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In Conversation with John Ohliger and Ivan Illich—April 8-10, 1978

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Key Words: John Ohliger, Ivan Illich, mandatory adult education

Abstract: In April, 1978, John Ohliger left Madison, Wisconsin, for Cuernavaca, Mexico, to assist Ivan Illich and Valentina Borremans with annotated bibliographies of Illich's writings. During this trip Ohliger used a tape recorder to audiotape his experience so he could share it with his future wife Christina Wagner upon his return to Wisconsin. These audiotapes are entirely from Ohliger's point of view. He decided when to turn on the recorder and when to turn it off. This essay is based almost entirely from these audiotapes, and therefore represents Ohliger's view of his relationship with Illich, and more importantly it provides a brief glimpse into Ohliger's humanity and humanness.

John Ohliger is one of the most controversial persons in adult education history, and as one of his many mentees and friends I suspect that this is a position he would take great pride in. He championed volunteer/non-compulsory adult education for over four decades, and challenged the dominant culture, which sought and has basically achieved the professionalization of our field. His essay, "Is lifelong adult education a guarantee or permanent inadequacy?" (Ohliger, 1974) captures the essence of his belief that mandatory adult education is a tool of the technocrats and scientists who see education as knowledge that is taught, rather than a process that captures the essence of being and understanding. In this essay, as in many of his writings, John leans on Ivan Illich to clarify the historical evidence that education has evolved into something where you learn official knowledge that is provided by experts, for example, through Cooperative Extension or an adult literacy center.

Grace and Rocco (2009) described John as a radical adult educator, and this may be true. But knowing John, I am not comfortable with this simple characterization. He was a complex individual that is hard to pigeonhole into one school of thought or political frame. Was he libertarian or a socialist? I'm not sure. He valued liberal arts education while at the same time valued the knowledge you can only get from experience. He was literate and a skilled writer, persuasive with words yet able to speak common everyday language that most people could relate to. Personally I can attest to the fact that John's friends did not always agree with him, nor was he looking for his friends to rubber stamp his ideas. He was a thinker and a listener. He didn't try to convince you of his position and then correct you when he decided you were wrong. He listened and then tried to have a dialogue with you so that together you might deconstruct both sides of the argument. Arguably he was an intellectual giant in the development of adult education during a forty-year span that began in the 1960s and ended with his death in 2004.

This research provides a very personal perspective of John's humanness and humanity. The research is primarily based on an audiotape diary that John kept of a trip to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to work with Illich and Valentina Borremans on annotated bibliographies of Illich's writings. The reason for keeping this diary was not for intellectual reasons but so he could share his experiences with his future wife Christina Wagner upon his return to Madison. John

introduced Illich to adult education and championed an Illichian philosophy, which still permeates the foundation of our field. You cannot understand John without understanding his relationship to Illich and his notion of deschooling, mandatory adult education, and free choice. The purpose of this historical research is to better understand John's humanity and humanness, and his relationship with Illich. This is the first historical analysis of these audiotapes.¹

Ohliger (1973, 1974), and Illich (1970) are two of the iconic saints in adult education. Their influence on adult education's philosophical formation began in the early 1970s and continued for the next twenty years. Though I never met Illich, Ohliger was a close friend who challenged my beliefs and supported me in my pursuit to understand how personal values shape an adult educator's practice. Conducting research on saints is one of the most difficult challenges for a historian. How do you portray a saint's humanity, imperfections, ego, and idiosyncrasies without facing criticism from his or her worshipers? What documentation must historians produce to build a portrait of a saint that is not based on incomplete evidence, innuendo and hearsay? How do we interpret the intersection between a saint's text and life experiences? In an essay that Christina Wagner (2009) wrote, she shared how frustrated John would get when scholars and students would write about Illich as if he were a god and perfect. "John felt that to leave out the warts because they were embarrassing or regretful was dishonest, because they are an essential part of who we are" (p.321). My research is not intended to highlight John's warts but to honor the essential part of who he was.

This historical research is constructed from John's perspective of these three days with Illich, and relies primarily upon analyzing his audiotapes collected during this visit to Cuernavaca in 1978. It also uses other historical artifacts, including some of John's letters, essays, and diary notes, to develop a deeper understanding of the historical importance of this event and its protagonists. He controlled the tape recorder—when it was turned on and off, who was recorded and what was saved. Throughout the audio recordings, John provides commentary, opinion and analysis not only to explain the events but also to describe what he was feeling. This is a very personal journey that is similar to many of his writings and publications (Ohliger, 1973, 1981, 1997).

The tapes begin with John reflecting on a walk with Valentina and Illich in Cuernavaca. He is sitting with his tape recorder, while looking out his room, noting that Illich had left the compound to for a meeting. Valentina is sitting on the grass meeting someone, there is a large dog that John is cautious of, new Siamese kittens walking across the courtyard, and visitors and staff are walking by. John describes a walk through the compound, and his first time in Illich's office, which he compares to a small public library. It is near 11:30 a.m. and John complains how he is hungry and is ready to eat lunch. Next time he comes he will bring candy bars. As he describes these scenes he keeps giving updates on what the kittens are doing. By 1:30 p.m. still no lunch, so John declares that he will go to Valentina and tell her he is starved. During this part of the tape he reflects briefly on the annotated bibliography he is working on, feeling that it appears not too important to anyone but him. John's has been up since 6:30 in the morning working alone. The feeling during the initial 30 minutes of this tape is that John is unhappy if not melancholy that he and his work are not being paid more attention to by Illich and Valentina.

