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WHERE ARE WE HEADED? REFLECTIONS ON CIVILIZATION, CULTURE, AND EDUCATION

Abstract

The reflections offered in this chapter are one attempt to perceive our social problems in a new light. We take stock of major international and Polish educational initiatives, including education for the sake of peace, suggesting the need for their further analysis and evaluation. As the borders of every human being's responsibility for the survival of the human species are shifting closer and closer, we argue that it is worth pondering the overriding values necessary for the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of humans and groups of people, setting goals that we can strive for together as humans, and discussing the directions and quality of socialization. All this points to the importance of investing in universal humanistic education – such that more people will ask themselves “What can I do?” rather than “What is going to happen?”

Keywords: civilization, culture, education, future studies

1. Introduction: The scope of these considerations

“For whom and what are humans responsible?” – this was the main question addressed at the seminar held by the “Poland 2000 Plus” Foresight Committee in 2017. Finding an answer to this question, which is by no means an easy task, is turning into an urgent and immediate “call to action,” the last lifeline that keeps us from drowning. Protecting the Earth's biosystem as well as our fellow humans, both as living organisms and as creators of culture and civilization, requires all of us to act. We have our backs to the wall, and either we mobilize to take peaceful measures to recultivate our natural and cultural environment or... well, there is no other way. Moving to another planet or planetary system is hardly realistic.

Counteracting environmental degradation, violence, evil, poverty, wars, and terrorism is not a new test facing people, our institutions and various organizations, especially international ones. We entered the 21 century confronted with a major challenge posed by terrorism and alarmed by its growing intensity and changes in its forms. But what are the causes of terrorism? Who are the terrorists? Why do they knowingly sacrifice their lives in terrorist acts? What can be done to prevent the escalation of violence as well as the death and suffering of many innocent people? Are changes in civilization and culture linked to the growing intensity of

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violence and terrorism? What steps should be taken to prevent all these tragedies and misfortunes?

Terrorism, along with its causes, methods of action, and consequences, requires in-depth analysis from different perspectives (including sociological, psychological, economic, anthropological, political, and military). In the globalizing social world, we must take into account different sides of violence-generating conflict, especially the motives of terrorists and those who are hiding behind them. Is it possible to peacefully resolve such conflicts and disputes between people, societies, nations, cultures, and religions? Are education, upbringing, and preventive measures effective in countering the intensification of terrorism? Does counter-terrorism education, if taken seriously (systemically prepared and designed to reach every corner of the globe), perhaps still make sense?

I will not attempt to resolve these questions here. Rather, the reflections I offer in this chapter on civilization, culture, and education are just the tip of the iceberg – we must climb it, look around, and strive to perceive our social problems in new dimensions. In these considerations, therefore, I will especially draw upon the knowledge of great humanists, along with their projections and warnings, who undertake many pedagogical initiatives imbued with humanistic values and concern for the world's future. In addition, I will present major international and Polish educational initiatives, simultaneously suggesting the need for their more in-depth analysis and evaluation.

I will not comment on the concept or implementation of new school curricula. The Polish Ministry of National Education published a new core curriculum in February 2017, and new textbooks are hastily being written. One would presume that environmental protection and education for safety will be important goals in the field of education. However, speaking about goals requires a careful analysis of the textbooks and methods for teaching specific subjects and curricula. In this sense, I see a need for humanistic values and peace-minded education. I am convinced that steps should be taken to evaluate the efforts made so far to ensure the peaceful coexistence of different nations, religions, and cultures and to translate theoretical knowledge, the results of empirical research, and important humanistic ideas into concrete educational projects aimed at fostering greater tolerance for “otherness” and understanding for cultural diversity. However, we must not remain silent about the hidden and important causes of conflict, rooted both in the human psyche and in economic and political mechanisms.

2. Where are we headed? What is our nature?

For many generations, people, or at least those who are involved in the exchange of knowledge about humans and their culture, have shared a common belief that culture does not appear out of nowhere, nor is it bestowed upon us, humans, once and for all – rather, we ourselves keep culture pertinent through our

In the postmodern world, humans are compared or reduced to the role of vagrants and/or tourists. So the questions arise: Where are we headed? For what purpose? Are we satisfied? Are we fated to be alone? Are we happy?

Such a world, being posited no longer only by futurists, is strange, incomprehensible, and mysterious, but also terrifying. Does it really mean that nothing can be done? Is this state inevitable? If we also factor in the present, with its wars, poverty, intolerance, diseases, and terrorist attacks, all of which also make up the universe of our civilization, we will arrive at a picture of the world that a human with prosocial attitudes and imbued with humanistic values would surely like to forget about as soon as possible, and to turn by magic into a world that is friendly to people and nature, to everyone.

