

The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion

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Keynote

The Creative Power of Cities in Combatting Social Exclusion

by

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Whilst I have been asked to speak to you tonight about “the creative power of cities in combating social exclusion”, I have chosen to give my presentation a more positive title: “Why we should love our cities – and why our cities should love us”.

I speak to you not as an educationalist in citizenship, culture or anything else. I come as an urbanist – someone with a fascination in how cities work and why they don’t.

I want to speak to you about the following things:

- Why cities matter
- Why citizenship matters and how we have almost lost it
- And how we can create a new form of citizenship, which is intercultural, egalitarian and creative.

I will ponder upon the economic crisis and the paradox of how it may just have shocked us as a society into attaching a little more value to ourselves and to each other as citizens than we did before. For years I have been becoming more concerned at how we seemed to be allowing our citizenship – that many had fought so bravely to achieve on our behalf – to fall into disuse, in the blind pursuit of other, more materialistic attractions. Paradoxically, the economic crash may have reminded us that we actually need each other – more than we need that new handbag or car.

I will begin with a tale of three cities. Firstly Dubai, portrayed by many as the most dynamic city of the decade and heralded by the Financial Times just four years ago as the ‘city of the future’. However, you will be aware that over the last weekend Dubai has hit serious problems and has stared financial disaster in the face. A halt has been called on its profligate growth and its two tier society.

And the British press also covered an interesting side-issue of the Dubai crash. British football players such as Michael Owen were facing massive losses in the value of their investments in Dubai. And this struck me as interesting, because footballers – whether you care for the game or not – have a part to play in the way that I think about citizenship, identity, belonging and culture. They are powerful symbols of their city. Owen is one of the stars of Manchester United. One of his greatest predecessors at the club was a man called Bobby Charlton. He was also an investor but of a different kind. Whilst Owen has invested the millions in financial capital he has earned from the football fans Manchester, into a fantasy island in the Persian Gulf; Bobby Charlton invested social capital into the children and the streets of the city of Manchester itself. He was to many people the first citizen of Manchester and he bore that responsibility with great nobility. Here he is pictured having a kickabout with a bunch of kids in the 1960s – a scene it would be impossible to imagine today’s football superstars engaging in.

And what of the club that Charlton played for? It is now owned by the Glazer brothers, a group of financial speculators who bought the club with profit in mind and would sell it tomorrow if the price were right. What do they care for the meaning of citizenship in Manchester or the role their ‘asset’ might play in the social cohesion of the city?

And this led me to thinking about a third city. The city indeed whose football team beat Manchester United in the European Champions League Final this year – Barcelona – a very different model of sports culture, urbanity and social cohesion. Why does it feel so different? Perhaps it’s because the football club is not the plaything of three American financial speculators but is a mutual company, owned by 150,000 citizens of Barcelona. They love their club and their city, not because they are mere consumers of it, but because they are in a very real sense the co-creators of it.

A tale of three cities – I know which one I prefer.

The world has undergone massive change in the last 20 years, not least here in the Baltic States. As well as the end of the Soviet Union, the whole of Europe has seen economic deregulation which has seen the market enter into many areas formerly controlled, often badly, by the state. For many people their life chances and horizons have expanded along with the possibility of travel for a holiday, to work or trade or permanently search for a better life. We live in a world of mesmerising global flows of information, ideas, capital and people. This is exciting and liberating for some but we do not all share in its fruits equally. Indeed many people and places may well feel that this opening up has somehow stripped them of their wealth and identity and given it away to others without their consent.

Politicians seem increasingly powerless to intervene. Levels of political participation fall and it seems that as individuals we have greater influence through our activity as consumers than we do as citizens or electors. Places start to look alike as the same international brand names populate the high street. You could portray this positively as the onward march of freedom and liberal democracy, or negatively as the increasing homogenization and commercialization of our lives and communities.

