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THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION[1]

When East European countries joined the European Union, linguistic and cultural diversity increased, and generated new conflicts even as some attempt was made to use diversity to build a stronger democracy and develop Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC).[2] In recent decades, such problems have been sharply exacerbated by the largest inflow of refugees ever to sweep over Europe. Languages are being promoted[3] while they pose a serious challenge when some people are denied the right to keep their na-

[1] This text is an updated version of a shorter paper published in *Critical Essays on Contemporary European Culture and Society*, ed. U. W. Beitter (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 42–52.

[2] The Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) project was initiated in 1997. Its aim was to identify (a) which values and skills individuals needed in order to become actively engaged citizens; (b) how they can acquire those skills; and (c) how they can learn to pass them on to others. In 2010, the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education was adopted by the Organisation's 47 member states in the framework of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7. On 28–29 November 2012, in Strasbourg, France, over two hundred participants from all over Europe and beyond attended the Conference on "Human Rights and Democracy in Action – Looking Ahead: The impact of the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education."

[3] As the European Year of Languages 2001 began developing projects in almost all European countries and in many cities, and European educational systems were asked to integrate the "European dimension" in their syllabi, the question of languages became more than ever a serious challenge in Europe. On the eve of the closing event of the Year, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers decided to declare a "European Day of Languages" on 26 September each year, to celebrate linguistic diversity, plurilingualism, and lifelong language learning.

tive language and culture in their own homeland,[4] while some immigrants can see their rights to their language and culture of origin preserved. Is it possible to develop a European educational system (systems?) which could keep and in some cases revive languages and cultural diversity and at one and the same time develop European democratic citizenship consciousness? To explore this question, I shall refer to Derrida and his concepts of "an ideal of democracy" and "democracy to come"[5] as tightly linked to language and human rights, basing my analysis on three of his major texts: *Right to Philosophy*, *The Other Heading*, *Specters of Marx*, and *Talking Liberties*.

Defining democracy

In Derrida's "ideal of democracy," the key word is "ideal"; for it stresses that his reference is not to democracy "as we know it today, not democracy as a reliable state of things" determined by Western societies.[6] In *Specters of Marx* and *The Other Heading*, in "Call it a day for democracy" in particular, Derrida discusses the concept of democracy as something which "remains to be invented. *Every day*. At least."[7] He makes it clear that the social, political, philosophical, and economic dimensions of our world have changed, are still changing, and that intellectuals the world over have to re-think the meaning of "old" paradigms, and develop new ones. For example, what is the new model for a democratic society in the face of problems of homelessness, refugees, violence, fierce nationalisms, virulent ethnocentrism, xenophobia, "cleansing," and exterminations? For Derrida, the future holds a promise, for "at the core of the idea of democracy there is a promise," that of the "ideal of democracy."[8] It entails "some openness to the future, and this openness to the future and this

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[4] E.g., in the 2000 Eurobarometer survey, Irish was declared to be "foreign" by 38% of the Irish people.

[5] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," in: *Derrida & Education*, ed. G. J. J. Biesta and D. Egéa-Kuehne, London: Routledge, 2001, 380. Interview of Jacques Derrida by Alan Montefiore in the Oxford Amnesty Series of Lectures, 13 February 1992.

[6] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 396.

[7] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading. Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. B. Nass, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, 98. Original emphasis.

[8] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 396.

openness to the other imply that we do not simply reconstruct," as Montefiore suggested.[9] That is why, Derrida insists, when "you refer to … democracy, you have to speak of democracy *today* … democracy to come,"[10] and experienced as always possible. But note that it does not mean a democracy which will realize itself only in a future time, nor a "regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or … a utopia."[11]

By "democracy to come," Derrida refers to the very concept of democracy as "the concept of a promise" which can manifest itself only where there is disruption and upheaval, when there exists a gap between the present state of democracies and the ideal of democracy. Thus the *apparent* failure of democracy is "*a priori* and by definition" characteristic of "*all* democracies, including the oldest and most stable of so-called Western democracies."[12] In fact, it is in this very gap that democracy is being shaped, "between an infinite promise … and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise."[13] In this gap heterogeneity must be preserved, "as the only chance of an affirmed, or rather re-affirmed future."[14] Without this gap, without this disjunction, without this "*diastema*," democracy may simply believe, *in all good conscience*, to have succeeded, to "ha[ve] done one's duty," and therefore may lose "the chance of the future, of the promise or the [call] … of the desire also (that is [the chance of] its very possibility)."[15]

