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Labyrinth of the World and Castle of Knowledge

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“Labyrinth of the world and castle of knowledge,” the topic of my speech today is a loan from the time Pedagogy started its process as a discipline. *“Labyrinth of the world and paradise of the heart”* is the title of an early work by Jan Amos Comenius, the father of modern Pedagogy and the idea of the school for all.

In this book, the world is portrayed as a chaotic complex of roads and buildings, with two castles dominating in it: the castle of happiness and the castle of knowledge, to which, as it is always the case with castles, access is limited to only a few people. A young man decides to gain insight and to understand this world and thus accepts the help of two guides, the Omniscient and the Deceiver, and with a pair of special glasses as technical gear he starts his study-tour. At the beginning, he thinks he sees a harmonious world, later, however, he realizes it is a world of tears, conflicts and agony and that the harmonious order, which he thinks he has discovered thanks to his guides and his special glasses, is in fact the result of manipulation. In the end, he realizes that access to knowledge is possible only when the heart of the individual is deliberately and consciously used as a departure point.

Using contemporary rhetoric we can interpret this metaphor as follows: the world is a labyrinth, for its understanding, it does not suffice to use eloquent guides and modern technical gear. Its recognition or misinterpretation depends on the value system an individual has embraced. This value system gives function to educators and technical equipment.

This was the starting point for Comenius and based on it, several decades later, he wrote *“Great Didactics”* thus establishing Pedagogy and the idea of education for all. In other words, this was the starting point for *“new learning”* in the 17th century – a process with positive consequences to every one of us until today.

A clarification becomes necessary here: This image of the world as a labyrinth was not Comenius’ invention. It was the prevalent image of the world at the time, as many literary and countless art works of the era show.

What was new, though, and can be considered Comenius' contribution to new learning, is summarized in the following points:

- ✚ First, the confidence that the world appears as a labyrinth only as long as people are unable to identify the internal logic governing its function—for Comenius, this internal logic was divine order.
- ✚ Second, the recognition that education may be responsible for the deceptive image of the world or, in contrast, it may facilitate people to discover the real laws governing the world, and
- ✚ Third, the conviction that in the world, there exists, as an innate element of the order governing it, a form of education of general power, which educators are simply called on to discover and implement.

In this sense, for the founders of new learning in the 17th century, schools should cease to be “castles of knowledge” for the few and chosen and should become “workshops of humanity” –as Comenius called them– for everyone. In other words, schools should become institutions in which people acquire the ability to transform the world from a labyrinth to a familiar place of residence.

I opted for the reference to logic, which launched the previous educational revolution, to remind all of us the relations existing between the worldview, the view of the role of education and the view of the form of education. Now let me pose the question: Are educational systems in today's “new learning” “castles of knowledge” or “workshops of humanity”? And, are there metaphors in our time corresponding to the “labyrinth of the world” and the “paradise of the heart” or have such questions ceased to exist in the educational discourse today?

As a first observation, let me remind you a well-known but generally neglected truth: In the brief time elapsing from the beginning to the end of my speech, hundred thousands or millions of people in the world persecuted by hunger, wars and dictatorships will cover millions of kilometers searching for a place of descent living. On their way, they will discover that several “traditional” obstacles are still intact and insurmountable: there exist borders between countries, there exist limitations due to differences in ethnic origin, there exist rejections due to differences in religion, there exists exclusion from education due to differences in mother tongue.

For millions of people, therefore, the world continues to be –not to appear, but to be– a labyrinth in which they move in agony, seeing no way out.

But –and this is my second observation– the dominant metaphor that conveys the world image of those who develop the educational discourse –and I include all of us in here– is in complete contrast with the reality above: It is the metaphor of the “global village.” The image, that is, of a world without borders, based mainly on “unchained” information and communication due to modern technology and characterized by the existence and function of various networks. A picture of a free, rich, happy and interesting world, founded on the basis of two significant social and political developments: the “globalization of economy” and the emergence of the “society of knowledge.”

Let us pay attention to the similarity of the older and the current metaphors: In the older times, we had the labyrinth of the world for the masses of people on one side and the castles of knowledge and happiness for the few, on the other. Today, we have the labyrinth of the world for the masses of people and for most countries on one side and the global village for the society of knowledge, on the other. It seems to me that the only difference today is that “the castles of knowledge and happiness” have been “merged in a network”.

