

Changing values in a world in transition

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Introduction

Recently, the Pompidou Center, in Paris, organized a seminar on "Values for the XXI century". I was invited to participate in one of the round tables dealing with a specific set of values. They were:

"weakness, slowness, frugality, availability"

The unexpected configuration of this set of values is an example of the search that goes on in different circles for values capable to embody another philosophy of life.

Have we not heard political leadership being referred to by modern analysts as a leadership of "competence and compassion" (...) ?

And what about the values proclaimed by the "Summer games" which are a light version of the unregulated liberal mode of living?

What to say? Before our eyes, series of values (or attitudes presented as values) seem to define ideals to reach, codes of behaviour to adopt. It is against such background that I situate what I have to say this morning.

My perspective doesn't flow from an essentialist concern. Rather I will try to see things in a socio-cultural and socio-political perspective, attempting to see the consequences of a world-in-transition on the formulation and perception of values.

I - A world in transition

At different levels the transition process is underlined. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was the economies in transition, meaning the transformation of centrally planned economies into market economies. Practically at the same time the process of democratic transition gained momentum. In Europa, countries under Communist regime moved towards democratic forms of governance. (Similarly, the complex changes in Africa).

Already these two processes are showing that it was a fallacy to think of a change from well-established regimes into the forms of political and economic systems we considered as defined once and for all. The transition appears open ended, undetermined, leading to a different landscape from the one expected.

In some countries (e.g. Hungary) remain very strong rural components with their values of security and tradition. For all countries, technological progress appears seductive and, with it, the concern with success, experimentation, confidence in machinery, desire for newness. Again in some of them, the environmental degradation had gone so far (Poland, Check and Slovak Republics, former DDR) that ecological thinking is pruned with the accent on : cycles of life, primacy of organic solutions over mechanical ones, of process over machinery.

All these traits coexist in the same space and time. It is not obvious that they may be able to compose with each other. Conflicts may arise. A firm political direction may give priority to one tendency over the others. The question necessarily arises: how is the education for values pursued? is it a mere instrument of the statu quo? or is it an attempt to form a criterium above/outside all social tendencies?

If the solution is to encompass the existing trends, who is invested of the wisdom to define the values? If it is resistance and an attempt to form a new awareness, how much of an ideological overtone is then given to the education for values?

Put in this way, the problem doesn't offer any way out. Values become opportunistic devices. - This seems clear for us, because we are seeing it in movement, in a transition period, when the choices and the decisions on a macro-level appear very clear to the outsider.

I contend that education for values asks to be seen, if not in a transition period (society may be stable if not stale!), at least in its differentials as a way to overcome the internalized effect of the social and cultural trends.

This is why a world-in-transition offers a unique opportunity for a reflection on values in the education process.

A world in transition empties itself necessarily of the dominant modes of thinking and judgement, of the acquired ideas and norms. It dares to adventure itself into the newness of the unknown. It is a time of "not anymore" and of "not yet", apparently empty and yet full of the potentiality for a clear reassessment of values. This is why it seems to me adequate to try to perceive some of the trends of this transition period - in order to seize some of the trends which may open questions in relation to values. I look particularly at societal processes and at cultural phenomena.

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1. Societal processes at the transition period
 - a) New ideological frames of reference

As direct impact of the changes I mentioned - the economic and the democratic ones - there seems to be a replacement of old ideological terms of reference by new ones.

Ideologies are not dead. They tend to emerge over and over again as an expression of discomfort with uncertainty and as mechanical replacement of action by reaction.



With the reinforcement of the market, competitiveness permeates all the spheres of doing, with its accompanying set of attitudes, namely, centrality of the "ego", persuasive confrontational mode of operating.

Without any philosophical clarification, possession, property, ownership accentuate the trend towards having, at the expenses of being. The mediations used, namely all the steps of marketing, dilute the frontier between what is and what appears to be.

The subject is thus diluted by the mechanisms needed for the full functioning of the market. (As if "the market" would be a magic entity.)

Overarching economy and politics, the archetype of the winner shapes aspirations and desires. The spiral of power and visibility, having the winner at its center, conveys equally with it the marginalization of the weak, vulnerable, disorganized. The freedom leading the struggle towards democracy creates, paradoxically, social zones of dependency or of outcasts. Both mechanisms are driven by the motto of "always more": more things, more freedom, greater speed. The empire of MORE, of quantity, annihilates judgement. In the name of freedom, ceases the evaluation of each new situation and of its components.

