

# Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter!

## (Part III)



*(Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, South Africa)*

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

*„Democracy is a body of values and procedures that one must know in order to orchestrate and balance them effectively.“*

What contemporary Spanish philosopher Daniel Innerarity recently formulated reflects nicely the learnings with our own initiatives in the last years: When experimenting with our [“Citizen Dialogue Series for a Pluralist Democracy”](#) since 2014 and when hosting a number of regular “Salons” in 2018 dedicated to a collective outlook to a desired and more than ever uncertain future (“In which society do we actually want to live?”), we had great conversations, but always came back to the question of “citizen skills”: Almost all participants openly admitted that they were not used to think or even act in their social role as citizens, nor would they attribute sufficient “hard” and “soft” citizen skills to themselves. And many of those turned out to be around the challenge of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity (beyond [“ambiguous illusions”](#)).

This is not too surprising, at least not in a Germano-centric (or to some extent also euro-centric) reality where the certainty of an ever increasing wealth had become the cultural core pillar of (West) German generations after 1945. In his book [“The Germans and their Myths”](#) from 2009, Herfried Münkler developed the intriguing idea that after the Nazi abuse of any possible somewhat German myth, post-war generations built their identity solely around “D-Mark” and “Wirtschaftswunder”. Personally, I would add a third new myth: In a “National Biedermeier Swing”, Germans flourished in their economic and engineering sphere, inversely attached little value to social sciences, and collectively retreated from international politics. This went well for many decades and created a cosy space where even educated Germans would celebrate the new heights of German export successes and would at the very same time not accept any responsibility (or at least self-interest) for

whatever happened outside German borders (or outside their family homes).

An entire country had decided to measure its well-being solely with economic success (e.g. money, titles, and the size of company cars) – with the national tabloid [BILD](#) as a flywheel. Globalisation was good for the Germans as long as it didn’t bother them with unpleasant questions about the systemic interdependencies of our complex world. Egoism was translated as realism and altruism as naiveté. Today, reality cannot be ignored any longer and all of the sudden the complexities of modern societies seem to come as a surprise for many. This is frightening of course and converts our latent “German Angst” into passionate uncertainty and ambiguity avoidance.

#### **The blind spots of VUCA**

Last week, I wrote about the [“challenges for democracy in VUCA times”](#). “Uncertainty” and “Ambiguity” represent two of the four letters in the trendy acronym “VUCA”. The term “VUCA World” to announce a more confusing future ahead of us was first used in [1987](#), but only became slowly popular after 2008. Considering



its omnipresence in (management) conferences since then, I am often surprised how many top deciders have either never heard of it or – if so – have largely misunderstood what it ultimately means. They would proudly present their models how to hedge markets’ volatilities or how to reduce complexity in their organisations. However, when I ask them how they personally deal with (also their very own) uncertainties and ambiguities which might happen to occasionally

overwhelm them, many would deny to ever experience that.

Well, what else to expect: Since the 1920s economics and finance were built around the ideology of controlling risk with mathematical models. But how to measure ambiguity when it stands mathematically for situations where objective probabilities cannot be assigned? Decades of business school programmes would fall to pieces... And although modern quantum physics (just think of [Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle"](#)) have shown that even in physics there is no such thing as an objective reality which is independent from the observer, dealing with ambiguity also has to do with the psycho-social side of the world. Hence, it is disturbing "soft stuff" which reminds "insecure over-achievers" of their carefully hidden blind spots.

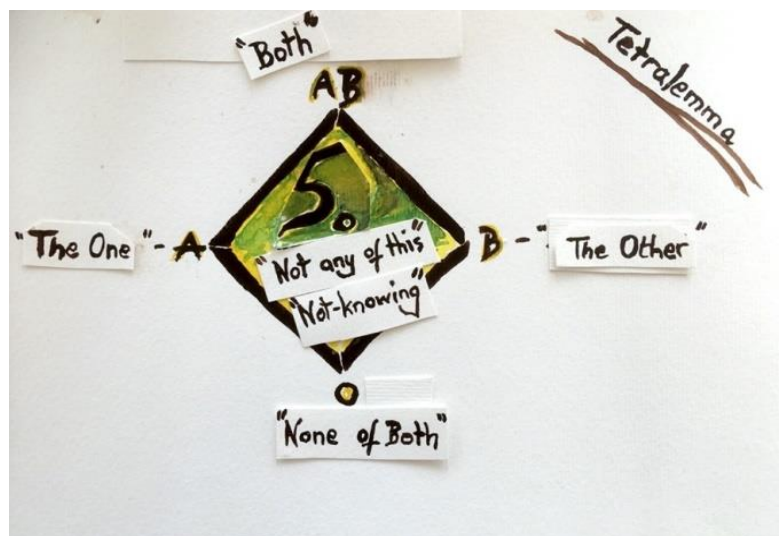
But it is also and truly a cumbersome challenge for rational thinking: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" noted Scott Fitzgerald ("The Great Gatsby") already in 1936.

In an [open letter](#) to all stakeholders in the gentrified "Frankfurt Bahnhofsviertel" some years ago, I wrote that both the police were doing a good job overall and of course there were cases of racial profiling. Why should both not be possible at the same time? Maybe because the brain doesn't like ambiguity at all: It interprets it as a threat and triggers the [fight or flight system](#).

