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Subject: [blog-en] Education: a blind spot that represents a major lever in shifting towards sustainable societies

In Thierry Gaudin's book 2100, *Récit du prochain siècle* (1990), he predicts the emergence of an era of “urban barbarians” due to a society that is unable to provide meaning or social integration. The only way out of it would be through a massive, worldwide education movement. We couldn't be closer to such a reality. It would be hard not to draw another parallel yet, in this respect, between the barbarity of the killings in Paris on November 13th and the climate negotiations.

I believe this will be the first time a meeting between Education Ministers will be organised within a COP – a sign of recognition, I hope, that alongside technological innovation and intergovernmental negotiations, tackling climate change also requires a profound, worldwide education reform, from preschool to university.

Because although climate change is currently the most obvious manifestation of the Anthropocene, the symbol of which twenty years ago was the hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica, right where no human being lived, it is only one of the aspects of a more general crisis affecting all relations: between people, between societies and between humanity and the biosphere.

This crisis does not only call into question the way in which the world is governed and the political inaptitude of governments in finding a way of cooperating in order to manage these relations. Its roots are in our representation of the world and the way we see human societies within the biosphere. It questions our ability to understand and accept complexity, to think and act when relations between beings and things become more important than each of these beings of things on their own.

This is why education should be at the forefront of concerns. Our current education model is too often based on separating things instead of connecting them: separating thought and action; separating different fields of knowledge; separating values from techniques; separating abstract knowledge from knowledge formed through experience; separating the past, present and future.

We need to take action. We need to venture forward and rebuild education, deconstructing the underlying foundations on which it is built – foundations that we are so conditioned to that we are not always even aware of them. We need to harness all the educational experiments that have thrived over the last twenty years, under various names and on different scales, yet which have often remained on the fringes of the school and university system, and assign them a central role in our education system. In the process we need to profoundly change the way in which we teach and understand knowledge and commitment, not separating intellectual skills, practical skills and life skills. This is what the Ministers' first meeting should strive to achieve.

A year ago, I took part in a small group that sought to initiate such a reform. The ministerial meeting to be held at COP21 is a first response to our wishes. This was an encouragement to take things further, with a Manifesto – which provides an overview and the first steps of a strategy for change. We are well aware that the road will be long. Several years ago, Edgar Morin was asked by the French Ministry for Education to come up with a high school reform. He ended his response with the question, “who will teach the teachers?” This perfectly sums up the challenges that need to be overcome, which will require time and perseverance..

The Manifesto is not entitled “Education in Sustainable Development” or “Addressing Climate Change through Education” but “Education in Global Citizenship”. A reform of this magnitude can not be carved up into parts; it's not simply a question of adding another unit – no matter how well-designed – to the already overloaded curriculum. Education in Global Citizenship means that learning – whether focussed on the local or the global – in the context of the interdependent, jumbled world that is ours, is not solely based on teaching abstract understanding of these interdependent relations, but on inspiring cooperative commitment, whether this be in preschool vegetable gardens or later on in life: it essentially consists of the ability of each of us to assume our present and future responsibilities in the interdependent world in which we live.

The notion of “training in solidarity” and “training in co-responsibility” have been reduced to abstract moral concepts, so much so that such training has gained the reputation of being sanctimonious twaddle. We have forgotten their legal origins. Solidarity is collective, united commitment; the ability to mutually support one another; it's what holds societies together. Responsibility is the ability to account for one's actions and for their impact on the community. In both cases, training does not concern “me and the world”, but “me in the world”, inherently implying a different kind of relationship between societies and nature, of which we are an integral part.

We have obviously emphasised the importance of local-based approaches and on the need for real co-responsibility pacts between local governments, educational institutions and the students themselves, seizing on what environmental education associations have already been able to develop.

The local is first and foremost what we encounter everyday, which is the best way to grasp the complexity and connections between people and things: complexity is best understood through the practical, rather than the abstract. It's also where commitment begins. From the environment that young children feel close to, to the globalised world of adulthood, commitment develops gradually, through wider and wider concentric realms, as they learn about responsibility through an ongoing process that takes place as their horizons open up, moving from the classroom into the world.

The international Ecocity meeting held in Nantes in 2013 revealed a striking consensus on the need to anchor all levels of training in a local context – an antidote to the juxtaposition of knowledge assumed to be universal. This implies radically decentralising the education system, not so that everyone retreats into their own local orbits, but in order to ground the whole education system in the real world. An education reform does not only concern reforming content and methods, but also implies overhauling the very way educational institutions and universities are governed, and transforming it into a multi-level governance model.

In a previous post, I quoted the legal expert Mireille Delmas Marty, who sees in the climate issue a unique opportunity (that must be seized!) to initiate a reform of global governance. It is clear that the same can be said for education.

http://blog.pierre-calame.fr/public/Ten_billion_new_version_du_Manifeste.pdf

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