TRANSITION AND CIVIC LEARNING

Below, some educational challenges of the transition are explored that takes place in Europe's post-communist region, and which will hopely result in operative democracy based on free market economy. As democracy presupposes an autonomous citizenry, the focus is on civic literacy, being the outcome of civic education. It is argued that civic education is less a matter of institutions of formal education than of NGOs that constitute civil society. Moreover, the revival of civil society is from the point of view of civic literacy encouraging because it offers spaces of civic learning.

Civic literacy

In its report to UNESCO (1996:61-65), the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century points out that education is not merely the transfer of common values shaped in the past. Neither is it a matter that regards exclusively schools, universities or other formal institutions. Which applies particularly to civic education that must continue throughout the individual's life and must become "part of the basic framework of civil society and living democracy."

Conceiving the outcome of civic education as civic literacy, one can describe the latter in the words of *Chesney* and *Feinstein* (1997:2) as the ability "to decide what governments *should* be doing, understand what governments are doing, and have the skills required so that governments will respond appropriately."

Another function of education concerning democracy discussed by the UNESCO Commission is related to the emergence of "information societies", and might be seen as the acquirement of digital literacy which enables the individual to use information and communication technology (ICT). It is obvious that in information societies civic literacy includes digital literacy as well.

Civic education deserves particular attention especially in post-communist countries that find themselves in a historical process, to which is usually referred as "transition." However, there is more going on. The so-called transition is in fact an unprecedented metamorphosis encompassing the political, economic, cultural and social sectors of society. Speaking of "transition" means that the focus is limited to the two former sectors. In this sense, transition is expected to result in an operative democracy and free market economy. Both presuppose, as Ferge (1996:102-103) says, autonomous citizens. However, being an autonomous citizen presupposes, in its turn, civic literacy whose acquirement in the communist era has not been furthered because the rulers preferred a kind of civic education that resulted in citizens who complied with their wishes.

Although historical events like the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the rise of Solidarity in Poland or the collapse of communism itself show that in the long run this kind of civic education was not extremely effective, it remained not without effects. One of these is that people in post-communist countries still have to learn how to be autonomous citizens.

Civil society

As has been stipulated by the above mentioned Commission, to become and to be autonomous citizen is a matter of lifelong learning that exceeds the space and time of formal education. In this context, civic literacy is explicitly related to civil society. The latter can be considered as the social space between the individual and the State, other than the market, a space that is constituted by voluntary associations or NGOs (non-governmental organisations).

The Czech-born, British-trained philosopher, anthropologist, and social theorist Gellner (1994:passim) conceives civil society as a cluster of such associations. These are strong enough to prevent tyranny, but are none the less entered and left freely. The presence of a strong civil society implies the absence of either ideological or institutional monopoly, and the rotation of positions of power. Therefore, no doctrine, church, political party or infallible leader dominates the social order. The close relationship between civic education and civil society becomes manifest when Gellner speaks of the "modular man". Modular people are highly variable in their activities and perform diverse tasks in the same cultural idiom. They are not anomic nor atomized but associate with others in complex networks.

So, civil society presupposes "modular people" and represents simultaneously the space where people become "modular." A crucial factor with regard to civic education in post-communist countries is the weakness of their civil societies. This is a mainly a heritage of the communist past because the establishment of communist dictatorship went with the suppression of civil society implying the elimination of voluntary associations that in the rulers' view were potential hotbeds of political opposition. The latter is correct. Voluntary associations are bastions of democracy because they protect their own autonomy, limiting in this way central power. Besides, people who associate freely create and share information in order arrive at mutual understanding of the world that surrounds them, whereas the image of the world resulting from their communications is not necessarily identical with the one that is cherished by the mighty. In addition, members of voluntary associations are not only persuading each other, but often propagate their collective ideas outside the own organisation, mobilising in this way consensus and, eventually, action in society.

