

European Conference
Cities and Urban Spaces: Chances for Cultural and Citizenship Education

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Final Remark

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I was asked to summarise not only the discussions of the last 3 days here in Trieste, but also the NECE conference last December in Vilnius and the workshop on the City and Diversity held in Barcelona in June.

I started by asking what kind of city we want. I offered the alternatives of a Guest worker city, Assimilation city, Multicultural city and Integrations city (an explanation of which is already available in the transcript of my Barcelona speech) and rejected all of these in favour of the Intercultural City. This is a city which is open, dynamic, constantly changing and hybridising and occasionally even contested, but where there is interaction, negotiation, accommodation and empathy within and between different cultures, age groups and social classes in a shared public sphere and citizenship.

But there are powerful forces preventing our achievement of this city. Three of these are Fear, Powerlessness and Inequality. If Citizenship and Cultural Education (CCE) are to mean anything at all they have to address these very difficult issues of our age.

Fear of change, of the unknown, of the stranger - and the way this is magnified in an unhealthy relationship between populist politicians and media - is now having a profound effect on our public policy and on the way our cities look and feel. We no longer trust others - or perhaps even ourselves - to do the right thing. We are less willing to enter into direct relationships with those we share our living space with; less willing to engage in the daily negotiations and compromises that build communities. We prefer instead to shelter behind barriers. Those who can afford it employ lawyers to keep the world at bay and surround themselves with fences. The rest slips into a surly defensiveness expecting the worst rather than seeking the best from every encounter. And public policy becomes responsive and retributive but rarely resolves or repairs the underlying issues that lead people to be fearful.

Any conference concerned with Citizenship should be concerned with Power - yet I heard it discussed rarely. We should be concerned of course with the larger structural forces, which grossly disempower certain parts of the world, and of our cities, in relation to others - and the kind of power, which seems to elevate some elements of society above the normal obligations of citizenship. But we should also be concerned at the sense of powerlessness, which many individuals now feel in regards to their own lives. This is not just in the sense that people feel disconnected from the forces, which shape society but also the sense that nothing they can do as a citizen will influence the course of their lives (other than perhaps buying a lottery ticket or entering a TV game show). This lack of agency is corrosive of the very sense of citizenship.

In a not entirely plausible, but nevertheless thought-provoking, experiment the British think-tank Demos has attempted to quantify and map powerlessness in the UK¹. Taking 8 variables – educational attainment, occupational status, income, employment, freedom from crime, health, participation in elections and marginality of their locality in parliamentary elections – they have produced a map of stark contrasts. Outside of London, where powerful and powerless districts sit side-by-side, most other cities are presented as black holes full of people with little or no influence over their individual or communal lives, surrounded by a ring of much more powerful suburbanites. The principle value of this kind of exercise is to make us reflect on how difficult it can be for people who – usually through accident of birth – are raised in areas in which there is a pervasive and historic culture of detachment from many of the values and tools that citizenship education takes for granted. And the forces of urban competitiveness and neo-liberal globalization are currently reinforcing these divisions.

Michael Lerner in his book *Surplus Powerlessness* wrote that:
Human beings have a profound need to actualise their capacities for loving, creativity, freedom, solidarity and understanding. People are powerless to the extent that they are prevented either on an individual or social basis, from actualising their human capacities.

It is surely through citizenship and cultural education that this can be realised. Yet in our current times most people are looking elsewhere for actualisation, for identity and for self-worth - to the global branded consumer goods. But only if we can make citizenship and cultural education at least as attractive as the brand names will we truly succeed.

But it is too easy to complain that the problems that affect people like 'us' are all the cause of 'them'. It is a lazy cliché to assume that power rests exclusively with the politicians and the bureaucrats. As Charles Landry reminded us, a creative city needs a creative bureaucracy. And there are times when we need to empower and trust our politicians to do the right thing on our behalf, rather than to constantly undermine them with a corrosive cynicism.

How can we speak of citizenship when our societies and governments are now tolerating levels of social inequality unseen since the 1930s? Startling research across the major industrialised countries demonstrates that quality of life is now less connected to the absolute wealth or poverty of a nation but rather to the degree of inequality between the richest and poorest within the nation². Take any of today's 'social evils' (infant mortality, teenage pregnancy, mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, obesity, imprisonment, educational underachievement and lack of trust) and you will find that the countries, which perform the worst are the most unequal – the USA, the UK, Portugal and Singapore. These countries are also the worst performers in terms of sustainability and recycling and – despite their propaganda – they are not even the most creative and innovative. The more equal societies register more patents per capita than the unequal ones. OK, so inequality is hardly news, but this is... the research finds that it is not only the quality of life of the poorest that is the worst in the most unequal countries. Even if you are very well off in the UK and USA, your general quality of life and life expectancy is lower than were you in the same position in a more equal society.

