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[See table of contents](#)

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CONFÉRENCE INAUGURALE

*Par Peter Leuprecht**

Contrairement à ce qui a été indiqué sur les cartons d'invitation, mon intention n'est pas de donner une conférence inaugurale, mais tout simplement de partager avec vous quelques réflexions sur le sujet de ce séminaire qui me tient à coeur. Dans ma langue maternelle, j'emploierais le terme «Gedankensplitter» ce qui, dans une traduction littérale, veut dire «éclats de pensée».

Je voudrais commencer mon exposé par une thèse qui en réalité me paraît être une évidence, à savoir que l'apprentissage et l'éducation interculturels sont indispensables dans une société multiculturelle. La société multiculturelle n'est ni une doctrine ni une idéologie; ce n'est pas une sombre machination ou un moyen de noyer des poissons quels qu'ils soient. La société multiculturelle est tout simplement une réalité.

Dans un remarquable rapport rédigé à la demande du Conseil de l'Europe et intitulé «In from the Margins», la «Task Force» pour la Culture et le Développement a décrit l'Europe comme «une culture des cultures». Cette définition s'applique également à ce pays, le Canada, à cette province, le Québec, et à cette ville de Montréal. Elle s'applique en fait à la plupart des régions du monde. Quel pays peut encore se présenter comme «monoculturel»? Que nous le voulions ou non, nous vivons dans une société multiculturelle.

On the basis of this reality, I would now like to share with you some thoughts on seven issues:

- culture,
- diversity,
- identity,
- inclusiveness,
- pluralism,
- democratic citizenship (and);
- human rights.

I. Culture

In their above-mentioned report, the distinguished women and men of culture who formed the European Task Force on Culture and Development, wrote that culture can be understood as "the whole life of the people" and its values or, more narrowly, as artistic activity of all kinds. Let me quote another definition of culture which in my view

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is pertinent, although it is the work of lawyers from different European countries gathered in the “Groupe de Fribourg” in Switzerland. This is what the group says about culture:

Le terme «culture» recouvre les valeurs, les croyances, les langues, les savoirs et les arts, les traditions, institutions et modes de vie par lesquels une personne ou un groupe exprime les significations qu’il donne à son existence et à son développement.

What I find important in this definition is the idea of culture giving a meaning to one’s existence and development.

II. Diversity

The powerful ideology of nationalism which entered history at the end of the 18th and in the 19th century was to have a tremendous impact on the perception of cultural and linguistic diversity. Ethnocentric nationalism had an overwhelming influence on political thinking and practice, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. It provided a justification for assimilating minorities and for colonizing other peoples. The writings of both J.S. Mill and Engels are highly significant in this respect; according to them, progress required assimilating smaller cultures into larger cultures. “The half-savage relic of past times” (according to J.S. Mill) or the “ethnic trash” (according to Engels) was doomed to be “absorbed” or “extirpated.” Marxists as well as liberals in the 19th century regarded the great nations as the carriers of historical development. Smaller nationalities were regarded as backward and stagnant; they were expected to abandon their national character and to assimilate to a great nation. German was seen as the “language of liberty” for the Czechs, just as French was seen as the “language of liberty” for the Bretons, and English was seen as the “language of liberty” for the Québécois. J.S. Mill opposed the idea of the Québécois to maintain a distinct francophone society in Canada, and encouraged their assimilation into the more “civilized” English culture. He also wrote:

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.

Unfortunately, certain politicians in Europe and other parts of the world (including this country) share these views of J.S. Mill. As far as I am concerned, I am convinced that these views are wrong and have been shown to be wrong. In addition, experience – including some extremely tragic recent experience – has shown that any dream of an ethnically “pure” state is bound to lead to disaster.

As early as 1849, the great Austrian playwright and poet Franz Grillparzer who was to be the prophet of the European tragedy wrote in a dramatic and desperate epigram:

Der Weg der neuen Bildung geht von Humanität über Nationalität zur Bestialität.

(The way of the new culture goes from humanity through nationality to bestiality.)

