

# Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter!



*(Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, South Africa)*

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## Part I: Why citizen skills matter to me

Beware! The following text is not a simplifying populist tweet and no quick-to-consume TikTok video in writing. Purposefully, it is a longer read both to mirror the importance of the topic and to stretch your comfort zone. Please only read it when you have enough time and energy. ☺



(Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa)

### **To be questioned: The automatic stability of democracy**

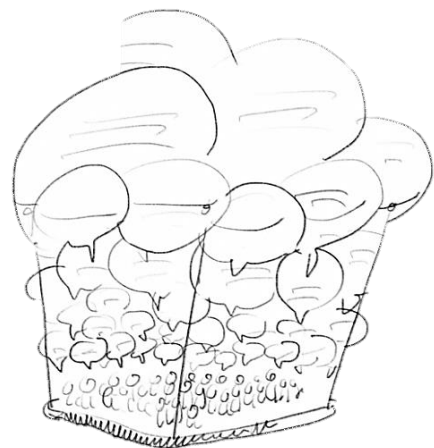
It was in 2012 during a coffee break at a full-day conference: Three German business women discussed school system issues of their children. When it was my turn to contribute something, I shared the latest experience with my mentee boy. His hard-working, single mother had 3 poorly paid jobs and was desperately trying to get her and her son's daily life organised in the best way possible. I therefore said:

"Unfortunately, there are no all-day schools nearby. I hope there will be more all-day school offerings soon." Boom! Silence... Six eyes staring at me with disbelief. One woman said: "All-day schools are child abuse!" The second: "A child must see his or her mother in the afternoon. We are not in a socialist country." And the third added: "We must protect our children against state interference." As a trained mediator and facilitator, I made an effort to rephrase and strictly stay with the concrete case of my mentee boy without trying to generalise. But the women refused to further exchange and closed the conversation unilaterally: "Arguing in favour of all-day schools means promoting child abuse."

The exchange left me puzzled: Three well-educated human beings could not even imagine that another option of looking at such a complex social challenge existed. I started wondering whether they really had no one in their lives with

slightly different experiences or reality constructions of this very same world. This was long before the terms ["filter bubble"](#) or "home office elite" became common language, but since then I have been even more attentive when listening to people in different "perception pockets" of society.

At first, I remembered how irritated I had always been by the normality of pejorative and misanthropic language as well as anti-democratic comments especially in top management and upper class environments ("let's quickly bring back census suffrage" or "homeless people are weak characters and don't deserve to live"). But when I started listening more carefully also in non-bourgeois, progressive, left-liberal environments, I detected [similar patterns](#): Less racist and homophobic maybe (and with good intentions, morality and purpose instead), but they looked as much down on other dissimilar groups. Obviously, both right and left identity politics had cultivated a populist friend-enemy dichotomy which hampered productive dialogue in a democracy, it had also boosted populist responses to complex challenges in all filter bubbles, be it right, left or wherever.



This is when I began to seriously question the then (2012) still popular notion that democracy was deeply and irreversibly embedded in German society and that German ["Vergangenheitsbewältigung"](#) after 1945 had immunised German society against certain

infectious social patterns. I thought of what my granduncle had always told me about the [“Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold – Alliance of Active Democrats”](#). Founded by democratic parties from the middle of the political spectrum in 1924, this organisation actively (until 1933) tried to protect democracy in the Weimar Republic against anti-democratic movements from the extreme left and right. When my granduncle was their President in the late 1980ies, the organisation was primarily a place for memories, not for actions anymore. I am almost sure that he would have agreed with my alarming analysis in 2012 and would actively support his remarkably committed successors in the organisation today.

### **Needed: The renaissance of the conscious citizen in us**

When I shared some of my critical thoughts on the state of democracy for the first time in a German-speaking dinner speech in 2013, the vast majority of listeners disagreed and said things like these: “German democracy and global multilateralism have stable, rock-solid foundations. It took a while but finally we Germans have climbed the next level of civilisation.” Of course, I thought then. In their respective “echo chambers”, they would only find “déformations sociales” similar to their own. And when they invited to conferences, forums, and salons, they typically restricted dialogue to a curated number of opinions not too far from their own. Anybody who would take a position outside of an imaginary circle of acceptable language would be expelled. Even basic debating techniques (e.g. playing the devil’s advocate) became more and more risky. When I professionally acted as mediator or facilitator, avoiding trigger words that could unintentionally incite a chorus of outrage in a respective group had become not only an important skill anymore, but a survival strategy.

