ENCUENTROS

Education and Citizenship in the Global Era

Lecture by
Fernando Savater
The IDB Cultural Center was created in 1992 by Enrique V. Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The Center has two primary objectives: 1) to contribute to social development by administering a grants program that sponsors and co-finances small-scale cultural projects that will have a positive social impact in the region, and 2) to promote a better image of the IDB member countries, with emphasis on Latin America and the Caribbean, through culture and increased understanding between the region and the rest of the world, particularly the United States.

Cultural programs at headquarters feature new as well as established talent from the region. Recognition granted by Washington, D.C. audiences and press often helps propel the careers of new artists. The Center also sponsors lectures on Latin American and Caribbean history and culture, and supports cultural undertakings in the Washington, D.C. area for the local Latin American and Caribbean communities, such as Spanish-language theater, film festivals, and other events.

The IDB Cultural Center Exhibitions and the Concerts and Lectures Series stimulate dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas. The Cultural Development in the Field funds projects in the fields of youth cultural development, institutional support, restoration and conservation of cultural patrimony, and the preservation of cultural traditions. The IDB Art Collection, gathered over several decades, is managed by the Cultural Center and reflects the relevance and importance the Bank has achieved after four decades as the leading financial institution concerned with the development of Latin America and the Caribbean.
Education, Key to a Democratic Society

When they told me about the possibility of giving this lecture, I thought that it was certainly an interesting topic in Europe, but I also believe this topic is of particular interest in the Americas. What is especially relevant in Latin America, in my view, is the issue of education in relation to the formation or preparation of people who can use and maximize the benefits of democratic institutions. That is, not education understood simply as instruction, as professional training, as preparation for the work world—which is naturally an important dimension of it—but education understood especially as the preparation of citizens, of people able to deepen democracy and utilize it in such a way that it is not perverted or does not vanish for lack of practice or improper use.

I do not regard citizens of a democracy as a natural product—they do not spring up by themselves like orchids or thistles—they have to be cultivated. I think that a citizen, a person able to draw maximum benefit from democratic institutions, is a social work of art, or should be a social work of art, and demands special preparation; that has been true since the origins of democracy. The Greeks were clear on the link between democracy and paideia or education, the preparation and formation of citizens.

Increasingly we have come to realize that the true, basic and most necessary production, indeed the production that is most beneficial for democracy, is the fashioning of democrats; that is, producing people who can live together, and use democratic institutions critically and creatively. This is—or ought to be—the primary task of democracy itself.

The Weight of Ignorance

In one of his latest works, John Kenneth Galbraith—the Canadian-born sociologist and economist who spent most of his career at Harvard—says something that had a special impact on me when I read it. Galbraith says: “ Democracies today are ever fearful of the influence of the ignorant.” I really think that is true. In

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our democracies, where everyone has the right to vote, and can participate and intervene with their contribution in the management of public affairs, the influence of the ignorant is decisive and frightful. It is decisive because it tends to help the demagogue over someone who is proposing a realistic solution; it tends to hinder realistic proposals that entail some kind of sacrifice, some kind of postponement of desires because they will not be understood or comprehended. That is, ignorance is likely to be a drag on the real utilization of democracy.

The ignorance Galbraith has in mind is not ignorance in the naïve sense of the word, that is, being ignorant of specific details, such as just where Teheran is located, or who were the first ten kings in the French dynasty. It is not about data, because most of us are ignorant in that sense. It has sometimes been said that culture is what remains when one has forgotten everything else. Hence, it is true that all these items of information belong to those things that one forgets, and culture is what remains, above and beyond all these items of information. After all, for specific information and facts we now have the Internet and encyclopedias.

The ignorance to which Galbraith alludes is ignorance of the essential procedures of relationship with others. In this sense, one who does not know how to express his or her social demands intelligently and reasonably to others is ignorant. They do not understand the reasoned social demands made by others, they cannot understand a simple text that goes beyond the newspaper sports section, or they cannot express in writing ideas of some significance or depth: this is the kind of ignorance Galbraith is talking about.