Derrida reminds us that, inherent in that notion of democracy, there is the necessity to be vigilant when discussing such idioms, and to look critically at "[t]he best intentioned of European projects, those which are quite apparently and explicitly pluralistic, democratic, and tolerant."[16] Within their supposedly clearly understood meaning, and despite the best intentions to remain true to their "spirit," lurks the danger of wanting to "impose the homogeneity of a me-

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[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 396. Original emphasis.

[11] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New Interntional*, trans. P. Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge, 1994, 65.

[12] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 64. Original emphasis.

[13] *Ibidem*, 65.

[14] *Ibidem*, 37.

[15] *Ibidem*, 28.

[16] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 54.

dium, of discursive norms and models."[17] For example, talking about Europe, Derrida wondered – and his words ring more true than ever[18] – whether

> the future will … escape monstrosity… [For] in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences, those that we recognize all too well without yet having thought them through, the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also, and there is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very "spirit" of the promise.[19]

The challenge of access to rights, democracy, languages, and education

Derrida discussed at long length his concern about "the problems of the access … of people who until now had no access to human rights – children, women, and so on and so forth."[20] This is in part why Derrida's texts are especially significant when discussing the consequences of exclusion due to the hierarchies prevailing in the so-called history of the West.[21] He has denounced the limits of any institutional discourse on democracy. Derrida's profound understanding, informed by experience, is at the root of some most perceptive discussions of the dynamics of exclusion, discrimination, and exile, and he calls on us to "never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering."[22] An analysis of questions of exclusion and privilege, hegemony and access to language, knowledge, educational institutions, and democracy can be traced throughout his writings, conferences,

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[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] E.g., see the latest elections (Brexit, American presidential) and upcoming elections (France, Germany).

[19] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 6.

[20] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 398.

[21] I have previously discussed the problems of human rights and access to education, especially in the context of Eastern Europe. See, "The Challenge of Freedom in Eastern Europe: Derrida's Ethics of Affirmation and Educational Responsibility," in: *The New Europe at the Crossroads*, ed. U. E. Beitter, New York: Peter Lang, 1999, 25–38; and "Paths to Integration and/or Multiculturalism: Cultural Crossroads and/of Education," in: *The New Europe at the Crossroads II*, ed. U. E. Beitter, New York: Peter Lang, 2000, 89–109.

[22] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 85.

and seminars. In addition, these questions are the specific focus of the texts he gathered in *Du droit à la philosophie*.[23] In these texts, Derrida explores the conditions of access to philosophy, to the "proper" discourse, to language, to instruction, research, publication, and to the "legitimacy" of philosophy and education. He asks: Who has a right of access to philosophy, education, language? Who holds their power or privilege? Where does the responsibility lie, to whom, for whom?

When discussing "the right to a quality education"[24] the problem of language becomes a major issue. In cases where educational opportunities are diminished or denied through linguistic control or coercion, some children may find themselves excluded from the learning process, and later, as members of the community, they may lose all abilities to participate in the democratic process, in the governing of their region, and in the decisions which affect their lives. For, says Derrida, "[i]f there are human rights, which means universally valid human rights, they should be accessible, understandable to everyone, whatever language they understand or they speak."[25] Derrida often discussed the importance of the affirmation of language and its link to responsibility as a commitment to speak to one another, to listen to the other's language, to "hear" one another, to "get along." In Europe, and in any country, it is necessary more than ever to consider this affirmation of language, and the problem of idioms and translation, in order to "avoid both the nationalistic tensions of linguistic difference and the violent homogenization of languages through the neutrality of a translating medium that would *claim* to be transparent, metalinguistic, and universal."[26]

Some measures have been proposed to minimize the damaging impact of imposing dominant norms through education. For example, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*[27] establishes some fundamental rights, some which specifically address education, like *Article 14*:

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[23] J. Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie*, Paris: Editions Galilée, 1990, trans. J. Plug and others and published in two volumes: *Who's Afraid of Pholosophy? Right to Philosophy 1* (2002), and *Eyes of the University. Right to Philosophy 2* (2004).

