

Ester Bonal, Philippe Meirieu and Marina Garcés

Ester Bonal

Well, good morning everyone. I won't introduce Marina and Philippe again, because Pep has already introduced them very well, but I would like to say a few words about both of them.

And before anything else, I would like to tell you, on behalf of the three of us, that we fully support the demands and protests taking place at this very moment in this country, in the fields of education, healthcare and libraries. We are completely aligned with these demands, and at this congress there will be a succession of people who are role models precisely because of their struggles, their positions, their defence of educational rights, equity and the fight against inequalities.

Personally, I have to say that I think yesterday the focus was shifted. The focus was lost. And the focus of this protest should have been somewhere else. We are very saddened by what happened in this regard.

Well. Without further ado, before asking the first question, I would like to tell you two little personal stories.

When Albert told me that he wanted me to — well, not exactly asked me, because Albert doesn't ask whether you want to — he said: "Will you moderate the dialogue between Marina and Philippe?" I had a nervous breakdown for two reasons.

First, because they are people I read. I read them, I know them and I follow their work. I see them at conferences.

I was lucky enough to develop a friendship with Marina. And Philippe, for me, was my guru. But, on top of that, Philippe is one of my gurus.

And he introduced me to someone many of you know: Pilar Figueras. Pilar Figueras made me sing from the time I was five years old. She was the director of the Centre d'Accords Infants.

I had sung with her all my life. And when I decided to take an interest in education, one day she gave me *Frankenstein Educator*. I discovered an entire world and read Philippe's books.

That is why there is also an important emotional journey here. And in Marina's case, I discovered a shared world. I started reading Marina's books, and one day she published *School of Apprentices*. And I was thrilled.

Those who know me know that I am a bit of an enthusiast. And I do things. Catalans do things.

I am a Catalan who does things.

And I wrote to Marina and asked her if I could put up a post on social media, because I wanted educators all over the world to read *School of Apprentices*. And from that point onwards, we committed ourselves to one another and established a beautiful relationship.

We have two very important role models here.

And without further ado, we will begin with the first question, which has a lot to do with what happened yesterday and with what is happening in Catalonia at the moment.

When we talk about educating for democracy, Philippe Meirieu and Marina, with their key books, are very important.

In cities where we say, or want to be, educating cities, but where at this moment, at least here in Catalonia, families with children are being reported, we have an education policy that has decided to introduce plain-clothes police officers into universities.

And there are teachers on holiday, while algorithms and other elements outside school and education beyond school often have a much greater influence on education.

So, what can education do, and what can it not do on its own, in the face of this situation?

Philippe.

Philippe Meirieu

Thank you, thank you very much for welcoming me.

I am very happy to be here. First of all, I would like to pay tribute to Pilar Figueras, whom I knew well and who played a particularly important role in the movement you represent today.

The question “What can education do for democracy?” is a very broad and very important question.

And I would first of all like to say that education is not just school.

Of course, school is fundamental, it is essential. It is the place through which practically all children of a certain age group pass.

Of course, schools need support and need the resources to fulfil their mission and, in this regard, I once again express my solidarity with the colleagues who demonstrated this morning.

But schools are not alone.

I insist very much on the complementarity between family education, on the one hand; school education, on the other; and all the education that takes place outside school, in the city, and especially within the associative fabric.

Recent research I have been able to carry out shows that many children and adolescents who later took on responsibilities as adults, who became involved in associations, trade unions or politics, discovered this sense of responsibility not at school, unfortunately, but in associations where they became active alongside school.

And it is important to remember this, because the cities you represent can be remarkably effective in this regard.

So, what can schools do in a situation such as the one that has been mentioned, and which is particularly difficult today?

They can embody an ideal of emancipation and solidarity.

They can ensure that people do not remain closed in on themselves, in their individualism, in their selfishness, but that they meet one another.

And if I had to convey just one message to all those among you who work for an educating city, it would be this: create cities of encounter.

Encounter between generations, encounter between social groups, encounter between cultures.

Encounter so that everyone can discover new horizons and not remain enclosed within what they have built.

Encounter so that everyone can weave bonds of solidarity.

Encounter because every individual, every person in the city, is at the same time someone who has resources to offer others and someone who needs others.