Spaces of social learning

The elimination of voluntary associations has damaged badly the societies involved also because such organisations are schools of democracy as well. For joining together voluntarily in view of common goals means debating what should be done, and then organising to get it done. So, on the base of argumentation common goals have to be defined, strategies have to be formulated, and the people whom it concerns must co-operate in order to realise what they are striving after. While negotiating and co-operating, members of voluntary associations educate each other by sharing knowledge and experience, developing attitudes and acquiring skills. They are, therefore, not "only" schools of democracy but represent simultaneously spaces of social learning. In Wildemeersch (1995:32-56) perception, social learning encompasses tackling problems that arise in the environment as well as the optimal use of the problem solving potential of the individual, group or organisation involved. It implies critical reflection on the backgrounds and starting points of usual definitions of the problem under discussion. Social learning is, moreover, based on action and on reflection-on-action whereas it is interdisciplinary, encompassing cooperation between diverse actors. Processes of social learning are conceived by the above author as responsibly finding our way out globally as well as locally. Learning our way out globally occurs in the light of the finiteness of our planet and increasingly blocked future, whereas finding our way out locally means that we

learn to deal effectively with the limits of local livelihoods, and the natural, societal and cultural constraints imposed upon them.

The significance of social learning might be brought out in more relief by considering it against the background of the emergence of the risk society, being in Beck's (1994:5-19) view "a developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society." One effect of this development is that ideologies, faiths and other collective or groupspecific sources of meaning are suffering from exhaustion, break-up and disenchantment. Consequently, in the course of their lives, in different social roles and under continuously changing conditions individuals are facing problems which they must increasingly interpret and solve individually, without the support of such systems of values and norms. Individuals are, therefore, compelled to conduct and arrange their own lives in ways that differ from traditional ones.

So, one has to design and stage one's own biography, including commitments and networks. The latter explains, at least partly, the emergence of voluntary associations on local, national and on international level that are putting issues on the agenda previously neglected by governments and traditional political parties.

Public discourse

If voluntary associations are spaces of social learning where in complex discursive interplays individualisation in the above sense takes place, then civil society is the space of public discourse where common values are precipitating. Public discourse encompasses processes of creation and diffusion of social knowledge called by Eyerman and Jamison (1991:164) cognitive praxis. Its importance in view of lifelong learning becomes clear if one realises that our ideas about issues like environment, human rights or women's emancipation, and so on are shaped by our cognitive participation in public discourse.

In addition, such issues have not originated, as Beck says, "from the farsightedness of the rulers or from the struggle in parliament – and certainly not from the cathedrals of power in business, science and the state." They have been put on the political agenda because ordinary people joined voluntarily to further the environment protection, respect of human rights or the emancipation of women, and succeeded in generating enough support in society to become politically relevant.

Of course, mass media play an important role in public discourse. Suppression of civil society by the communist rulers implied suppression of public discourse as well, and the subjection of the press to the rulers' control. However, also due to the development of communication technology, the latter turned out to be increasingly difficult. A fascinating example in this context is the "Internet Revolution" that took place in Belgrade at the turn of 1996 (Bennahum, 1997). Earlier, in 1992, the Milosevics regime has violently suppressed students' street protests by bringing tanks and riot police into action without much public attention abroad. So, when in 1996 students started to fight again for democracy, one of their first step was to set up a Web site in order to generate support by mobilising above all international public opinion. This strategy worked, and Milosevics could not stop them also because that would mean that his police had to shut down every phone in Serbia.

Civil society and ICT

The Serbian students' case illustrates the relationship between civil society and ICT. ICT has transformed "old" into "new" media whose main characteristics are integration and interactivity. Basically, these can be attributed to digitization as well as to the fact that previously separated devices like the telephone, television and computer are moving towards the use of digital technology. Digitization is, in the words of Sullivan-Trainor (1994:26-27) at the hart of the ongoing multimedia revolution. Its rapid development is carried by unfolding communication networks that increasingly cover the earth. According to recent information in the press (De Telegraaf, 1997) already 52 % of the Australians have a personal computer at home, followed by 43 % of the Dutch. Which means that the U.S. (43 %) is not any more the most covered country. However, it is the country where the most PCs are connected to networks with modems (32 %). A main gauge of information delivery is the boom in sales of modems. to the Internet. The sales of modems are expected to grow at an average rate of 17,2 % world-wide (22,4 % in Europe alone) between 1994 and 1998, as well as the expanding reach of Internet (Jackson, 1995).

In the context of ICT, the term "information superhighway" is often used. This term became familiar when president Bill Clinton and vice president Al Gore put it on the agenda of the United States in 1993. The Clinton Administration sees the superhighway as a tool to remain competitive world-wide and as a vehicle that will enable and encourage pro-active approaches to solving domestic problems. It will speed up the pace of ICT application in the education of both the young and of adults. A document of the US Department of Education on this matter issued in 1994 states that ICT will be the vehicle for improving education and lifelong learning throughout America (Sullivan-Trainor, 1994: 102-103). It is, however, unlikely that the Clinton Administration or its successors are going to finance its construction also because the US government lacks funding. Consequently, the development of the information superhighway will be driven by market forces.

