Arts education and the struggle for cultural hegemony

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Following Paul Collard's request, I shall try not to break out in panic. Instead, I want to take a realistic look at the current (cultural) political landscape. In doing so, I will no doubt also express my own concern regarding what the speakers before me have already touched upon.

Let me start with something positive: The Nobel Committee has awarded the Nobel Literature Prize to Bob Dylan. I would say this is impressive proof of diversity. The decision opens up the expressive spectrum of literature, but it has also raised many new questions that are directly linked to our subject. Bob Dylan composed songs and wrote lyrics. One of them was: *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, another*: A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall*. This somehow defines the theme of our discussion.

I will start by quoting Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the Freedom Party of Austria, the current centre of right-wing populism in the country. Paul Collard has already spoken of the party's alarming impact. In a few weeks time, we may possibly have a new federal president from this party. On the eve of Austrian National Day, Strache said:

"The unrestricted flow of culturally alien economic migrants, seeping into our social welfare systems, is shaking the very foundations of our social structure and making a civil war not unlikely in the medium term." (Strache 2016, quoted from Die Presse 2016).

This is the political rhetoric that has now engulfed Austria. And unlike Paul Collard, my impression is not that this is something that has occurred overnight. For years, we have been talking about the lesser evil. And political relations are becoming increasingly menacing. We have now arrived at the point prejudice expert Wilhelm Heitmeyer referred to as the "everyman for himself" moment (Heitmeyer 2011, cf. Goettle 2012). This is all that has remained in this game.

For some members of our circle, this is perhaps overly simplistic. But if in connection with current political developments in Europe I ask the provocative question whether this is necessarily a statement about the success of arts education, what I want to know is whether and to what extent our work is linked to current political developments. There is absolutely no doubt about the fact that there have been many wonderful arts education projects, and there are many beneficiaries, individuals and groups. But on a structural level, I would like to ask the question once again: What are we doing here?

I can definitely interpret possible responses as a general criticism of the new cultural policy to which we have committed ourselves since the 1970s. In this context, I come to similar conclusions to those outlined by Paul Collard: We were highly motivated, emphatic and euphoric when our task was to use cultural policy as an instrument that could help us in a special way lay the foundations for a liberal democracy. But now, it could be that we need to

ask ourselves whether we have not merely been swept along by a tide of liberal democracy, that we have been beneficiaries of a development that we have been unable to sustain. And now the negative side is becoming apparent: we are confronted with the kind of grotesque notions of culture we originally opposed.

I am probably very Austria-specific if I say that culture and politics have always had a very tense relationship. Particularly in this country, culture has often been used as a substitute for politics. It was a way of not getting your hands too dirty in order to descend into the depths of concrete politics: In cultural affairs we are better, and we can still promise that everything will be better, more beautiful, and more important. But at the same time, I ask myself whether this form of arrogance does not have its price to pay if the role of arts education activities today is to gloss over social differences and make us forget what politics has not been able to achieve. After all, do we still have the energy to claim that our efforts can bring about sustainable social changes?

The claim that arts education would be beneficial to the development of creativity ties in with notions of individualisation that have lastingly defined education concepts in the last few years. Individualisation is indeed an important dimension of social development. But it also has its downside: It suggests separation, isolation, it says something about our current sense of insecurity. What should I actually hold on to? Do I always have to face the world on my own with my creative possibilities? This can be exhausting.

A comprehensive definition of culture always drifts into our discussion of arts education, and sometimes I think there must be a reason why we discuss our subject in English under the term *arts education,* narrowing down the content and methods, whereas *Kulturelle Bildung* always connotes something far more grand.

My claim is that diversity can only thrive in a liberal environment. I believe such an environment is essential even to be able to talk about tolerance and diversity. Now we face the problem that more and more citizens (with the active support of right-wing populists) are no longer able to relate to these liberal notions. They are worried by them, they want to get rid of them because they see no reason to keep them, because their prospects for the future are getting worse and worse. And if I repeat Warren Buffett's famous remark: "There's class warfare, all right, [...] but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning" (Buffet n.d. quoted from Sargent 2011), this also says something about the long-term changes in the social interests in which we have become involved. My belief is that we cannot simply escape these influences. Whether we like it or not, we are part of them.

If we speak today about arts education in connection with migration and displacement, then I claim that the current wave of immigration is not the cause of our disillusionment with liberal values, but it has contributed towards an escalation in the political discussion. This is in evidence in countries such as the United States, Hungary or Poland that have not seen significant migration. Even so, these countries are also experiencing similar trends towards authoritarian, *illiberal* forms of rule. I would like to briefly mention just a few points

regarding how we should respond to this. I am formulating them very casually: I am a proponent of combining cultural and political education. We deal with similar issues, and we cannot establish any difference between them. Secondly, at a time when immigration, especially from Arab countries, is challenging the process of secularisation in Europe, I call for the secularisation of culture. My theory here is also based on the difference between the English and German conceptual histories, if we have to consider the fateful division of civilisation and culture, especially in central Europe. I am referring to the *Minima Moralia* of a successful political system. These are not primarily cultural, but civilisational achievements. They are about democracy and human rights, tolerance and the equality of men and women. I consider it important that in future we treat these separately from cultural debates as universal achievements and not always in the context of specific ethnic and cultural notions of identity.

Everyone should be allowed to lead a cultural life, but this should not be burdened with all these notions of identity. I am in favour of drawing a clearer line between "what we are actually talking about when we speak of the principles of liberal democracy" and "what we are talking about when we speak of cultural states".

An interesting development is currently taking place in this context in the area of art mediation. Based on the term "unlearning", which was coined by the educationalist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Charavorty Spivak quoted from Sternfeld 2014:15pp), I ask myself whether arts education is not also being assigned the role of "unlearning" certain cultural actualities. Stefan Hirschauer told a similar story about the "alienation of one's own culture" twenty years ago. The consequences of this would allow us to distance ourselves from our own cultural peculiarities and in the current situation to concentrate on fundamental civilisational achievements.

I would like to end with two brief reports based on personal experience.

We are currently evaluating the activities of a Swiss foundation in Germany. A colleague from Halle an der Saale reported that today entire generations in this town are now unemployed. Up to three generations no longer know what regular employment means in terms of organising everyday life (and also their personal and social values). Yes, I agree, this is primarily a social matter. And yes, immigrants are also affected by this. But a thriving community can only be sustained in future if we are willing to pay greater attention to social conditions – irrespective of the ethnic and cultural circumstances of the affected persons.

Another aspect is the socio-psychological situation which is intensified by current inward migration. Zygmunt Bauman said that when faced with refugees, we see a reflection of our own insecurity (Bauman 2016). We see what could happen to us or to our descendants. This scares us. It creates what I think he called *Retropie*, a nostalgic notion of a supposedly better past, where culture still embraced us all and was not broken by diversity.

My second experience was in Basel. I thought the conditions there would be very different to those in east Germany. And indeed when I asked my interview partner specifically about the current migration situation, she answered: "It's not really a problem." I delved a bit deeper and

suddenly everything was quite different. "Yes there are families who move away from certain neighbourhoods so that their children can go to school in areas where there is no migrant diversity." Suddenly I heard about the lengths socially privileged groups go to to avoid precisely the kind of thing we are trying so hard to achieve.

It would be good if we could also develop possible solutions on the basis of these considerations. Thank you very much!

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