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Society is already reacting to these blind mechanisms. National mechanisms have been created to analyse and judge new forms of social realities. Hence the councils on audio-visual or the councils or committees on bio-ethics. (But we are still so convinced that the de-regulation of the State is a must in economics that we fail to define centers of ethics for the economic or the political process.)

How does the educational system relate to this environment? If in its macro-reality the educational system conveys these values, how can it evolve other values at the individual level? Is the educational system schizophrenic?

b) Globalization of issues

In this transition period, we are part of a globalized picture: one single chain of world information, one type of pop music, one system of credit and interlinked currencies, ..., are we on the way from a bipolar to a unipolar world? And if so, what are the consequences for values?

We have come to this period in history from a time of division, separation, exclusion being a political mechanism for definition of identity and citizenship.

But many diversified events are shaking the boundary-shape map of the world. In front of our eyes boundaries are revealing themselves in what they are: ways to preserve identity, self-sufficiency and power. No wonder that the world is gradually allowing the erosion of boundaries - nothing is anymore self-contained. Boundaries, when they exist, become thin barriers through which circulate freely money, merchandise, people.

While globalization of issues seems to create an ever more unified world, we see a painful, sometimes bloody, effort for each culture to affirm its own identity, to be respected in its own identity. Global and local become the two sides of each cultural and sociological reality.

How then, to relate these two modes? Which values are there in the world culture as well as in a specific culture of a group so that the circulation between the two may be possible? Through which set of values are they communicating? Which values reinforce the two poles? How can education evoke, at the same time, the world as a common global shared by many and the local - country, city, school - as the specific where all values will be expressed?

The globalization leads to a broadening of contents of values as well as to new ways of formulating them. How far we are then from the dichotomies of values used in classical examples of moral judgement! The traditional question of either/or, generated in a world of separation, division and therefore of polarization gives room to the compatibility of elements

which for a long time had been seen as contradictory. What is at stake then is not a mere accommodation of diverse realities. It is rather the discovery of the interconnectedness between such different realities. Concentrating on their mutual connection, the values that reside in the interface will be relevant. They will stand out and will illuminate in a new way the two realities. It is time to replace sharp antagonisms of either/or by both/and. No issue remains close in itself. Reality is not a set of things but a chain of connections. All processes in life cease to be seen as parts of a great machinery and become gradually components of a great thought.

Entering such a "thought" is ultimately the goal of education. Less than the passing on the mechanistic approaches to segments of life, it is the understanding of life itself in its accessible processes that is the bulk of education. Values are then related to context as integral part of knowledge.

c) Social poliocenteredness

The relation of local to the global doesn't happen within the logic of a hierarchical scheme. The social and cultural tissue of the world-in-transition is poli-centered. The hierarchy of events is disseminated into different webs of culture and society. This can be seen at its extremes in the economic chain of production and distribution in our time. The delocalisation of enterprises, characteristic of the last decade and probably of the years to come (because of the economic growth it has helped to generate), illustrates this point. Employment and unemployment are generated in a decentralized way. Unemployment is happening where a corporation has its headquarters while generation of jobs is happening where no profit is taxed or re-distributed. Thus any decision concerning the economic and social management of such an enterprise has to encompass disjointed units and to be formulated in relation to different social realities.



This example illustrates the need for embracing all the time in the value-system, the multiple causes and consequences of any action. Values are said to be contextual not because of a mere relativism of principles. Rather, because of the fact that, outside the full context, they may be irrelevant or even inadequate.

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2. New cultural phenomena

The world-in-transition offers already some inkling of what the new reality can become. This is perceived, first of all, by culture.

a) Centrality of information

It has become obvious that the greatest change has occurred in the rôle and dispositif of information. (Reading recently a biography of Marguerite Yourcenar, the shock of realizing that she had to copy all her manuscripts - no photocopy machine, much less a computer, and yet she is from our time!). I don't make any hypothesis about an information society ... But I stress the centrality of information (and our appetite for its renewed hammering into our ears and our eyes.)