3. Diagnoses, forecasts, warnings

Back in the 20th century, numerous attempts were made to counter various threats. Interdisciplinary scientific reports were written, warning against the degradation of the natural environment, the depletion of natural resources and energy sources, and so on.

In 1972, the Club of Rome published a report entitled *The Limits to Growth*. It signaled a global catastrophe, warning people against the imprudent exploitation of natural resources – a catastrophe that would occur if the world continues to develop based exclusively on economic, quantitative criteria. This alarming forecast shows the limits of growth. It mentions the positive impact in the form of considerably longer life expectancy but also looks critically at the poor quality of life. The fact that millions of people still live in poverty is terrifying. The report also lists the results of the Industrial Revolution, which contributed to the supply of low-cost workforce yet generated the serious problem of unemployment and threats to the natural environment. The report proved an important warning against the consequences of economic exploitation pursued by humans. It called for moderation, prudence, and respect for the natural environment.

Subsequent reports have highlighted the role of education in the processes of the development of societies and the struggle for peace in the world. Such documents called for measures aimed at creating conditions for the emergence of a learning society, education for peace, and a humanistic civilization based on knowledge and information.

The UNESCO report written by Edgar Faure et al. entitled *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*⁸ emphasized the need for education on coexistence and collaboration with others as a necessary condition of the safe existence of human beings. In its preamble, the report expresses its concerns about

⁸ Report of the International Commission on the Development of Education, published in 1972.

the dehumanization of the world. It also asserts that the existential aspect of everyday life should manifest itself in the empowerment-based approach to personal development.

In 1979, in turn, the Club of Rome published the report entitled *No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap*, which included the concept of lifelong learning (the report referred back to *The Limits of Growth*).

Different concepts of human development have been developed in laboratories and studies of scholars, and various projects have been posited to harness new technologies and scientific accomplishments in the service of humans. All to no avail. The chasm between technological civilization and humanistic civilization, described so vividly and persuasively by Bogdan Suchodolski,⁹ is widening. Indeed, This has been noted in consecutive publications written by concerned scholars.

In 1981, the Club of Rome issued Aurelio Peccei's report *One Hundred Pages for the Future*, which pointed to diversified socioeconomic and cultural growth. The publication was guided by the idea "act locally, think globally." Aurelio Peccei refers to the young generation, arguing that the world's future is in the hands of young people, who should understand threats and find ways to save the world.

In 1996, another report was published: *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Its lead author, Jacques Delors, stresses the importance of the new quality of education. Here, we should point out to four pillars of education:

- learning to know,
- learning to do,
- learning to live together, to live with others,
- learning to be.

In 1995, a team led by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar wrote the UNESCO report entitled *Our Creative Diversity*. It argues that the imperative for education derives from the dialectic of community and diversity. What is important is the creative diversity of identity and local cultures. Cultures must be protected against globalization, marginalization, and degradation.

Another UN initiative involved compiling the report entitled *In From the Margins* on 1998. It could be described as supplementary to a report written for the Council of Europe (CoE) by the European Task Force for Culture and Development.¹⁰ The report's central themes are "two interlocking priorities: to bring the millions of dispossessed and disadvantaged Europeans in from the margins of society, and cultural policy in from the margins of governance." The report highlights the role of culture as a factor behind social advancement and social integration. The role of culture in education for tolerance and peace is not without importance in this context.

⁹ B. Suchodolski, "Dramat upowszechniania kultury," in *Współczesne dylematy upowszechniania kultury: Materiały z konferencji*, ed. J. Gajda, Lublin 1991, pp. 8–19.

¹⁰ *In From the Margins* is treated as a supplement to the report *Our Creative Diversity*.

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Further deliberations on the problems faced by the modern-day world and the need for more intensive and systematic educational action were undertaken by the “Poland 2000” Foresight Committee affiliated with the Presidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), later renamed the “Poland 2000 Plus” Committee, then the Foresight Committee “Poland in the 21st Century.”

Among many topics of the conferences organized by the Foresight Committee affiliated with the PAS Presidium, subsequently summed up in published volumes, we can name two directly linked to the education of the future:

- Culture as an Inspiration for General Education,¹¹
- the Ethos of Education in the 21st Century.¹²

In her introduction to the first of these publications, Irena Wojnar writes: “There is a strengthening conviction that from the perspective of the world’s further existence and development, it is necessary to intensify what is referred to as the human factor, or the creative presence of thinking, sensitive, and active humans, individuals and groups. (...) From the perspective of the reality of the postulated democracy and the new world order, education emerges as a tool and as a chance for the planned social changes focused on humanistic values, or the properly understood freedom, pluralism, tolerance, and human rights. (...) Education should lead to the development of culture in people.”¹³ These reflections are an obvious continuation of the concept contained in Suchodolski’s *Wychowanie dla przyszłości* [Education for the Future], which called for the development of education and culture, stimulated by the personal actions taken by people in the service of humanistic civilization. Neil Postman, in turn, pins certain hopes on change in the world, on education that takes advantage of cultural goods.¹⁴