Europe, and Germany in particular, was indeed to go this way which brought with it immense human suffering and destruction. Unfortunately, the influence of ethnocentric nationalism is far from having vanished. On the other hand, after World War II, cultural and linguistic diversity came to be increasingly regarded as a good to be defended and promoted. Something like a human right to cultural survival and flourishing appeared in international law.

In today's world cultural diversity is threatened by the strong impact of "an all-encompassing, Americanized, global culture" ("In from the Margins"). As Edward W. Said writes in his book "Culture and Imperialism," "rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world." Linguistic diversity is threatened by the growing dominance of English as the international *lingua franca*, the leading global means of communications.

Large parts of the world seem to be torn between two conflicting trends: on the one hand, the recognition of the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures as a valuable common resource to be protected and developed and, on the other hand, the pressure of paneconomic ideology, globalization and the "market"; determination to preserve one's "identity," sometimes even an obsession with "identity," on the one hand, and powerful forces of standardization and uniformity on the other.

I regard it as essential for cultural and linguistic policies to resist the diktat of paneconomic ideology; and I must confess that I abhor the concept of "linguistic market."

III. Identité

L'identité est un concept d'une infinie complexité. Le sens qu'on lui donne est d'ailleurs quelque peu paradoxal. En effet, étymologiquement parlant, le mot a sa racine dans le «idem» latin qui veut dire «le même». D'un autre côté, il désigne ce qui fait que chacune et chacun de nous est différent, identique à aucune autre personne; c'est dans ce sens qu'il apparaît dans des expressions telles que «pièce d'identité».

Dans le monde qui nous entoure, nous constatons que le concept d'identité fait l'objet de multiples manipulations et abus. Des hommes s'entre-tuent au nom de leur identité. J'ai souvent évoqué les phénomènes inquiétants d'obsession identitaire et de repli identitaire.

Je n'ai nullement la prétention d'apporter des réponses définitives aux multiples et graves interrogations que suscitent ces phénomènes ainsi que le concept d'identité et l'usage qu'on en fait. Je dirai tout simplement que je crois fortement aux vertus d'une identité ouverte et multiple. J'emprunte à mon très cher ami Antonio Perotti, l'un des

grands penseurs et acteurs de l'«interculturel», la belle image de la marguerite : comme celle-ci, notre identité est faite d'une multitude de pétales. De même qu'on ne saurait réduire la marguerite à l'un ou l'autre de ses pétales, on aurait tort de vouloir réduire notre identité à l'une de ses multiples facettes (par exemple l'ethnique, la nationale, la linguistique ou la religieuse). Notre «identité» est essentiellement composée, composite, reflétant la multitude et la diversité de nos appartenances; c'est une grave erreur que de vouloir la réduire à une seule appartenance.

Comme le dit si bien Amin Maalouf dans son remarquable livre «Les identités meurtrières», «l'identité n'est pas donnée une fois pour toutes, elle se construit et se transforme tout au long de l'existence». Notre identité n'est pas figée ou immuable; on ne peut la congeler; il ne faut pas l'enfermer dans un musée. Elle est quelque chose de vivant. Surtout, nous définissons, redéfinissons et brassons constamment notre identité à travers le contact, le dialogue, l'échange et parfois, le conflit avec l'autre et l'altérité. Il faudrait percevoir et vivre la diversité non comme un handicap ou une barrière, mais comme ce qu'elle est : un extraordinaire enrichissement. Ce qu'il nous faut, c'est l'ouverture sur l'autre, non la fermeture. Comme l'écrivait si bien Octavio Paz, «l'homme (c'est-à-dire l'être humain) est le seul être qui est en quête de l'autre».

IV. Inclusiveness

Modern societies produce numerous forms of exclusion, in particular social exclusion. The Council of Europe launched a few years ago an ambitious project on "human dignity and social exclusion." Exclusiveness has often been viewed positively by those holding power. Certain organizations, clubs and even universities were deliberately "exclusive" which was synonymous for select or high class. The challenge with which we are confronted today is to build an inclusive society, at the domestic and international level.

V. Pluralism

In today's world, we must accept and try to achieve not only political, but also cultural pluralism.