Therefore, at the beginning of our era’s “new learning” we are witnessing a similar situation with that described by Comenius. We know the answer of educators at that time: they demanded and promoted a heavy use of new technologies –in those days, the printed and illustrated book- in order to make the implementation of radical new forms of education possible, and thus achieve equity and democracy in education. (Equity and democracy are my terms).

And what about our answer? This is the topic we are discussing in this conference – this is actually the topic discussed, even in a presentation of a small project on the use of computers in a small school somewhere in the world.

Examining the educational discourse developed by powerful organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, OECD, the World Trade Organization, developed for the support of various countries in their process to the contemporary castle of knowledge, we form the impression that these organizations allow no diversification. The measures and policies of implementation they propose are specific and uniform, only total acceptance of the proposed measures and their

undeviating application, regardless of any collateral damages, does promise positive results, namely, entrance to the global village.

Technically, their way of thinking does not differ from the way of thinking of the founders of new learning in the 17th century: the discovery and acceptance of the internal logic ruling the world leads to the discovery and acceptance of the corresponding philosophy for education. I remind you that Comenius' proposal was based on the conviction that in the world, there is ingrained, as an element of the order ruling it, a form of education of general power, which educators were simply called on to discover and implement. It seems to me, that today, Comenius' "divine order" is replaced by the order of the dominant model of economy and, consequently, the principles governing education draw their origin from the principles of the dominant model of economy. At the heart of this model lies the transformation of everything in human society into a ware.

Therefore, the suggestions of those international organizations to reform educational systems are based on the commercialization of knowledge and the promotion of market-economy rules and practices in the educational systems. This basic philosophy becomes obvious every time this policy leads to extreme situations –and it does much too often.

A characteristic example is the persistence of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to enforce the imposition of user fees in the educational systems of poor countries despite the fact that "United Nations studies have shown that the imposition of user fees for school have led to falling attendance rates. So after 10 years of International Monetary Fund and World Bank imposed user fees in Ghana, two-thirds of rural families could not afford to send their children to school consistently."

Robert Naiman of the Center for Economic and Policy Research remarks:

"There is a perverse disconnect here. In the United States, there is a broad consensus across the political spectrum in support of universal access to public education through high school. Yet the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, institutions, which get a fifth of their funding from the U.S. taxpayer, impose 'user fees' on poor children in Africa. As the actress Valerie Harper pointed out, her daughter goes to a public school for

free –why would we keep kids out of school in Africa because their parents can't pay?"

Why? The answer to this question seems to be simple for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: Because, according to the statements of their experts, “user fees are supposed to promote efficiency.” However, for many people it is difficult to understand the discrepancy previously characterized as “perverse disconnect” – a discrepancy, which appears in many other sectors of education too. The spontaneous explanation would be that this is an inconceivable paradox or hypocrisy. The truth is that it has to do with the educational expression of a significant aspect of globalized economy.

I remind you that in globalised economy, the huge possibilities actually offered by the new technologies of information and communication have not achieved a balanced development on global scale. On the contrary, what happens is the marginalisation of a large number of countries, since 85-90% of high value, high technology products are produced and sold in North America, Japan and Europe, 85% of patented inventions take place in the USA, Germany, France and Britain, and 85% of the agreements between companies are signed in the USA, Europe and Japan.

In other words, globalised economy does not affect all countries and all people in the same way. On the contrary, there is a big differentiation. In the field of education, this differentiation is expressed through two different educational discourses: an educational discourse for the countries and people in the labyrinth of the world and an educational discourse for the countries and people of the global village.

So when we talk about “new learning”, we usually talk about learning exclusive to the global village. Our duty as educators and pedagogues is to associate new learning mainly with learning in the labyrinth of the world -in the same way our ancestors-in-profession did in the previous educational revolution. Besides, we have to do that for a very practical reason: no revolution –not even an educational one- is possible in our days without democratic legitimization. And democratic legitimization for new learning has been pending.

So let us consider what “new learning” means in our times, what its democratic implementation looks like and which can be its contribution to the solution of difficult problems in education.

Last year, in my speech in the Learning Conference, I indicated that supporters of an educational orientation towards the needs of the society of knowledge demand that the school moves away from the banking model of education. Their suggestion has been based on an educational need and on a development in technology.

