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The UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education – is there an underlying philosophy?

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I shall speak about the question if there is an underlying philosophy of the Roadmap and I think the wish is that I shall give an answer to this question. In preparing this keynote I really tried to find such an answer, but it was more difficult then only to say Yes, there is, or No, there isn't. Why is this case? The problem lies in the word “philosophy” and the answer depends on the understanding of this word.

There are different possibilities to understand this word.

1. You can understand “philosophy” in a strong academic way. In this way “philosophy” means the way of serious and fundamental reflections on the big issues of human life. Philosophy means here the famous philosophical systems of Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard etc.

In this perspective the answer to the question of an underlying philosophy is easy: The answer is definitely NO. To get this answer is very comfortable, because it is not even necessary to read the Roadmap. You can get this answer alone by considering the way this paper has been developed. It was a process of five years. It was an ambitious series of consultations and we had at least five big international conferences. That means: The Roadmap is the work of a big number of different people from all over the world. Alone because of this reason it is impossible, that all these people have the same philosophical background. That is the reason why we cannot expect that the Roadmap is grounded on a coherent philosophy in terms of the big names of famous philosophers.

2. But we have another meaning of the word “philosophy”, namely “philosophy” understood in a pragmatic sense of big guidelines, of main goals and ideas of an institution or organisation. In this case the answer is also very easy, but in the contrary to the first case the answer is YES.

Why is this the case? The positive answer is due to the fact, that the Roadmap is a paper of the UNESCO. That means, that the legal framework and the big ideas of the UNESCO must also be valid for the specific UNESCO-paper “Roadmap”. There are at least two big political fields which are relevant, namely cultural policy and education policy. If we consider education policy we have of course big guidelines. We have only to consider the

UNESCO programme “Education for All” (EFA). The last issue of the global monitoring report has been published some weeks ago. In this big educational programme the UNESCO tries to realize the important goals of the world conference on education in Dakar in April 2000. Because arts education is part of general education, all the goals of general education policy must also be the goals of arts education policy, simply because of logical reasons. Therefore it is not surprising that we can transfer the slogan “Education for All” also into the field of arts education and we find it explicitly in the Roadmap: Arts Education for All.

If we consider on the other side cultural policy then we have a lot of conventions with relevant goals. It is only necessary to mention the newest convention in the context of UNESCO, namely the convention for cultural diversity. In this convention we find a lot of keywords which are also keywords for arts educations like empowerment, producing awareness about cultural diversity, the recognition of different art forms and the respect for all cultural expressions of human being. Arts and arts education play an important role in this convention, because they are considered the most important means realizing the big goals of the convention.

Now we have a Yes and we have a No, so that the situation is undecided, we have a tie. In terms of tennis we need a tie-break, we need a decision between these two alternatives. That means we need a third approach.

3. In a third approach we can talk about philosophy in the sense of the general legal framework of UNESCO. In my first two approaches it was very comfortable, that it was not necessary even to read the Roadmap. In my third approach – I am sorry – but now it is necessary to read the Roadmap. We find the answer of the question for an underlying philosophy in the first pages. Because in these first pages the legal framework, the two systems of references are mentioned explicitly: The Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child.

These declarations and pacts are a relevant binding legal basis for the Roadmap, and that means that – as a consequence – their philosophy is also the underlying philosophy of the Roadmap. We can also ask: Is there a philosophy of human rights (for example) and what does belong to this philosophy?

Very briefly I shall mention only three crucial philosophical points:

1. The first and maybe most crucial point of the philosophy of human rights is the understanding of human being, the special idea of men. This special idea of men is the concept of the individual person, the single person as an autonomic subject. This idea is definitely not natural. It has been created – some people say: invented – during the Renaissance. This concept of an individual person, which has the responsibility for the own activities, which has a certain kind of autonomy, which means: to give himself the laws of acting, is very closely connected with the name of Jacob Burckhardt, the famous Swiss historian from the 19th century. I think, that this idea of men is so convincing and natural for all of us, that it is interesting to remind you to a saying of Clifford Geertz, the famous anthropologist, who said, that the Western idea of an individual person is very strange for most parts of the world.

In the history of the Conception of Human Rights this is a very crucial point. I remind you simply on the big debate during the Vienna World conference on human rights in 1992, when some countries from Asia and Africa demanded to add to the existing human rights also the rights of special groups. Obviously our understanding of arts bases on the idea of a single author, a single printer, a single composer.