As much as I could handle this situation as a professional, I was worried as a citizen. In my early teenage years, I was brought up with the

notion that ultimately it was **only democracy when everyone fought for the right of political opponents to be able to openly articulate their opinions even if they harshly disagreed**. In 2013, I therefore decided to focus henceforth my personal energies on **two prerequisites of democracy** which I saw particularly endangered:

- (1) **“Dialogue Across Filter Bubbles”**: Most people do not personally interact with people who live a life very different from their own.
- (2) **“Citizen Skills”**: Most citizens do not have the basic knowledge to understand how democratic communities or societies are technically organised, and where/how they can concretely involve themselves (instead of merely complaining), and – even more importantly – many people simply lack basic psycho-social skills which citizens in a democracy ought to have if it is not to be driven by primitive instincts.

The first one (“Dialogue”) came very natural, since with my and my colleagues’ [purpose of “bridging people & ideas”](#) we always live and act on the edge (of diverse groups). For the second (“Citizen Skills”), we could also draw a lot from our professional experience, but it required even more time and effort to make a difference in this field.

In any case, democracies have a hard time, when only moms and dads talk in their roles of moms and dads, or of employees and employers, or house owners, or taxpayers, or patients, or pedestrians. Especially when we are consumers and career climbers, we are stuck in a [rat race for money and status](#).



And if we happen to catch an outside glimpse of our own lives we typically shy away from going deeper: “Where would I end up if I embarked on a journey of self-reflection?!” Hence, when citizens are consumers in the first place and when consumerism has corrupted our thinking and acting, we may need a renaissance of the conscious citizen! The citizen who tries to combine different perspectives of the world within one single person und who understands that those different roles in society may lead to multiple interests in that very same person. The citizen whose horizon goes far beyond his or her own family or job. The citizen who not only (vaguely) wants democracy, but the citizen who knows how to participate in public policy making and how to generally co-develop a democratic and pluralistic society.

#### **To be stretched: Our comfort zone as citizens**

It has always been an essential part of my role in this world to nudge the “citizen” in others. I even still have the dream of all of us not voting in elections based on our (often financial) interests, but based on what we believe would be best for the society (or the planet) as a whole. In early 1993, I had the privilege to attend a seminar with philosopher John Rawls in Boston. Students from all over the world discussed his [“veil of ignorance”](#) in long nights: How would we want to structure a society without knowing where we would ultimately end up in such a society? In the last 27 years since then, I have often initiated renewed sessions around this classic philosophical exercise. People seemed to like it and sometimes referred to me afterwards as a “diehard idealist” or “romantic dreamer”. Yes, I do confess: I am still a romantic dreamer! 😊

Soon after 2013, there was the so-called “refugee crisis”, Brexit, Trump... and suddenly the unpolitical German middle class (or better: the formally educated elite) woke up in 2016 and rallied around [“Pulse of Europe”](#) and the

likes. Worthy causes and encouraging developments, but most of them were feel-good initiatives in the end and – more importantly – still largely again within the respective filter bubbles as well as with the underlying tonality that it was primarily the others who needed to change.



This was the moment when I (together with some of my colleagues) decided to allocate even more than a third of my working time on activities around “pluralistic democracy”. Since we are a “Social Business” and are used to cross-subsidising our pro bono activities, we didn’t start a foundation or put up an initiative website. We even hesitated to talk about it in public, because we believe that there is already far too much “aggressive selling” by almost everybody in today’s (social) media realities. But now, years later and after many bilateral conversations with wonderful people from very different national, ethnic, and social backgrounds who want to get involved more with “Citizens Skills Matter” activities and experiments, I have decided to summarise my highlights and learnings so far. I will share some of them in the next weeks in my personal network and invite you all to contribute.

#### **Consider this in the meantime:**

*Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that the best way to corrupt young people is make them respect those who think alike more than those who think differently. Although I try hard to take this advice to my heart every day, I sometimes fail. How about you? I invite you to share your stories how you succeed or fail when dealing with others thinking differently than yourself?*



## Part II: There are both “hard” and “soft” citizen skills

*“Every democratic community or society must permanently re-emerge based on the collective action of its citizens.”* (“Slogan of the Month” in our student philosopher circle, 1990)

When we were teenage students, we loved reading [Alexis de Tocqueville and his observations on the young U.S. democracy](#). Although from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his idealistic pragmatism (or was it pragmatic idealism?) came as a breath of fresh air to the political routines of our Bonn Republic in the 1980. His combination of European philosophy tradition with a matter-of-fact analysis of the technicalities of parliamentary democracy in the U.S. inspired me so much that I was convinced I would become a sociologist and political scientist (which has happened and not happened at the same time somehow ;-)).

After having read ancient political philosophers like Aristotle, we turned our focus to the role of individual citizens and the development of [“civic virtues”](#). We dived into Montesquieu’s comparison (in [“Spirit of Laws” from 1748](#)) between democracies that were built on the “love of virtue” (i.e. the willingness to put the interests of society ahead of private interests) and monarchies that were built on the “love of honour” (i.e. the desire to attain greater rank, status and privilege). Looking back to this teenage stuff with my 2020 self, I wonder how Montesquieu would qualify our societies today...

[Last week](#), I mentioned two prerequisites of democracy which I felt were in danger in 2013:

- (1) **“Dialogue Across Filter Bubbles”**: Most people do not personally interact with people who live a life very different from their own.



- (2) **“Citizen Skills”**: Most citizens do not have the basic knowledge (**“hard”** skills) to understand how democratic communities or societies are technically organised, and where/how they can concretely involve themselves (instead of merely complaining), and – even more importantly – many people simply lack basic psycho-social (**“soft”**) skills which citizens in a democracy ought to have if it is not to be driven by primitive instincts.

The latter may need more explanation: The attention of politics and social sciences often focuses on whether people *want* democracy and whether they are *allowed to live in* a democracy. Nobody ever talks about the *skills of citizens to act* in a democracy. Of course not: As a politician or any other public figure, you would not even survive 24 hours until a tabloid-driven public outrage would end your career if you dared to play the ball back to citizens in certain situations. Let me therefore use my independence to make the point: A critical mass of people simply lacks the *skills to act as citizens in* a democracy!

And this is not a question of formal education (measured by official certificates). I have got to know many people with very basic formal education who have a humanistic coordination system in place which is quite conducive for democracy. In contrast to that, I have exchanged a lot with top managers and professors from various academic disciplines who had made their way up the social ladder without a clue of what day-to-day public policy making in a democracy actually requires.

Of course, badmouthing the political system is popular all over society, but when bashing the political class comes together with money and execution power, I really start worrying.

The skill set required for being a good politician in a democracy is by far NOT the same as managing a company! Please let me know immediately when you happen to run into individuals who are great in producing agile compromises... under huge uncertainty... with tremendous pressure from increasingly irrational and dissimilar sub-groups within societies... and who are as great in managing the game-theoretical complexity of international relations... and all of this at the same time! Democracy needs such talents!



Democracy” for 12 super-diverse participants each (in German: [“Mitmach-Dialoge”](#)).

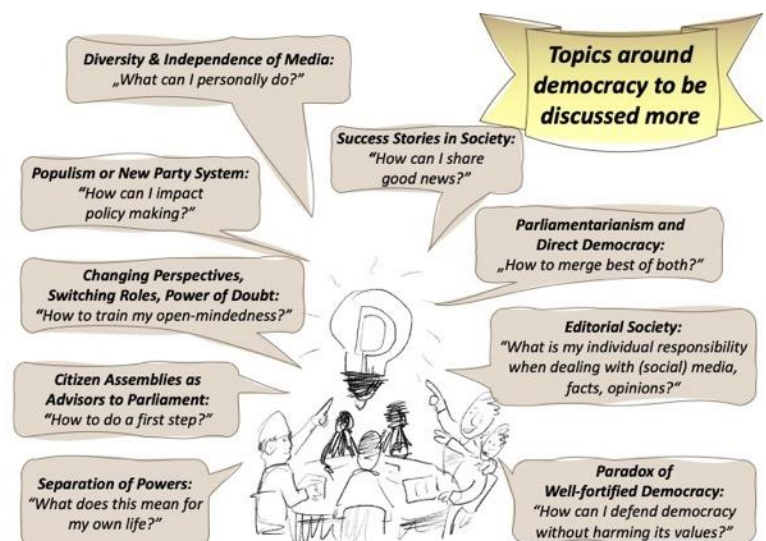
In each of them, we offered inputs on **“8 Challenges for Democracy in VUCA Times”** and let participants rotate to allow for controversial and enlightening conversations.

In a second round, we facilitated constantly changing small group constellations to neutralise dysfunctional patterns. And finally, the participants co-created topics where they would want to **personally contribute more** to strengthen pluralistic democracy in modern societies.

Maybe, the hubris of some can be explained by the famous [“Dunning-Kruger Effect”](#): Isn't it exactly those people who have low “citizen skills” that overestimate their own ability the most?! In any case, whatever the threats to democracy from the extreme left and the extreme right might be, I was and I am convinced that it is most dangerous when the middle of society withdraw from taking responsibility beyond job and family.

### What we therefore experimented with in 2014: “Citizen dialogue sessions”

When friends and I brainstormed how to initiate dialogue across filter bubbles and how to increase citizen skills, we ruled out organising just another conference where similar people like us brain-fuck with one another in order to feel good. Also, we strongly believed that we wanted to start with little things within our circle of influence. We therefore used our almost 20 years of experience as conference/workshop organisers and facilitators to compose and conduct a series of tailor-made and interactive “Citizen Dialogue Sessions for a Pluralist



### **What went well: Strengthening “hard” and (even more) “soft” citizen skills**

The series of test sessions showed us that, while important and helpful, it was indeed less about knowing details of the legislative process or how to involve yourself in public policy making in your neighbourhood (“hard” citizen skills).

