

Demokratie-Stiftung der Universität zu Köln



Literalität und Partizipation

Über schriftsprachliche Voraussetzungen
demokratischer Teilhabe

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Einführung in die Tagung

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our international conference on literacy and participation. The title we have chosen is one which I believe is not only of contemporary academic interest but which reflects a growing concern about the social and human costs of educational deprivation and exclusion. Although our meeting's main attention will be focussed on whether basic standards of reading and writing are indispensable requirements for democratic participation, its wider social implications should not be overlooked.

Generally speaking, the relationship between literacy and individual abilities to care about and take part in public affairs is characterized by the human capacity to apply – and profit from – basic techniques of communication. Expressive skills such as rhetorics and the art of wording can be regarded as indispensable ingredients of interactive competence, and no person seems to be more dependent on its refinement and situational appropriateness than the professional politician. Such qualities are by and large conditioned by the strategic objectives of the spoken word as it is directed towards and received by public audiences. But is the welfare and strength of democratic orders sufficiently provided for by political mechanisms which are primarily founded in the tradition of oral interaction? I think not.

My scepticism is founded on at least two observations. First: Political communication designed to address a community of listeners relies on the emotional properties of their delivery and aim at the immediate impact of their messages. Talk shows and televised political debates would fail to realise their dramaturgical potential if they did not expose their audiences to spontaneous outbursts of political polemics and excitement. Yet by

cultivating its discourses according to principles and standards of public entertainment, political communication deteriorates into a media spectacle, as Colin Crouch has argued, employing its manipulative potential to disguise the fact that political decisions and matters of fundamental public relevance are dealt with in the inner circles of economic and party political elites.

My second point is that the realisation of political commitment via a display of oratorical properties is by no means unconditional but rests upon the foundations of linguistic and literary competence. Being able to take part in democratic procedures and to act politically when it matters may at times require the sagacity and courage of situated verbal involvement, but participation can hardly materialize if the cultural tools for interpreting the world and act upon it have not been acquired. Participation in a civil society calls for a great many literacies. They respond to different challenges and routines of our lives, but their common denominator is the concept of understanding, and here we enter educational grounds.

If we suggest for a moment that democratic participation is not a gift handed down to us from the state but a civil responsibility to develop and defend a chosen political order, then clearly everybody is entitled and, indeed, obliged to join in that task. As I have just pointed out there are no short cuts to participation, and to treat the pursuit of political interests as an occasional tribute to popular entertainment or electoral routines is clearly no option. If we further assume that citizenship is a socially constructed form of human existence into which no one is born by an act of nature but which needs to be achieved by socialisation and individual commitment, the need to obtain participatory skills is only a logical consequence. „In a republican order of government“ writes Montesquieu, „one is fundamentally dependent upon the powers of education“. Democracy, then, not only requires the education of its citizen but is an educational process in its own right.

This conference is about being able to take part in creating and representing a political order based on learning and understanding. Just as learning knows no ending, understanding, too, is always unfinished business. Being literate therefore means to be able to direct and support one's understanding

of the world by using not only different tools of perception but above all adequate means of making sense. We know from our own experience how trying these efforts can be when they are confronted not only with linguistic barriers but when sociocultural premisses come to bear which we are not accustomed to. Taking participation seriously and acting in favour of its political implementation means that unlimited access to learning must be provided, above all in its most fundamental form and application. Without the ability to decode texts and meanings communication is confined to oral exchanges, the resources for understanding the world are limited and the prospects of participation bleakened.

At this point we should perhaps remind ourselves that at the beginning of what we call 'modern age' the idea of enlightenment originated in the encyclopedic endeavour to represent and embrace the world's knowledge in printed form. The educational significance of this encyclopedic turn is manifold: 1. it prepares the ground for the secularisation of teaching and curricular systems, 2. by spelling out the scientific and material motives of social and economic transformation it marks the transition from the Ancien Régime to civil society, 3. educational progress is firmly linked to the political concept of emancipation through knowledge, and 4. in order to fill out the status of citizenship he – and later she – must be literate. Enlightenment, we may conclude, was and still is a political process of helping people to develop as many 'literacies' as they need for understanding and acting in the world when and wherever it matters.

Ladies and gentlemen, before I am going to introduce you to our panel of speakers, let me briefly sketch the limitations of today's meeting. First of all, we should not imply that we know a lot about the political habits and behaviour of functional illiterates. There is, however, some empirical evidence to suggest that people with reading and writing difficulties are reluctant to participate in political debates or engagements, because they feel unable to argue and support their views rather than not having any. Furthermore, the conference cannot not do justice to the social, biographic and statistical composition of basic education clientels. Democratic participation should be regarded as a human right independent of administrative or educational categories. Yet how participation is being realised and by

which means political convictions can be articulated and transferred into action is a question closely related to the degree of civil liberties learners have experienced in their countries of origin. Likewise, the legal status of migrants coming to this country determines to a great extent the scope and nature of their political inclinations.

With these conceptual restraints in mind, I should now like to hand over to our speakers who intend to stimulate and lead our discussions from different angles and theoretical positions.