Two opposite movements can be seen in the information pattern. First, the fragmented scattered information, episodic, in 1.30 mn! News, stories, publicity, all around the clock; information given in order to call the attention, not to widen knowledge. Second, the attempt to put it all together, to assemble the puzzle. And, at the end, a perception of things, some knowledge.

It seems to me that these two movements can play an important role in the understanding of the education for values.

Information is pouring out from many sources; it builds up "noise", indifferntiated mixture of signs. The incapacity to follow one single information is the indication that "noise" is beyond human acceptance. A first ethical question is thus the following: - in order not to fall into madness, the balance between information and noise has to be reached. This is the level of survival in the information zone.

Still, information continues to pour in, including in the classroom (or in a lecture like this one!). Many signs come, are singled out by the mind or the heart or both and registered in one's own memory.

To find a center for human life, for knowledge, for ethical values, the second movement is necessary: to put it all together, to relate, to assemble, to connect.

And again this movement corresponds to a moment. Soon it is overcome by more information which doesn't come in by organized layers but in disconnected events and by diversified channels. Then the whole process is starting again.

To be able to deal with the information around the human person is, to my mind, a pre-condition of an ethic life.

b) Interdisciplinarity

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The interconnectedness I referred earlier becomes unavoidable in the culture being born of this transition period.

The world is facing a globalisation of issues, an erosion of boundaries. This is not only true about social events and phenomena but about knowledge itself.

The capacity to assemble information and to organize it in meaningful ways is dependent on the understanding of knowledge. A recent study edited by UNESCO has as its title "entresavours" - inter-knowledges. We would say, in more conventional terms, interdisciplinarity. No solution, no breakthrough is found only within the scope of one discipline - the circulation between different fields, their inter-relatedness is an essential ingredient of the world-in-transition.



One of the fundamental tasks in life - at all levels of creation and execution - is to explore the passage from one field to the other. Life is not in isolated patterns but in the interconnections.

Boundaries cease to be what separates. They become what can unite. It is the work at the interfaces. It is there that creativity can emerge, that new viewpoints can be discovered and elaborated.

I don't think this can be grasped in a fragmented use of school-time. In the context of disperse information, the discovery of the borderlines is possible when problem-centered knowledge is sought. We go back to Chesterton's old question: "What is there more relevant than to teach the world?"

(I consider that one of the great changes of the years ahead is the practical learning of the interdisciplinarity. There lies one of the ethical questions which are most relevant in today's world: the compelling need to deal with life and its real problems. Resistance encountered at many different levels and then incapacity to cope with new problems.)

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Here we are facing the key-approach to science, to education, to politics, to problem-solving. We are dealing with the question of complexity.

c) The complexity approach

We are dealing , at all stages of knowledge and learning, with autonomous and yet interdependent elements. This double feature characterizes a system or any of its sub-systems. It is the understanding of the inner evolution of systems and of their interaction that is at the root of the science of complexity. Complexity is the cornerstone of all living reality.

We are led into it through inter-disciplinary approach and through problem-centered knowledge.

The science of complexity creates a high turbulence and uncertainty. Because we are dealing with alive realities, all scenarios are just probabilities.

But above any other consideration, what is important in this approach is the fact that everything is related with everything else. Nothing is isolated, determined per se.

(?)

I have moved here in the frontier between the ethics of knowledge and the ethics "tout court". I don't think that this frontier separates two different questions. We are coming at a period in history when the subject is channelled in the study of the object, when the object acquires the autonomy of subject, when subject/object accomplish a partnership. The act of knowing conveys the knower. Maybe then education for values can be equated with education as such.

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Yes, I agree with those who establish a relation between understanding and judging, between knowledge and ethics, but only in one way:

- Knowledge in our time contains specific demands that encounter the root of ethical values.

II - Changing values

A world-in-transition provides new questions to the education for values. But likewise values are also perceived in diversified ways.

3. Myths and social construct

a) Myths and absolute values

Two sets of elements are at work in the shaping of values - the primordial myths, on one side, and the social construct, on the other.

Primordial myths are passed on, from generation to generation, as fundamental beliefs that structure the individual existence and its relationship with the others and the world. They permeate, implicitly, often unconsciously, the most elementary choices and decisions. They provide the ultimate criterium for what is "good" or "bad", often without an articulated rationale behind it. In this context, they generate values which are often absolute values, appearing as imperative to the individual conscience.