This is powerful evidence – so why has it not been taken up and debated by our politicians? There is a widespread fear of challenging some of the unspoken assumptions of our consumerist age – that elitism is efficient, that exclusion is necessary, that greed is good and that prejudice is natural. But challenge them we must if we are to reassert a culture of citizenship.

¹www.demos.co.uk/publications/the-power-gap

²www.equalitytrust.org.uk/

Did our conference tackle these issues? And, at a time when governments across Europe are taking an axe to public services and civil liberties in order to rectify a financial crisis brought upon them by their unquestioning trust of banks and financiers, did our conference really get to grips with the challenges this poses to citizenship? Have we been too complacent when we should be displaying anger at this state of affairs? Well anger is understandable but doesn't move us forward. However I believe the CCE community faces its greatest challenge at this time, and if this of all iniquities cannot motivate us into reasserting our values, then I don't know what will.

So which direction to take? I can tell you two directions which could be followed but which must at all costs be avoided. Firstly the danger that in an unequal world CCE simply helps those who are already society's insiders and winners to exploit their positions even further. In Britain we find that after 50 years of egalitarianism the ranks of our creative and political class once again being filled almost exclusively with those who benefited from an elite and expensive education.

The second 'no-go' is that CCE is employed by the state to help society's outsiders and losers learn how to integrate and become 'normal' like everyone else. This is a tendency I see in Germany and some other European societies, where integration is a journey the majority assumes must be made by the minority, but not by them.

To me the best CCE projects question and enhance the citizenship of all of us, whether we are involved in them or not. They enter the public space and public consciousness, even if uninvited, and require us all to reappraise what it means to be a citizen. Let me take a wonderful example from Germany called "*Migrantas*". A group of German and migrant women have employed their skills in design and salesmanship to make the invisible become visible. Working with migrant women who often lack skills of literacy and language, they help them to use pictures to describe the struggles and dilemmas of their life. These are then transformed into simple but powerful pictograms with stark messages about injustice and prejudice. The women then employ considerable skill and guile to persuade the owners of mainstream advertising sites to portray their pictures – thus reaching a vast audience with unsettling questions. We need more projects like "*Migrantas*"³.

I have heard an interesting debate during the conference. Some people are saying that whilst it is informal CCE projects like "*Migrantas*" that attract the most attention, they may actually only be a sideshow in comparison to the main issue. These people say the place where most CCE does and should take place is in the formal school curriculum and related activities and this is where the bulk of activity and attention should be focused. I personally don't have enough information to form an opinion either way, but I was certainly pleased to see how the conference featured schools and young people. For example the Youth Parliament of the Alpine Convention and the ecological citizenship of students at "htl donaustadt" in Austria.

There were other important issues, which perhaps didn't get as much attention as they merit. For example none of us surely underestimates the power of information and communications technologies yet they seemed to get barely a mention in our conferences. Was this because we see them as a global phenomenon and thus beyond the scope of a conference on the city? If so I would challenge this because my experience of the new web 2.0 social technologies is that they retain and even enhance territoriality. There are numerous Facebook groups based upon local and city networks for example. Then there is the wonderful example of Apps for Democracy in Washington, which I have described in a previous speech.

³www.migrantas.org/

I know the organisers tried extremely hard to integrate politicians and media professionals into this conference and sadly it hasn't really happened. We have to find new ways of creating a dialogue with these people because they cannot be left outside the CCE debate. The challenge is for all of us to find more ingenious ways of creating that dialogue.

And finally, one important point, which came up at our Barcelona workshop but did not seem to re-emerge in Trieste: It is my belief – and I expect that of many people here – that citizenship is not simply a status to be passively conferred but a right, which must be actively and constantly asserted through what we tend to call 'active citizenship'. For example, if we want a society that can cope with increasing diversity, this requires all citizens to engage and interact with others, including the stranger. My own profound belief is that tolerance alone is not enough. However, a strong counter voice emerged making the case that we should expect tolerance in our society but that we have no right to demand that people interact. Indeed to do so would be authoritarian and anti-democratic. We must agree to disagree and this is a debate that should continue.

But I do believe that in CCE we should 'walk the talk'. That means that if we site our conference in a particular city we should actively engage with the world outside the conference centre. And so the final word should be given to the small group amongst us who got up extra early this morning to symbolically plant a tree for peace and democracy in Trieste's Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia.