

# Reflexion on Values

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## 1 Introduction

Sitting in a nice conference room in Tisvildeleje, May 1989 and listening to the analysis of different incidents I got the impression that we used a lot of words full of values and we did not reflect on them with the care as we make it with the technical terms of education (e.g. mother tongue etc.) we discuss about in IMEN.

I had the impression that we are sometimes victims of manipulation, though unconsciously. I spoke about my feeling to the colleagues participating in the discussion, but my provocative remark fell on my own head: I was asked to write a statement on my findings for a further discussion.

This paper is meant to inspire a discussion and a reflexion on our ideas and values. It's starting point could be the following statement. I discovered that different values appear in IMEN documents and discussions without reflexions. The key values of the new conservatism (e.g. conformism, socialization, presentism, democracy, communication, information etc.) are present everywhere as clearly positive notions, though they are more complex, sometimes paradoxical. This is the everyday mind (Alltagsbewusstsein) in work. The everyday mind always accepts the ruling ideas of a given era without reflexion. This is the strategy of survival.

I'd like to prove this thesis in three steps. First I shortly introduce the key-values of the 70-ies and 80-ies; then I'll show how these values are present in education and in IMEN documents, too and, finally, the paradoxical nature of these values will be discussed.

## 2 First step: Key values of the eighties and seventies

### Statement

The new conservatism became gradually dominant in the second half of the 70-ies in the Western civilization: in politics, mass culture, ideology, and began to rule the language, that is the social communication. New concepts were introduced, old ones were redefined and the society integrated them almost unconsciously.

### What are these values?

We can make a classification of them in four groups.

**Group 1.** The direct negation of the sixties. These values are *socialization* and *cooperation*. We will discuss them later in detail.

**Group 2.** The values which reveal the new face of the new era. These are *communication* and *information*.

**Group 3.** Continuation and reevaluation of the values of the 60-ies. These are: *presentism*, *democratization*, *conformism*.

**Group 4.** The values that were always present in Western culture but influenced only the life and mind of the ruling minority, but in the last three decades have become a mass phenomenon. These are *hedonism* and *narcissism*.

## 2.1 A closer look at these values

**Group 1.** The direct negation of the sixties: *socialization* and *cooperation*. These values have always been constitute part of human society as such, but they have another role in the new conservatism: After the widespread and radical anti-establishment attitude and civil indiscipline of the 60-ies, the re-formulation of society could be carried out only through the acceptance of *socialization* and *cooperation* as positive values. Socialization and cooperation in this sense mean first of all the integrating of the individual, but at the same time, the lessening of its integrity (conformism) and in this way the pacification of the masses.

**Group 2.** The new face of the new era: *communication* and *information*. These values are the key words in the economy, in the society and in the sphere of values. This type of communication and information has been established by technical development. Communication and information were important concepts in the 50-ies and 60-ies as well, but in a philosophical way. The language philosophy after Wittgenstein dealt with communication as an aspect of alienation.

**Group 3.** Continuation and re-evaluation of the values of the 60-ies.

*Presentism.* There existed still a historical consciousness in the sixties, this period was interpreted as a part of a historical process, through already at that time an overestimation of the present has begun and the past lost its significance.

*Democratization.* In the 60-ies it meant a widening of the existing democracies e.g. it meant the civil right movements in the U.S., the struggle for the rights of the youth, the questioning of the privileges of the middle classes etc.; In the 70-ies and 80-ies the democratization had an effect on the mass culture, on education. Mass education reached the level of secondary and higher education. Mass culture, humanistic culture, music, film etc.

*Conformism* is opposed to the non-conformism of the sixties. Being conform to the majority has become a positive attitude. It does not mean that conformism did not have any role in the New Left movements, but there it was the other way round: the non-conformity to the majority and conformity to the chosen minority was obligatory.

**Group 4.** Values that always played some role in Western cultures but only in the upper social group. *Hedonism*, *narcissism* are seemingly the reinforcement of individuality, since hedonism is an enjoyment-centered word view and narcissism means a self-cultured, self-

fixed thinking. But when they become mass phenomena, the individuality is lost.

### **3 Second step: How do these values appear in education, in rhetorics, in practice and in IMEN documents?**

First I want to quote the questions posed in preparation for the first IMEN conference. We will see that two groups of values are confronted with each other. These two groups represent on the one hand the attracted values of the past and the new values of the 60-ies.

- "1. Which was the dominant paradigm of mother tongue teaching around 1970?  
1.1. Which were the fundamental objectives, the content, the teaching-learning concepts of this paradigm? On which aspects of language education did this paradigm characteristically put special emphasis?

The following coordinates may serve as a guide for your description:

- language skills - literature;
- oral language- written language;
- emphasis on language structure - emphasis on language use;
- formal approach to language - creative/individual approach to language;
- discipline oriented education - child-centred education;
- emphasis on role of teacher - emphasis on role of pupil;
- classroom education - individual education;
- textbook orientation - thematic work;
- mother tongue education as broadly defined subject or general education." (Herrlitz et al. 1984, 19).

It is obvious from the quotation that almost all values mentioned above are present: especially different forms of democratization as well as aspects of communication, presentism. Socialization, however, appears only later, in the next phase of IMEN work in studies in MTE 4, published 1988 about the situation of 1985 (Delnoy et al. 1988). I think of how many times group work appears in these diaries, portraits, case studies. We can witness a further development of this process in the third phase of IMEN studies that is in the key incident analyses in Tisvildeleje papers. In all three phases presentism played an important role as a questioning of the legitimation of literature teaching. This is signaled in a reduction of the proportion of literature teaching and humanistic culture.

### **4 Third step: The paradoxical nature of these values**

#### **4.1 Democracy**

The last months proved that there is no alternative of democracy in Europe in our age. It may not be forgotten though, that democracy is a paradoxical phenomenon from the ancient Greece till the mass democracies today.

Innate in democracy is the conflict between principal of the majority rule on one hand and the justice and liberty on the other (cf. De Tocqueville 1874, Mill 1859 etc.). This

theoretical commonplace remains unnoticed or unreflected in everyday consciousness (mind) and can cause a misunderstanding also in education. E.g. it can mean democratization of the teaching learning process if the teacher leaves the centre of classroom interaction - I mean in group work, but in some cases group work leaves some children to the mercy of the peer-group and the teacher can hardly control the situation anymore.

The other controversy of democracy is that the opinion of the majority is not spontaneous expression of the majority but it is often manipulated (cf. works by Riesman, Marcuse etc.). In mass societies this is even more so. Teachers can be the channel of this kind of manipulation if they don't reflect on the main values of the society.

## **4.2 Socialization, cooperation**

Both of them are natural basis for developing the creativity of the individual who is inspired by the society and focuses his creative activities on the society. But both of them can become the context for distracting personal integrity. In certain teaching-learning situations the role of the individual becomes second rate in comparison with the importance of the group. In one case the aim is the development of the individual and the tool is the group, in the other case the aim is the existence of the group itself and the tools are the members of it. The product of the educational process in the first case are socialized individuals or a grouping of free individuals, and in the second case: conformity without personality or a homogeneous group without autonomous personalities.

## **4.3 Communication, information**

I think I do not need to discuss in detail the importance of communication, information in education today, and that modern life in general is unthinkable without them. But we should not forget that these concepts are paradoxical, too.

The teaching of the forms and ways of communication can only be legitimated if real messages pass the channel of communication, if real information flows through the media. But if the forms become empty and ritualized it can cause a uniformity of expression and thinking and loss of originality, individuality.

## **4.4 Presentism is a double-sided, Janus-faced phenomenon, too**

It has emancipatory features: it can free the modern personality from the past as a trauma, it can put an end to the cultural monopoly of the middle class, it can mean the right of children for enjoying their life in the present. But it also means that the message coded in human culture is lost, and we can not substitute it with any other similarly deep and complex message.

The presentism and democratization together mean in the education that the more democratic the school system the less academic it is, there remains less and less room for sciences, arts, the past, everything that is transcendent, and everything that has not an immediate practical use. Till the middle of the 70-ies the conservatives supported the teaching of literary canon (heritage), and the progressives attacked it. But then the

situation changed: the new conservatism realized that too much humanistic culture is not so desirable, instead, the society and economy needs specialized, highly qualified experts. Besides the human culture and its representatives, the intellectuals are troublemakers and are sometimes obstacles of pacification of the masses. Ever since the conservatives and "progressives" are competing in getting rid of the humanistic culture, in expelling it from schools. I wonder if the main values of the so-called progressives: democratization, developing of communication skills and creativity etc. are so contradictory to humanistic culture in school education as it is sometimes claimed.

#### 4.5 Hedonism and narcissism

Both also play a role in liberating the personality and in developing a personal identity. I mean it in a historical sense, too (cf. in Habermas on Protestantism). Hedonism, narcissism together with presentism can easily be (similarly to the above mentioned values) a short way leading to manipulated, pacified members of a mass society, who is concentrating mainly on his/her body, his/her satisfaction. We can say: Voila - our ideal typical contemporary who hardly differs from a citizen of the Brave New World.

### 5 Conclusion

The acceptance of values without reflexion in the case of a teacher is dangerous not only for him/herself but also for the community. Only an independent minded personality can educate free, successfully socialized and creative individuals (if it is the aim, if it is our main value, if it is not an obstacle of the development of a new age with new values.)

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