And organising society, organising the social fabric so that some people's resources can benefit and meet other people's needs is, I believe, something that cities can do or, at the very least, can initiate.

Many people have resources they are unaware of. I believe we need to allow them to show those resources, to see themselves as people who have resources to offer, and to help others.

And those who need others can, in this way, build relationships and build solidarity.

We cannot do everything. Education cannot do everything.

It cannot change the world on its own.

But it can do a great deal.

It can allow people to meet, to discover that they complement one another and can be supportive of one another, and that is no small thing.

It is already a great deal, and that is what you are doing in the cities you represent.

Ester Bonal

Thank you very much.

Marina, what would you like to add?

Marina Garcés

Yes, thank you very much.

I am very happy to greet all of you, all the people who have come from so many parts of the world to think and talk over these days about how our cities, municipalities and territories form part of this educational challenge, of this chain of knowledge involving people and movements.

But I must also say, as Ester said at the beginning, that for me being in this open room, because it is a very open room, is a source of great sadness and concern about how we can make our struggles not merely struggles against enemies but, in fact, a school of alliances.

That is somewhat what I want to talk about and what I have always tried to think about and put into practice, both through philosophy and through activism and social movements.

So, first of all, I would like to greet you and all the people who are out in the streets today defending schools, libraries and healthcare, because it is not only schools that are fighting for their

salaries, as the media often want us to believe. We are fighting for much more: we are defending public services.

And public services are not simply services, tools of the State. They are the guarantee that everything we call democracy — which can remain an empty and often misleading word, as we know, when it is used to protect certain political elites — is actually democracy.

Democracy means having a good public service available to everyone, regardless of their origin, age or abilities; quality services that are public and open.

I think that if we talk about democracy and critical thinking today without these public services, which have been in the process of being dismantled for years — let us not forget that — there is very little we can say, and they will only be empty words.

Having said that, excuse me, I can hear changes in the volume.

When I wrote *School of Apprentices*, which is not simply a book but a resource for an entire way of understanding thought, education and politics as inseparable, I had three convictions.

The first is that any educational crisis is not merely a pedagogical crisis, a crisis between educational models, but a political, social and world crisis.

And the world is not simply the planet, it is not merely what we can objectify before us; it is what connects us.

And when connections grow distant, when bonds erode, when everything we have witnessed over the past few days in the form of struggles manifests itself not only as a problem but also as a distance between the interlocutors and political subjects who, in some way, can form part of the same society through what they learn or do not learn from one another, that is where we can speak of an educational crisis in a strong and real sense.

We have been experiencing a sustained educational crisis here in Europe for many years, and in different ways around the world.

That was the first point of *School of Apprentices*, and it is the starting point for a vision that does not confine pedagogy to its own problems, nor a discipline to its own limits, but enables all of us, in some way, to become educators concerned with life in common, with these shared worlds that we may or may not be able to sustain today.

The second conviction is that we cannot talk about education in the third person.

Philosophy — and this is more my field — and especially the philosophy of education, from its origins, from the philosophers of Greece and all those stories we tell, stories that are cultural myths, have transmitted to us a way of approaching educational problems always in the third person:

How should we educate?

How should we educate the other?

How should we educate children?

How should we educate young people?

How should we educate the citizen?

And the person who asks this question — the educator, the legislator, the teacher — places themselves outside the question.

In other words: how do we educate the other?

For me, the second conviction, and I think the idea of an educating city should come from here, is not to ask ourselves in the third person how to educate others, but how we want to be educated ourselves.

Moving into the second person plural.

Turning the question towards ourselves.

This is where the educational question becomes inseparably a political, cultural and social question.

So: who are we as we learn from one another? Do we learn from one another or not? Do we unlearn from one another, or do we confine learning only within and outside school?

As Philippe Meirieu said, school is not the only educational reality in our societies.

We can say it in this plural form, in this first-person plural.

And this, finally, brings us to the third conviction:

There is no emancipatory education without alliances.

There is no emancipatory education and alliances.

And when I talk about alliances, I am not talking about alliances in the terms in which institutions and companies have appropriated this word, as partners or interlocutors within a particular type of enterprise.

I mean: who are our allies?

That is the question.