Social constructs are shapes taken by the social organization as a result of the various ways in which a group of human beings structures its existence, the relationships between young and old, between men and women, between the living and the dead, the living and the new generation, the different types of activity, the organization of property and solidarity. The interplay between all these elements give also rise to values which are contextual values. (e.g., the change in the status of women over the last five decades led to new contextual values in the relationship between men and women).

Myths are providers of meaning while social constructs give direction. Myths precede the individual, while social constructs may be changed by the individual.



b) Contextual values

An ideal society would combine in equilibrium myth and social construct. Values would then spring forth as the interplay between myth and social construct - sometimes in harmonious blending, at other times in unforgettable tragedy. One such case, in our Western tradition, is the story of Antigone. (Though in this century, because of Freud's discoveries, Antigone's story has been replaced by the story of her father, her tragedy remains a paradigm of the two sources of values.).

Antigone, led by the primordial myths of her people, encounters the social construct of the political organization of the Theban society. In Greece, the sense of the city carries with it a very clear definition of the fundamentals of political organisation: obedience to the law is seen as the basic ingredient of any judgement on individual behaviour. Hence, Creon's strength in affirming that if he doesn't defend such a law, there would be no meaning in his task as a King. But Antigone comes to the fore of the scene by taking another stance: she has to obey, first of all, to the unwritten laws of respect for the individual - her brother whose treason leaves him without burial.

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In Antigone's decision there is more than a rebellious gesture. There is the respect for every human being (even those who have become outcasts out of their own will); there are the ties of brotherhood (even the one tainted by the double crime of Oedipus and Jocasta); there is the cohesion among human beings in spite of all the boundaries that separate them (even the fact that only Antigone and Ismenia took care of their blind father while the two brothers vanished from their duties).

Antigone's attitude illustrates that, in the realm of primordial myths, there is a wealth of the symbolic reality of life which gives consistency to values. The strength of the symbolic reality is not only in the fact that it opens one's own practice to a spiritual dimension; it is also in the capacity to subvert other values it conveys with it.

Deprived from the symbolic dimension, values lose their autonomy and become easily entangled in moral norms, if not in their rigidification of social conventions.

Paradoxically, primordial myths can also lead to social conventions, in a series of reductionist processes. Alongside the path for values, primordial myths can translate themselves into rigid ideologies. When these ideologies can form into society they create a set of norms which are the core of social conventions.

The frame of reference of the symbolic is an essential source for values - besides any cognitive achievements, any technological training, any dynamic learning process, the openness to the symbolic is the basis of all paths of spiritual and moral development.

The primacy of the symbolic takes its status from the acknowledgement of the superiority of the mystery zone of being over the rationality in all its efficiency and its logic. It is not a deny of rationality but it affirms that rationality covers only one aspect of one's own perception of life.

In this context, education is the process through which one gains perception of and access to where the symbolic illuminates and clarifies the whole field of knowledge.

"Education to values" is first of all the path and the method that will enable all who are involved in the process to enter the universe of the symbolic.

It is my conviction that, in the face of a world-in-transition, we have to discover anew the primordial myths and the social construct in which our lives are called to live.

Before we tackle any methodologies in terms of education for values we have to ask ourselves among Europeans:

- which are the primordial myths that shape our culture? where is the source of strength? which are the stories that carry with them spiritual energy?
- which are the pillars of our social construct, of our living together? What is for us a "taken for granted" attitude in relation to ourselves, to others, to things, to nature, to events? which are the unspoken rules of our lived space?
- are there absolute values? from where do they derive? are we able to rethink our contextual values apart from ideologies or schools of thought? isn't there a task ahead to situate values both in the mythical and in the sociological realm?

4. The person at the crossroad of values

The human person, the subject, the "I" who gives blood and flesh to the values, who makes them unique, is the key actor of the equation of values.

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The education for values appears to me as the process by which values are appropriated by the conscience of other human beings in a totally new alchemy. Three aspects have to be taken into account.

a) Integrated contemporaneity

The sense of time is crucial in this process of appropriation. Every moment offers an opportunity for bifurcation, for choices to be made, for options to be taken, for paths to be followed. This means that the education for values draws the consequences of integrated contemporaneity. Being present to one's own time. Neither stockage of knowledge nor philosophical study of values can replace the appropriation into oneself of contemporary thought,



contemporary knowledge, contemporary human and social experiences and organisation.' Whatever has to be taught, has to be channelled through today's culture and events.