The participants valued most the reminders of the little things which we all should have learned in school or latest as young professionals: Just think of “active listening”, “first notice without judging” or generally all principles of [Marshall Rosenberg’s “nonviolent communication”](#) (check it out: this was one of the most valuable elements in the curriculum of my qualification as a coach in 1997 and still helps me a lot in all I do). We were happy to see that such a “renaissance of cultural and social techniques” could be fostered by simply practicing them among citizens.

### **Where we failed: Multiplying “dialogue across filter bubbles”**



We had known before that it would be hard to always get true diversity in a group. Also, we decided against feeding our illusion of diversity by including the “usual suspects from highly sought after fringe groups” that have reached semi-professional talk show guest status. We therefore utilised our entire network and credibility as professional and private “bridges” to reach out in all pockets of society. We used a concept of “quota allocation for a balanced diversity” in order not to compromise, and – while realising our responsibility to also protect those individuals - we cautiously approached

groups of society who would probably not actively respond to our invitations. And this worked well for a limited number of test groups, but we were not able to apply this approach to a much larger number of sessions.

### **What we concluded: Donating our design to “Citizens’ Assemblies”**

With the “citizen skills” modules of the “Citizen Dialogue Sessions” working well, we wondered in 2014 where else we could apply our workshop design prototype. And since the idea of [“Citizens’ Assemblies”](#) (or similar concepts) advising (!) bodies of parliamentary (!) democracy fortunately had regained popularity in the years before, we decided to “donate” our tested design as an element of preparatory training to such Citizens’ Assemblies whenever in the future they would be in place. Technically, their members would be drawn from a public citizen register with a quota allocation to ensure socio-demographic representation. What a great leverage for our citizen skills modules this could be! Today (2020), we still think this a good idea.

**Maybe because the “2020 Corona summer” will be a cathartic moment and our democratic societies will re-emerge based on the collective action of citizens from very different filter bubbles.**

#### ***Consider this in the meantime:***

*How would you rate both your own “hard” and “soft” citizen skills on a scale from 1 to 10? And what is your life-long learning curriculum as a conscious citizen? Please share your self-assessment to inspire all of us...*



### **Part III: “Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity: Maybe the No. 1 Citizen Skill”**

*„Democracy is a body of values and procedures that one must know in order to orchestrate and balance them effectively.“*

What contemporary Spanish philosopher Daniel Innerarity recently formulated reflects nicely the learnings with our own initiatives in the last years: When experimenting with our [“Citizen Dialogue Series for a Pluralist Democracy”](#) since 2014 and when hosting a number of regular “Salons” in 2018 dedicated to a collective outlook to a desired and more than ever uncertain future (“In which society do we actually want to live?”), we had great conversations, but always came back to the question of “citizen skills”: Almost all participants openly admitted that they were not used to think or even act in their social role as citizens, nor would they attribute sufficient “hard” and “soft” citizen skills to themselves. And many of those turned out to be around the challenge of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity (beyond [“ambiguous illusions”](#)).

This is not too surprising, at least not in a Germano-centric (or to some extent also euro-centric) reality where the certainty of an ever increasing wealth had become the cultural core pillar of (West) German generations after 1945. In his book [“The Germans and their Myths”](#) from 2009, Herfried Münkler developed the intriguing idea that after the Nazi abuse of any possible somewhat German myth, post-war generations built their identity solely around “D-Mark” and “Wirtschaftswunder”. Personally, I would add a third new myth: In a “National Biedermeier Swing”, Germans flourished in their economic and engineering sphere, inversely attached little value to social sciences, and collectively retreated from international politics. This went well for many decades and created a cosy space where even educated Germans would celebrate the new heights of German export successes and would at the very same time not accept any responsibility (or at least self-interest) for

whatever happened outside German borders (or outside their family homes).

An entire country had decided to measure its well-being solely with economic success (e.g. money, titles, and the size of company cars) – with the national tabloid [BILD](#) as a flywheel. Globalisation was good for the Germans as long as it didn’t bother them with unpleasant questions about the systemic interdependencies of our complex world. Egoism was translated as realism and altruism as naiveté. Today, reality cannot be ignored any longer and all of the sudden the complexities of modern societies seem to come as a surprise for many. This is frightening of course and converts our latent “German Angst” into passionate uncertainty and ambiguity avoidance.

#### **The blind spots of VUCA**

Last week, I wrote about the [“challenges for democracy in VUCA times”](#). “Uncertainty” and “Ambiguity” represent two of the four letters in the trendy acronym “VUCA”. The term “VUCA World” to announce a more confusing future ahead of us was first used in [1987](#), but only became slowly popular after 2008. Considering



its omnipresence in (management) conferences since then, I am often surprised how many top deciders have either never heard of it or – if so – have largely misunderstood what it ultimately means. They would proudly present their models how to hedge markets’ volatilities or how to reduce complexity in their organisations. However, when I ask them how they personally deal with (also their very own) uncertainties and ambiguities which might happen to occasionally overwhelm them, many would deny to ever experience that.



