Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter!

(Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, South Africa)

Part I: **Why citizen skills matter to me**

Part II: **There are both "hard" and "soft" citizen skills**

Part III: **Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity: Maybe the No.1 "Citizen Skill"**

Part IV: **"Citizen Skills": 12 Hacks for everyone in daily life**

Part II: There are both "hard" and "soft" citizen skills

"Every democratic community or society must permanently re-emerge based on the collective action of its citizens." ("Slogan of the Month" in our student philosopher circle, 1990)

When we were teenage students, we loved reading Alexis de Tocqueville and his observations on the young U.S. democracy. Although from the middle of the 19th century, his idealistic pragmatism (or was it pragmatic idealism?) came as a breath of fresh air to the political routines of our Bonn Republic in the 1980. His combination of European philosophy tradition with a matter-of-fact analysis of the technicalities of parliamentary democracy in the U.S. inspired me so much that I was convinced I would become a sociologist and political scientist (which has happened and not happened at the same time somehow ;-)).

After having read ancient political philosophers like Aristotle, we turned our focus to the role of individual citizens and the development of "civic virtues". We dived into Montesquieu's comparison (in "Spirit of Laws" from 1748) between democracies that were built on the "love of virtue" (i.e. the willingness to put the interests of society ahead of private interests) and monarchies that were built on the "love of honour" (i.e. the desire to attain greater rank, status and privilege). Looking back to this teenage stuff with my 2020 self, I wonder how Montesquieu would qualify our societies today…

Last week, I mentioned two prerequisites of democracy which I felt were in danger in 2013:

(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 (**"hard"** skills) 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 (**"soft"**) skills which citizens in a democracy ought to have if it is not to be driven by primitive instincts.

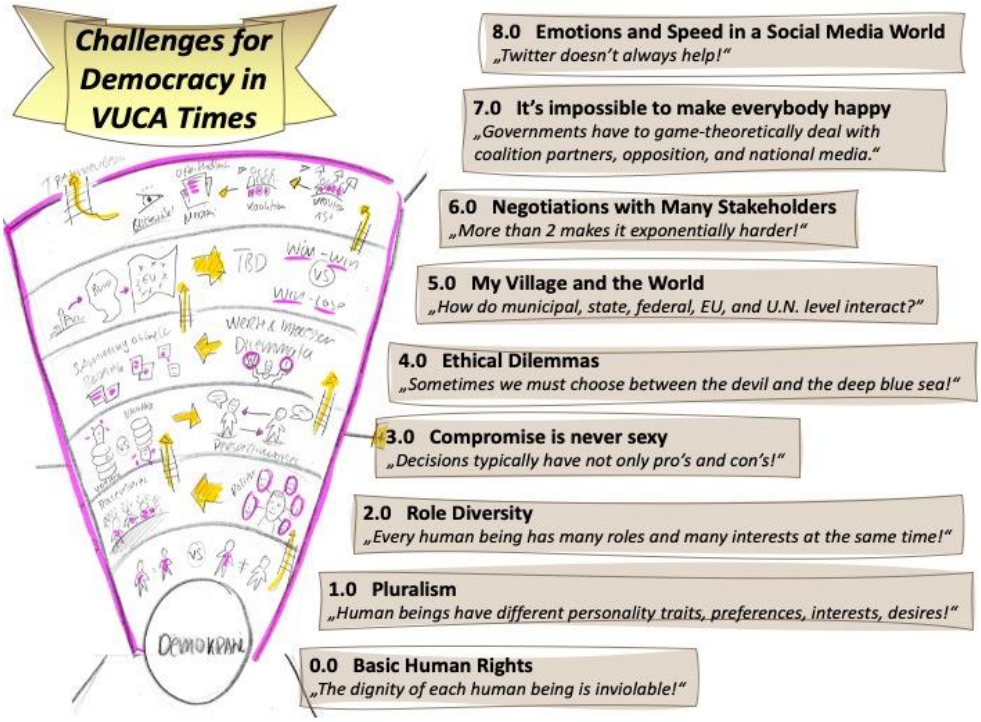
The latter may need more explanation: The attention of politics and social sciences often focuses on whether people *want* democracy and whether they are *allowed to live in* a democracy. Nobody ever talks about the *skills of citizens to act* in a democracy. Of course not: As a politician or any other public figure, you would not even survive 24 hours until a tabloid-driven public outrage would end your career if you dared to play the ball back to citizens in certain situations. Let me therefore use my independence to make the point: A critical mass of people simply lacks the *skills to act as citizens in* a democracy!

And this is not a question of formal education (measured by official certificates). I have got to know many people with very basic formal education who have a humanistic coordination system in place which is quite conducive for democracy. In contrast to that, I have exchanged a lot with top managers and professors from various academic disciplines who had made their way up the social ladder without a clue of what day-to-day public policy making in a democracy actually requires.

Of course, badmouthing the political system is popular all over society, but when bashing the political class comes together with money and execution power, I really start worrying.

The skill set required for being a good politician in a democracy is by far NOT the same as managing a company! Please let me know

immediately when you happen to run into individuals who are great in producing agile compromises… under huge uncertainty… with tremendous pressure from increasingly irrational and dissimilar sub-groups within societies… and who are as great in managing the game-theoretical complexity of international relations... and all of this at the same time! Democracy needs such talents!