The educational need is this: time must be found and the appropriate learning context must be created in school for acquiring certain “key-qualifications.” Such qualifications include creativity, theoretical thought, autonomy, planning and analysis, great willingness for teamwork and exchange of information, flexibility and independent problem solving. The above are all qualifications related to contemporary forms of work in dynamic sectors of economy. At the same time, these are qualifications that critical educators have long been demanding, envisioning a school that cultivates the creative, social and open to cooperation individual.

Fulfilling this educational need is made available by the recent development in the technology of information. Nowadays, direct access to information, larger in size than any corpus of materials provided in the educational systems of the whole world, is possible. Consequently, acquiring the skill to handle this technology, offers the educational system the possibility to lighten the school syllabus and create space for the cultivation of the desired knowledge and the key-qualifications.

Some people identify new learning and education for the society of knowledge with the extensive use of technology of information and communication – for instance the powerful organizations I mentioned before share this view. However, the above-mentioned need for the cultivation of skills and competencies suggests that this assumption is wrong. What is right, though, is that the idea of “new learning” is associated with specific reforms of the educational systems, which are supported to a large extent by the possibility of implementing these technologies. For this reason, it is wrong to assess the dissemination of new learning in an educational system by simply counting the computers existing in the schools. What is right is to combine the count with the evaluation of changes in the curriculum, the teaching approaches, the learning strategies and the forms of assessment. In fact, dissemination of new learning in an educational system can be estimated in a much better way by measuring its distance from the banking model of education.

The end of the banking model of education implies the possibility of successfully facing some of the most serious issues in our education: handling cultural and

linguistic diversity in the classroom, imposition of inclusive education on a broad scale, enabling students an individual program of studies, disbanding of courses based on age etc.

Our educational systems could achieve all these by implementing elements of new learning as of today. Why don't they, then? As an answer to this question, please allow me to make a speculation.

New learning is an opportunity for humanity to promote equity and democracy in education through new means. At the same time, new learning has mainly been concentrated in affluent societies, because of the capital needed for the provision of technological substructure. These are usually societies with rich dynamics but with poor conceptions for the education of the poor and different people. Poor conceptions for the education of the poor and different people lead to poor conceptions of the potentialities and prospects of new learning. This does not remain unpunished, though: leaving people in the labyrinth of the world has an impact on dwellers of the castle of knowledge. Since humanity is an entity, the labyrinth of the world and the castle of knowledge are the two sites of the way humanity has taken. And this way is obviously wrong. What we need is a dramatic turn and new learning can become an appropriate vehicle.

This conference works for me as a pool of ideas and experiences. Therefore, I am really happy to be here and have the opportunity to listen to you in the next days. I will do that partly due to my academic interests but mainly due to a practical and very personal reason.

Last year we started a literacy program with young prisoners imprisoned in an institution at the outskirts of Thessaloniki, my hometown.

The prison for those who cross it from the entrance to its end –where a small part of the interior yard was transformed into a “school”— is a chaotic complex of corridors. As you walk every now and then, you have the impression that you are at a dead-end, sometimes you realize that you are indeed at a dead-end and you are obliged to change your course, while at other times, you realize that the ironwork that is blocking your way can actually open with the help of the right person and the right key. And then you reach the school. A school that young prisoners seek out even

though it is freezing cold at winter and burning hot at summer since there is no heating and no air-conditioning.

“You cross a labyrinth successfully,” I once thought to my self quite spontaneously, *“but you don’t reach its exit and the world. You reach a small hell.”* That was what I thought and what I told the prisoners, apologizing for the learning conditions.

“No,” a young prisoner corrected me quite spontaneously too, *“you leave an unbearable world and join a paradise.”*

At that moment, the phrase that has become the title of my speech today emerged. The phrase obsessed me and has not left me since—very much like a song that is stuck on your mind first thing in the morning and does not leave you the whole day. Only this phrase has acquired its own momentum and sealed my personal way of perceiving and assessing contemporary educational matters – as you have already noticed.

I could not tolerate to think that an informal course in a prison could be considered a paradise –not even as a compliment to me, their teachers’ teacher. So, what I hope now is that this conference can give me so many ideas about new learning, that I can go back to the prison and announce a new school by telling the young prisoner: *“I have got so much experience, that I can offer to you something much better than a paradise – I can offer you a workshop of humanity”*.