Well, what else to expect: Since the 1920s economics were built around the ideology of controlling risk with mathematical models. But how to measure ambiguity when it stands mathematically for situations where objective probabilities cannot be assigned? Decades of business school programmes would fall to pieces... And although modern quantum physics (just think of [Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle"](#)) have shown that even in physics there is no such thing as an objective reality which is independent from the observer, dealing with ambiguity also has to do with the psycho-social side of the world. Hence, it is disturbing "soft stuff" which reminds "insecure over-achievers" of their carefully hidden blind spots.

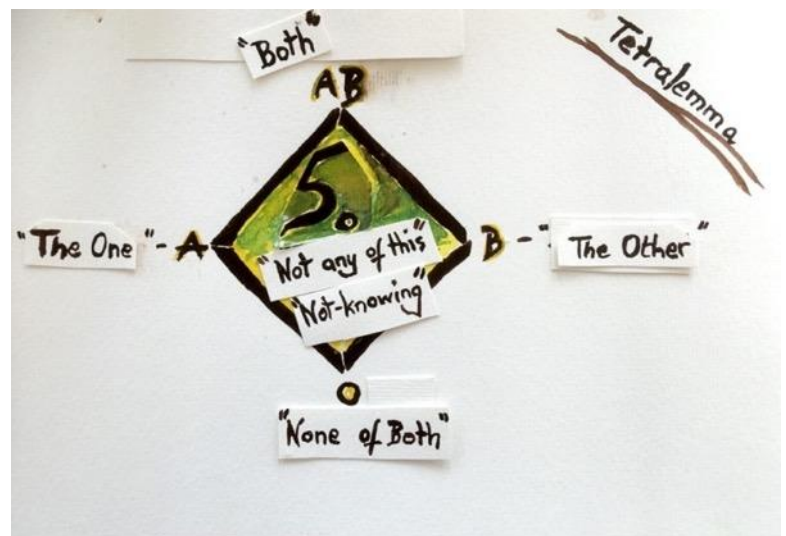
But it is also and truly a cumbersome challenge for rational thinking: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" noted Scott Fitzgerald ("The Great Gatsby") already in 1936.

In an [open letter](#) to all stakeholders in the gentrified "Frankfurt Bahnhofsviertel" some years ago, I wrote that both the police were doing a good job overall and of course there were cases of racial profiling. Why should both not be possible at the same time? Maybe because the brain doesn't like ambiguity at all: It interprets it as a threat and triggers the [fight or flight system](#).

This is why probably ancient philosophy schools or rabbis in Talmud schools taught their students to defend a position with verve and then do the same with the opposite position as energetically. Good assessment centres for high-potentials also use this method until today, but honestly: How many company CEOs could you imagine in 2020 that would act convincingly as union leaders addressing a crowd of workers??

## Tetralemma: An increasingly popular fusion of Western and Eastern logic

Let me make the case for venturing more ambiguity by sharing a beautiful model which has helped me a lot in the last 15 years. If you don't want to check the growing literature about ["Tetralemma"](#), this is my nutshell summary: Western science at some point made a choice to build its fundamental logical system on the bivalence of "right" and "wrong". This allowed for Karl Popper's "critical rationalism" with its empirical falsification and continues to be powerful and important – especially in times of conspiracy theories of all kinds. This focus on either "A" or "B" however neglects that often A and B ("both") or neither A nor B ("none of



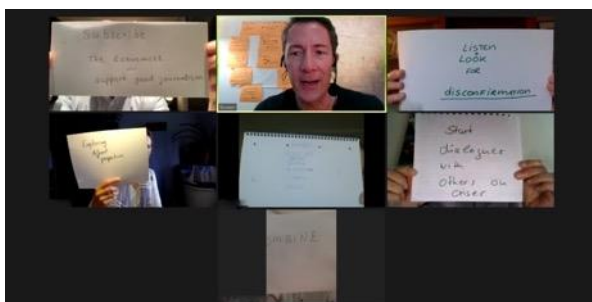
both") could also be valid (or at least value adding) positions in a logical scheme. Think of a new job offer that makes you think whether you should accept it ("A") or keep your existing job ("B"). In this example, "none of both" seems to be a straightforward position if you ultimately end up in a third job. If you struggled with the "both" position, a career coach would probably help you by asking: "Which ideas has the new job offer triggered in you to transform your existing job in a new direction?"

Similar to the "four-corner argument" in classical logic, variants of "Tetralemma" were used in court procedures in Ancient Greece and constituted a core element of Indian logic (especially as "fourfold negation" in "Buddhist

logic"). In recent decades, a fifth position ("not even any of this") has often been added. Some theorists argue that this would allow for the integration of spirituality into a logical framework. I would rather use this fifth position to integrate "not-knowing" into our knowledge-based logical system (which would make it a "Pentalemma" of course). "We know that we don't know" would then become a logical part of the knowing.