[24] UNICEF, The State of the World Children. www.unicef.org/sowc99 and www.unicef.org/sowc16. Last (accessed: 6 December 2016).

[25] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 391.

[26] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 58. Added emphasis.

[27] http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf (accessed: 6 December 2016).

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

However, the dilemma, as Derrida points out, is that while it is necessary to respect minorities, differences, singularities, idioms, and languages, it is *at one and the same time* imperative to respect also "the universality of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and univocality, the law of the majority, opposition to racism, nationalism, and xenophobia."[28]

Before addressing the problem of this *aporia*, it is necessary to consider two closely related issues: the paradox inherent in the concept of universal rights, and the question of language as a commitment for access to education.

The paradox of universal rights

In his long introduction to *Du droit à la philosophie*, "Privilège," Derrida discussed what he saw as the paradox of human rights. He showed how the so-called *Universal* Declaration of Human Rights, "while claiming to be grounded in the concept of natural rights," is actually dependent upon a *topos*, and "a lexicon of justification or jurisdiction, of legitimation or foundation."[29] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is grounded in history, and in his Oxford Amnesty lecture, Derrida reminded his audience that the human rights, "what we call the human rights is a set of concepts, laws, requirements which were not given in nature, from the beginning."[30] The concept of human rights has been developed over time, through a number of declarations which have gradually determined it and given it its shape and content. However, the rights to education, to instruction, to culture, to language, are only relatively recently

[28] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 78.

[29] J. Derrida, "Privilège," in: *Du Droit à la Philosophie*, 55.

[30] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 392.

developed concepts, which emerged as human rights were being refined, redefined, and more and more specifically determined. So, the words Derrida pronounced concerning the university can also apply to human rights: "Here, for example, is not an indifferent place."[31]

Derrida showed how the concept of human rights "also implies a philosophy" which, also, often claims to be universal; although, as he pointed out, it is hardly the case.[32] For while one often tends to consider philosophy "a universal discourse, [which] crosses the borders of languages, nations, determined groups" and which "claims to address the universal problem,"[33] its concepts of culture, instruction, and education, actually also "have a history, a genealogy (*paideia, skholè, cultura, Bildung*, and so on) and a very complex structure."[34] From the beginning, they have been linked with specific cities and languages (Greek, Latin, French, German), and a familiar tradition outside which "the word[s] [do] not mean anything."[35]

Furthermore, for Derrida, "the right to education [also] supposes the knowledge and the teaching of rights and the law"; and in order to gain access to rights and the law, individuals first need access to "the ability to read and interpret, in short, [it supposes access] to instruction."[36] Derrida saw this circular reasoning as inscribed in the concept of "power" (*pouvoir*, as a verb: to be able/to be allowed to; and as a noun: power; also akin to the term "empowerment") with a play on the concepts of authorization and of ability. Derrida wondered how to satisfy both of these exigencies of *pouvoir*: "By a being able/allowed-to-interpret, being able/allowed-to-speak, to write, to decipher?"[37] That power – given, as in being-allowed; or taken, as in being-able – this empowerment, have to go "through the practice of the language" and "through philosophy: through the constitution of power as linguistic and philosophical competence." Derrida saw the latter (philosophical competence) as being inscribed within the circle of access and education, but also as "the condition of the circulation of the circle."[38]

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[31] J. Derrida, *Du Droit à la Philosophie*, 113.

[32] J. Derrida, "Privilège," 58.

[33] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 399.

[34] J. Derrida, "Privilège," 56.

[35] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 391.

[36] J. Derrida, "Privilège," 63.

[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] *Ibidem*, 64.