Some would say that what we have gained in wealth and choice we have lost in trust and cohesion. A variety of research suggests that we are generally more suspicious of each other than we used to be, although as a recent study by Eurobarometre suggested, whilst the Nordic countries still seem generally very trusting of each other (with three quarters of Danes saying most people can be trusted), the EU Accession countries paint a very different picture (with only 14% of Lithuanians trusting most people). Some say that our lack of trust is leading to a decline in our care and compassion for each other. Nothing now gets done unless there is a contractual obligation and the threat of legal action to back it up. We sanction our state authorities to carry out more surveillance and create more rules governing the public sphere, and we are more ready to see the creation of more jails to house those who cannot or will not follow the rules. For those who have the financial ability, there is the choice to opt out of the public sphere more and more through the purchase of health care, child care, education, leisure and the emergence of gated communities.

But, for me, one thing stands out above all others. It is becoming apparent that deregulation has led to increasing inequality in our societies. I am not talking here about the total amount of wealth within a society, but about the size of the gap between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% in any country. Again there are variations, with the Nordic countries still being relatively egalitarian but Russia and America showing enormous extremes of wealth and poverty.

This will not be news to most people. But what I do think is new is recent research which has been able to make a hard scientific connection between the quality of life and the degree of inequality¹. Choose almost any indicator of social dysfunction you like: physical illness, mental illness, the extent to which people trust strangers, the size of the prison population, and you will find a remarkable correlation. The more unequal the society, the greater are its social ills. And the process is accelerating. Social mobility increased in the western world up to the 1990s, but now it is in decline.

¹ See *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (2009) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. London, Allen Lane.

One social observer has described well this paradox of neo-liberalism:

“Technology, migration and material abundance all allow people to wrap themselves into cocoons of their own making... finding communities that fit their values where they can avoid those who might force them to compromise their principles or their tastes.”²

We have recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and no doubt the world is a better place for it. But we were naïve if we thought this would be the end to such edifices. We are familiar with the segregated cities of the United States and the walled in favelas of Brazil of course. But you can visit the city of Padova in Italy and find a wall that has been built by the city council to separate a neighbourhood of immigrants from the rest of the town. This is happening in the European Union in 2009.

We might look at images such as these and conclude that the city and citizenship are in crisis, perhaps terminal. But I describe myself as an urbanist because I believe in cities – their civilising capacity and the ability to improve themselves and their citizens. I draw my inspiration from another type of Italian city – the great city states of the Italian Renaissance. I also look for inspiration to the great British cities of the 19th century which, having endured the turmoil and squalor of the industrial revolution in the first half of the century went on to bring about a revolution in public health, education, social security, urban design and democratic governance in the second half. You might say that over the last quarter century we have been through another industrial revolution of equivalent technological power and economic rapaciousness, and perhaps we are now at that stage again where we need to bring about a new social revolution and create a new citizenship.

Firstly, I believe this new citizenship needs to be creative because creativity is concerned with:

- Recognising the inner potential often hidden in people and places;
- Re-empowering people;
- Re-assessing resources and finding new assets;
- Re-thinking and re-invention; and,
- Re-casting possibilities, including turning perceived weaknesses into new strengths.

And this new citizenship needs to be intercultural because it needs to take account of a world in which people are constantly on the move in search of a better life. It needs to recognise that such a movement is not a threat to the city but a potential opportunity, the diversity dividend. The source of many of the world’s great ideas and civilization has been through the mixing of different and apparently incompatible people and cultures. I strongly believe that the cities, which wholly embrace heterogeneity will move forward whilst those that seek homogeneity and purity will stagnate and decline.

This has been the subject of the book³ I wrote last year and which has now been taken up by the Council of Europe as a trans-national network of cities⁴.

In it I argue that a new creative and intercultural citizenship will be based upon a firm foundation of rights, enshrined in law. That is legal protection from prejudice, discrimination and oppression. But it will not be based upon entitlement, a concept, which has become bloated and distorted in recent years. The strength of any society is what you put into it rather than what you take from it, but we have been in danger of losing sight of this.

² J. Walker Smith, Yankelovich Partners

³ Wood, P and Landry, C (2008) *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage*. London, Earthscan.