### Corona dialogue with "both A and B"?!

March 2020: A society suddenly had to deal with the uncertainties of the new Corona virus and with the ambiguity and not-knowing of science. A society willingly delegated responsibility to heroically acting leaders who pretended to be very certain about what they do. A society briefly gathered when in shock and then started splitting into new extremes: Those who rather neglected the virus and played it down and those who rather dramatised and panicked. A society had difficulties accepting that maybe sometimes both A and B can be right at the same time. Even on a meta-level, the population seemed to be split in halves: Some were convinced that Corona could help us "grow together again" and some stated that Corona would "drive us apart". Well, maybe it is both A and B even here...



In any case, it seemed to be the perfect time to make the cluster of hard and soft citizen skills around "Dealing with Uncertainty and Ambiguity" a dedicated issue. In the months from April to June 2020, I therefore hosted a series of 9 virtual "Mini Salons on Social Sustainability" with seven participants each. Although everybody was already annoyed by far too many energy-draining video conferences in

the new "Corona home office world", people seemed to enjoy the fast-paced interaction and the switch to the role of a citizen dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity.

At the end of each "Mini Salon", I asked the altogether 60 participants what they as citizens would personally and concretely want to contribute to society in the next months. And to make it harder, I added two conditions: (1) Let the contribution be "in favour of" and not "against" something and (2) try to see the positive already in society with an appreciative (instead of a "spot-the-mistake") attitude.

The output was impressive. And when I received



even more contributions in the weeks after the "Mini Salons", I compiled and tweaked them to a preliminary list of "20 Citizen Hacks" which may help to orchestrate and balance our democracy effectively. Check it out next week in Part IV... ☺

### Consider this in the meantime:

*In the last months, when have you noticed something to be both "right" and "wrong" at the same time? How did you personally handle this ambiguity?*

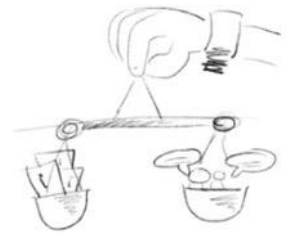
## Part IV: “(Soft) Citizen Skills” - 20 Hacks for everyone

At least since 9/11, it became clear that the certainty of the traditional East-West and North-South divide was over and that also developed countries would face new challenges requiring new solutions. It took our societies a while to accept and digest these new realities. In fact, we are collectively sliding down giant societal “change curves” and are experiencing not-knowing, denial and exaggeration, anger, fear, anxiety... so far, all this was to be expected!

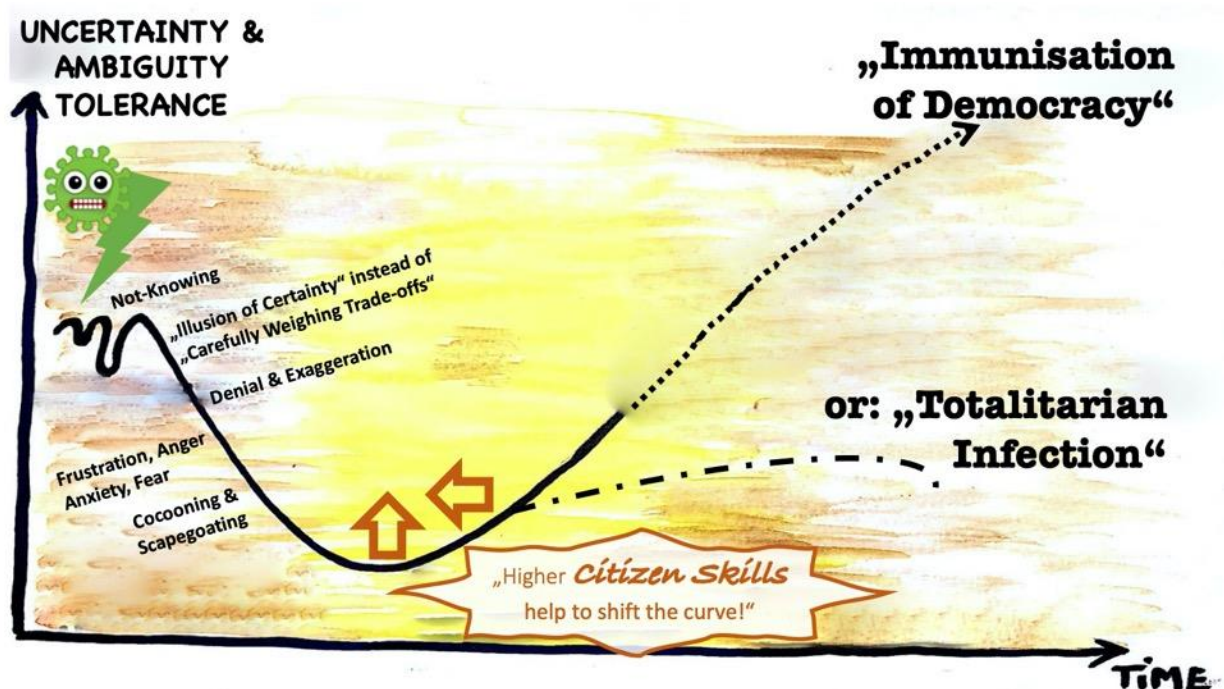
Neo-authoritarian government models seem to offer relief here. In times of acute crises, their fast response times are attractive – especially if one forgets that regimes without a free press

