

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies

Political Strategies - Social Changes - Educational Concepts

Conference Paper

Speech

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The boundless kingdom of imagination

"Writers are citizens of many countries: the finite and frontieraed country of observable and everyday life, the boundless kingdom of imagination, the half-lost land of memory"

Salman Rushdie, text delivered to the International Parliament of Writers, november 1993, Strasbourg

When the organisers of this event kindly invited me to deliver this lecture, they suggested something that might reconcile my two worlds – the exile (here in its broader sense) in Europe and literature. While gathering ideas, feelings and impressions to conceive my topic for today, I thought about the issues that dominate my life the last two decades: my first years as an African student in Normandy, the first stories I published at that time and the unsuccessful homecoming in my country of birth, Djibouti, the latest French territory to be decolonised in June 1977. After five years in Caen, I have been turned out into a singularity, that is to say, I became a writer. Because of that peculiarity, I've had no other choice but to remain distant from the tight regime of Djibouti and to construct laboriously a self with many layers of identity and ties of loyalty. These events constitute my personal history which is not so different from that of many others. How did I succeed in finding my way in that difficult period, a period of profound anxiety, a period of questions and doubts, of small inner volcanos, the kind of schizophrenic dislocation experienced by millions of migrants throughout the world. Why is the question 'Who am I?' not longer so problematic and frightening? How did I succeed in finding cultural paths and knots both personal and collective? It is quite possible that I have cured, for the time being at least, the neurosis I was facing because I became a manipulator of words, *un homme de lettres*, a man of living in a country of his own imagination. My short introduction jumps over different concepts and difficulties – the complex notion of exile for instance - that I am not going to explore and eventually solve. It is interesting that the Bible describes naming as a decisive moment of creation. God sets man free through language and gives man the power to name the animals. Adam assumes a paramount creative role, just as God did, through words. What is more, Indians believe in a universal mind – brahman – of which we are all a part. So, the main question (of this introduction) might be: are there rivers and bridges, modest or grandiose, that can unit all of us? Is there something as a collective imagination (*imaginaire*) founded upon the human condition beyond time and space ?

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1) Problems without passports

I could continue discussing my personal problems for quite some time but it is more interesting and more challenging to move to serious considerations. Our world is facing, to use the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's phrase, numerous "problems without passports" – problems of terrorism and counterterrorism, of proliferating conflicts, of the degradation of our common planet, of contagious diseases and chronic starvation, of human rights and human wrongs, of mass illiteracy and massive displacement. These are problems that no one country, however powerful, and even no one continent, however protected, can solve alone. These are surely the shared responsibility of humankind. And therefore they cry out for solutions that, like the problems themselves, also cross frontiers.

It is comprehensible to try to ignore worldwide tragedies, to retreat into the private sphere and discard depressing issues. Yet an event, or could we call it a sad 'fait-divers', taken place in 1999, still haunts me. Yaguine Koita (aged 14) and Fodé Tounkara (aged 15) were born in Conakry, Guinea. On the 28th of July, they froze to death on a Sabena Airbus (Flight 520) flying from Conakry, Guinea, to Brussels, Belgium. Their bodies were discovered on the 2nd of August in the airplane's rear right-hand wheel bay at Brussels International Airport, after having made at least three return trips between Conakry and Brussels. The boys were carrying plastic bags with birth certificates, school report cards, photographs and a letter. This letter, written in imperfect French, was widely published in the world media. I will, with your permission, quote a few lines of that letter I guess many of you know well.

English translation of the letter

"Excellencies, Messrs. members and officials of Europe,

We have the honorable pleasure and the great confidence in you to write this letter to speak to you about the objective of our journey and the suffering of us, the children and young people of Africa.

But first of all, we present to you life's most delicious, charming and respected greetings. To this effect, be our support and our assistance. You are for us, in Africa, those to whom it is necessary to request relief. We implore you, for the love of your continent, for the feeling that you have towards your people and especially for the affinity and love that you have for your children whom you love for a lifetime. [Furthermore, for the love and meekness of our creator God the omnipotent one who gave you all the good experiences, wealth and ability to well construct and well organize your continent to become the most beautiful one and most admirable among the others].

