The Sad Loss of Gender

Ivan Illich

The social philosopher Ivan Illich is author of numerous books, including The Deschooling of Society, Medical Nemesis and Gender. In the following comments, excerpted from a long conversation which took place at the McCormick Seminary in Chicago, Illich reviews some of the themes of Gender.

We have lost, irrevocably, a way of being human. And although there still remains, in our flesh almost, the vague presence of something which has been, I do not see how such an ephemera can be passed on to our children. Standing beyond the edge of an extraordinarily rich and varied epoch, we must now face the sad loss of gender. The epilogue of the industrial age and its chimeras may be read in this loss.

At the end of the 20th century, the modern myth of sexual equality has finally triumphed completely over the complementarity of gender, in which the plurality of cultures - distinct ways of living, dying and suffering - was rooted. The reign of vernacular gender marked a profoundly different mode of existence than what prevails under what I call the regime of economic sex. They are male/female dualities of a very different kind: Economic sex is the duality of one plus one, creating a coupling of exactly the same kind; gender is the duality of two parts that make a whole which is unique, novel, nonduplicable.

By "economic sex" I mean the duality that stretches toward the illusory goal of economic, political, legal and social equality. Male and female are neutered economic agents, stripped of any quality other than the functions of consumer and worker.

By "complementary gender" I mean the eminently local and time-bound duality that sets off men and women under circumstances that prevent them from saying, doing, desiring, or perceiving "the same thing." Together they create a whole which cannot be reduced to the sum of equal, merely interchangeable parts; a whole made of two hands, each of a different nature.

Gender implies a complementarity within the world that is fundamental and closes the world in on "us," however ambiguous or fragile this closure might be. The domains of activity inside that closure - be it child rearing, cooking, sewing, plowing, the use of a hammer or a pot - have a dignity and meaning, often ritually expressed or mythologically represented, and valued solely by its contribution to the subsistence of a community.

Before industrial times, no culture lacked a gender dividing line in the use of tools, although no two cultures drew that line in exactly the same way. In many pockets of rural Europe today, tools still smell of gender. In Styria, for example, men's sickle's are clean- edged for cutting; women's sickle's are indented and curved, made for the gathering of stalks. Animals are also tied to gender. In one area of the upper Danube, women feed cows but never the draught animals. Farther east, women milk cows that belong to the
homestead, while the herd in the pastures is milked by men.

In short, each activity is embedded in a circumscribed whole. How that embeddedness is articulated defines the novel way of life of a community, what I call the "art of living" or "art of suffering" and what is commonly referred to as culture. No one is the same, or does the same thing. Men and women complement each other; nothing which is necessary for their life in society can be done by their hand alone. Discrimination has no meaning in this context.

The Origins of Discrimination

Once gender is disembedded from the commons, and ways of doing things are transformed into scarcity-based exchanges or tasks of production meted out as the exchange of labor for pay, discrimination arises. Of everything economics measures, women get less.

Clearly, the rise of market relations, the penetration of capitalism, monetarization and commodity dependence accelerated the abolition of gender.

I believe, however, that the demise of gender preceded the rise of capitalism, dating to the middle of the 12th century in Europe. It was in the first marriage contract that we find the origins of the notion of male/female equality in the idea of bonding equal parts in a contractual couple. Before men and woman took the marriage Oath before God, swearing had been completely prohibited by the Church. Henceforth, God became the cement, the witness of a bond between two individuals broken out of the community as abstract, legal entities.

This mechanization of the "thou" of the other gender ended the self-imposed limits of community and opened up the possibility of unlimited inter-marriage. Hence, the limited size of community, once imposed by gender, dissolved and the concreteness of the "we" disappeared.

That transition, in my view, was the key anthropological root of the birth of a new kind of conceptualization of human activity: society and culture as a "system" with interchangeable and substitutable parts. Also arising out of this transition was an abstract notion of the global "we," disembedded from any concrete reality and seeking the fulfillment of "needs" made scarce by a limitless domain of possibility.

By the end of the 20th century, "systems" thinking has gone so far that the main demand of the global "we" is the equal provision of the universally standard requirements for average survival - which in its most advanced stage means biocracy: the management of human life from sperm to worm, from conception to organ harvest. All that was disembedded from a way of being in the limited community must now be managed, with the result that everyone is assigned the same way of living.

Fetus as the Corruption of Hope

We can see how far we've gone down the systems path by reviewing the history of the perception of the unborn. Historically, the fetus didn't exist. It was unseen, unborn, a "not yet." Pregnancy had the same meaning in all languages: something which is there, but at the same time is not. The "notyetness" was fundamental. When
the unseen embryo developed and was born, it may have been a child, a cripple, a "molecalf" or a clump of blood.

Now, with new medical technologies, the embryo becomes a "fetus"; the "notyet" loses its mystery as we see it in the sonogram. It becomes another patient, another disconnected part of a way of being to be managed.

To me, the fetus is a symbol of the corruption of hope, just as the medicalization of dying is the corruption of agony. Hope is transformed into expectation - the awaited results of technological intervention.

The fetus thus serves as a new emblem of what the future will be. Every moment of existence, since it is all encompassed by the "system, " is a profaned domain open to intervention.

The final step of "systems thinking" is the elimination of time itself. With real-time computers that are never shut down, all potentiality will be subject to management, choice, selection and intervention. The future will hold no surprises because it will be part of the present.

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