Illich's theory of society, and therefore of the education system, is fundamentally inadequate, and his political prescriptions are therefore misleading. In placing manipulative institutions at the centre of the determinant forces in advanced industrial society, Illich ignores other determinants and also the dynamics by which the various forces and institutions interrelate. That he regards such considerations as irrelevant is obvious from his insistence that, for the purposes of his thesis, there is no difference between socialist and capitalist societies. He assumes that if social outcomes (school systems) are similar, there is no need to look further. But if the dynamics of capitalist and socialist societies differ, there is need to specify these differences if a theory of social change is being propounded.

I would argue that a theory of society critical of the manipulative nature of education systems and other institutions in capitalist societies must take into account that the productive forces are privately owned, and operated for the benefit of a few, not for general welfare. An adequate theory would have to take into account not only the nature of the economy, but also that of the state and the family, and the influence of all of these on the education system. For state-financed mass education systems were set up at a certain conjuncture in the development of capitalist societies, to perform particular functions, and to maintain and reproduce the existing distribution of wealth and power. At the end of the nineteenth century, these systems were introduced to produce the appropriate numbers of differently skilled workers required by the increasing complexity of the production process, and to ensure that such workers were docile and accepting of their "proper" place in society. That this still holds true today is sometimes made explicit by employers, educationists and economists. For example, last year the Victorian Employers' Federation issued a rebuke to the Education Department of that state warning that students who showed "no respect for intellectual discipline, scholarship, democracy and our national heritage" were considered "unemployable." Similarly, a university vice-chancellor sees education as a "great investment" by the government, from which the full value must be obtained in terms of an expanding economy. And the authors of a book on education and the economy explain that the links between the two are stronger than ever before:

"In an advanced industrial society, it is inevitable that the education system should come into very close relationship with the economy. Modern industrial technology, based on the substitution of electrical and atomic power for other forms, and introducing new and more intricate forms of the division of labor, transforms the scale of production, the economic setting of enterprise, and the productive and social role of labor. It is dependent to an unprecedented extent on the results of scientific research, on the supply of skilled and responsible manpower, and consequently on the efficiency of the educational system."

"Education contains an unprecedented economic importance as a source of technological innovation, and the educational system is bent increasingly to the service of the labor force, acting as a vast apparatus of occupational recruitment and training. Social selection is added to its traditional function of social differentiation: it must promote new as well as maintain old elites." (16)

Thus the large numbers of failures and dropouts Illich sees as ultimately making the education system "uneconomic" as an investment, and so dysfunctional, are not necessarily dysfunctional in themselves. Rather, they can be seen to be the large numbers of unskilled workers required by the system. And
these academically unskilled workers do not work only in the productive sphere. The education system helps to "select" girls for their specific place as wives and mothers, doing unskilled and unpaid but socially necessary work in the family, and encourages them to think of other work as transient and unimportant compared with this. (17) Hence women form a permanent reserve labor army, as well as reproducing labor power in the family, and so their "failure" in schools is functional to the system, and will not necessarily lead, as Illich claims, to an exposure of its irrationality. Because he ignores the importance of the fundamental areas of the economy, the state and the family, Illich is issuing a moral condemnation of the effects of a schooled society, rather than an analysis of it. Hence his prescriptions for change are in apocalyptic or vague terms: a crisis, individual poverty, changes in values and attitudes.

This is not to imply that the maintenance of a values consensus is not important for a given society to function. But it is vital to examine exactly how such a consensus is maintained. Illich's concept of "institutionalised values" is vague, and actually refers to two distinct processes. The first is the adoption of attitudes of acceptance and docility towards the status quo even by those who are exploited by it. This I will call ideological hegemony. The second process is the replacement of human aspirations and relationships by material commodities -- "consumerism" -- which can be called, as Gintis suggests, commodity fetishism. (18) Both of these processes exploit the majority and benefit a small minority: the owners and controllers of the means of production, and the main proponents of the ideology which preserves the system: the administrators and theorists of Illich's "manipulative" institutions and of other institutions of the ideology which preserves the system: the administrators and theorists of Illich's "manipulative" institutions and of other institutions and systems he does not mention. (19) Illich's thesis on ideological hegemony is that individuals become psychologically "addicted" to institutionalised values: their minds are manipulated and they become incapable of behaving in any but a docile and passive way. This is an extremely rigid and static view of the nature of consciousness. Sallach (20) cites empirical evidence which suggests that the ideologies and beliefs of the majority are not the coherent result of psychological manipulation. Rather, they are underdeveloped, fragmented, and internally inconsistent. Findings also indicate that only those actually sharing in societal power need develop consistent values, and that the exploited classes suffer from the lack of a coherent alternative to, rather than the wholesale adoption of, hegemonic values.