It is necessary to do a "genealogical analysis [i.e., "deconstruction"] of the trajectory through which the concept [of human rights] has been built, used, legitimized."[39] Assumptions must be uncovered and critically examined through a tracing of its history, and of its use as a philosophical, ethical, juridical, or political concept in order to take into consideration these specific determinations. For Derrida, its link to an ideal of democracy is evident on another level. Like democracy, the concept of human rights is still always in the making, always to-come, *à venir*, while the universal declaration of human rights is still being written; the latter can never be a finished process, but rather a promise as the ideal of a declaration to-come. In any case, Derrida stressed, it is of paramount importance that "[i]f there are human rights, which means universally valid human rights, they should be accessible, understandable to everyone, whatever language they understand or they speak."[40] For Derrida, the paradox of a right to education lies in the fact that it implies an education already determined by concepts and by language.

The question of language and languages

As illustrated by Derrida's experience and that of his schoolmates in Algiers, Algeria, described in *Monolingualism of the other*, the actual access to education through language is in fact discriminating on two counts. (1) A lack of familiarity with the "right" language, even within one's "own" language, in effect, works out a discrimination. Those who do not, or cannot, use that particular language or their own variety of that language "*in a certain way,*"[41] linked to history and genealogy, to connotations, styles, rhetoric, potential semantic, characteristic of specific groups and social classes, can find themselves, in actuality,[42] excluded from access to education. (2) Access to human rights and their content can be assured only by instruction, education, and knowledge of the language. Even when education, and education in the language, can enable one to perceive the rights to education and their instrumentation, not everyone has access to this

[39] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 391.

[40] *Ibidem*.

[41] J. Derrida, "Privilège," 52. Original emphasis.

[42] Nearly 40 years ago, a major worldwide survey was conducted for the UN (Capotorti, 1979) on government released information to assess "how minorities were treated *de jure* and *de facto*" (Phillipson 1992: 94).

understanding – at least, to the understanding of the "essential" part of the language – because there is a distinction between understanding its linguistic expression, and the hermeneutics of its content. One must learn how to read. In that sense, the question of language is tightly linked to what Derrida called the "technical condition of access."[43]

This is why, when we talk about the right to education, this question cannot be avoided: Is education a universal – i.e., natural – right? As such, is it accessible? And as such, does it not entail an essential relation with the experience of language, school, and education, where access to education must go through a language and its sub-codes which are all, as we have seen, generally dependent on, or enforced by, the dominant language and its culture. Moreover, "even if we could do without any institutions … schools … disciplines" and curricula, wrote Derrida, "language would still be indispensable."[44]

Since one cannot dissociate concepts from language, from what one insists on calling natural language, and since yet, from the very beginning, both concepts and language were determined by a cultural, historical, national, and ethnical context, one must be aware of the fact that this supposedly universal translator imports or conveys with it some national hegemony. Derrida reminds us that international law and international institutions were born in, and defined by, the West. So far, they all are "Western texts, Western discourses." Not linked to any particular nation, they are nevertheless very European, said Derrida, indicating that nowadays, "European" – i.e., Western – culture encompasses "also the United States, maybe Japan too."[45] Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its rhetoric may seem transparent enough, Derrida showed how they are nevertheless tightly linked to language, to a particular language, to its practice, its use, and its understanding. As mentioned above, the concept of human rights also implies a philosophy, a certain concept of truth and of its relation to language. Language is not neutral as Derrida pointed out: "[a]s soon as you reaffirm your own language, your own idiom … there is the beginning of some nationalistic affirmation."[46]

Which is why we have to be careful, to be "vigilant," a term often used by Derrida. And we need to think new kinds of teaching, and new ways of thinking. But again, while traditionally we were asked to make a choice between

[43] J. Derrida, "Privilège," 60.

[44] *Ibidem*, 51.

[45] J. Derrida, "Talking Liberties," 401.

