Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter!

(Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, South Africa)

Part I: Why citizen skills matter to me

Beware! The following text is not a simplifying populist tweet and no quick-to-consume TikTok video in writing. Purposefully, it is a longer read both to mirror the importance of the topic and to stretch your comfort zone. Please only read it when you have enough time and energy. ☺

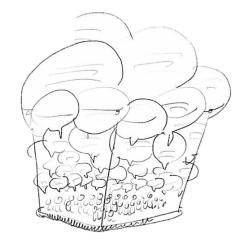*(Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa)*

To be questioned: The automatic stability of democracy

It was in 2012 during a coffee break at a full-day conference: Three German business women discussed school system issues of their children. When it was my turn to contribute something, I shared the latest experience with my mentee boy. His hard-working, single mother had 3 poorly paid jobs and was desperately trying to get her and her son's daily life organised in the best way possible. I therefore said: "Unfortunately, there are no all-day schools nearby. I hope there will be more all-day school offerings soon." Boom! Silence… Six eyes staring at me with disbelief. One woman said: "All-day schools are child abuse!" The second: "A child must see his or her mother in the afternoon. We are not in a socialist country." And the third added: "We must protect our children against state interference." As a trained mediator and facilitator, I made an effort to rephrase and strictly stay with the concrete case of my mentee boy without trying to generalise. But the women refused to further exchange and closed the conversation unilaterally: "Arguing in favour of all-day schools means promoting child abuse."

The exchange left me puzzled: Three well-educated human beings could not even imagine that another option of looking at such a complex social challenge existed. I started wondering whether they really had no one in their lives with slightly different experiences or reality constructions of this very same world. This was long before the terms "filter bubble" or "home office elite" became common language, but since then I have been even more attentive when listening to people in different "perception pockets" of society.

At first, I remembered how irritated I had always been by the normality of pejorative and misanthropic language as well as anti-democratic comments especially in top management and upper class environments ("let's quickly bring back census suffrage" or "homeless people are weak characters and don't deserve to live"). But when I started listening more carefully also in non-bourgeois, progressive, left-liberal environments, I detected similar patterns: Less racist and homophobic maybe (and with good intentions, morality and purpose instead), but they looked as much down on other dissimilar groups. Obviously, both right and left identity politics had cultivated a populist friend-enemy dichotomy which hampered productive dialogue in a democracy, it had also boosted populist responses to complex challenges in all filter bubbles, be it right, left or wherever.

This is when I began to seriously question the then (2012) still popular notion that democracy was deeply and irreversibly embedded in German society and that German "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" after 1945 had immunised German society against certain

infectious social patterns. I thought of what my granduncle had always told me about the ["Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold – Alliance of Active Democrats"](). Founded by democratic parties from the middle of the political spectrum in 1924, this organisation actively (until 1933) tried to protect democracy in the Weimar Republic against anti-democratic movements from the extreme left and right. When my granduncle was their President in the late 1980ies, the organisation was primarily a place for memories, not for actions anymore. I am almost sure that he would have agreed with my alarming analysis in 2012 and would actively support his remarkably committed successors in the organisation today.

Needed: The renaissance of the conscious citizen in us

When I shared some of my critical thoughts on the state of democracy for the first time in a German-speaking dinner speech in 2013, the vast majority of listeners disagreed and said things like these: "German democracy and global multilateralism have stable, rock-solid foundations. It took a while but finally we Germans have climbed the next level of civilisation." Of course, I thought then. In their respective "echo chambers", they would only find "déformations sociales" similar to their own. And when they invited to conferences, forums, and salons, they typically restricted dialogue to a curated number of opinions not too far from their own. Anybody who would take a position outside of an imaginary circle of acceptable language would be expelled. Even basic debating techniques (e.g. playing the devil's advocate) became more and more risky. When I professionally acted as mediator or facilitator, avoiding trigger words that could unintentionally incite a chorus of outrage in a respective group had become not only an important skill anymore, but a survival strategy.