leaders who make it public when they (responsibly) weigh trade-offs and ethical dilemmas are punished by voters. I find this frustrating.

Unfortunately, the truth here is stranger than the fiction of “[House of Cards](#)” ...



It is up to us citizens to decide what we want. And if we want to immunise our democracy, we must not blame politicians for not guaranteeing certainties they can impossibly deliver. We need to overcome our primitive instincts and take (political) responsibility ourselves. Be it in old or new parties, ad hoc initiatives or simply by being more competent citizens.



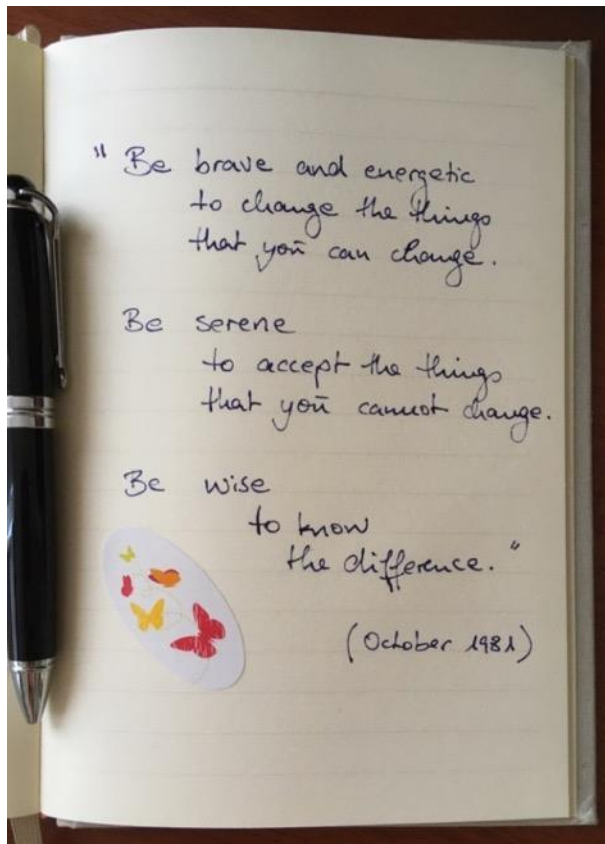
and without annoying opposition (parties) are naturally faster. However, it doesn't need much education to have learned that this speed (and the illusion of clear and unambiguous decisions) not only comes at the expense of reduced civil rights, but totalitarian regimes simply have a disastrous track record of sustainably enabling good life in societies.

Even in our current democracies, leaders who pretend to be heroes are perceived as strong decision-makers whereas other, more candid

Let me summarise: In part 1 of this manifesto, I encouraged you to deliberately and regularly spend time with people who live a live very [different from your own](#). Then, I reminded you of the importance of “[hard](#)” and especially of “[soft](#)” citizen skills. And in part 3, I promoted [dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity](#) as a key competence for citizens in the 2020s.



In this fourth instalment, I want to tackle the toughest challenge: **What can each of us actually do to become a more skilful and competent citizen?**



Let's begin by remembering what our parents told us when we were young: Stop blaming others! Start with what you can do yourself! And guess what: When I recently found my 1981 "Poesiealbum" (friendship book) which we used to pass around when we were 5<sup>th</sup> grade classmates, I realised once again that we don't have a lack of knowing and wanting, but of acting. It's like with your "10-minutes-a-day strengthen-the-core" exercises which you know you should do...



Therefore, I decided to collect a number of "Citizen Hacks" which may help us to work on our own (soft) citizen skills. Let me be very clear:

- (1) These hacks are not brand new (neither are "grandma's household life hacks" on YouTube, but they are still good).
- (2) They may not be intellectually impressive (neither are most management innovations which often are as well simple remakes of fundamental "forgotten social techniques").
- (3) Therefore, they don't include "hard" citizen skills like "Vote!" or "Inform yourself about the candidates in the next mayoral election".
- (4) Many hacks are inconvenient! It is human that we mostly follow more comfortable and more egocentric reflexes which offer a quicker reward. So, changing a pattern might annoy you.
- (5) The hacks are partly overlapping (= not mutually exclusive) and certainly not collectively exhaustive. And that is alright! ☺

The first prototype of 12 "citizen hacks" has been complemented by 60 participants of a series of virtual ["Mini Salons on Social Sustainability"](#) in an agile process from April to June 2020, before I tweaked them again. Now, there is an updated prototype with currently 20 hacks ready to be tested. They are supposed to be food for thought, something to spur you into action!