¹ John gave these audiotapes originally to Carl Mitcham, who has one of the largest collections of Illich's artifacts and has written extensively on Illich. Through Chris Wagner, I contacted Mitcham who made these tapes, and other material, available to me.

What is striking that John waits patiently for Illich, while Illich goes on walks and attends meetings, probably not even aware that John wants assistance from him.

Later that day John tells Valentina that bibliographies should be kept under 500 words and that they are an important means to engage new readers and sell books. Hopefully, they might one day be made into a movie. She asks him if he is still hungry, after eating a little he says he is fine. Then he asks if they keep the dog as a watchdog, she replied yes. She says she doesn't know what to do with the kittens, they are so beautiful but they need to be sterilized. John then tells her how many animals in Madison were put to sleep last year, and that there are so many rules that not keeping a cat on a leash could result in a \$100 fine. He ends this part of the tape saying it was a fascinating conversation with Valentina about animals—now he must go back to work.

Later in the day John shares how he is getting tired. He has done a lot of work but is ready to go home, back to Madison. He is partially homesick and frustrated that he has not been able to get Illich to set aside time and help him with the bibliography. Around 5 p.m. he laments that he is

getting sick of working of this stuff. We could have done this really together. We both could do this. It is about getting this informal connotation together which is really fine. They have a lot of exciting opinions. But they need to be kind of cleaned up because Valentina doesn't like informal, freaky, hippie language... And maybe there is a problem with the Dutch publisher... Ivan maybe wanted me to come down here as a prod to get Valentina to finish this god damn thing. This is such a hodgepodge of stuff... there is some good women's thing but it is just about women getting in charge of their bodies but just about gynecological problems nothing about the political aspects. Nothing about racial minorities, but Valentina said this was intentional... I talked about the strike but it is only about textiles workers... the government is very supportive about foreign owners because they don't want to lose them... tomorrow Valentina wants to use the box with the slips of papers on subjects... I explained to her that bibliographic essays are not real essays. But I guess this has prodded her to divide this stuff into subject headings... I told her that I'm just here to work and am not a tourist, I'm not on vacation. As soon as I get the worked finished I'm ready to go back... I told her about you [Christina], that you are something of a vegetarian... she said that Ivan says he feels better when he doesn't eat too much meat... (April 8, 1978)

As John goes on with this description his frustration builds and his voice changes to a more introspective tone. He continues with his self-analysis.

[This] fatigue leads to depression. It always seems to get to me. I can also say that something that attributes to this is a feeling of inferiority to Ivan and Valentina... they are so adept to making a life. A good life in terms of economics at writing and speaking and I suppose this is something I would like to be able to do. That is just depressing to be around. They are so facile with words, and so mildly aggressive. I guess it is in an OK way. I don't know. At this point I'm ready again to start walking to the airport in Mexico City. I could take a taxicab or hitchhike... I miss you [Christina] very much. And I miss Madison. I guess I'm just not much of a traveler. (April 8, 1978)

John is alone and tired, feeling somewhat sorry for him self, not sure of his purpose in Cuernavaca nor of his purpose in life. He shares these insecurities as if he knows that no one will

ever listen to the tape, and that it is merely a way to release the tension that has been building all day.

Later that evening, he turns on the recorder again as he tries to continue his work on the annotated bibliographies. As the Sun sets John is forced to quit working, his room does not have adequate light. At dinner he tapes a conversation he had with Illich during dinner where he reminded Illich that he was not there for a vacation. Illich's response is to ask John if he wants to go for a walk.

Illich: I want to have a good conversation just the two of us. Even without worrying. I am curious what you have to say to this. This is unfinished. This is about language, not about education...

John: This is a first draft of the newsletter [*Basic Choices*] that we want to send out to a 1000 people or so opposing mandatory education... There is a draft statement in here we want [people] to sign somewhat based on the Cuernavaca manifesto... This is not radical... my hope is that when you talk about convivial politics what we are talking here in terms of political opposition linked to mandatory education... it is linking political opposition to positive alternatives... you describe in the introduction of the *History of Needs* how difficult it is to find convivial politics... Hopefully this will be an article in *The Progressive*... (April 8, 1978)

John wants Illich to read the latest draft of this article, which Illich readily agrees to do. They end this conversation with Illich saying he has time the next day or the day after to work with John on the bibliographies. At this point John is a different person, a colleague and friend with Illich's. John's energy is renewed.

But later that night John begins to reflect on his conversation with Illich and how he feels about the imbalance in their relationship.