Ignorance, like dire poverty, isolates people. There is a great deal of talk about contemporary individualism and the cultural isolation to which people sometimes submit voluntarily, being centered on their own lives with the tendency to break social bonds and be centered solely on personal problems. But the true isolation, the most frightful isolation because it is inevitable, is that of the person who is subjected to the two fierce dictatorships of dire poverty and ignorance; that is even more the case in a hyperinformed world like our own.

Ignorance or Information as Social Conditioning Factors

In our world today—no doubt there are some people here who are more familiar with these social issues than I am—the great differences of class are no longer simply between the possessors and the dispossessed, between those who hold means of production or lands and so forth, and those who do not; naturally, this still lies at the root of the question. Today the true differences of class are between those who have primary direct access to information and those who have to receive it from third parties, who may or may not give it to them, and who can dispense it one way or another. The essential class difference of our age is the divide between those who possess information and those who do not. And of course ignorance is one of the obstacles to information.

Today we say that in our age we are receiving more information than at any other time, and it is true. The essential difference between education today and that of a hundred years ago is that in the
past children who went off to school really did not know basic things: they did not know, for example, the secrets of sex, violence, power. They were practically ignorant of everything essential in life, and education entailed the gradual revelation of all these things. Even today, when someone acts with unusual naïveté, as if unaware of these murky mechanisms that lie beneath the surface, we say that he or she “is like a child,” but that means how children used to be, not the way they are now.

Indeed, children long ago were unaware of things. But children today, through visual media and television, have received information on matters like sex, violence, the assaults of the powerful and many other things; they have received information on this long before going to school. A child is already informed, so school does not mean the revelation of secrets, but rather it teaches how to navigate a world with too much information. Education must teach how to prioritize information, reject what is irrelevant or deceptive, delve further into what matters, and reflect on information that is contradictory.

Influence of the Internet

Such is the culture of information confronting education today. There is talk about the Internet, for example, and sometimes governments—at least the one that I know best, my own—when they want to claim to be very concerned about education, say: “Every child will have an Internet-connected computer.” It’s good for a child to have Internet access, just like having a ballpoint pen or wearing shoes; these are useful things, but it is not education; it is just a means of information. And indeed, the Internet is extremely useful for those people who know what they are searching for.

If you are a philologist of Semitic languages, or if you are interested in the works of Shakespeare, the Web is indeed wonderful because it puts you in contact with people who share your concerns; you can exchange bibliographies with others, for example. All of us who are interested in some topics are very grateful for this new communication and information tool that we have been given. But those who don’t know what they’re looking for, those who go onto the Internet completely naïve because they are still at a pre-education stage, run up against what is usually out there; according to the experts between 94% and 96% of what goes over the Internet is nothing but advertising. Hence, those who don’t know what they are looking for go from one more or less disguised advertisement to another. All they are doing is wandering through advertising for sometimes simple, even useful, things and sometimes advertising for horrors and crimes; they never get away from advertising.

Precisely today in this globalized world of media, education is more necessary than ever so as not to get lost in a world in which information itself can become an instrument that hinders rather than aids learning. In this sense, current education, education for avoiding this dangerous ignorance that Galbraith speaks about has to be education that doesn’t simply transmit information, but prepares people to handle it, and also prepares them to develop the ability to present arguments and to persuade.
Is Changing One’s Mind Worthwhile?

I don’t know whether it happens elsewhere but as a rule there are things—things quite connected to the human being—that you know better in your own culture. For example, in Spain I have observed that people feel a certain pride in being unpersuadable. People claim: “I think just as I did when I was seventeen.” What horrible news! Meeting a human being who may now be sixty and who since age seventeen—despite meeting people, reading books, seeing landscapes, and so forth—has never changed his or her mind should send chills down anyone’s spine. What that means is that such a person has never thought—neither at age seventeen nor now. It is impossible that with all of the transformations of life, one has never changed any essential idea. Such a person has gone with ideas the way others go with religion—as a dogma; that is no doubt very common. And it seems like a great boast to have never changed one’s mind even when things change, even when the parameters of the world change.

We are told something quite different about the famous English economist John Maynard Keynes. A reporter once asked him in an interview, “Well, Professor Keynes, two years ago you weren’t saying what you’re saying now.” And Keynes answered him: “Well, look, it’s true. You’re right. The fact is that I thought it over and I realized that I was wrong, and when I’m wrong, I change my mind. What do you usually do in that case?”