VI. Democratic Citizenship

What do we mean by citizenship? Let me start by saying what it does not or should not mean. First of all, I believe that citizenship is not the same thing as nationality. "Staatsangehörigkeit" (belonging to a State). One can be a citizen without being a national of the State in which one happens to live. Secondly, neither citizenship nor nationality should be based on ethnicity.

Let us now define positively what citizenship is or should be. In the concept of citizenship, there is the idea of the city, "la cité", the idea of belonging to a community,

which entrains politics and rights, notably political rights. The Greek word for citizen is “*politis*” derived from the “*polis*”, the polity. It is the framework in which the citizen exercises his or her rights and responsibilities. In the world of today, citizenship is exercised at various levels: at the local, regional, national, and increasingly, the international level.

In a democratic society, political power must be the power of the people, the citizens in the “*polis*”. In today’s world, political power understood in this sense is constantly weakened. The sites of power and the exercise of power are increasingly distant from the citizens who risk once again to be reduced to subjects. Accountability is eroded. According to Karl Popper, “economic power must not be permitted to dominate political power; if necessary, it must be fought and brought under control by political power.” The truth is that economic and financial power is less and less controlled by political power and that military power prevails more and more over political power.

As responsible citizens, we must be aware of these dangers and resist and reject the diktat of paneconomic ideology. We must get our hierarchy of values right. As Confucius said, “the superior man understands righteousness; the inferior man understands profit.” It is essential to restore the primacy of politics and to mobilize citizens’ power at all levels. At a time of globalization, it is increasingly essential for people to get organized and to exercise their citizens’ rights and responsibilities not only at the local, regional and national, but also at the international level. In this respect, the experience of the successful battle against the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) is most encouraging; non-governmental citizens’ organizations prevailed against paneconomic ideology and the logic of the market although it seemed to be a fight between David and Goliath.

There is obviously a strong connection between citizenship on the one hand and language and plurilingualism on the other. People cannot effectively participate in the democratic processes without language, without having access to the different kinds and levels of discourse involved. In a shrinking world, plurilingualism is a means of empowerment, a means of enabling people to participate as citizens in the democratic processes also at the international level which, I admit, are far from sufficiently developed, but will have to be developed as a result of pressure from concerned citizens.

VII. Human Rights

It is in my view essential – particularly, perhaps, in our “Western” societies – to transcend an essentially egoistic, individualistic and acquisitive approach to human rights. These are not only the rights of each and every one of us; they are also and above all the rights of others. In the same way as Bartolomé de Las Casas discovered human rights by meeting the “other” who was the “Indian”, we are called upon to discover and to practice human rights in the encounter with the other and otherness. Many serious evils from which our society suffers, such as racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, aggressive nationalism, ethnocentrism and intolerance in its various forms, have their root

in a dual rejection: rejection of what is universal in the human being and humanity and which therefore links all human beings; and rejection of the other, otherness and difference. I agree with the late philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas who regards the experience of the other, “meeting the other’s face”, as the fundamental experience of the human being. The capacity to meet the other’s face is one of the main requirements for our modern societies. There is, therefore, a profound connection between intercultural education and human rights education. Both, intercultural learning as well as education and human rights education are a must in the multicultural society in which we live today.

* * *

The world we are trying to build and of which we want to be responsible citizens must be a world that achieves unity in diversity; a world that appreciates, nurtures and celebrates its diversity as a fabulous treasure; a world in which meeting the other’s face is a challenging and enriching every day reality; a world of citizens aware of their rights and, even more importantly, the rights of others and of their ensuing responsibilities; the world as a marvelous symphony in which a multitude of different voices produces harmony – harmony through mutual respect.

This may be an eternally unfinished symphony; it deserves nevertheless being played. Every human being, all peoples, all religions and all cultures on this earth are called upon not only to listen to it, but to participate in its execution. This is the way not to drift towards the clash of civilizations for which, according to some, the world is programmed, but to unite humanity in harmony through respect – respect for the equal dignity of every human being.

I hope that your Seminar will contribute to that noble aim.