I would give anything to be back with you [Christina]. It helps talking on this [recorder]... Ivan said he didn't want me to leave... The only reason I'm here is as prod to finish that fucking bibliography... Their idea, the only two options are total individual autonomy and total immersed heteronomy... loss of identity... Why can't we have group autonomy... As Valentina says, whenever you take on a group you are immediately part of some massive institution. Where would Ivan be without the help of Valentina, Everett Reimer, Dennis Sullivan and hundreds of other people... Doesn't that mean he is part of some kind of collective? ... There must be some kind of volunteer groups that are part of some kind of volunteer collective... Right now I just pissed off! ... I don't know what it all means. I sure don't know... I'm going to get some rest now... I'm not suppose to call up there until 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I really feel like telling them to go fuck themselves. They really got me down here under false pretenses but I know it's mixed up with my own desires and greed and ambition to get help from them to set up a material center with the Illich materials to make them available to people. And to be able to live a little more, a little less pion-like life by responding to request on Illich, Paulo Freire, compulsory adult education, mass media and lifelong schooling and all that stuff. Just because my motives aren't pure does that mean that other people have a right to con me like he has been doing by avoiding me the last couple of days. I don't know. It is a little after 11 and I'm ready for bed... A little while ago a large beetle just ran across the floor

and reminds me how much you [Christina] love bugs...I might try to call you tomorrow morning and find a place to make a long-distance call from. Good night... (April 8, 1978)

The next morning John wakes after a good night's sleep. He decides to try and call Christina. He gets dressed and goes into town. At some point he calls Illich and tries to set up an appointment to work with him later that day. Illich unfortunately is busy and says he "may squeeze in an hour" tomorrow. John is very frustrated. April 9, the second day and there still is no meeting with Illich.

The next day, Monday, April 10, John wakes at 5 a.m. to the sound of roosters. After some reminiscing about his family, his grandfather and grandmother, and what he feared as child, he asks, "Why am I so afraid of Illich sometimes. So discombobulated that I stammer and stutter at times. I don't say the things are really on my mind...I wonder what all that fear means. For a while I thought that is was some type of moral authority...Mixed in this with is some sort of inferiority..." (April 10, 1978). Later that morning John and Illich finally get together and visit about current events, philosophy and politics. After about an hour of sharing, they get down to editing some of the bibliographies.

At the end, they spend a lot of time discussing the finances and pending incorporation of Basic Choices. Ivan offers to make a \$300 contribution. And he gives John the names of many people, including an Austrian Countess and Governor Jerry Brown, who might help him with written material as well as financial contributions. Clearly Illich has no idea of John's fears or inferiorities toward him, or if he does he does not let on. Rather he is very accommodating as he basically gives him the names of his closest colleagues that John can contact using him as a referral. After the meeting John reflects that he is a "little less frightened" (April 10, 1978) of Ivan, and that he can't understand his fears. Illich spends over an hour helping John strategize on how to get Basic Choices up and going to the point it will provide him with a steady stream of income. Illich is very sensitive to John's needs, including his financial pressures.

These audiotapes highlight the complexity of John's relationship with Illich. Were they peers, colleagues, friends, and equals? Or was Illich the mentor and John the mentee? In these tapes, John discusses the sacrifice he made to complete this journey to Mexico only to find Illich too busy meeting with other people, making plans for future trips abroad to teach classes, and writing new articles at the expense of devoting the necessary time needed for the annotated bibliography. As a result much of John's time is spent working alone. Throughout these tapes John struggles with homesickness and the need to stay longer in Mexico in order to finish his work with Illich and Vallentina. At one point he comments, "I am getting tired but getting much done. I'm ready to go home again" (April 8, 1978). Later in the day he laments, "here we go again, it's about 5 [p.m.] and I'm really getting sick of working on this stuff. We could have done this work together [referring to Illich]. The kind of work I'm doing we both could do..." (April 8, 1978). Later that night John recalls a conversation he had with Illich at dinner. In his frustration to find enough time with Illich, he points out, "I did not come down here for a vacation" (April 8, 1978). Illich responds by wanting to talk about a new paper he was just finishing, "I would like to have a least a good conversation between the two of us, even without worrying. I'm curious what you say to this" (April 8, 1978). Throughout these conversations there is tense intimacy where John wants to finish the annotated bibliography and Illich wants to discuss new ideas, as well as take John to the marketplace and introduce him to other friends. John is the taskmaster while Illich is relaxed and enjoying each minute of the day. Though they are friends with mutual respect, Illich controls the pace and is the dominant partner.

Grace and Rocco (2009) write, “Ohliger’s social philosophy, pedagogy and practice provide insights to help us think critically about how educators and learners as citizens and workers can mediate the intersection of instrumental, social, and cultural concerns” (p.xvii). The purpose of this research is to better understand John’s social philosophy by capturing his voice, modesty and humanity—aspects of great historical figures that are seldom revealed. Conducting historical research on saints and icons raises the question: Do their worshipers really want to learn about the internal struggles and weaknesses of important historical figures that connect their lives to everyday people? There is no doubt that if John were living today he would want to share these private thoughts with others who are searching for the true meaning of life and adult education. This research is part of a larger historical project that seeks to preserve John Ohliger’s place in the development of adult education’s philosophy and values.

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