Messrs. members and officials of Europe, we call out for your solidarity and your kindness for the relief of Africa. Do help us, we suffer enormously in Africa, we have problems and some shortcomings regarding the rights of the child.

In terms of problems, we have war, disease, malnutrition, etc. As for the rights of the child in Africa, and especially in Guinea, we have too many schools but a great lack of education and training. Only in the private schools can one have a good education and good training, but it takes a great sum of money. Now, our parents are poor and it is necessary for them to feed us. Furthermore, we have no sports schools where we could practice soccer, basketball or tennis].

This is the reason, we, African children and youth, ask you to create a big efficient organization for Africa to allow us to progress.

Therefore, if you see that we have sacrificed ourselves and risked our lives, this is because we suffer too in Africa and that we need you to fight against poverty and to put an end to the war in Africa. Nevertheless, we want to learn, and we ask you to help us in Africa learn to be like you.

Finally, we appeal to you to excuse us very, very much for daring to write you this letter to you, the great personages to whom we owe much respect. And do not forget it is to you whom we must lament about the weakness of our abilities in Africa.

Written by two Guinean children, Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara".

If facts and figures are undeniable, it is not just a question about a set of figures on GNP tables, a subject for economists and businessmen. It is rather a matter of people. Yes, Africa is indeed now poorer than it has ever been. Extreme poverty has multiplied four times over the last two decades. More than a third of the continent's inhabitants survive on less than half a dollar a day. More "development money" (mostly European) has gone into Africa than the Marshall Plan brought to a war-destroyed Europe. It is also absolutely true that most of that money returns to the pockets of the donor agencies.

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But where are our industries, universities, public institutions, hospitals, roads? Our civil wars have gone on for so long that they seem to be endemic, eternal, and insoluble. Somalia, a country which is almost mine because I'm culturally a Somali, has been totally disappeared as a state. Victim of the plethora of Somalian warlords. At the dark heart of African insecurity we find poverty, endemic and growing worse. We find greed. I am talking of the greed of the predators – the arms manufacturers and the oil guzzlers and the smugglers of people. Let me confess something heavy on my heart: having dealt with Somalia and having written a book on the Rwandan genocide (Moisson de crânes, Le Serpent à plumes, Paris, 2000), I would have occasionally pictured myself as an artist engagé but I must confess that I know nothing about the Darfour conflict. Experts discuss whether it could be designated as a genocide or not and there I am mute and ignorant. End of the parenthesis. From East to West of the continent, the situation is equally depressing. An average Nigerian, despite the oil boom, is now poorer than in 1970; the country is devastated by ethnic and religious disputes and remains one of the most corrupt places on earth; the justice system has all but collapsed; civil disorder and escapism are the norm and the once proud universities (Ibadan, the home of the first generation of daring Nigerian thinkers such as novelist Chinua Achebe or Ife where Wole Soyinka took his first position as a professor) have imploded. Nowadays, there is a joke tailored by my generation: 'Do you work or do you teach ?' is the question the potential mother-in-law asks you when you are introduced to her by your girlfriend.

Blague à part, the vast majority of developing countries have emerged recently from the womb of colonialism; both colonialism and globalization have in many ways fractured and distorted their cultural self-perceptions. Development will not occur without a reassertion of identity: that this is who we are, this is what we are proud of, this is what we want to be. In this process, culture and development are fundamentally linked and inter-dependent. The task of the writer is to find new ways (and revive old ones) of expressing his/her culture, just as his/her society strives, in the jungle of globalization, to find new ways of being and becoming. In my latest novel, In the United States of Africa (Jean-Claude Lattès edition, Paris, 2006), which is both a satire and a philosophical tale à la mode of Voltaire and Swift, I tried to revisit one of the most inspiring political ideas of the late fifties and sixties - Panafricanism - so that younger African generations know something about Kwame Nkrumah and Cheikh Anta Diop, Habib Bourguiba and Frantz Fanon, George Padmore and Haile Selassie. At the same time, I tried to put the world upside down. Africa has become a hegemonic continent just as the USA or the European Union and consequently the USA and the EU are the worst countries on earth. I did not write the novel to take a kind of virtual revenge (the poor replacing the powerful and closing their frontiers to the white Westerners, desperate young Portuguese or Italians disappearing into the Mediterranean Sea whereas young charming girls from Monaco or the Vatican find themselves trapped behind walls of prostitution in Algiers or Douala). What I tried to do is to picture the world from a different, perhaps new and refreshing, point of view. All in all, I would like the novel to be read as a philosophical tale addressing the present issues of inclusion and exclusion, migration and powerpolitics, race and otherness. It also is a pleasant story, I hope. As a writer committed to democracy, ethnic and religious pluralism and secularism, I see cultural reassertion as a vital part of the enormous challenges confronting African countries – as vital as economic development. We are all familiar with the notion that "man does not live by bread alone". In Africa, I would argue that music, dance, art and the telling of stories are indispensable to our ability to cope with that vital essential construct we call the human condition. After all, why does man need bread? To survive. But why survive, if it is only to indulge in more bread or more couscous? To live is more than just to sustain life – it is to enrich, and be enriched by life, by others be them strangers or neighbours, friends or foreigners. Our poorest men and women in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world feel the throb of imagination on their pulse, that is why they continue telling stories to their children under the starlit skies.