As in an advent calendar, I will introduce one "citizen hack" at a time over the next few weeks and illustrate their relevance with examples from both (very personal) "private life" and/or (what I would call) the "professional or political sphere". Please share your comments and post your own examples as to how you train your citizen's muscle – with little stories or short videos... Why not launch a new challenge – as cool and global as the "Ice Bucket Challenge", but one that matters more?





#### **Here's this week's "Citizen Hack":**

***When you are overwhelmed by your own uncertainty and fear, pause and be resilient, rather than attribute responsibility to (possibly misplaced) scapegoats! Notice more, judge less ("Judgement Detox")!***

#### **"Private Life" Example:**

##### **Blaming others in order not to feel your pain**

As I'm sure you've noticed, I have tried to ignore the COVID-19 situation in my manifesto. The risk of unknowingly using trigger words in an overly emotional public discourse is simply too high. Nevertheless, dealing with uncertainty and fear in the face of a pandemic currently teaches us a great lesson about life in general: When we all struggle, we strive to find a culprit for our misery and happily identify other human beings to take the blame. Let's pause for a minute and work on our resilience: Who of us doesn't make mistakes? Is the mistake really that bad? And is it really true that there was a mistake in the first place? If we all had used these check questions when we heard about the (wrongly accused)

"American super-spreader in Garmisch" instead of immediately asking for severe punishment, we wouldn't have been able to conveniently redirect our attention and negative energies to someone else. I hope that in the future we won't regress that easily to bad habits which remind us of times of mob law.

#### **"Professional or Political Sphere" Example:**

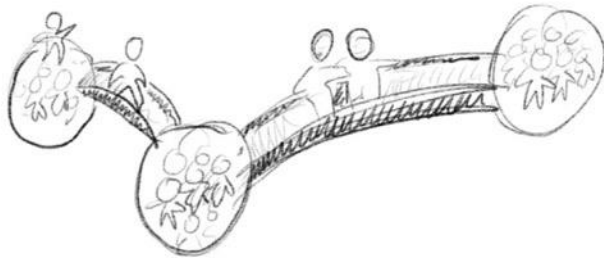
##### **The E.U. as institutional scapegoat**

National governments themselves regularly play a nasty "scapegoat game" with E.U. institutions when they claim E.U. successes for themselves and when they blame the E.U. for unpopular decisions – which is even more reprehensible when national governments themselves have actually lobbied for those decisions behind the scenes. Let's just imagine for a moment what would happen if more skilful citizens could unmask such unworthy behaviour and turn the tables: In such circumstances, what would prompt national politicians to act would not be opinion polls or clickbaiting of national tabloids, but skilled and well-informed citizens. The latter would have more realistic expectations towards democratic institutions which would then allow those institutions to transparently engineer better compromises (and decisions).



Of course, populists of all camps are unlikely to appreciate competent citizens: It's like the scapegoat role of referees in modern football and how the video assistant referee (VAR) seems to be a threat for (too) many football fans to not have a readily available culprit to blame. The similarities between political populism and football fan culture are often painfully fascinating.

Hence, stop shifting your own frustrations in life to politicians, to football referees, and to other human beings in general! Instead: Pause for a while before you act (or not)! Notice more, judge less!



bridging people and ideas that otherwise would not come together! ☺

*Please share your comments and post your examples of this or the other “citizen hacks” coming in the next weeks – as little stories or short videos... Why not launch a new challenge – as cool and global as the “Ice Bucket Challenge”, but one that matters more?*

### **Be a radical citizen and a bridge!**

In the different parts of this manifesto, I have shared with you my own coming-of-age as a radical citizen. At least since 2012, I have allocated a third of my working time to not-for-profit activities for social sustainability. In the last years however, I was more and more convinced that I must do more. My own radicalisation as a citizen had come to a point where I decided to enter a public stage more frequently – with all the risks that come with it: Left and right identity politics are ready to attack everyone outside of very small ideological opinion pockets. But who else, I said to myself, who else is independent enough to be able not to be everybody’s darling?!

Like everyone else, I sometimes make mistakes and engage in convenience trade-offs. There are even moments when I simply want to refrain from thinking and acting. But I try to do my best. I already simplified my life many years ago: Reduce property and fixed costs to a minimum and lead a virtual lifestyle with an agile and hybrid company set-up. And yes, I am also aware of my countless privileges: Being physically and mentally healthy, having great friends and family, being gifted with some positivity and belief in my self-efficacy. And I feel both old and young enough to fail forward as a citizen whose purpose it is to co-create social innovation by