Who are our allies in an open way, in a dialogical way?

When I told Ester yes, and Albert Solé that I wanted to come to this meeting, it was precisely with this idea of exploring alliances.

Not from the perspective of what kind of organisation we can create or how we can partner more effectively, but really:

Who are those whom we do not know, who are part of our shared worlds and with whom we can bring together both our learning and our struggles?

An alliance of learners.

If I had to define an educating city, I would use these terms.

There is no educating city where an alliance between learners is not possible, whatever the conflict, whatever the conflicting perspectives, whatever the levels of misunderstanding.

Every alliance forms part of this possibility of encounter and alliance around this common goal.

Ester Bonal

Well, thank you very much.

There have been words connected to interdependence, the space of encounter, alliance, connection, the need to preserve public services and solidarity.

And when I was talking about Philippe, I was also thinking about something we have shared with Begoña Román, who says that the cries and proclamations of the French Revolution were precisely: liberty, equality and fraternity.

Begoña always says that fraternity is what we have forgotten most, and that it has to do with this ability to listen in order to generate alliances and spaces of encounter, both inside and outside.

Let us move on to a second question, which brings us to the scale of critical thinking at this gathering.

When we talk about critical thinking, we think about educating ourselves, training ourselves or developing our critical thinking in a context and a world where there is an avalanche of information, very often heavily manipulated, and where social networks are spreading everywhere.

How do we educate critical thinking today?

Philippe Meirieu

Perhaps, before answering your question directly, I would like to return to a point Marina raised.

Education can only take place in the first person plural.

This “we” is essential, and this “we” is what structures educational life as an exchange between learners, as an exchange between all those people who can both give and receive.

Giving every person in the city a status that allows them to be both someone who gives to others and someone who can receive from others.

And I believe this is the role of the city.

It is about giving each person the confidence that allows them to contribute something — knowledge, skills, culture — to their peers and, at the same time, to accept receiving, because we are humble and we are not omnipotent, what others can give us.

Creating this solidarity is fundamental, but this — and Marina also mentioned it — presupposes that we still believe in education.

And today I am very concerned because I observe that, around the world, some of those who govern us no longer believe in education.

They believe in repression, they believe in exclusion, they believe in the power of weapons and violence, but not in education or prevention.

And you mentioned the French Revolution, and I thank you for that.

The French Revolution was part of that Enlightenment movement which affirmed that all human beings can be educated, that all human beings are educable and that no one should be excluded from the circle of humanity.

I think that in this respect the world made progress for many years, but I believe that today, when we look especially at populist movements, we see that a number of countries around the world — and my own country is not free from this drift — are choosing instead to exclude those who are

considered resistant, rather than going towards them and accompanying them through a process that allows them to discover themselves, relate to others and stand in solidarity with them.

As for the question of critical thinking, you are obviously right to challenge us.

The world we live in is one in which certainties are delivered to people through machines, mobile phones and slogans.

And what education can certainly do is place people in a process of inquiry, put them in a questioning attitude.

The great American philosopher and educator John Dewey explained that at the heart of pedagogy, just as at the heart of democracy, lies the process of inquiry, the process of investigation, the process of desire.

Stimulating the desire to learn and not settling for knowledge, however sophisticated it may be, and even less so when that knowledge comes from machines and artificial intelligence.

For a long time I believed that pupils, for example at school, wanted to learn.

I think this is not entirely true.

Pupils want to know and, if possible, to know without learning.

And our role as adults is to allow them to desire to learn, and not simply to know.

Not to be satisfied with the certainties that fill them, but to remain constantly in search and continually discover new knowledge beneath the knowledge they are being taught.

So critical thinking is something that takes place at every moment, at every instant.

It is at the heart of the city, at the heart of the school, at the heart of the family.

Every time an adult accompanies a child and says:

“Go further. Let’s go further together. Let’s not settle for what we think we know, for our representations, for the slogans that besiege us, for the advertising that pushes us towards consumption. Let’s go further, let’s search, let’s set out on a quest.”

And here I believe adults have a great responsibility because we must transmit to children not simply knowledge, not simply skills and competences, but a relationship with knowledge.

A relationship of rigour.

A relationship of inquiry.