That is the core of the issue. When they realize that they have been wrong, some people change their minds. But others don’t because they think that to do so would be humiliating. Likewise, some people are incapable of either being persuaded or persuading. In other words, they think that when they have set forth their rights or their desires, they are done; they have met their obligation, and they do not need to try to present arguments, or to make the concerns or desires they are expressing comprehensible to a person who shares them.

I believe that many of the outbreaks of violence in our world today that we are concerned about and that trouble our societies are the work of people who cannot communicate their desires, yearnings, and concerns to others, and who do not understand or comprehend what others are saying. It is in this breakdown of communication that violence appears—violence as an argument when all others fail, when you cannot understand others.

One means for attempting to banish violence from our societies through education consists in creating a type of character able to persuade and be persuaded, able to enter into the world of argument which is the world of democratic reason. For really that which is not imposition, coercion, or deceit in our democracies, is persuasion: persuasion of some by others, persuasion by someone who understands the interests and needs of others, or who knows how to argue in such a fashion that the rest of the population accepts them. That is not something that happens by chance, that takes place without training, or without prior preparation. In my view that is something essential in education that we have to think about.
Training Rulers

It is difficult to turn these issues into educational topics since they are expressions of desires. The hard thing is for education to be guided, for example, toward realizing that we are shaping people who are going to be rulers. An American professor, Amy Gutman, begins her very interesting book on democratic education by recalling something that Aristotle states in his Politics: “To govern one must first have been governed.” Hence, this notion of education as a process that is democratic from the outset is absurd and nonsense, as if in a classroom the teacher and the children are all studying on the same democratic level. That is not true: education is a preparation for democracy. But there is no democracy in the classroom because there is no democracy between one who knows and one who does not, between the one who is leading the class and the one who has to receive guidance from the class. Likewise, there is no democracy between parents and children; relations may be very positive but it is not a democratic relationship. Democracy is a relationship of equality; human equality exists, but not equality in terms of the roles played in the classroom.

Preparing for democracy often means precisely having been governed, having been subject at a particular time to an authority, which does not have to be a tyranny. Education is based on authority. As you recall, the word, auctoritas comes from the Latin augeo, which means “helping to grow.” Authority properly understood is that which helps people to grow. It is the very opposite of tyranny, because tyrants want everyone to remain permanently underage, like children. Authority is the opposite of tyranny, because it means the person who is exercising his or her authority is helping us to grow in knowledge, virtue, citizenship, or whatever. By contrast, it is the tyrant who blocks our knowledge and our possibility of being involved in politics.

What Aristotle was saying, and what Amy Gutman retrieves while bringing the idea up to date, is that we who are later going to exercise governance have to have gone through the phase of understanding what it means to be governed, and what is entailed in a relationship in which one is in some fashion guided, directed, informed, and receives the model of life from others. This is essential if we are to come to govern later, because all democratic education is the education of princes and rulers. When one is educating, one is not simply preparing people to do a job or make money or to be subject to certain social routines; one is preparing rulers who are going to lead the country, namely all the citizens.

We ought to conceive of the education of each democratically educated citizen as if our political future depends on him or her, as if we depend on whether this person has sufficient knowledge and will, the ability to persuade and be persuaded, so that our future with him or her will be assured. In what country or in what democracy is education really viewed that way? We run the risk of education being converted—and in many places that is what happens—into a privilege precisely for those people who need it the least. The individual who has had the luck and privilege of being born into a family with books, music, and culture has already traveled some distance down the educational road. On the other hand,
someone who is born into a family where there are no books, not much language, no appreciation for culture, and perhaps not even a basic family structure has only society to prepare them to develop the ruler within. It is society that must not abandon him or her. Such persons, who have the least resources to pay for a good private education, are the very ones who need it most.

Including the Excluded

The people who most need government institutions are those who are recently arrived in the country in poor condition, or for any other reason have had no personal access to education. Unfortunately, to a great extent we find that education is “five-star” (like restaurants), for those who can pay for it, but from there it goes downhill, until what is left within everyone’s reach is a kind of “McDonald’s-ization” of education, or “fast food” education, where one is taught not to kick and fight, to obey everyone else, and that’s as far as it goes.

