



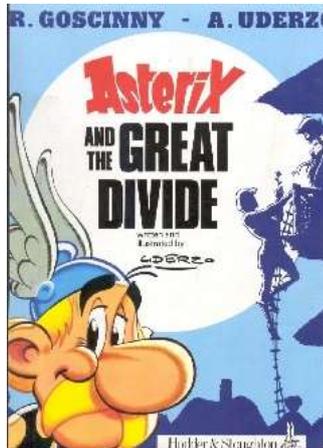
Transversalism, the Death of Civic Education

Dear Readers,

A few years ago, a group of citizens from canton Ticino (TI) launched an initiative to amend the canton school law. Their goal was to introduce a new education branch called “Education to Civism, Citizenship and Direct Democracy”, which should rely on a legal basis adopted by a specific vote of the cantonal parliament; such a branch should be compulsory and taught for at least two hours per month. Simultaneously, they asked the Institute of Federalism to carry out a comparative study about civic education in Switzerland.

The study proved quite complicated to complete because of federalism in education and the consequent difficulty to find the relevant documentation in the 26 cantons. Nevertheless, a long and patient research work delivered scientifically based earnings. It enlightened mainly a big gap between, on the one side, the unanimous recognition of the importance of this branch, and on the other side the lack of means attributed, combined with a dangerous drift towards transversalism.

The study is obviously too long to be extensively presented here, but its main teachings deserve to be recalled, if only because they have universal value.



After an introduction (1.), our brief presentation will be divided in three parts. Firstly the acknowledgment of the Swiss students mediocrity in civic education (2.). Secondly, some comments about the paradigm shift which contributed to create this disappointing

situation (3.). Thirdly, some reflections about the fact that civic education goes far beyond the school framework (4.). A word of conclusion laments the impossibility to reform the system in the desired direction (5.).

1. Introduction and Methodology

Firstly, we have tried to enlighten the current situation. Since legislative sources are practically non-existent, we conducted a small survey in a number of "model" cantons. Other information derived indirectly from the numerous statements written on the subject. However, regardless of the information acquisition mode, there is a clear finding to make: civic education is never a specific branch, it does not benefit from a specific schedule, it practically never has specific manuals, and moreover it is "victim" of "transversalism" and "socio-constructivist pedagogy" (see 4.).

2. Young Swiss Students: bad Performers

It is easy to observe a general impression within society, supported by scientific studies, showing that young Swiss people are poorly educated in all aspects of the knowledge traditionally referred to as civic education. Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin himself shared this statement: "The quoted study is unfortunately neither the first nor the only one to identify the gaps in civic education that Swiss students present."¹ This does not mean that the situation was better previously: Edgar Zufferey deplored as early as 1969 the fact that civic education was a "neglected" branch².

International Survey and Comparison

According to a PISA survey, young Swiss ranked 21st out of 28 in terms of political interest³. In addition, Switzerland ranks 19th in the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) study on civic education of young people aged 14 in 28 countries. According to this study, the political notions of young Swiss are below average, their ability to interpret politics is average, but their capacity for political engagement is at the bottom of the rankings. This is a paradoxical situation in the country of direct democracy! For their part, Swiss students describe the education received as *unsatisfactory*.⁴

Another international comparison that is not very flattering for Switzerland finds itself in "*Demokratiebarometer*", a journal devoted to democracy published annually by the University of Zurich. In its 2011 edition, which caused a stir, Switzerland (homeland of direct democracy and country that sees itself gladly as the most democratic in the world)

¹ Réponse à la question Pascale Bruderer 06.5242, December 12th, 2006.

² Problèmes scolaires – L’instruction civique, cette délaissée, par Edgar Zufferey ; in *Le Confédéré – Quotidien édité par le parti radical démocratique valaisan* – Tuesday, January 28th, 1969.

³ Quoted among others by Postulat FR of September 12th, 2003 (233.03 DICS/DIAF) or the interpellation SZ I 11/10 of September 13th, 2010.

⁴ SWI swissinfo.ch – L’éducation politique dans un paquet cadeau (January 3rd, 2006).

ranked in 14th place only. Germany leads Switzerland in 11th place, while the gold medal goes to Denmark.

For Prof. Bühlmann, co-author of the study, this state of affairs is not due to the frequency of voting in Switzerland (the so-called “*Wahlmüdigkeit*” in German), but to the Swiss' disinterest in political processes and to the fact that they consider themselves incompetent to decide. This is due to a lack of civic education. In his view, if we want a direct democracy, then we must invest more in civic education to enable citizens to feel competent. He regrets that there is in our country no school branch “political instruction” worthy of the name, but only a very superficial civic education.