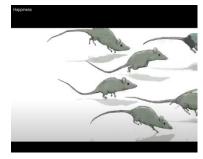As much as I could handle this situation as a professional, I was worried as a citizen. In my early teenage years, I was brought up with the notion that ultimately it was **only democracy when everyone fought for the right of political opponents to be able to openly articulate their opinions even if they harshly disagreed**. In 2013, I therefore decided to focus henceforth my personal energies on **two prerequisites of democracy** which I saw particularly endangered:

(1) **"Dialogue Across Filter Bubbles"**: Most people do not personally interact with people who live a life very different from their own.

(2) **"Citizen Skills"**: Most citizens do not have the basic knowledge to understand how democratic communities or societies are technically organised, and where/how they can concretely involve themselves (instead of merely complaining), and – even more importantly – many people simply lack basic psycho-social skills which citizens in a democracy ought to have if it is not to be driven by primitive instincts.

The first one ("Dialogue") came very natural, since with my and my colleagues' [purpose of "bridging people & ideas"]() we always live and act on the edge (of diverse groups). For the second ("Citizen Skills"), we could also draw a lot from our professional experience, but it required even more time and effort to make a difference in this field.

In any case, democracies have a hard time, when only moms and dads talk in their roles of moms and dads, or of employees and employers, or house owners, or taxpayers, or

patients, or pedestrians. Especially when we are consumers and career climbers, we are stuck in a [rat race for money and status]().

And if we happen to catch an outside glimpse of our own lives we typically shy away from going deeper: "Where would I end up if I embarked on a journey of self-reflection?!" Hence, when citizens are consumers in the first place and when consumerism has corrupted our thinking and acting, we may need a renaissance of the conscious citizen! The citizen who tries to combine different perspectives of the world within one single person und who understands that those different roles in society may lead to multiple interests in that very same person. The citizen whose horizon goes far beyond his or her own family or job. The citizen who not only (vaguely) wants democracy, but the citizen who knows how to participate in public policy making and how to generally co-develop a democratic and pluralistic society.

To be stretched: Our comfort zone as citizens

It has always been an essential part of my role in this world to nudge the "citizen" in others. I even still have the dream of all of us not voting in elections based on our (often financial) interests, but based on what we believe would be best for the society (or the planet) as a whole. In early 1993, I had the privilege to attend a seminar with philosopher John Rawls in Boston. Students from all over the world discussed his "veil of ignorance" in long nights: How would we want to structure a society without knowing where we would ultimately end up in such a society? In the last 27 years since then, I have often initiated renewed sessions around this classic philosophical exercise. People seemed to like it and sometimes referred to me afterwards as a "diehard idealist" or "romantic dreamer". Yes, I do confess: I am still a romantic dreamer! ☺

Soon after 2013, there was the so-called "refugee crisis", Brexit, Trump… and suddenly the unpolitical German middle class (or better: the formally educated elite) woke up in 2016 and rallied around "Pulse of Europe" and the likes. Worthy causes and encouraging developments, but most of them were feel-good initiatives in the end and – more importantly – still largely again within the respective filter bubbles as well as with the underlying tonality that it was primarily the others who needed to change.

This was the moment when I (together with some of my colleagues) decided to allocate even more than a third of my working time on activities around "pluralistic democracy". Since we are a "Social Business" and are used to cross-subsidising our pro bono activities, we didn't start a foundation or put up an initiative website. We even hesitated to talk about it in public, because we believe that there is already far too much "aggressive selling" by almost everybody in today's (social) media realities. But now, years later and after many bilateral conversations with wonderful people from very different national, ethnic, and social backgrounds who want to get involved more with "Citizens Skills Matter" activities and experiments, I have decided to summarise my highlights and learnings so far. I will share some of them in the next weeks in my personal network and invite you all to contribute.

> *Consider this in the meantime:*
> *Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that the best way to corrupt young people is make them respect those who think alike more than those who think differently. Although I try hard to take this advice to my heart every day, I sometimes fail. How about you? I invite you to share your stories how you succeed or fail when dealing with others thinking differently than yourself?*