⁴ www.coe.int/interculturalcities

Another foundation of this new citizenship is the nurturing of curiosity. Without curiosity you cannot have creativity, nor can you have empathy. And I profoundly believe that we are all creative agents – it is part of our birthright as humans – and yet by our teenage years most of us have already been persuaded that we do not have a creative bone in our body, and that even if we did we should make it a deep secret if we want to keep our friends and get on in the world.

I believe that a healthy citizenship is not placid or permanently harmonious. On the contrary, it should be engaged, argumentative and negotiated. We should all be prepared to listen to the opinions of others and to speak up and explain our own. And the new citizenship is based upon the confident conviction that even though we now live in cities where many languages are spoken and many religions practiced, it is still possible for us to exist together in a single, diverse public sphere.

Here are ten aspects of the new citizenship and ten examples to illustrate it:

1. Firstly **political participation** is vital.

You can judge a city on how it treats its newest and most vulnerable inhabitants. In many parts of Europe migrants are disbarred from playing any part in national or local elections until they have been naturalized, and this can take years or even decades. As part of its Plan for Convivencia and Intercultural Living, the City of Madrid has decreed that anyone who has been a resident of the city for six months, regardless of whether they hold Spanish citizenship, can take part in elections for local districts. And furthermore they can stand for office to serve on local committees which take decisions about and spend public money on their neighbourhoods. It seems to me that giving people a responsibility for and a stake in their own district is one of the most fundamental and effective ways of making citizens of people. It sometimes seems to me that indigenous people who have become complacent about their own citizenship could learn much from these foreigners who breath new life and energy into their adopted cities.

2. The **welcome** a city gives to newcomers is vital.

If a city really wants to portray itself as open, progressive and intercultural, then it is important for it to say so. Many politicians have become mealy-mouthed about where they stand on such principals, fearful of retribution from those who prefer purity and exclusivity. This is why I celebrate a city such as Neuchâtel in Switzerland – yes, the country that recently voted to ban the building of minarets – where politicians have led a high profile campaign. Firstly ‘*Salut Etranger*’ is an unambiguous welcome to strangers because the city knows its economic future depends on its ability to continuously attract new people. Secondly the city has re-branded itself as ‘*Neuch... à toi!*’ meaning ‘the city is yours’.

3. **Citizenship education** is of course vital,

but we must not delude ourselves into thinking that it can only take place in the classroom. Some of the most effective citizenship education I know takes place on the streets and in people’s homes. Take, for example, the borough of Neukölln, the poorest and most ethnically diverse part of Berlin. Here large numbers of women are isolated by poverty, culture and religion from playing their full part in society. Through the scheme *Stadtteilmütter* (or District Mothers) a large number of minority women have been recruited and educated to be able to give language training, health advice and other vital information and advice to other migrant women. It is based on the age-old principle that mothers are at the heart of a cohesive community and can be the most powerful influence on the next generation of active citizens.

4. We often take our **public space** for granted and too easily surrender it to control by others: commerce, the state, the car, the criminal. Active citizenship is about taking it back and bringing it to life. Anyone who has been to New York City will have been to Times Square because it has iconic status. But like me, you may have been disappointed because it seems dominated by traffic which makes it almost impossible to wander around the space freely. Property owners in the area evidently felt the same way, which is why they initiated a massive experiment this summer. For three months they simply declared Broadway 'closed' by erecting temporary barriers. They all contributed some money and bought a large batch of the cheapest deck chairs they could find, littered them around the empty, car-free streets and then stood back to see what happened next. It wasn't long before the people of New York took over and turned the area into a vibrant new 'park', full of all kinds of strange and familiar social activities. The high risk experiment was deemed such a success that it is to be repeated next year.