That is the opposite of the kind of education that should be fostered, because what matters is that without blood or violence, education can be a revolutionary instrument in a society. Societies revolutionize either through force, violence and confrontation, or through education. For in itself education is a struggle against social inevitability, against the inevitability that forces the children of the poor to always be poor, that forces the children of the ignorant to remain ignorant, that forces a woman whose mother was illiterate to be illiterate herself, and so forth. Education rises up against all these inevitabilities.

Private or Public Education

In many European countries—and in Spain too, of course—a long debate has arisen between public education and private education, education paid for with public funds and education arranged with private funds. In my view it is essential that a portion of education be paid for with public funds for the simple reason that those who most need it cannot pay for it.

In any case, whether public, private, or however it might be posed, education is always public because it is a social concern. It is never just “daddy and mommy’s” problem of the little boy or girl; it is always a public problem. Even if you have no school-age children, even if you aren’t part of the teachers union, education still remains an issue for you. I am convinced that in social terms that is the real problem: no matter whose hands we are in, we are in the hands of those who educate.

I once wrote that democracy educates in its own defense. A democracy that does not educate is in some manner creating the enemies or the individuals who are going to destroy it. If we really do not want democracy to be just a term or an empty shell, we absolutely must insist on education; for it is the foundation that makes democracy genuine, that creates people able to critically and creatively transform society through democratic systems. That can happen but only if most people are sufficiently trained for it. If the latter does not happen, obviously the former cannot take place either.

Unquestionably the aim is to create or spread humanity. But humanity un-
derstood not only as a description of the species, the human species to which we all belong, but humanity as a value. When we speak of humanity, we are not saying simply that we share some biological characteristics or certain given determinations, but that we also share in some manner a certain ideal, a certain procedure whereby human beings acknowledge one another. And that is going to be ever more necessary.

The Specter of the Dead

Today we live in a world with over six billion people. If the population keeps increasing—some demographers say that the number of human beings may keep growing—then a surprising phenomenon will take place. According to demographers, by the end of the century that we have just begun, for the first time in history there will be more human beings alive than those who have died since the beginning of the world. The Romans, for example, used to say when someone died “He went to the majority.” The most democratic act in the world is to die because you go to join the largest number of people there ever were.

But now, if what the demographers say is true, for the first time being born, not dying, will mean joining the majority. And that may be important, for if societies do not move forward, or do not do so along the line that we would wish, it is because in some manner the dead are holding them back. The resentments of the dead, the ambitions of the dead, the accumulated injustices and injuries of the dead, are holding societies back. In Joseph Conrad’s well-known novel, The Shadow Line (1917), the ship captain, a young man who wants to take the ship to port, says that he cannot do so because the former captain, who lies on the bottom of the sea, is holding him back.

In some fashion that is the way it is: it is the dead who are holding up the possibility of an authentic transformation of society. And in many cases we are waging the battles of the dead with the prejudices of the dead. If at some time there really are more people alive than dead, and if through education the living could creatively think about social conditions and what we share—and not simply repudiate the past—, then perhaps we would experience something surprising in the world.

The Reason for Insecurity

Today we are obsessed with security, and rightly so; people talk of the security and insecurity of the world. But it is obvious—and anyone thinking a little about what surrounds us realizes—that societies are more secure when they are fair and balanced. Nothing favors insecurity more than imbalance and injustice. Compare what happens in a country with relatively few possibilities, few riches, such as The Netherlands, for example, and a country full of riches and possibilities, such as Colombia, to contrast two extreme cases.

What is it that makes some countries so much more secure than others? It is usually not justice in the metaphysical sense, perfect justice, but a certain balance, a correlation between information and democratic preparation; that is what creates security. I sincerely do not trust much in the kind of security obtained by bombing other countries. I trust more in the security obtained by educating citizens and young generations. We have to edu-
cate so that those educated will be better than we are. I, who was born and grew up in a dictatorship, have to prepare people to live in democracy. And we teachers who are quite imperfect, who are probably representatives of this old world of the dead, have to educate the new generations to cast off these burdens and break the ties that we have perhaps not been able to break. This is the great paradox of education, and it is what makes it, in my view, valuable, precious and frail; hence the importance of citizenship in supporting education.