This is why probably ancient philosophy schools or rabbis in Talmud schools taught their students to defend a position with verve and then do the same with the opposite position as energetically. Good assessment centres for high-potentials also use this method until today, but honestly: How many company CEOs could you imagine in 2020 that would act convincingly as union leaders addressing a crowd of workers??

## Tetralemma: An increasingly popular fusion of Western and Eastern logic

Let me make the case for venturing more ambiguity by sharing a beautiful model which has helped me a lot in the last 15 years. If you don't want to check the growing literature about "[Tetralemma](#)", this is my nutshell summary: Western science at some point made a choice to build its fundamental logical system on the bivalence of "right" and "wrong". This allowed for Karl Popper's "critical rationalism" with its empirical falsification and continues to be powerful and important – especially in times of conspiracy theories of all kinds. This focus on either "A" or "B" however neglects that often A and B ("both") or neither A nor B ("none of both") could also be valid (or at least value adding) positions in a logical scheme. Think of a new job offer that makes you think whether you should accept it ("A") or keep your existing job ("B"). In this example, "none of both" seems to



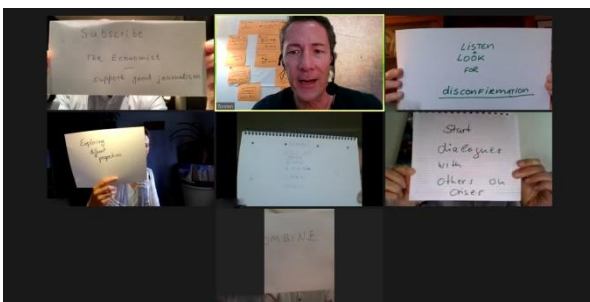
be a straightforward position if you ultimately end up in a third job. If you struggled with the "both" position, a career coach would probably help you by asking: "Which ideas has the new job offer triggered in you to transform your existing job in a new direction?"

Similar to the "four-corner argument" in classical logic, variants of "Tetralemma" were used in court procedures in Ancient Greece and constituted a core element of Indian logic (especially as "fourfold negation" in "Buddhist

logic"). In recent decades, a fifth position ("not even any of this") has often been added. Some theorists argue that this would allow for the integration of spirituality into a logical framework. I would rather use this fifth position to integrate "not-knowing" into our knowledge-based logical system (which would make it a "Pentalemma" of course). "We know that we don't know" would then become a logical part of the knowing.

### Corona dialogue with "both A and B"

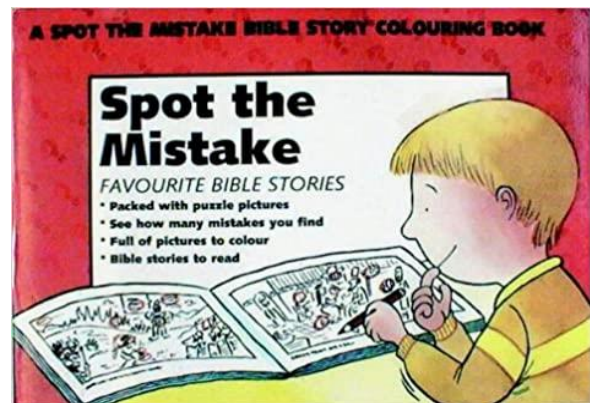
March 2020: A society suddenly had to deal with the uncertainties of the new Corona virus and with the ambiguity and not-knowing of science. A society willingly delegated responsibility to heroically acting leaders who pretended to be very certain about what they do. A society briefly gathered when in shock and then started splitting into new extremes: Those who rather neglected the virus and played it down and those who rather dramatised and panicked. A society had difficulties accepting that maybe sometimes both A and B can be right at the same time. Even on a meta-level, the population seemed to be split in halves: Some were convinced that Corona could help us "grow together again" and some stated that Corona would "drive us apart". Well, maybe it is both A and B even here...



In any case, it seemed to be the perfect time to make the cluster of hard and soft citizen skills around "Dealing with Uncertainty and Ambiguity" a dedicated issue. In the months from April to June 2020, I therefore hosted a series of 9 virtual "Mini Salons on Social Sustainability" with seven participants each.

Although everybody was already annoyed by far too many energy-draining video conferences in the new "Corona home office world", people seemed to enjoy the fast-paced interaction and the switch to the role of a citizen dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity.

At the end of each "Mini Salon", I asked the altogether 60 participants what they as citizens would personally and concretely want to contribute to society in the next months. And to make it harder, I added two conditions: (1) Let the contribution be "in favour of" and not "against" something and (2) try to see the positive already in society with an appreciative (instead of a "spot-the-mistake") attitude.



The output was impressive. And when I received even more contributions in the weeks after the "Mini Salons", I compiled and tweaked them to a preliminary list of "12 Citizen Hacks" which may help to orchestrate and balance our democracy effectively. Check it out next week in Part IV... 😊

**Consider this in the meantime:**  
*In the last months, when have you noticed something to be both "right" and "wrong" at the same time?  
 How did you personally handle this ambiguity?*

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