This brings me to Europe, the most illuminating continent in modern history. Europe has been the land of mass migration in the 19th century and till the middle of the 20th century. The social phenomena at the origins of yesterday mass migration were not very different from the ones which drive nowadays millions of African, Asian migrants to the lands of Europe. Migration and nation are two connected entities, now in conflict, now in harmony. Are those leaving their homelands traitors or ambassadors ? The relationships between migrants and local authorities swing from *laisser-faire* to coercion, from

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negative perception to positive perception, from 'immigration subie' to 'immigration choisie' if we use French recent taxonomy. These days, we experience the utterly negative side with its amount of fear, rejection and racism. The events of September 11th inaugurated a whole new set of challenges for Muslim immigrants. Life has become more difficult—not only for them but for their host societies, as well. And never in modern times has so much international attention been focused on Muslims – their religion, their beliefs, their way of life.

Yet, one might not forget the fact that migration has a history as long as humanity. It has always existed and it will continue to exist. The largest community in the world ignored by institutions and statistics, a community with neither flag nor army, is the caste of "the other": of exiles, refugees, immigrants, displaced people, outsiders, outcasts, strangers, untouchables – and, of course, artists and writers (as different as Dante, Victor Hugo, Einstein, Kafka, Mann, Conrad, Benjamin, Arendt, Hikmet, Neruda, García Márquez, Rushdie or Soyinka). When I am optimistic I fancy that as a writer, as an African-European citizen with many loyalties and ties, as a man of this time and world, my task is to be open to others, the Other with a capital 'O', to the Beyond, to what I don't know and what I assume to be different. I like to think the knowledge of the Other is the highest task to undertake, a task similar to the unveiling of what Emmanuel Levinas once called the 'visage humain'. When one becomes aware that the tragedies of our time are all global in origin and reach, and that tackling them is a global responsibility, then half of the job has been done. Interdependence and living together are the key goals.

2. The International Parliament of Writers

Europe has in stock all the necessary conceptual and philosophical tools to tackle the issue of integration and togetherness. Just an example, in 1993 a profoundly original institution, the International Parliament of Writers, was founded at Strasbourg. A cluster of famous writers, philosophers and opinion leaders (including Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Edouard Glissant, Salman Rushdie, Vincenzo Consolo, Russell Banks, José Saramago etc.) put together their energy and reputation to rescue endangered writers throughout the globe. The protection of freedoms of expressions outlined in such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 19) and the charter of International PEN, was the key goal. One of its originality was the target. The Parliament was not interested in dealing with the states or a group of states but with the cities, the municipalities or, even as in Paris with districts or local partners such as the Musée Pompidou. A year and a half later, the European Charter of Cities of Asylum by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. The experience had many advantages. First, it proved much more efficient. Secondly, it discarded the national level and focused on more humane level. One of the Parliament's references or source of inspiration was the medieval network of (European) cities and the notion of hospitality vivid at those times (I am mentioning in passing here the notion of cosmopolitanism and hospitality revisited by Derrida – 'On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness', *Autodafé*, the review of the IPW). After twelve years of functioning, the Parliament, whose mission was temporary, was dissolved. Many writers of every corner of the globe were rescued and given a shelter. If the institution disappeared the idea is still alive in the USA, in Mexico and in Europe.