In Poland, the following concepts have emerged: education for art and through art, esthetic education, cultural education, intercultural education, and so on. Efforts were made to put into effect the Interministerial Program of Cultural Education, which highlighted strong links between the values of symbolic culture, ecocodevelopment measures, cultural education, peace, tolerance, and anti-discrimination measures.¹⁵ In 1998, Janusz Gajda urged the treatment of culture as *regnum homini*, as opposed to the treatment of culture in market terms. Maybe we should return – or perhaps we even must return – to the concepts that have already been worked out in the realm of the pedagogy of culture?¹⁶

¹¹ *Kultura inspiracją kształcenia ogólnego*, a collective volume edited by I. Wojnar and J. Kubin, Warsaw 1998.

¹² *Etos edukacji w XXI wieku*, a collection of studies edited by I. Wojnar, Warsaw 2000.

¹³ *Kultura inspiracją kształcenia ogólnego*, Warsaw 1998, eds. I. Wojnar and J. Kubin, introduction

¹⁴ N. Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

¹⁵ The document was adopted on 27 November 1966 by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland. Those who contributed to the development of the program included in particular: Assoc. Prof. Wiesława Pielasińska and Agata Bielawska, director of the Department of Cultural Education at the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art.

¹⁶ The chapter “Kultura jako regnum homini i kultura w kategoriach rynku – wyzwania dla edukacji,” in *Kultura inspiracją kształcenia ogólnego*, op. cit.

4. Education for peace

The preamble of the UNESCO Constitution of 1945 stipulates that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”¹⁷ Ettore Gelpi, in turn, argues that the culture of peace cannot be exclusively a culture of negation, but rather “should be a culture of community on the global scale,” a culture of opposing violence in various forms, in interpersonal relations and between groups.”¹⁸ Indeed, those who have spoken out in the discussion about the future of the world and the role of education in the improvement of the world have included the likes of the Italian thinker Umberto Eco.¹⁹

In the wake of the great tragedy of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 that claimed the lives of thousands, there began to be much discussion on terrorist threats and the ways to counter them. Blame started to be placed on Islam and the culture that had its roots in Islam. But there were also voices that blamed the culture of the West. In his *Holy Wars, Passion and Reason, Scattered Thoughts on Cultural Superiority*, polemicizing with the arguments of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who professes the superiority of the Western culture over Islam, Umberto Eco pointed out the West’s unilateral approach to Islamic culture and the resultant threats for the education of the new generation of young Europeans. He writes that “[w]hat isn’t incidental, and should worry everyone – politicians, religious leaders, educators – is that certain declarations, or even entire impassioned articles that have somehow justified them, become a subject for general debate, occupy the minds of young people, and perhaps induce them to fervent conclusions in the heat of the moment. It is our young people I am concerned about, as it is too late now to teach the old ones any new tricks. All the religious wars that have bloodied the world for centuries are born from vehement adhesion to simplistic opposing views, such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, good and bad, black and white. (...) One element of confusion is that we often fail to grasp the difference between identifying with our own roots, while understanding that other roots also exist, and the ability to distinguish between good and bad.”²⁰

Eco also points out to the importance of the objective analysis of differences between civilizations, “because that’s the point in hand.” Referring to the methods

¹⁷ <http://portal.unesco.org/en>

¹⁸ Gelpi, E. (1992) *Conscience Terrienne – Recherche et Formation*. Firenze: McColl Publisher. See above *op. cit.*

¹⁹ e.g. in Poland in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13–14 October 2001, article “Święte wojny, pasja i rozum”. See the next footnote.

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *Holy Wars, Passion and Reason, Scattered Thoughts on Cultural Superiority*, Quaderns de la Mediterrània, 10. Intercultural Dialogue between Europe and the Mediterranean/El diàlego intercultural entre Europa y el Mediterráneo, IEMed, Barcelona, 2008, pp. 29-36, https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/10/q10_029.pdf

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of anthropological research of different cultures, Eco urges us to follow their example. “The real lesson that should be learnt from cultural anthropology is rather that in order to assert that one culture is superior to another, we need to set some parameters. Describing what a culture consists of is one thing, but saying which parameters we judge it on is something else entirely. (...) The parameters for judging them, however, are something else entirely. They depend on our roots, our preferences, our customs, our passions, and on our system of values.”

While asking himself if there are superior and inferior cultures, Eco answers: it’s not so simple. However, one thing is certain: the peaceful coexistence of different cultures requires tolerance for diversity, mutual understanding, education, and acceptance of differences.