2. The second point, which belongs to the philosophy of human rights, is a certain understanding of policy, especially of the state. In western tradition the idea of state was the answer to the question: How to live together in a regulated way without violence. The answer was democracy. You find such democratic ideas also in the Roadmap e.g. especially in those parts of the Roadmap, where the map speaks about the role of advocacy, of the importance of convincing policy makers, and where the map stresses the idea of collaboration and partnerships between different institutions.
3. A third point with a lot of philosophical implications is the conception or definition of arts. In the first version of the Roadmap before the conference of Lisbon we had a very strong and narrow definition of arts: arts are only music, drama and visual arts. During the different regional conferences we had a lot of critics against this narrow conception of arts, because colleagues from Asia and Africa told us, that in their countries other artistic expressions are much more important than these traditional European art forms. If we now read the current version of the Roadmap than we can find a more open description of the arts.

If you agree that all this is relevant for UNESCO and the Roadmap then a consequence of my consideration is that the answer to the question of an underlying philosophy of the Roadmap is YES. We have even a very strong underlying philosophy. We have the situation of an iceberg, namely that the underlying philosophy is indeed mainly underlying: Namely under water. You cannot see it very easily, you see only the peak of the iceberg.

If there is now a certain awareness concerning the question for the philosophical background of the Roadmap then we can read it again and find more and more critical and crucial points. I will give you some examples.

In chapter two “develop individual capabilities” we find nine assertions about the impacts of the arts. If we read these assertions critically then we have to say, that we haven’t any clear proof for any of them. I will mention only two problems: in this part of the text it is spoken in a very general way about impacts of “the” arts. But is it really true, that music, dance, visual arts and all the other art forms have the same impact? I don’t believe it.

Another crucial point is the question: Is it really true, that where ever and when ever I deal (for example) with music I have the same impact? I don’t believe it, I would say: It depends on the way of teaching, of dealing with music and of the special selection of music, what kind of impact we can expect.

I think: All of us know, that there are a lot of possibilities to deal with arts in a very boring way, even in school. The consequence is, that we have to make clear, under what circumstances arts and arts education are interesting and fulfil our big expectations on the impact of arts.

Another interesting and perhaps crucial point is the special concept of education. One result of the Lisbon-Conference was, that we have to face all over the world a tendency of marginalisation of arts education.

This process is mainly due to the influence of PISA, because as a consequence many countries concentrate their educational efforts into the three PISA-subjects. I think, that it is not only because of a problematic education policy. The danger of marginalisation has also to do with the special concept of education in the PISA-studies, namely with “literacy”. The competencies, which are covered by “literacy”, are of course important. But I think, that the special concept of education, which we need in arts education, is much broader than the PISA-concept. That means that we also have to fight for our own educational concepts.

This is also valid for my last point: The relationship between the Roadmap and the EU. In this point I will be a little bit polemic. I guess, that you don’t find the word arts education in all the

papers from the commission. You can read a lot about vocational training or about employability. This is important, of course. But I think that the EU has a too narrow concept of education. The same I would say about cultural policy. Meanwhile we have a so called communication about cultural policy and since November 2007 we have a cultural political Agenda. But if you read cultural political texts from the commission, then very soon you will find the word creative industries and you will read it very often. Of course this part of culture is very important. But culture is more than cultural industries – and education is more than producing employability.

I now come to my conclusions:

1. Concerning the understanding of the word “philosophy” we find different answers to the question for an underlying philosophy depending on the understanding of the word philosophy; but:
2. the Roadmap is a political, not a philosophical paper. That means: we have to do with another logic of argumentation, and it is clear that this has to do with another strictness of the arguments.
3. But nevertheless: we should make a difference between rather empty phrases which we often use in public debates for legitimation of arts and arts education, and the serious and critical debate in a smaller group of experts, who also are interested in the truth of our beloved assertions about the impact of arts education.

Therefore: My hope is, that we are – at least during this conference – very precise under what circumstances all these important goals of arts education can be realised. And I think, that the issues of this conference are very appropriate for such a critical debate, namely to talk about dimensions of quality of arts education and the necessary research and training-programmes of teachers.

And a last remark: Concerning the EU we should try, to find some additional recommendations, which we address to Brussels. One recommendation could be:

To adopt the Road Map as an official paper of the EU.