The same holds for the European Union. The so-called Bangemann Report (1994) on *Europe and the global information society* urges the EU to put its faith in market mechanism as the motive power to carry the Europeans into the information age. The tools of this policy are fostering an entrepreneurial mentality as well as developing a common regulatory approach to bring forth a competitive, Europe-wide, market for information services.

Meanwhile, something like a "civil society information superhighway" already exists. It is the above mentioned Internet that is often referred to as the cyberspace, and is perceived by Virilio (1995) as "a new perspective without any reference: a *tactile perspective*" (Italics by the author – JK). The Internet is more than just a gigantic network of computers or a virtual space through which one can move. It has a dimension of human relationships, it is a communication network, it is the pre-eminent carrier of global thinking as perceived by Teilhard de Chardin in his *le phenomene humaine* (1962:150).

Innovations like the automobile and the television have profoundly changed human life, and one may expect that ICT will cause radical changes, too. In any case, it is already changing our lives. De Rosnay (1996), for instance, claims that we are witnessing the birth of a new society that due to ICT is organising itself in networks rather than pyramids of power, in interdependent cells rather than in hierarchical mechanisms, and that makes desperate politicians and bureaucrats whose frames of mind were modelled in the vanishing industrial world. Negroponte (1995:230), to quote another author, points out while politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free from many of the old prejudices. "These kids are released from the limitation of geographic

proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play, and neighbourhood. Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony."

In the United States, and elsewhere, the diffusion of the new information technology went with the growth in size and strength of voluntary associations (Wright, 1995). The personal computer and printer, computerised mass mailings, the fax, the modem, E-mail and increasingly user-friendly software makes selforganisation easier and cheaper. Using ICT, voluntary associations become simultaneously more effective in mobilising consensus and action, and in generating direct pressure on politicians. The case of the American Association of Retired Persons illustrates this development, although in this context the ageing of the population plays a role as well. Since 1965 this associations' membership grew from a million to more than thirty million, and nowadays its communication output represents fifty million pieces a year. "And when its members talk... Congress listens."

Or take a small European country like The Netherlands, where in the view of Frissen (1994:345) the traditional State is increasingly giving way to a virtual one. "Virtual State" is "a metaphor of complex and contingent relationships between politics, government and technology in the *condition post-moderne*". These relationships are characterised by, amongst others, fragmentation that is becoming manifest in decentralisation, growing autonomy of local governments, autonomous international regional connections, privatisation as well as in many temporary horizontal networks of public, privatised and societal actors, i. e. NGOs. Fragmentation is, moreover, furthered by new forms of steering and policy making marked by more interactivity between administration and civil society. The traditional one-way process of policy making is diminishing in which government decrees and charges. It is giving way to interactive steering via networks, which implies that none of the actors is dominant whereas policy is not necessarily initiated by the government. In addition, interactive steering means that the actors co-operate in defining problems and policies, as well as in the implementation of the latter. They are involved in processes of learning how to find ways out. So, learning associations emerge in learning society.

Pessimism

To return to the post-communist countries in Europe, it would seem that their inhabitants have been moved suddenly from dictatorial welfare states into risk societies. Ideologies, faiths and other collective or group-specific sources of meaning are undermined firstly by communists themselves, and then by their successors who committed themselves explicitly to democracy and free market economy. However, free elections and privatisation do not yet mean operative democracy and free market economy. Millions of people facing unemployment, impoverishment and social disintegration are confused, disenchanted, anxious. Although all but a few groups have been hit severely by the transition, as has been pointed out earlier (Katus, 1997), particularly the situation of the youth is critical. The Hungarian researchers Gazsó and Stumpf (1996), for example, see the young as the real losers of the transition. Most young people are not interested in political parties, they have lost faith in democracy, and there is among them a great group pessimism concerning the future. Moreover, life experiences of their parents gathered in the communist era became in many respects irrelevant to them, neither do they consider political leaders as models because many of these turn out to be anything but inspiring heroes.

One should also worry about social exclusion due to ICT. As the above mentioned UNESCO (1996:65) Commission rightly stresses, ICT creates divides and disparities within as well as

between societies. Disparities arise between societies that are becoming rapidly digital, and societies that because of lack of funds or political will are not able to adapt fast enough ICT. At the same time, within a given society ICT creates cleavages between those who can and those who cannot use the new tools. So, in addition to the distinction between the haves and the havenots, there is a new distinction between the knows and the knownots.