A relationship of desire and enthusiasm.

And this is the relationship we must maintain with ourselves, because by maintaining it with ourselves we can pass it on to our children.

I believe critical thinking is not simply a set of pedagogical or didactic devices.

It is a relationship with the world.

A relationship that questions the world and never settles for the simplifications, the schemes and the slogans that simplify this world, caricature it and fill us with certainties — but certainties that generate violence.

So yes, schools have a responsibility.

Families have a responsibility.

But cities also have a responsibility, provided that they allow people to meet and embark together on a search.

To embark together on a search despite our differences:

Differences in age.

Differences in origin.

Differences in concerns.

Differences in professions.

To come together in the search for solutions.

Local solutions, right here, for today.

But also more global solutions.

Solutions that allow our world to escape the paths that threaten it.

When different individuals come together in search, when they search together and give themselves a common object of inquiry, I believe we can overcome the satisfaction of immutable certainties and gain access to the critical thinking you were referring to.

Ester Bonal

Thank you very much.

Sorry, I'm taking notes.

Marina Garcés

Yes.

I completely agree with everything Philippe Meirieu says, and I would like to add a few things.

I think we have often adopted a very abstract conception of what critical thinking means.

And when I say abstract, I do not mean that in opposition to abstraction, which is very necessary and very good, because it allows us to move beyond what our lives immediately are and what immediately conditions us.

It allows us to move; otherwise, we would not search for anything or go in search of anything.

But we have to go beyond abstraction and ask ourselves what material, symbolic and institutional conditions make this movement and this displacement possible.

Since many of you come from different parts of the world, I would like to give you a piece of information that appeared in this country last week.

We are talking about critical thinking and, therefore, we are talking about the conditions for emancipation.

You should know that the age of emancipation, in the literal sense of the word — that is, being able to leave home and one's family with sufficient resources — for young people who are no longer young Spaniards today is 30.2 years.

30.2 years is the age of emancipation in Spain today.

If we start from here, what happens?

In other words, from where do we think? How do we think? With whom do we think?

Because thinking does not happen only here, in this abstract space. It happens with the whole body, with life, with working time, with precarity, with the people we live with.

We are talking about how to live in a way that is not limited or imposed by all these closures, even in the most intimate aspects of life, in family life and in relation to housing.

Because we are talking about the fact that this age of emancipation corresponds — and we could do the mathematical calculation — to a particular price per square metre.

And that is also violence.

That is also war.

That is also an attack on people's lives.

Therefore, when philosophers, educators, teachers — and often politicians too, in their speeches — fill these words with critical thinking, emancipation and autonomy, with the great modern Enlightenment tradition surrounding these concepts, we must give them all this embodied, concrete and situated condition of what they mean today.

So, how do we teach critical thinking?

By learning to perceive all of this.

At the moment when we set ourselves in motion to formulate those questions that make it possible to dismantle, question, change and construct other possible relationships.

This means not disconnecting, for example, housing struggles, educational struggles, the problem of reading and our relationship with language.

These are not separate problems.

Because if we separate them, in some way we have already lost.

We specialise in our own ways of relating to the world, when, in the end, critical thinking is precisely this:

It is not having a ready-made opinion about what we think of things.

It is being able to change our view of things as we encounter one another, not only in dialogue with others, but also through confrontation, through relationships and through a journey with those others.

Therefore, learning critical thinking is all of this:

Knowing where we are and at what point we stand in relation to all these dimensions of the problem.

Not in order to feel more powerless, but quite the opposite.

And here is the other aspect that I believe has a great deal to do with whether we want to continue talking about critical thinking.

What is the dominant emotional state today in almost every area of social life, at least in our context?

Powerlessness and fear.

Who has fed this powerlessness and this fear?

How have we become permeated by powerlessness and fear in schools, in neighbourhoods, in the streets, in our intimate lives and in our emotional relationships?

Because fear and powerlessness are not divine gifts; they do not fall from the sky.

They are fuelled by a huge, highly profitable industry of fear that makes us more governable, more isolated and more fragile.

And which means that, ultimately, these confined lives, which cannot move autonomously, freely and under conditions of equality throughout the city, end up becoming these proto-fascist individuals, these angry individuals, these resentful individuals, who eventually, in some way, make this situation explode.