- b) Commitment to - nature
 - future generations

The new conditions of today's world give a new relevance to the future dimension in one's own time.

As nature became part of history, it asserted its existence as a philosophical category, constituting itself a partner in what Michel Serres calls "the natural contract". The responsibility for nature, for the preservation of its future enter as new dimensions of an ethical education. The many facets of such a responsibility are only too obvious in the day-to-day display of natural or man-made disasters and in the clumsy attempts to bring a remedy to them.

The commitment to future is also present in another way. By safeguarding nature (and in the threshold of catastrophic changes in the next decades), it is also the life of future generations that we are safeguarding in a way that no other generation had to be in earlier periods of history.

c) I have to make the connection with my old philosophical roots. A person-in-the-world, yes, but a person-with-others-in-the-world. And this being "with-others" is so vital that it can become the ultimate value by which the individual life can be measured.

"The future lies with the man or woman who can live as an individual, conscious within the solidarity of the human race. He then uses the tension between individuality and solidarity as the source of its ethical creativity."

What does this mean today? which are the expressions of such a solidarity? How can it be learnt?

Most generations of adult people are still from the time when collective commitments had a great appeal. "Project of society", "Alternative project" ... were signs of such solidarity.

Meanwhile, alternatives have disappeared. Many people have taken refuge in strict individualism: personal desire, personal careers, personal fulfilment. Where, then, to find the sources for this intense participation in the "solidarity of the human race"? Maybe the chance of educators today is to rediscover that solidarity together with their students.

d) The person who makes the personal equation of values is either a boy or a girl. A whole new perspective will come into society if education for values will open the doors than men and women spontaneously are ready to open. And they are different doors (Carol Gilligan).

Our world needs both set of values. But they need to be cherished, unveiled, articulated, shared.

5. A search for new paradigms

We are talking about values in a time when the need for a new paradigm is manifest.

To the logic of the "more", to the force and absolvedness of the "winner" we raise fundamental questions. The world cannot cope with always more nor the earth with the growing exploitation of resources. We cannot proceed calmly through a road in which millions of men become every day more destituted.

- a) End of linear progress
- b) The fallacy of continuous growth

The linear progress is over. Growth is not the solution. For a time, even 20 years ago it was possible to say that growth, progress, onward and upward, was the course for technology. But as Rollo May already then stressed, "in ethics, in aesthetics, in other matters of the spirit, the term progress in that sense has no place". Today we can stress that even in technology that progress has no sense. Many scientific achievements are possible which are neither socially acceptable nor desirable. The time of limits has begun. A new sense of values has to be probed, discovered, made visible and cherished.

6. Lifelong learning

- a) Partnership in learning
- b) the Masters and the values

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The changes taking place at all levels of society as well as in our perception of things and events leave everyone unarmed. Nobody has the information, the tools required to match the situations. So all those involved in the education enterprise have to discover they are learners too. This reveals clearly the main shift: from education to life-long learning.

. This supposes a questioning mind, a dynamic attitude and a capacity to go on reformulating one's own understanding of things and personal convictions. Moreover, life will be captured as a learning system where every element provides information and helps to advance one's own questions. The life-long learning can only happen in a partnership relation.



. Let us take, first of all, the dynamic attitude. I want to make it clear: a questioning mind doesn't operate in a vacuum. It is the fact that, at any given moment, information and its interpretation are firmly stocked and secured that enables a question to be formulated whenever new stimulus appear. The essential question there is not one of intellectual grasp but rather on affective security - it allows to challenge the thresholds of stability, it allows to jump with quantum leaps, it allows to "surf" through the waves of social transformation.

. The life-long learning process is also built on the realisation that since World War II there were as many discoveries as in all history before that period. The acceleration of the cognitive process since the 30s' makes of the great minds of the beginning of this century new classics - they stand out as wise men and women whose works have provided us with new knowledge, new patterns of interpretation, new roads to the symbolic world... An initiation into values is also the discovery of the new classics and their appropriation into one's own life-project. This is a task still undone. If there is going to be partnership in learning I guess it ought to start at the joint discovery of the treasures of wisdom brought by the new classics. To bring history back to today's realities.

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c) Master, the guide

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- a) Centrality of it.
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