It is almost needless to say that post-communist countries are threatened by digital underdevelopment, while the growing social inequalities within each of them imply that millions of citizens have no chance to acquire digital literacy.

Civic learning

It is difficult to imagine that those who are hit hard by the transition, and who have lost faith in democracy, will become autonomous citizens, committed to democracy based on free market economy.

The prospects are discouraging indeed, especially when one neglects the people's ability to learn. Like millions all over the world have learned themselves to use the new media, millions in post-communist countries are now learning to associate and to co-operate to tackle present and future problems, to create networks helping the elderly, the poor and the disabled. In Hungary, for instance, where it is deeply rooted, civil society is recovering rapidly, increasingly offering spaces of civic learning. This opens an encouraging perspective also because civic education nourished by civil society, and not dominated by a State, church, political party or infallible leader, forms part of the basic framework of living democracy.

With regard to digitalization it should be pointed out that the relationship between ICT and civil society is not one-sided. ICT fosters the development of civil society, but the latter, in its turn, is furthering its adaptation and diffusion as well. Governments should stimulate the diffusion of CIT as much as possible, but they simply cannot provide all the hardware and create sufficient learning environments to ensure rapid digitalization void of social exclusion. Civil society, on the other hand, is constituted by thousands of NGOs that because of efficiency and effectiveness increasingly apply ICT, enabling their members to acquire digital literacy. True enough, voluntary associations in post- communist countries are mostly lacking funds. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of NGOs from the region involved that join the cyber community. One explanation of this phenomenon lies in the fact that since the reunification of Europe many voluntary associations in the West assist NGOs in post-communist countries to overcome the present difficulties. Therefore, also on international level new learning spaces arise where people educate each other to appreciate cultural plurality and to create a colourful, civilised life in Europe.

J. KATUS

REFERENCES

Bangemann Report (1994), *Europe and the global information society*. Recommendations to the European Council. Brussels, 26 May.

BECK, ULRICH (1994), *The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization*. In Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order. Cambridge: Polity Press.

BENNAHUM, DAVID S. (1997), *The Internet Revolution*. In Wired, April 1997.

CHESNEY, JAMES D. and OTTO FEINSTEIN (1997), *Building Civic Literacy and Citizen Power*. New Jersey: Wesley-Addison.

De Telegraaf (1997). *Nederland zit vol met PCs*. May 13.

EYERMAN, RON and ANDREW JAMISON (1991), *Social Movements. A Cognitive Approach*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

FERGE, ZSUZSA (1996), *Social Citizenship in the New Democracies. The Difficulties in Reviving Citizens' Right in Hungary*. In International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Vol. 20.

FRISSEN, P.H.A. (1996), *De virtuele staat. Politiek, bestuur, technologie: een postmodern verhaal*. Schoonhoven: Academic Service.

GAZSÓ, FERENC and ISTVÁN STUMPF (Eds., 1996), *Losers. Overview on the Situation of Hungarian Youth*. Budapest: Milleneum Youth Foundation.

GELLNER, ERNEST (1994), *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and Its Rivals*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

JACKSON, JAMES O. (1995), *It's a Wired, Wired World*. In Time Special Issue: Welcome to Cyberspace. Spring.

KATUS, J. (1997), *Reflections on the Youth in Post-Communist Countries*. In Cyrce, S. Hübner-Funk, L. Chisholm, M. du-Bois-Reymond and B. Sellin (Eds.), European Yearbook of Youth Policy and Youth Research. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter (in print).

NEGROPONTE, NICHOLAS (1995), *Being Digital*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

ROSANY, JOËL DE (1996), *Ce que va changer la révolution informationelle*. In Le Monde Diplomatique, Aout.

SULLIVAN-TRAINOR, MICHAEL (1994), *Detour: The Truth About the Information Superhighway*. San Mateo: IDG Books Worldwide.

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, PIERRE (1962), *Het verschijnsel mens*. Urecht/Antwerpen: Aula-Boeken.

UNESCO (1996), *Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

VIRILIO, PAUL (1995), *Alerte dans le cyberspace*! In Le Monde Diplomatique, Aout.

WILDEMEERSCH, DANNY (1995), *Een verantwoord uitweg leren. Over sociaal-agogisch handelen in de risicomaatschappij*. Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit.

WRIGHT, ROBERT (1995), *Hyper Democracy*. Time, January 23.