5. But there are many **private spaces** in the city too where conviviality and citizenship can be built. Think of your own city. I'll bet there are buildings or institutions you would like to explore or people you would like to know, but you are too shy or reserved to approach them, or maybe you are worried about causing embarrassment to them or yourself by making a social or cultural mistake. Marjolijn Masselink had these feelings about her city of Rotterdam, so she created a new company called *City Safari*. It is directed at Rotterdammers themselves and says to them 'Be a tourist in your own city'. As an individual or a group of friends you can tell Marjolijn what kinds of things you are interested in and she will design a personalised tour of the city, visiting five places you could never normally go to – the house of a migrant, the house of a local, of a transvestite, a mosque, a church, whatever, in order to know and understand them better.

6. Cities are in part the summation of their public **institutions**, and their character contributes to the vibrancy – or the inertia of the city. Take libraries – an institution currently undergoing a crisis of purpose owing to the spread of IT. Having had much of their role as dispensers of information and entertainment undermined by Google etc, they need to find other ways of being relevant. Tower Hamlets is London's most diverse borough and is undergoing a process of gradually replacing each of its branch libraries with *Idea Stores*. Designed especially by the architect David Adjaye, to stress accessibility, transparency and flexibility they are located next to major shops and keep the same opening hours (including Sundays) to encourage maximum usage. They have high staff numbers including 'meeters and greeters' there to encourage first time users to feel welcome and comfortable. Although still holding large book stocks they also have space available for a wide variety of other usages, to ensure they are seen by people in the neighbourhood as the centre of their community.

7. Information **technology** has certainly a lot of responsibility to bear for the decline in conviviality and civic participation as we are all drawn inexorably closer to the TV and computer screen. But technology also has the potential to reinvigorate and build new forms of citizenship. The Chief Technology Officer of Washington DC, Vivek Kundra, realised the city was gathering and sitting on vast quantities of data that it barely used nor even knew what to do with. It included real-time crime feeds, school test scores, and poverty indicators, making it the most comprehensive of its kind in the world. He asked iStrategyLabs how it could make it useful for the citizens, visitors, businesses and they suggested *Apps for Democracy* – a contest that cost \$50,000 and returned 47 iPhone, Facebook and web applications with an estimated value in excess of \$2,600,000 to the city. For example, an add-on to Facebook that enables commuters to share cars, thus reducing congestion. During 2009 the city's goal is to attract new ideas from at least 5,000 citizens of Washington, DC. Incentives include a \$1,000 "Social Citizen Award" and public recognition for their participation.

8. You might think **conflict** was a strange place to be looking for citizenship, but in my opinion it is a normal and natural aspect of urban life that we ignore at our peril. Take any space with a high concentration of people of different background and you will always have differences of opinion and the potential for conflict. In much of northern Europe we are very uneasy with this. We prefer to maintain a pretence that everybody is happy and would encourage avoidance rather than engagement to keep it this way. But sweeping a conflict under the carpet does not solve it – it can even make it worse – as we learnt with the riots that swept the UK in 2001. In southern Europe, particularly Italy, they understand these things much better. The city of Torino has street wardens employed to anticipate possible family or communal disagreements and operates a House of Conflicts where mediation and conciliation can take place. They also appreciate that a well-managed process of dispute between initially warring factions can eventually bring the antagonists together and may reveal solutions previously unimagined. This is active citizenship enacted by the city and the citizens themselves. Too often we delegate this to the lawyers and the criminal justice system – to our collective loss.

9. Another counter-intuitive but no less important element in citizenship-building is the role of the **outsider**. Very often those on the inside of a situation may be complacent or even blind to the erosion and loss of important aspects of civic life. It very often needs the sharper eye of the outsider to see what is missing or to point out the absurdity of what exists. Such a situation existed in the north Serbian city of Subotica. The Yugoslav war had led to a chaotic period of emigration, immigration and widespread neglect and disrepair of the civic infrastructure. In the neighbourhood of Pescara, Serbs, Croats and Hungarians lived side by side amongst derelict houses and impassable roads, but such was their suspicion of each other that none were prepared to take action to rectify the situation, even though they very often could not reach the shops or schools. Also worried about this was Stevan Nicolic, leader of the local (and outcast) Roma community, many of whom had been displaced to Subotica from other parts of former Yugoslavia. One day he persuaded a friend to lend him an excavator and some tools and road material and a small group of Roma people began repairing the road. As other (non-Roma people) passed by, Nikolic persuaded them to join in and, over the course of a week, this multi-ethnic group of neighbours who had never before spoken to each other had created a new road for their district. So impressed was the local authority that it allowed the creation of a neighbourhood council to improve the district, and now many other parts of the city have followed suit.

