

NECE 2018 Marseille

„It is the simple thing that is so hard to do”: Citizenship education in a complex world

Openig speech

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Bonjour à toutes et à tous, welcome to Marseille, welcome to La Friche!
Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Madame Ibn Ziaten,

I am honoured and delighted to open this conference.

We are proud to be guests of your city for the next few days. The oldest and second-largest city in France, the “Capital of the Mediterranean” and – last but not least – Zinedine Zidane’s hometown.

For me, Zinedine Zidane’s great artistry with the ball is a symbol for the vitality, the diversity and creativity of Marseille. Marseille can be seen as a “gigantic laboratory” – inequalities and contradictions are included and visible.

Here – according to the Marseille journalist Philippe Pujol – “France regards itself, beautiful or ugly, but always without makeup. Au naturel”.

These days we are confronted with shameful news surrounding the refugee drama in Europe: That’s why I would like to remind you that Marseilles was a transition city and temporary sanctuary for refugees from Germany and all over Europe during the Vichy regime.

Among them Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Lion and Martha Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Mann and others. One could then meet them on the Canebière – with too much luggage and too little hope, as it were.

This time is described in Anna Segher’s famous novel “Transit”. The difficulties and dangers of the daily solidarity with refugees during this time here in Marseilles are very well documented in Varian Fry’s fascinating memoirs “Surrender on Demand”. These early examples of European solidarity can be and should be an inspiration for us today.

When we discovered this location, la Friche la Belle de Mai, we were sure that this is tailor-made for the “spirit of NECE”: It was a “coup de foudre” or “love at first sight”.

Let me thank Alain Arnaudet and his colleagues for their hospitality and cooperation. We thank Tsveta Dobрева und Joachim Umlauf of Goethe-Institut Lyon/Marseille who opened so many doors for us in Marseille. The same goes for Sam Khebizi and his great team from Les Têtes de l’Art.

I am happy to say that we were able to build a very productive network and a strong alliance for civic education with French partners:

Our thanks to the Office franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse, to you and your colleagues, dear Beatrice Angrand, but also to the colleagues from Vote&Vous, to Benjamin and Alban, to the Ligue de l’Enseignement and David Lopez, to the Centre d’entraînement aux méthodes



d'éducation active (CEMEA) and many others in France for your commitment to the idea of international civic education and your dedication for NECE.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Why is this conference so important to us? What do we want to achieve? What are our main questions? I shall limit myself to a few remarks since other speakers will follow.

Truth be told straight away: We will attempt the impossible. To square a circle!

You, more than 400 professional and voluntary civic educators and activists are invited to look at and discuss the long-term global trends and dangers for democracy. At the same time („en même temps“, as the President of France would say) actively use this conference to find answers and formats, which help us re-invent and re-start democratic agency or citizenship in difficult times.

What does this involve?

This involves the future of democracy in a time of global transformation. A time of insecurities, crises and failures, as we all experience them in our daily work, our daily lives.

Niccolò Milanese and Lorenzo Marsili have put out a new book, called 'Citizens of Nowhere' in which they describe and analyse a deep crisis of citizenship worldwide. Without going into details here, let me refer to a pertinent thought of Antonio Gramsci in their book describing an "Interregnum" between the 'old' and the 'new'. In Gramsci's words:

"If the ruling class has lost its consensus, that is to say it is no longer leading but only dominant (...), this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies and no longer believe what they used to believe previously.

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; and in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." (quoted from Milanese/Marsili: Citizens of Nowhere; p. 42)

What Gramsci described over 80 years ago in his 'Letters from prison', still shines a light on democracy's present times.

The op-eds and scientific analyses in major publications refer to this: "How democracy dies", "The Age of Insecurity. Can Democracy save itself?" and "The People versus Democracy", just to mention a few. More recent figures from The Economist and its "democratic health index" demonstrate these crises of democracy, these "democratic recessions" worldwide: Less than 5% of the world's population currently live in a "full democracy".

Approaching Brexit, the open attacks not only in the US but also in the middle of Europe on fundamental democratic values such as freedom of the press and an independent judiciary. The new strength of authoritarian, xenophobic and nationalistic movements in Europe: These are only some of the signs of the "morbid symptoms" mentioned by Gramsci.

In order to discover the causes of these symptoms, I believe it is worth placing the crisis in our democracies more strongly than before within a political-economic context of capitalist societies.

As early as 1944, Karl Polanyi, the famous Hungarian sociologist, described the origins of the market economy in England in the 19th century with the term "great transformation".

Today, it seems, we are once again facing a "great transformation" in which the boundaries of all living conditions continue to erode. The possibilities of controlling economic, technological and social change through democratic action seem increasingly limited – in particular when politics itself describes itself as being powerless or without alternatives.



This transformation of our democracies and economies, only outlined here, unsettles millions and creates feelings of powerlessness and fatigue of democracy. One can imagine no better entry point for polarising emotional politics, in which nationalist resentments and calls for authoritarian solutions are largely echoed.

How can we as citizens, as educators and activists, react to the “brave new worlds” outlined here?

In view of these crises, what Bertolt Brecht said in his poem “Praise of Communism” applies to civic education: It is the simple thing that is so hard to do. (In German it sounds slightly better: *Er ist das Einfache, das schwer zu machen ist.*) Brecht referred to the difference between theory and practice. Between utopia and the nitty-gritty of translating our aspirations into concrete ideas and actions in our classrooms, in our cities, in civic and cultural action.

When I learned the poem many years ago at school in the German Democratic Republic, the fall of the Berlin Wall was still a long way off, the future looked anything but positive. Nevertheless, not only Brecht, but also many others inspired me to keep looking for new spaces in which we could think and speak about alternatives to the prevailing system. You know that history rewarded us all in 1989.

So: Do not let yourself be discouraged! Look for like-minded people and allies across linguistic and national borders: they may be sitting left and right next to you in this room. Nowhere else can better spheres of protection and action be developed and agreed for threatened civic educators than here and now in Marseilles.

Think of the beautiful graffiti I saw on my last visit on the way to the Friche: *Éduquer c'est résister* (Education is resistance!). The NECE platform with its partners and many sister networks can contribute to this, and we will stick to Liverpool FC's motto: You'll never walk alone!

Last but not least: I am convinced that citizenship education must take up the challenge and also become more emotional: We must try to counter the cynical emotional politics of right-wing populist actors and uncontrolled “neo emotionality” – as Fernando Vallespín calls it. What we need are new styles and a new language for civic education that engage people beyond the cognitive. Films, music and theatre must become normal instruments of our repertoire.

However, it seems to me that it is even more important to have role models, people who have utopias and visions that they put into practice every day. And I am therefore delighted that we have Madame Latifa Ibn Ziaten, founder of the IMAD Foundation, with us tonight. Years ago, as a mother, you lost your son to a terrorist assassin and, arising from your pain, decided to actively engage in political and inter-religious dialogue in France and the Middle East. For me, there is no better example of the power of our own citizenship, of empowerment, of the meaning of our work.

We are therefore honoured to have you with us today and we look forward to your keynote right after the opening panel with our French partners

On this note, let me thank you for your attention, I am looking forward to our debates, our controversies and our action points.