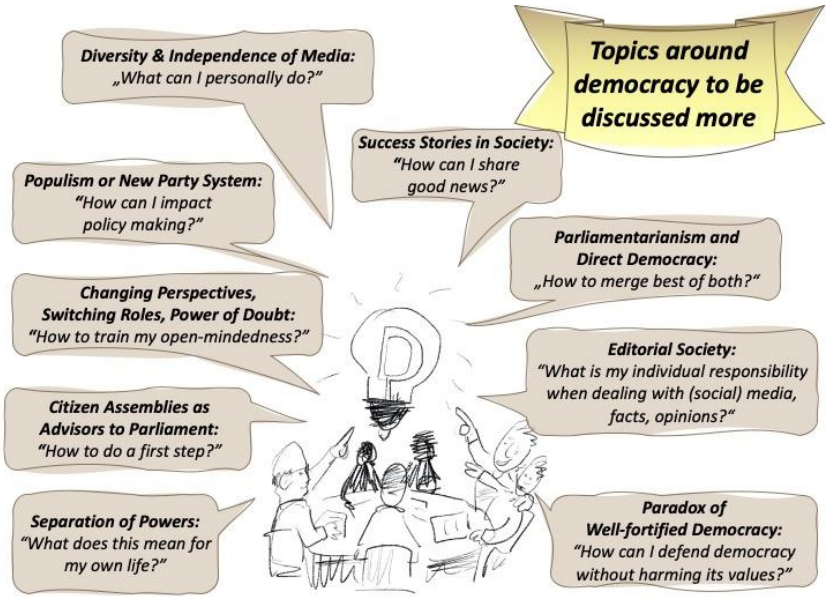
Maybe, the hubris of some can be explained by the famous "Dunning-Kruger Effect": Isn't it exactly those people who have low "citizen skills" that overestimate their own ability the most?! In any case, whatever the threats to democracy from the extreme left and the extreme right might be, I was and I am convinced that it is most dangerous when the middle of society withdraw from taking responsibility beyond job and family.

What we therefore experimented with in 2014: "Citizen dialogue sessions"

When friends and I brainstormed how to initiate dialogue across filter bubbles and how to increase citizen skills, we ruled out organising just another conference where similar people like us brain-fuck with one another in order to feel good. Also, we strongly believed that we wanted to start with little things within our circle of influence. We therefore used our almost 20 years of experience as conference/workshop organisers and facilitators to compose and conduct a series of tailor-made and interactive "Citizen Dialogue Sessions for a Pluralist Democracy" for 12 super-diverse participants each (in German: "Mitmach-Dialoge").

In each of them, we offered inputs on **"8 Challenges for Democracy in VUCA Times"** and let participants rotate to allow for controversial and enlightening conversations.

In a second round, we facilitated constantly changing small group constellations to neutralise dysfunctional patterns. And finally, the participants co-created topics where they would want to **personally contribute more** to strengthen pluralistic democracy in modern societies.



What went well: Strengthening "hard" and (even more) "soft" citizen skills

The series of test sessions showed us that, while important and helpful, it was indeed less about knowing details of the legislative process or how to involve yourself in public policy making in your neighbourhood ("hard" citizen skills).

The participants valued most the reminders of the little things which we all should have learned in school or latest as young professionals: Just think of "active listening", "first notice without judging" or generally all principles of Marshall Rosenberg's "nonviolent communication" (check it out: this was one of the most valuable elements in the curriculum of my qualification as a coach in 1997 and still helps me a lot in all I do). We were happy to see that such a "renaissance of cultural and social techniques" could be fostered by simply practicing them among citizens.

Where we failed: Multiplying "dialogue across filter bubbles"

We had known before that it would be hard to always get true diversity in a group. Also, we decided against feeding our illusion of diversity by including the "usual suspects from highly sought after fringe groups" that have reached semi-professional talk show guest status. We therefore utilised our entire network and credibility as professional and private "bridges" to reach out in all pockets of society. We used a concept of "quota allocation for a balanced diversity" in order not to compromise, and – while realising our responsibility to also protect those individuals - we cautiously approached groups of society who would probably not actively respond to our invitations. And this worked well for a limited number of test groups, but we were not able to apply this approach to a much larger number of sessions.

What we concluded: Donating our design to "Citizens' Assemblies"

With the "citizen skills" modules of the "Citizen Dialogue Sessions" working well, we wondered in 2014 where else we could apply our workshop design prototype. And since the idea of "Citizens' Assemblies" (or similar concepts) advising (!) bodies of parliamentary (!) democracy fortunately had regained popularity in the years before, we decided to "donate" our tested design as an element of preparatory training to such Citizens' Assemblies whenever in the future they would be in place. Technically, their members would be drawn from a public citizen register with a quota allocation to ensure socio-demographic representation. What a great leverage for our citizen skills modules this could be! Today (2020), we still think this a good idea.

Maybe because the "2020 Corona summer" will be a cathartic moment and our democratic societies will re-emerge based on the collective action of citizens from very different filter bubbles.

***Consider this in the meantime**:*
How would you rate both your own "hard" and "soft" citizen skills on a scale from 1 to 10? And what is your life-long learning curriculum as a conscious citizen? Please share your self-assessment to inspire all of us…

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