National studies and “empirical impressions”

In a study realized for the canton of Solothurn (SO)⁵, Carsten Quesel and Dominik Allenspach evoke parliamentary motions (the term “motion” describes here a parliamentary instrument asking the cantonal government to draft, amend or erase a law⁶) on this subject in this canton, but also in the two Basle (BS & BL), to evoke the relevance of a new approach. In fact, in almost all Swiss cantons there are dozens of motions that, in one way or another, are worried about the way – perceived as poor – in which civic education is delivered in schools... and therefore to improve the system.

The Bernese (BE) motion M 257/2006 refers to the “catastrophic results” of the study conducted by the HEP [Universities of Education] of Bern, Zug and Aargau (BE, ZG, AG). The students of Swiss schools know practically nothing about the political system of their country; for example, 90 per cent of the students interviewed did not know the name of the federal legislature. In addition, almost 70 per cent of students assume that the Federal Council decides whether a referendum is accepted or not⁷.

Another motion of Basel-Country (BL) is based on the demands of the young people themselves, resulting from the observations of the “Youth Forum”, which found that for example a common quiz with simple questions (How many members do the National Council have? Quote the seven Federal Councillors) gave disappointing (“*ernüchternd*”) results⁸.

The same thing happened in Fribourg (FR) during the parliamentary debate on the motion entitled “For a serious civic education”⁹: all speakers stressed the foolishness of

⁵ Carsten Quesel and Dominik Allenspach, *Rahmenkonzept zur politischen Bildung in der Volksschule*, Solothurn, März 2007, p. 7.

⁶ We shall use only the term “motion” despite the fact that there are several other terms to describe a parliamentary intervention in the cantons.

⁷ Study quoted in the question (CH) of Pascale Bruderer Wyss on December 11th, 2006, with the answer of Pascal Couchepin who was concerned.

⁸ Postulat dated January 25th, 2013: Einführung in «Staatskunde und Politik» an des Schulen der Sekundarstufe II; Nr. 2013-028.

⁹ Pour une instruction civique sérieuse ; of September 10th, 2012 ; MP 1501.12.

young people in this matter. The oral survey carried out by the canton of Thurgau (TG) made with sadness similar findings¹⁰.

To launch a petition on this subject, young politicians from Thurgau (TG) conducted an “unpretentious” survey in the middle schools of the canton. While 84% of those interviewed were aware of the existence of three powers in the state, 42% were unaware of who elected the Federal Council and half considered that there was a constitutional right to work¹¹.

For its part, the Zurich (ZH) motion 19/2008 also identifies gaps in this area; it quotes a 1999 study describing a situation considered unsatisfactory¹². Moreover, a MP from Valais refers to his attempts to attract the attention of young citizens as “facing individuals who have no basic knowledge in the field of civic education.”¹³

To top it all off – but is this a surprise? – young people themselves are not very sensitive to citizenship classes. This seems to be the fault of a *flawed* civic education¹⁴. This set of failures is not far from a vicious circle.

3. The Reasons for this Situation

The mediocrity of Swiss youth in civic education, combined with countless demands for change and improvement, are a good reason to try to understand why the situation has become so unsatisfactory and to see whether it is possible to change this development.

Methodological and Pedagogical Problems

There are two major problems in terms of pedagogy: firstly, as civic education is not a specific branch, students lack basis. Secondly, because of transversalism, students lack knowledge.

Of course, 90% of the students interviewed do not know the name of legislative at the federal level. If students do not know the difference between legislator and executive, notions as subtle as the differences between General Council, Municipal Council, Great Council, Council of State (without s), Council of States (with s), National Council or Federal Council will be incomprehensible to them. In addition, if they do not know what bicameralism is, how can they understand the structure of the Federal Assembly?

As early as 1991, in the canton of Obwald (OW), the “Schools Program for History and Policy”¹⁵ witnessed the lack of *real foundations* for students. The document pointed out

¹⁰ Auswertung der mündlichen Befragungen in den Schulhausteams der Sekundarschulzentren.

¹¹ What is still little... See „JCVP Thurgau fordert mit Petition mehr Staatskunde“; of June 13th, 2013.

¹² Bericht und Antrag des Regierungsrates an den Kantonsrat zum Postulat KR-Nr. 19/2008 betreffend Politische Bildung.

¹³ Délibérations du Grand Conseil relatives au postulat 3.022 concernant l'éducation civique des jeunes.

¹⁴ Article of SwIswissinfo by Laureline Duvillard (June 8th, 2011).

¹⁵ "Lehrplan Geschichte und Politik: Inkraftsetzung der definitiven Fassung".

that teaching would address topics such as “the common cell of the state”, “towards the federal state”, “women in the world”, “the creation of the United States” etc., but without considering whether the students had sufficient knowledge to grasp such complex problems.