Learning to understand different cultures involves mutual observations and mutual peaceful contacts. Through such reflection, we learn a new method of getting to know other cultures, learning to tolerate them, and accepting differences. Eco proposes the implementation of what is referred to as alternative anthropology, which facilitates the exchange of researchers from different continents and cultures for the purpose of conducting their own anthropological research. (For some years now, the international organization Transcultura has been campaigning for “alternative anthropology.”)

Here, it seems that we simply must quote a statement by Irena Wojnar’s statement.²¹ In the chapter “*Kształtowanie kultury pokoju – zobowiązaniem edukacyjnym na XXI wiek*” [Shaping a Culture of Peace as an Educational Duty for the 21st Century] whose title, as I believe, may (and even should) provide an inspiration for the identification of the most important tasks for the people who live in the 21st century, she writes: “We can observe a special intensification of ethical controversy that has dangerous consequences for public life and the life of individuals. Over the past decade, there have been growing, new manifestations of the absence of transparency in the world and the confusion experienced by man, scared by the limitless horizon of freedom.”

Numerous variants of new nihilism are intensifying moral indifference, desensitization, and consumption-based models of life, sanctioning signs of violence in different forms. The trend described by Konrad Lorenz as “the waning of humaneness” is growing in strength.²² Alain Finkielkraut analyzes the phenomenon of “lost humanity” in the times of the intensification of evil, cruelty, and “*la souffrance inutile*” (unnecessary suffering).²³

In the globalized world, violence in different forms scores easy and spectacular victories, justifying a certain need, or perhaps even the necessity of raising in a modern and interdependent way the problems of “repairing the world” and “repairing man,” as John Amos Comenius put it so many years ago, in

²¹ *Etos edukacji w XXI wieku, op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.

²² K. Lorenz. *The Waning of Humaneness*, 1983.

²³ A. Finkielkraut, *L’humanité perdue*, 1966.

analyzing “the labyrinth of the world” and “the paradise of the heart.”²⁴ After all, wars are waged both in the world and “within man,” as Erich Fromm argued.

In 1996, another UN initiative for peace was taken. An attempt was made to work out the project of education for peace. It is worth stressing that it was not the first initiative of this kind. We owe the beginnings of education for peace to Maria Montessori (1870–1952), who was active in this field in the 1930s. Those who continue her work notice a strong need for action for the promotion of the culture of peace, whose scope covers numerous aspects – it is meant to boost sensitivity to the values of local culture and the protection of monuments, highlight cultural ecology, and cultural education for the defense of the values of peace.²⁵

We share the views expressed by Wojnar and Suchodolski and therefore feel obliged to repeat after those prominent humanists that the culture of peace should be seen as a fundamental factor behind the ethos of education in the 21st century. In 1983, Suchodolski formulated conclusions that are still valid: “Education for the sake of peace means shaping people’s awareness and attitudes in a such a way as to enable them to work together to overcome different threats to peace, which have their source in the human psyche, ideological systems, the world’s social and political reality, injustice and harm as well as conflicts that have material justifications.” Suchodolski called for the implementation of two complementary and interrelated tasks. He described these tasks as “harmony in the world” and “harmony within people.”²⁶

5. What is to come?

All warnings of a crisis of values and all calls for peace of tolerance can, of course, be ignored. But not indefinitely.

We can say that certain ideas are utopian, that nothing can actually be done, that people are in fact helpless. Culture and civilization have spun out of our control. Everything has been objectified. I believe, however, it is instead high time for a global social contract that will embrace all the fundamental principles of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between nations, societies, and countries as well as fundamental guarantees of the implementation of these principles.

It is therefore worth pondering the overriding values necessary for the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of humans and groups of people. It is worth setting goals that we can strive for together as humans. It is worth discussing the directions and quality of socialization. It is worth working out methods and techniques of education that could lead to positive changes in the local surroundings and in the world in which we live. It is also worth investing in universal humanistic education.

²⁴ J. A. Comenius, *Labirynt of the World and Paradise of the Heart*, 1631

²⁵ *Etos edukacji w XXI wieku, op. cit.*, pp. 17–30.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.

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Maybe what I am writing about is another utopia? Nevertheless, there are more and more people who are advocating a social contract in this (or a similar) form. Federico Mayor, former director-general of UNESCO and author of the social analysis and forecast included in the report *The World Ahead: Our Future in the Making*, cites the words of Denis de Rougemont: “The decadence of a society begins when people ask: *What is going to happen?*, instead of asking themselves *What can I do?*”²⁷ The borders of every human being’s responsibility for the survival of the human species are shifting closer and closer towards us, and alarm bells are ringing louder and louder.

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²⁷ Federico Mayor, *The World Ahead: Our Future in the Making*, 2001. The report is based on a careful analysis of documents, statistics, and studies by international institutions and prominent experts and uses the databases, reports, and documents of UNESCO and its specialized institutions and agencies.

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