10. Finally there is a vital role for **leadership**. Leaders are needed and can be found in all aspects of society, youth, business as well as in the more conventional arena of politics and government. On this occasion, however, I am going to quote the case of one of the most impressive Mayors I have encountered. If Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina is known around the world for anything, it is as the location of the last but one of the bloodiest atrocities of the Yugoslav War when, with the cease-fire looming in May 1995, Serb gunners fired a shell into a market place full of multi-ethnic teenagers, killing 71 of them. 2000 saw the election of a new Mayor, Jasmin Imamovic, a charismatic lawyer as well as best-selling poet and novelist and a Muslim. He embarked upon a two year process of public consultation on a scale previously unknown in former Yugoslavia. This involves ongoing engagement with 40 local communes and voluntary organisations in which views on a wide variety of issues are canvassed. It has also seen the creation of a Mayoral Advisory Council of 25 unelected advisors representing the ethnic, religious, cultural, age, sexual and professional diversity of the city. He has also initiated a regular six-months city-wide survey of public opinion which appears to have the equivalent power to a referendum on key issues.

But he has also exhibited a remarkable talent for civic entrepreneurialism and the iconic gesture. Tuzla translates as 'salt,' and it was from mining this staple of life that the city was built. In doing so, however, the city had over the years quite literally eaten away its own foundations and by the time of Imamovic's succession large areas of the city centre were sinking. In a stroke of brilliance the Mayor declared the city's greatest weakness would be turned into its strength by transforming the sunken land into a great Salt Lake. Now surrounded by beaches and a beautiful park commemorating the victims of the war, it has now become one of Bosnia's most popular resorts bringing crucial revenue to the town.

Imamovic has also shown great understanding of how cities must position and brand themselves in the competitive new economy. He has carefully cultivated a series of international links and relationships with international cities and has gained membership for Tuzla of several pan-European and international networks. One clever way of building international links, whilst also sending out clear messages of the city's intentions, and also of improving the streetscape of the city centre is his public art programme. He has identified a series of great symbols of humanity (eg Mozart, Mandela, Shakespeare, the Beatles) and has invited their cities of origin to donate busts or sculptures to be displayed in the city streets. Where art has led, investment has followed, particularly from Austria and Germany. New banks have moved in and a large business and entrepreneurship centre opened in 2004.

And how do the people of Tuzla respond to the unconventional approach of their Mayor? Well, in November 2008 he stood for election for his third four-year term. His share of the vote went up to 76% and he received as many votes in predominantly Catholic and Orthodox neighbourhoods as he did in Muslim areas. And when asked recently what he thought was the most important thing he had given the people of Tuzla, he said "love".

In **conclusion**, it is my opinion that we rely too much upon the lawyer to draft legislation in the hope that this will build citizenship for us – when it is our responsibility to do it ourselves. Maybe too we rely upon the poets and other artists to be creative on our behalf – when it is our responsibility to discover our own creativity. And we sit and wait to be led by the politicians. Mayor Imamovic provides a unique combination of skills: a lawyer, a poet and a politician; and yet he has empowered his people to remake their own city.

But sometimes we do need the poet to encapsulate that which we feel but cannot articulate. This is why I admire the city of Toronto for employing a great human being, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco as its Poet Laureate, and I find it appropriate to end this speech with his words:

"If we are to come together as different people in a migratory age, we must share a common ethic. It cannot be religious, political, socio-cultural or ideological. In today's diversity, such commonality is found only in creativity and common delight. Creativity means a way of thinking, being, interacting, trusting, by which the citizen sees daily enterprise in a context of adventure, allowance, mutuality and beauty."

Thank you.