In all countries we teachers and professors are overloaded with social demands, and most countries are not very concerned about teachers; I don’t mean major university professors, but teachers who are with children or adolescents, who are the basic educators. Those of us who teach in the university take on people who are already formed. We can help them more or less, but their education basically does not depend on us. The first teachers are the fundamental ones, and no one listens to them. They are called when there is a case of violence, xenophobia, religious fanaticism, or whatever; then people say, “this has to be combated with education, this is a matter of education.” As for the teachers who have to perform this work which is then regarded as absolutely necessary, no one pays attention to them, and they are disregarded in society.

Participation, An Inescapable Premise

I think the citizens of all our countries have to step in to insist on the importance of education to do more than just prepare people to work, earn money, and do useful work in society. The role of education is to prepare rulers, to begin by governing those who are going to govern; this is the teaching that makes it possible to process information and not get lost in it. Entering into the world of argument, and receiving permission from others, makes people capable of communicating with one another. Otherwise we have impermeable airtight compartments, where people stay uninvolved because those from one tribe have nothing to do with those from the neighboring tribe, those from one sex have nothing to do with those of the other; in other words, their identities are off-limits to others.

We human beings cannot be incomprehensible to one another, and whatever reflects an image of impenetrability by some groups runs counter to humanistic, democratic education. Groups that are so proud that they cannot be understood and are closed to everyone else run counter to shaping a democratic society. It seems to me that this is more important in our own time than before, and it is also the way to claim true security, which cannot be separated from justice, which cannot proceed separately from balance, which struggles against ignorance and against dire poverty in our societies. These are not great truths that I have sought to pass on to you; they are things that you probably know as well as I, but in a world where everyone talks about what goes on, we philosophers are professionally fated to talk about what does not happen, the things that remain, the things still out there, the things that people forget. We philosophers take on the task of reminding, if perchance there is anyone who finds that welcome.
Some Fundamental Questions

Is education expensive? It is usually said that education is expensive, that it costs money, but not educating costs even more in the long run. In this lecture I have been focusing primarily on academic education, but in a democratic society we are all to some extent educators of one another. Of course, education takes place in families—as is natural—we needn’t ever think that academic education will replace the educational relationship of parents or the responsible adults in a family with children. The idea, very much of our own time, that one pays to be relieved of burdensome concerns—“No, I’ve already paid and I don’t have time now”—has no place in education; one may pay, but one still has to collaborate. The media also has an educational as well as an information and recreation dimension. The media is also sometimes anti-pedagogical, as we are aware.

Education used to be restricted to small groups; today the problem is how education is instrumentalized for large numbers of people. New methods of education are being invented, and no one has them fully completed, nor are they ultimately achieved with money. The transmission of models of education that will enhance democratic culture, rather than undermine it, is the way for countries to work with one another. The achievements of each one in these fields must not remain closed off, but must be transmitted. We have to be a bit like “doctors without borders” and become “teachers without borders.”

What to do with hopelessness? The problem of hopelessness or pessimism lies in what we do with hopelessness. There is an Argentine milonga that goes “Hope is often a desire to rest.” I venture to say that hopelessness is often a desire to rest. Acquaintances of mine who don’t do anything are on both sides. Some are optimists who say “Everything will take care of itself,” “It’s a matter of time,” “Don’t worry, everything will be straightened out.” Time straightens out as few things as space does; it doesn’t straighten out anything. The others are those who have lost hope. “It’s useless, what are you going to do...?” In both cases the issue is the same. They all calmly go out to dine and fulfill their duties; some are content with their optimism, others content with their pessimism, and both convinced that nothing can be done. Our world is frightful because this goes on. In some countries hope resides in the fact that since there is much to be done, instead of despairing and lamenting, we roll up our sleeves and try to solve problems.

The role of teachers. One of the main problems that all teachers face is that we know that we cannot teach the same thing that was taught to us. Many of the things we learned are no longer valid, or have to be presented in another way; teachers have to continually update their knowledge. For a teacher cannot be someone who simply gets the job and repeats the same thing every day like a broken record; a teacher must be someone who has some time away from teaching, some months of calm and rest in order to reflect on what he or she knows, and be in contact with other people and update that knowledge. We absolutely must update our knowledge. This is part of the cost of education because there must be teachers who can fill in for...
those who are updating their knowledge. In any case, many opinions and ways of seeing have been changing, aside from those that I have been able to change over time in my own life and experience. Objective knowledge has also changed in many respects.