These findings support an alternative thesis about the nature of ideological hegemony, which sees it as the result of limits placed on critical or revolutionary ideas, rather than as the result of inculcation of a coherent value system. This means that ideological institutions do not operate through individual psychological addiction, but rather through the omission of a political framework which is meaningful to the exploited, and by the imposition of structures which limit choices and behavior. Contrary to Illich's thesis, then, ideological institutions are seen as articulators and reinforcers of hegemonic values, but not as their source. Rather, the whole social and economic framework sets out a range of concrete social experience in which individuals have little choice but to fall in with hegemonic values. The mere removal of ideological institutions would not change these choices. As Gintis says:

"Abolition of addictive propaganda cannot 'liberate' the individual to a 'free choice' of personal goals. Such a choice is still conditioned by the pattern of social processes which have historically rendered him or her amenable to 'institutionalised values.' In fact, the likely outcome of de-manipulation of values would be no significant alteration of values at all." (21)

In this context, what Illich calls "irrational" consumerism of commodities, which he claims could be abolished if the addictive propaganda were abolished, appears not so much irrational as one of the reasonable options for social behavior in the whole context of capitalist social relations. Commodity fetishism, then, does not, necessarily, indicate manipulated minds. Thus Illich's thesis that the schools are the source of the social evils of psychological manipulation and consumerism, and that their abolition will end these evils, has no real basis. Those evils could persist in a capitalist society without schools. Nor do Illich's alternatives to schools hold much hope of revolutionary change. For instance, he tends to refer to the family as a natural learning situation where casual learning can and does occur without the distorting teacher-student relationship. He does not examine the hierarchies and manipulation which do exist within the family, and in particular the sexual division of labor where girls
"casually learn," or socially experience, inferiority. Social change which allowed more learning to take place in the family would not necessarily be any change at all. Similarly Illich's "convivial" learning webs could coexist with capitalist social structures and social relations and so would not in themselves change either the values or the social experience of the individual in capitalist society. They might mean, however, that more questioning and critical discussion could take place than is presently allowed in schools. But this would only lead to the fundamental change Illich claims he wants, if such criticism were put into practice outside the learning situation, i.e., if other capitalist social and economic institutions were attacked, and Illich does not advocate this.

Given the inadequacies of his analysis, Illich's political prescriptions tend to be ineffective. His basic advice is: abandon the schools, liberate yourselves as far as you can, and wait for the crisis. Radical teachers and students should leave schools to set up oases "free" from institutionalised values for themselves and a few others, while the majority remains in schools. This smacks of both crude ecological determinism, and of utopianism, to say the least. A way of combatting the effects of schools on a political level would be to provide teachers and students with the political framework to analyse both schools and society, which schools assiduously avoid doing at the moment. This would mean a rigorous analysis of the processes and attitudes in schools and other institutions which Illich tends to merely describe, and requires activity in schools, as well as outside them.

Critics of Illich's thesis are sometimes brushed aside with the claim that their real aim is to keep students and people in general manipulated and "schooled": that they are afraid to "set them free." I am in agreement with Illich that people should be freed from the manipulation of both schooling and "childhood," particularly since so much of the latter is foisted on to women as their natural duty. To end such manipulation, and other social evils, however, we must have an adequate analysis and an effective strategy, and these Illich does not provide.

FOOTNOTES

4. DS, op.cit.
5. DS, p.2.
6. DS, pp. 55-56.
7. DS, p. 67.
8. DS, p. 54.
10. This crisis theory was advanced at a conference in Melbourne in 1972. See "Cold Comfort," Melb., AUS, June 1972, p. 2 for a transcript of Illich's speech.
11. AS. This was also evident in his failure to answer questions about political action in Melbourne. See note 9.
12. DS, p. 79.
13. In Britain, the latter aim was extremely explicit. After years of parliamentary opposition to public education, the Education Act was passed just after the extension of the franchise. Parliamentarians stated as reasons for this the need to cultivate the proper attitudes in the voting masses. See Simon, B., "Education and the Labour Movement," London, 1960, and for the USA, Cremin, L., "The Transformation of the School," New York, 1964.
17. See Roper, T., "The Disadvantaged 50%" in "Cold Comfort," April 1972. Roper gives evidence that girls' marked failure as a group in schools is largely a result of the expectations school and society at large (especially their families) encourage them to have about their future.
19. e.g., the legal system. Illich shows some awareness of the power of the owners and controllers of the means of production over what is produced and how, and over the environment, which is shaped for the use of such commodities. He gives the example of motor car manufacture and advertising, and government-built super-highway systems (DS, pp. 84-86).
In general, however, Illich is not explicit about in whose interests institutionalised values operate, seeing them rather as an irrational addiction shared by all.