[46] *Ibidem*, 403.

singularity and plurality, Derrida called on us *not* to make a choice, but rather to face a dual responsibility: "how is it possible to reaffirm singularity, minority, specific idioms, natural languages, without giving rise to what we call nationalism in its violent and imperialistic form?"[47]

The dual exigencies of education

This dilemma, this double injunction, this paradox of universality, is a challenge for all educators to develop an ability to mediate differences and boundaries, exclusions and violence, hierarchies and borders, whether they are concerned with language, rights, or democracy. How can one respond *to*, respond *for*, be responsible *to and for* two imperatives? For example, how can one respond both to the necessity of respecting the voice of the other, the idiom of the other, the heterogeneity which welcomes the other, which is the necessary condition for the very presence of the other, *and at one and the same time*, to the necessity of a universal formal law? How can one satisfy to the conflicting imperatives of "neither monopoly, nor dispersion"?[48] How can one choose between two equally imperative injunctions? And why, Derrida stressed, is it so important that we should *not* have to choose? In *The Other Heading*, Derrida described such dilemmas and paradoxes when discussing the "new" Europe, and gave examples of *aporias*, of "double duties" which can also help us reflect on education and its dual responsibilities. Specifically addressing European issues, these double duties are characteristic of the challenge educators have to face the world over, wherever diverse ethnic and racial groups have to live side by side.[49]

These double injunctions, contradictions, *aporias*, are, according to Derrida, the essence of responsibility. Derrida described and discussed extensively and in most of his texts how these dilemmas are inherent in the concept of responsibility, are in fact *the very condition* of its possibility. For "at a certain point, promise and decision, which is to say responsibility, owe their possibility to the ordeal of indecisive nature of something which will always remain their condition."[50] He repeatedly stressed that, if there is an easy decision to make,

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[47] *Ibidem*, 401.

[48] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41.

[49] *Ibidem*, 76–78.

[50] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 75.

and only a set of rules to follow, or a program to implement, there is, in fact, no decision to be made, therefore, no responsibility to be taken.

Derrida linked this concept – this condition of possibility as being dependent on the simultaneous necessity of a condition of impossibility – to a notion of "messianic" approach to the experience of the promise. It is by opening a space for the affirmation of this promise, of the "messianic and emancipatory promise as promise,"[51] of the impossible event as a promise, that it will preserve its capital of possibilities, of dynamic ideal in-the-making, to-come. Derrida warned that there is danger in settling for an easy consensus, for "transparency," since while "claiming to speak in the name of intelligibility, good sense, common sense, or [supposedly] the democratic ethic, this discourse tends, by means of these very things, and as if naturally, to discredit anything that complicates this model"[52] As soon as we settle for a common space, we turn all possibilities into a program or into an "onto-theological or teleo-eschatological scheme."[53] Derrida defined "the condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility" as "a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention.*"[54] He also showed how closely related *aporia*, responsibility and ethics are declaring: "ethics, politics and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and the experiment of the *aporia*."[55]

The challenge of education for democratic citizenship in Europe lies in the paradoxical task educational systems are asked to accomplish, i.e., to reinforce national identity and to reduce cultural differences while at the same time developing the "European dimension" and preserving cultural diversity. Despite the rhetoric on promoting multiculturalism, some national school systems still banish "minority and regional languages." While the member states may be willing to accept new European programs (e.g., Erasmus, Europass, Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci, Come-

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[51] *Ibidem*.

[52] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 55.

[53] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 75.

[54] J. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41. Original emphasis.

[55] *Ibidem*.

nius) and develop the educational "European dimension," it is unlikely that they would accept any loss of authority over their own educational system.

The European Year of Languages 2001 prompted the development of projects in almost all European countries and in many cities, as European educational systems were asked to integrate the "European dimension" in their syllabi. Yet the question remains of whether it is possible to develop a European educational system which could preserve, and in some cases revive, languages and cultural diversity, *and at one and the same time*, develop a European citizenship consciousness. We saw that there is a tight link among languages, human rights, and democracy. The role language plays in gaining access to human rights and freedom, and the responsibility facing education in re-evaluating, re-considering, and re-interpreting its position along a continuum of double-imperative are paramount. Considering the *aporetic* nature of education and its issues of rights and languages, overlooked in all proposed models of education and curriculum, is not the necessary step to recognize that our true dilemma is not a choice? Rather, should we not refuse to settle for easy consensus, simplify, neutralize, or translate, and accept and assume the responsibility to think, speak, and act within *aporetic* situations, under the double contradictory imperatives of a continuum of what Derrida calls "double duty"?