The situation in Latin America. Churchill was once asked, “What do you think of the Germans?” and he answered, “I don’t know, I don’t know them all.” If I am asked what I think of Latin America, I have to say that I am somewhat familiar with it, but no, certainly not to the point of being able to offer a single judgment because—as is well known—Latin American countries are quite different, their situations are very different, and their historical experiences have been different. Speaking broadly, what can be said is that the weakness of civil society—that is precisely the core that is formed in education and onto which education turns—has produced a series of quite well known movements and shifts in society. Unquestionably, education is important, absolutely necessary for the transformation and regeneration of a country, but that does not seem to me to be the only element; there are economic structures, and other kinds of justice, and the abuse and arrogance of the military or violent groups. Obviously not every problem is simply a matter of education. Education is part of the solution to all problems, but not the entire solution to all problems.

I have been visiting countries in the Americas for thirty years to try to communicate and learn things in the realm of education. In countries that are experiencing positive changes, such as Brazil, we all know that what is absolutely necessary is not only the good will of the ruler saying what has to be done, but also of a country able to understand the messages, and to collaborate and participate in them; otherwise, nothing is achieved. The image—very Spanish—of an enlightened ruler who says what has to be done and then the whole universe changes, is now inconceivable. A ruler who knows what has to be done is better than others who don’t know or who think otherwise. However, it is obvious that without a people able to take advantage of such ideas and support them, they will all be in vain.

Education, citizenship, democracy. On these matters, there is a fundamental premise: good training in economics or in a specific discipline is one thing, and education is something else. The world is full of people who know a lot of physics and are very bad citizens or perverse individuals. Expertise can also be linked with malice and perversity. Hitler’s Germany had a high level of science and training, far higher than many other countries but that did not guarantee that there would be an education in citizenship. Hence I stress the idea of education for citizenship. If education for citizenship does not include the values of solidarity and democratic equality, people may be trained to be competent in particular areas, but that does not mean they won’t be very dangerous when running a country, because a country is not a bank, it is not simply a system of objects. Perhaps we could say, somewhat naively, that the science that teaches how to handle and deal with objects is one thing, and the science that teaches how to live with subjects is another. Some people are very competent in making calculations but not in creating social agreements.
There is also, of course, the issue of impunity. In a democracy one of the social values par excellence is equality before the law. Law should not be a mechanism that only allows fishing for small fish and lets the big ones get away, but rather a mechanism that maintains a criterion of equality in the application of the law. Democratic culture is essentially flawed as long as there are countries—and unfortunately there are some in the Americas—where everyone knows that at a certain level penalties no longer apply, where nothing can happen to certain people because they are beyond good and evil, and only the tolerance of the ruler allows them to commit greater or lesser outrages, because no one tries to apply the law to them any more. Democratic culture means that the highest dignitary, no matter how powerful, can be brought to justice and tried at any given moment, whenever necessary. Otherwise we are facing a very serious deficiency.
**Fernando Savater** was born in San Sebastián, Guipúzcoa, Spain in 1947. He has been Professor of Ethics at the Universidad del País Vasco and is Professor of Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where he teaches philosophy and literature. Essayist, journalist, novelist, and playwright, he has published over 45 books, some of which have been translated into a dozen languages. The best known are *La infancia torpedeada*, *Ética para Amador*, *Diccionario filosófico*, *El valor de educar*, *Las razones del antimilitarismo y otras razones* and *Contra las patrias*. He has been awarded the National Essay Prize, the Anagram Prize, the Cuco Cerecedo Prize granted by the Association of European Journalists, and was a finalist in the Planeta Prize for his novel, *El jardín de las dudas*, centered on the figure of Voltaire.

His life has been closely connected to groups and movements defending freedom, human rights, and opposition to terrorism through the ¡Basta Ya! platform. In December 2002, Savater received the Sakharov Prize of the European Union in recognition of the work done by ¡Basta Ya! This is the first time that this prize has gone to a Spanish group. His autobiography, *Mira por dónde*, was published in 2003.
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