The “transversalism” of civic education certainly does not represent the pedagogy best suited to this field. It means that citizenship education is supposed to be taught during other teachings like history or geography. Teachers are therefore 100% responsible of good or bad civic instruction. If they are not so interested, they will hardly comment on civism during their lessons. Most of them focusses on very basic and empiric cases. For instance, they organize a vote in the class to explain the notion of democracy. However, this presentation lacks the complexity of the real legislative process. Currently, many people worries: why does not the cantonal government take immediately a decision? They ignore the principle of separation of powers and the necessity of a legal base for decisions.

Another pedagogical problem lies in the fact that there is a tendency to replace the traditional “frontal” method by the “socio-constructivism”, which becomes a pillar of current pedagogy. For some teachers, this method gives less good results than more traditional ones¹⁶.

Transversalism, a real Paradigm Shift

As we try to understand why the current situation is so bad, we have to make a relatively discouraging observation: the situation reveals a semantic change reflecting a real paradigm shift. *Civic* education is no longer called that. Everywhere, it has become “*citizenship* education”. In doing so, it has definitively left the field of a specific teaching to blend – not to say dilute – into a vague transversal teaching that is supposed to prepare young people for their civic life by “sprinkling civism” over all kinds of courses and demonstrations. Educational and political authorities have endorsed this paradigm shift. It is now carved in the white marble of institutions, among others in the study plans both of French-speaking cantons (Plan d'études romand, PER) and German-speaking cantons (Lehrplan21). Citizenship education is now only a cross-sectional branch divided between different teachings and left to the teachers' whim.

Undoubtedly, the situation of civic education as it has become, highlights a real gap. Cantonal authorities give contradictory signals, in that they give citizenship education a substantial or even disproportionate ambition in terms of preparing young people for political life, while educational means remain very limited.

¹⁶ Graduate in Political Science (University of Lausanne), Mr. Miljevic has the tools of methodological analysis to apprehend and compare teaching methods. The site where the text has been extracted is unfortunately no more reachable:
<http://stevanmiljevic.wordpress.com/2014/06/01/moyens-denseignement-le-constructivisme-toujours-a-la-barre-au-mepris-des-recherches-scientifiques-serieuses/>.

4. The importance of civic education goes far beyond the school framework

Political and schools authorities have ignored the link between civic education and “real” democracy, in widening the permanent gap between the modesty of civic instruction teaching and the high expectations placed in it, especially in such a democratic country like Switzerland. This dilemma is illustrated for instance by a popular blog suggesting to introduce civic instruction teaching from the 3rd school year¹⁷. The blogger deplors the fact that the majority of Swiss citizens have never read the Constitution (in the broad sense) and that, as such, they ignore their duties as citizens as well as the history of Switzerland, a fragile balance between freedom and security. In this way, everyone considers his own desires as the yardstick against which democracy is to be measured, which is obviously not true and can be dangerous. For the blogger, this ignorance is due in particular to the widespread inadequacy of civic education, a phenomenon that does not date from today but also hit former schoolchildren, including the blogger. In his eyes, “If we introduce civic education today, then maybe in fifteen years we will have citizens who have an idea of their country”.

The importance of knowledge of civic education (understood as a snapshot of the existing state organization) cannot be overstated, since concepts like “democracy” or “federalism” are much more than mere maxims of State organization (in other words, a sort of Community Organization Manual). In order to play their role, such important concepts must also be anchored in the everyday mentalities of civil society. A democracy without “cultural grounds” exists only on paper.

From that point of view, the current situation in USA (December 2020) shows how dangerous the lack of civic education can be for democracy. Obviously, President Trump has no knowledge of institutions. Apart of his own prerogatives, he does not understand the State construction and functioning. He complains for instance that the Supreme Court does not support him unconditionally. It means that he does not even know the notion of separation of powers. The same goes for his fans. They have no idea of separation of powers, Justice, Constitution, and therefore they are not prone at accepting court judgments. It is unfortunately (but clearly) easier to become a despot in an uneducated country.

5. A somewhat disenchanted conclusion

This study has been inspired (and financed) by citizens of Ticino who launched an initiative aiming at making of civic education a full-fledged branch. Meanwhile, in September 2017, their (relatively modest) initiative has been accepted in a popular vote. Unfortunately, it remains an isolated case.

There are fears and doubts as to the possibility that the wishes of people asking for reforms and improvements, however numerous, may materialise. On the one hand, the

¹⁷ Staatskunde ab der 3. Klasse! Réda El Arbi, Monday February 29th, 2016 (Tages-Anzeiger Stadt-Blog).

new transversal status of citizenship education is now entrenched in the political and pedagogical ground. On the other hand, the aspirations guiding those seeking change are divergent, and sometimes even impossible to achieve if one examines them more closely: increasing the participation rate in the elections or exalting patriotism are missions that can hardly be entrusted to the citizen education.

For some time to come, only a privileged few will understand all subtleties of state and politics functioning.

Sincerely,

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