And then we blame them.

Young people become right-wing, others become I-don't-know-what, these people do not want to cooperate, the others...

How do we get here?

This, I believe, is the question of critical thinking today, before we start drawing great abstract pictures of the world.

Ester Bonal

Thank you. Philippe, would you like to say something? You can applaud. Applaud however you like.

Philippe Meirieu

Yes, I think, like Marina, that emancipation cannot be fragmented. Emancipation is global and affects the whole person.

But I also believe that today's emancipatory challenge is the rejection of any form of essentialisation, of any form of imprisonment.

And today I am concerned about forms of closure. Closure within our origins, closure within our identities and affiliations, but also closure within the tunnel of algorithms through social networks, which always prioritise what you have already chosen, what you have already done, and which lock you into what you already are.

Emancipation, etymologically, is the possibility of differing from what has made us who we are.

We are beings shaped by circumstances, we are contingent beings, but we are not condemned to continue being what has shaped us.

We can differ; we can be different.

And for each person to be able to be different, they need to find stimuli in their environment, in their context; they need to encounter culture, different forms of expression: the expression of culture in its most symbolic forms, but also the expression of artisanal culture, the expression of everything that builds human relationships.

This discovery of differences that enrich us is, in my view, at the heart of the process of emancipation, provided that it is linked to the concern, as you have quite rightly said, for the dignity of the person in their everyday life.

Dignity in housing, dignity in healthcare, dignity in social care.

But this dignity should not be accompanied by an assignment, by a label.

And today we label people and we label children.

In France we would say: "This pupil is dyslexic."

Yes, they are dyslexic, but they should not be identified as "a dyslexic".

This pupil also has abilities because they are interested in manga, because they are an excellent football player, and I must not imprison them within their dyslexia.

I have no right to lock anyone inside a particular nature.

On the contrary, I have a duty to allow these people to discover other things so that they can go beyond themselves and choose, go beyond themselves and choose their own lives.

And I believe that you, the cities, have an essential responsibility in this opening-up: in this capacity to show, to make people hear, to allow them to discover things different from where they come from, so that they can choose where they are going.

Ester Bonal

I am hyperactive. I am hyperactive, but I had not yet discovered the word.

I very much agree with what Philippe says: the existence of labels, or identifying someone solely through a particular characteristic.

And this has to do with Marcuse's idea of feeling that we have reached the top, and with this tension between the security that we human beings need and the freedom that we also need.

This tension generates a need for identity that fuels absolutely polarised, belligerent and even fascist attitudes, linked to closed communities, to this closure Philippe was talking about: how everything becomes increasingly closed and how this generates the exclusion of the other.

And how do we react to this?

When we defend these positions and look at ourselves in the mirror, when we see our own contradictions, we have to work because we want to educate for emancipation and for all of this, but at the same time we are inside institutions, schools, universities and spaces that are highly hierarchical and highly stratified.

How do we navigate this? How do we find the keys that will allow us to fight all of this?

Marina Garcés

I think there are two issues.

The other side of this fear and this widespread feeling of powerlessness is that those who have a structure — whether an institution, an identity or a position — in the face of this scenario of fear and powerlessness do not simply reaffirm their identity, their position and their condition; they also adopt a defensive attitude.

One of my concerns, alongside many others expressed by Philippe Meirieu, is this feeling that we increasingly live in environments where people who have responsibilities — and we all have some — increasingly tend to act defensively.

Sometimes using very good words, and I am not judging whether the intention is good or bad, because that is not the point.

But it is this closure: do not question me, do not say that I have done something wrong, do not call what I do into question.

And this can end up leading to dynamics of exclusion, to moving further and further away from those who make things easy for us, from those who reaffirm us and accept us without questioning us.

We cannot talk about critical thinking, or democracy, or educating cities, or anything similar, in environments where these practices increasingly drive us apart.

Can we stop acting defensively?

What happens if we stop acting defensively?

Perhaps we will not like what we discover about what we do, about who we are, about the image we sometimes reflect back to others.

Criticism and self-criticism can go hand in hand.

And self-criticism is not guilt, which is the other side I also wanted to address.