The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), located in Stavanger, Norway, is one of the offsprings of the IPW. A brand new founding charter was signed last year, in June 11, 2006. 'The Municipality of Stavanger is economically and legally responsible for the ICORN Administration Centre. The aim of ICORN is to 'work to advance a spirit of solidarity between individual writers and their host cities, among writers within the network, and among the participating cities and regions of refuge' (Founding Charter, Page 1).

Needless to say, this amount of precious experiences, accumulated in the last fifteen years, should inspire European policy makers. It should help them to formulate and implement original and appropriate responses to other groups and situations. The North-South or transnational relationships are defined by historical processes, by perceptions, and by power equations. Two components that appeal to me are ethics and power – more precisely, how non-power (or imagination) can be used as transformative agent.

This brings me to the second part of my argument or my example. It deals with the French language and its legacy and future. This recent and highly political debate has been labelled 'Le

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Manifeste des 44' by the medias.

Le Manifeste des 44

44 French-language authors, including Tahar Ben Jelloun, Edouard Glissant, JMG Le Clézio, Amin Maalouf, Alain Mabanckou, Erik Orsenna, Maryse Conde and Michel Le Bris, signed a manifesto titled "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en français," which was published on the cover of *Le Monde des Livres* (March 16, 2007). I am one of the 4 writers of the manifesto with Alain Mabanckou, Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud. The idea emerged in Bamako, Mali, where a North-South artistic festival 'Étonnants Voyageurs Bamako', has been taken place the last six years. Ideas and heated discussions take place there annually. The desire to undertake something practical was expressed by a group of writers, some African or Francophone and some French. These writers wanted to implement a reconsideration of the literary aspect of "francophonie", in which France sees itself as the centre or the hub, while countries from the ex-empire are the spokes or the periphery.

« [Le centre, ce point depuis lequel était supposée rayonner une littérature franco-française, n'est plus le centre. Le centre jusqu'ici, même si de moins en moins, avait eu cette capacité d'absorption qui contraignait les auteurs venus d'ailleurs à se dépouiller de leurs bagages avant de se fondre dans le creuset de la langue et de son histoire nationale : le centre, nous disent les prix d'automne, est désormais partout, aux quatre coins du monde. Fin de la francophonie. Et naissance d'une littérature-monde en français ».

Here is my rough translation:

"The center, that point from which a Francophone-French literature was supposed to shine, is no longer the center. The center, up until now, had an absorption capacity that forced authors who came from somewhere else to give up their belongings before melting in the pot of the language and its national history. The center, the fall prizes tell us, is now everywhere, in the four corners of the world. End of francophonie. And birth of a world literature in French".

It has been largely noticed that this year, all the major French prizes (the Goncourt, the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française, the Renaudot and the Femina) were awarded to non-native French authors, and so it was perhaps an opportune time to raise the question of a "world literature in French," one that can live and thrive in the same way as world literature in English. Indeed, it is quite clear from the document that the authors look to the English-speaking world as one in which it is easier for non-English writers to have their words heard, and their books considered for their merits.

The authors write:

Combien d'écrivains de langue française, pris eux aussi entre deux ou plusieurs cultures, se sont interrogés alors sur cette étrange disparité qui les reléguait sur les marges, eux "francophones", variante exotique tout juste tolérée, tandis que les enfants de l'ex-empire britannique prenaient, en toute légitimité, possession des lettres anglaises ? Fallait-il tenir pour acquis quelque dégénérescence congénitale des héritiers de l'empire colonial français, en comparaison de ceux de l'empire britannique ? Ou bien reconnaître que le problème tenait au milieu littéraire lui-même, à son étrange art poétique tournant comme un derviche tourneur sur lui-même, et à cette vision d'une francophonie sur laquelle une France mère des arts, des armes et des lois continuait de dispenser ses lumières, en bienfaitrice universelle, soucieuse d'apporter la civilisation aux peuples vivant dans les ténèbres ?

And, in English:

How many French-language writers, caught between two or several cultures, have asked themselves about this strange disparity, which relegated them to the margins, as 'francophones', a barely tolerated exotic variant, while the children of the ex-British empire were taking, in all legitimacy, possession of English letters? Was one supposed to take for granted a certain congenital degeneration among the heirs of the French colonial empire, by comparison with those of the British empire? Or else recognize that the problem was in the literary milieu itself, in its strange poetic art, turning like a dervish upon itself, and in this vision of a francophonie upon which a France, mother of letters, arms, and laws, continued to dispense its lights, as a universal benefactor, concerned with giving civilization to the peoples living in darkness?

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Even if things are not so rosy in the world of English-language literature, they are certainly rosier than in the francophone world. In any case, the manifesto drew a number of reactions. Abdou Diouf, ex-president of Senegal and now secretary-general of the International Organization of Francophonie denounced the 44 authors as "gravediggers of francophonie." And in *Le Figaro*, presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, who never misses an opportunity to show his muscles, jumped into the debate, saying that "francophonie is not a colonial concept." One wonders, given his passionate defense, how many native-born Frenchmen identify themselves as 'francophones.' We all know it is a term for the Blacks, the Browns, the migrants, The Others. Often, Francophone writers of European origins (such Russian born Andrei Makine or Greek born Vassilis Alexakis) succeed in joining the French literature category in bookshops, library, publishing collections or anthologies. On the other hand, French nationals by from the overseas (Glissant, Chamoiseau, Conde...), from the colonial empire are maintained into the Francophonie. The manifesto provokes an international coverage and a lively discussion is still going on the blogosphere.

It is quite possible that the non-French world looks upon all of this with a mixture of sympathy and amusement. Some will think who cares about so silly labels (Francophone, French, Maghrebine, Negro-Africaine literature) while others will consider it as an obscure and sectarian debate. But, of course, I persist thinking that it is a very serious question considering the tight links between nation, citizenship and language in the history of France. In these times of identity revivalism (*surenchère*) and ambivalences, one of the aims of the manifesto is to reconsider the framework of the French model, to move from the French republic of letters to the "litterature monde" in French, this is of course a step forward before establishing the *weltliteratur*, the paramount dream of Goethe.

Conclusion

The two examples show if need be that imagination is a transformative agent, it underlines the existence of groups and societies whose richness lies in their soul and not in their soil, whose past may offer more wealth than their present. Recognizing that this might be the case, and affirming that the imagination is as central to humanity's sense of its own worth as the ability to eat and drink and sleep under a roof, is part of the challenge. The IPW has shown us the way and the procedure. By renewing the true meaning of asylum. By welcoming persecuted immigrants. By removing borders. And by building decentralised bridges. I believe Europeans will not become any less European if, in Mahatma Gandhi's metaphor, we open the doors and windows of our continent and let foreign winds blow through our house.

Diaspore writers have primarily brought broader political and cultural dimensions. They have vivified European literatures that were increasingly neglecting the ambitions of their grand heritage. They have enlarged the horizons of countries self-righteously clinging to their insularity and shown them the world at large, a world once colonised.

The enfants terribles of the UK, using the language of Shakespeare and Derek Walcott, for instance, have brought new visions of truths, colours, depths, spectrums, insights, and compassion. They have brought new horizons. They have enriched us with neglected or ignored cultures. They have reignited in us such universal concepts as the struggle for love, liberty, equality, and universal welfare. They have reminded us that the differences between peoples are superficial, that irrespective of ethnicity, colour, or creed, we laugh or weep in the same way and for the same reasons. This is why, as a writer, I would argue that the specificities of literature are the best antidote to the globalization of the imagination. Literature teaches us to empathise, to look beyond the obvious.

Let me finish with a last image, a last wink to a European philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. Some claim that the era of the European intellectual fighting for the preservation of the diversity of the human spirit is now behind us. They claim that 'les intellectuels sont fatigués', that Sartre or Gramsci, Bourdieu or Derrida are history, that the European intellectual is mute and distant and brooding just like the character in the famous painting of Durer called 'Melancholia'. Slavoj Žižek reminds us with his usual passion that one the most precious legacy of Europe is the forging of a dream of better condition for mankind.

Thank you.