We are Catholic societies, whether we like it or not, and perhaps we are more or less religious.

And guilt is another side of these fears that run through us today.

We do not like feeling guilty.

We do not like feeling guilty when schools cannot do their job properly; we do not like feeling guilty as activists or intellectuals who, in the end, feel that we repeat empty words everywhere.

And very often this guilt ends up becoming a search for someone to blame.

We free ourselves from this guilt by looking for someone to blame.

And often those who are blamed today are young people.

And I wanted to say that one of the challenges we face is not to blame or victimise young people in our societies.

They are not only victims, nor are they solely responsible for the negative things of our time.

Philippe Meirieu has given the example of diagnoses in schools.

What happens is that young people who are diagnosed or criminalised — and this is happening more and more — end up being defined by that label.

I would suggest, to begin with, that one of the challenges is to stop allowing these labels to operate with the naturalness and everydayness with which we use them, because they are a mirror of our fears.

They are a mirror of teachers who need a diagnosis to escape from their pedagogical difficulties.

They are also a mirror of a society that does not want to look at the illnesses of its time except through control: police control, sociological control, technological control.

All of these are systems that close doors that should remain open and that end up creating the illusion of a world under control.

Ester Bonal

In this sense, there is a sentence by Philippe that I have read: education is an art because it manages the unforeseen.

And perhaps that is why, in this world obsessed with control, education is not of interest, because perhaps it is not capable of managing the unforeseen.

Philippe Meirieu

Yes, that is possible.

I believe education is, indeed, the accompaniment of freedom.

We live in a world in which accompanying freedom is considered more of a danger than an opportunity.

And perhaps that is where the whole problem lies.

It is also a problem because our institutions often have values.

And they are honourable, acceptable values, sometimes even very beautiful values.

But the practices they develop are not always consistent with the values they proclaim.

And I believe that an activist, whatever field they belong to, is someone who acts in search of coherence: coherence between values and practices.

And this coherence is not easy.

Because an institution tends to present generous, magnificent projects and then operates in the opposite direction to the projects it proclaims.

And we, you, because you are educational activists, will ask:

“Why don’t you do what you say? Why don’t you create a school that genuinely educates for autonomy? Why can people not meet in the city, because they are confined to neighbourhoods, cultures and professions?”

And you will question the dysfunctions of society in the name of these values, refusing to turn yourselves into people who point to scapegoats responsible for our own guilt.

And in the same sense, I would say that in order to agree to move towards dialogue, towards encounters, we must accept the value of debate: civic debate, debate between people.

I am very concerned about what is happening in the world today, which is a form of regression.

You all know that between the ages of two and three, children move from what we call muscular competence to linguistic competence.

Muscular competence is when a child, because they cannot yet speak, picks up an object and throws it or takes it apart.

But at the age of three, progressively, they accept talking about that object, naming it and entering into a relationship with the world through language.

And today we see heads of state at the highest level regressing from linguistic competence to muscular competence.

In other words, they are moving from the capacity for language, dialogue and relating to others towards force, violence and confrontation.

And I believe that one of the great challenges for education today is access to speech: allowing each person to discover that they are capable of speaking, of speaking with others, and of turning words into a tool of struggle, but a struggle for fraternity.

And I believe that today, because you are here, you will talk to one another; when you go home, you will make it possible for there to be spaces where people can talk, reflect together, debate together, and move beyond all forms of closure, beyond the temptation to oppose one another instead of talking.

And I believe that one of the most important civilising challenges is precisely this: managing to speak to one another instead of opposing one another.

Ester Bonal

Let us finish by recalling what both Philippe and Marina said: never stop seeking coherence between values and discourse, and between those values and what each of us ultimately does from our different areas of educational policy, educational centres, pedagogical spaces and all the fields in which we work in education.

Drawing a parallel with this idea of emancipation, perhaps the question is whether we are willing to take the risk of looking for these cracks and, therefore, emancipating ourselves from that which binds us to our institutions.

Looking for these cracks within institutions in order to start moving the machinery and changing things in a world that, as Philippe said, is moving backwards in this respect and taking us in the opposite direction.

I want to point out, Albert, that we had an hour and we have gone forty minutes over.

A round of applause, please, for Marina and Philippe.