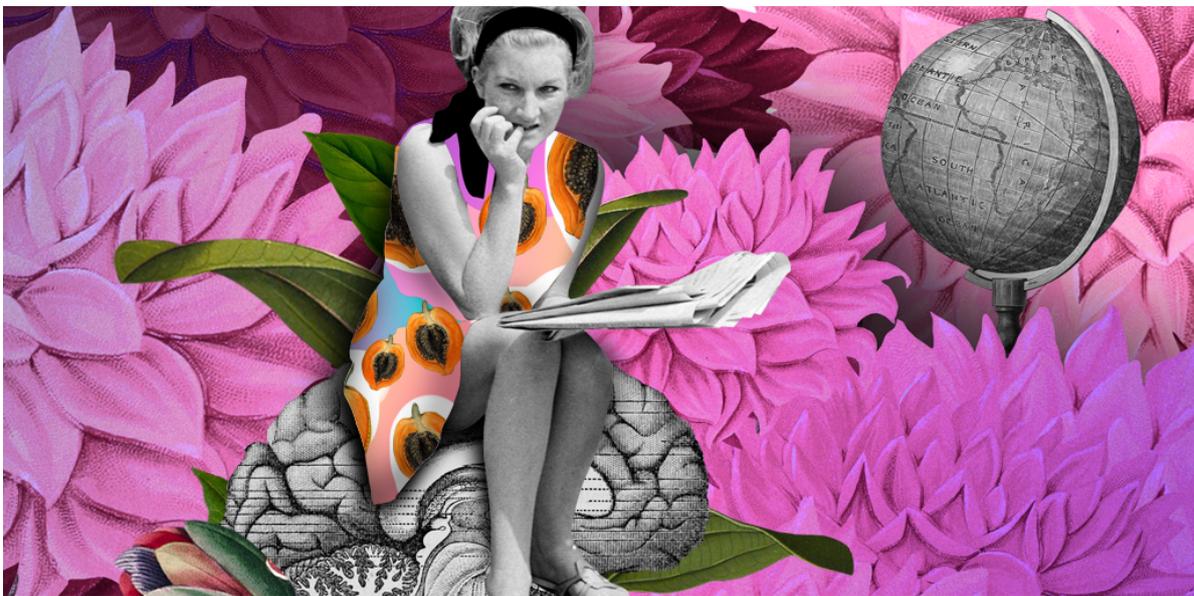


# Rethinking Society to Change the World: Challenges for Critical Citizenship

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Societies move in alternately progressive and reactionary cycles. Likewise, mass expressions of solidarity also vary: from the promotion of the movement to assign 0.7% of GDP to cooperation in the mid-1990s, to the response to the drastic cuts caused by the financial crisis of 2008 that decapitated the sector, and the reawakening of solidarity in response to the emergency caused by forced displacement around 2015. Cooperation is not always considered a priority and there are many who assert that it can only be prioritised once the needs of the local populace have been met. Additionally, for decades we have been aware of the interdependence of local and global factors: the climate emergency, armed conflicts, forced displacements, growing inequality, attacks on minorities and defenders of humans rights, etc. are factors that know no borders and require international efforts. So how can we make societies see that citizen involvement benefits everyone?

From the claims that “another world is possible”, the movements of angry, outraged and disillusioned people around the world, in every context and at every historical juncture, have incorporated different agendas while at the same time retaining aspects of earlier ones. What does “rethinking our society” mean in the current context? And in which

direction do we want to change the world? Some of the current movements want to place life at the centre, dethroning the economy as the main filter of reality in order to accommodate factors such as environmental sustainability and doughnut economics, abolishing oppression and privilege, placing human security above military security, and so on. The aim should no longer be to simply end poverty; it should also be to minimise inequality, with stricter controls in wealthier countries on the exploitation of resources and the abuse of tax havens, among other practices that threaten the entire world. This means getting to the roots of the problem; roots that are often hidden behind images of corporate social responsibility, greenwashing, and other condescending self-delusions on the part of northern societies.

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What role does critical citizenship play in all this? What is its function and to what extent can it really bring about change in the world? Critical citizenship can be an antidote to groupthink, by promoting divergent thought in order to generate alternatives and solutions to existing problems. Critical citizenship also incorporates the concepts of commitment and action geared towards transformation. The following sections will explain what critical citizenship involves, the personal and collective skills that are required, and how it can be promoted in different contexts.

## Don't be an idiot

In Ancient Greece, idiots were men (women, foreigners and slaves were usually excluded from the venues of public participation) who focused on their own affairs, in contrast to those who participated in the public decision-making processes for collective issues [1]. This behaviour came to be associated with their poor judgement, ignorance, and lack of education and expertise. In a world that is rife with political disaffection, critical citizenship can play a vital role in creating spaces for participation that have a greater capacity to question than institutional actors. However, for this participation to take place, certain conditions must be met with regard to both the conception of citizenship and the scope of what the act of critiquing implies.

Citizenship requires engagement with the processes of resolving the problems that affect people at different levels within a society. At the local level, beyond the basics of picking up dog excrement, using the correct recycling container and not making too much noise, exercising citizenship means questioning the models of public management (the planning of public spaces and other communal resources, meeting people's basic needs, providing spaces for participation, managing and reducing waste, etc.) in order to demand better services. At the state level, citizen involvement can range from exercising (or not) the right

to vote, to engaging with initiatives to change laws or policies or develop alternatives (e.g. with regard to consumption, housing, etc.).

The global level tends to lack even the lowest rung of citizenship, such as voting every four years or refraining from making excessive noise. Global citizenship is viewed as an extra, something that lacks even the most basic definition. However, despite the lack of expectations as to what global citizenship might involve, the potential for engagement is infinite. As a result, citizenship may or may not be critical: it may allow itself to be restricted to a more reductionist or a more maximalist conception of its full potential. In this article, however, we aspire to the maximum; to a society that is committed to reducing inequality, eradicating violence, ensuring respect for human rights, and establishing relationships of care between people and with nature.

With regard to the meaning of critical citizenship, some thinkers mark a distinction between being critical, and being a criticiser. Being a criticiser means to systematically seek out problems and defects, while being critical means to question oneself, to think in an orderly fashion, and to discern arguments. Citizenship should not involve criticising for the sake of it; rather, it involves questioning —after a process of reflection and reasoning— that which does not function correctly, with the aim of making it better [2].

It is also important to distinguish alternative thinking from critical thinking. Many of us tend to think that by presenting alternative ideas to those that are socially dominant, we are engaging in critical thinking. Undoubtedly, promoting alternative ideas offers a way of overcoming groupthink; it opens up other possibilities and enables us to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the dominant and alternative models. However, critical thinking can go a step further and teach us how to think, by fostering the skills required to reflect, assess, discern, relate and argue.

What, then, are the basic components of critical thinking that form part of a committed citizenship? The Philosophy for Children movement asserts that critical thinking must be linked to careful (empathic, appreciative) thinking and creative (imaginative and action-oriented) thinking [3].

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The foundation of careful thinking invites us to move beyond ethical reflection of a merely rational nature and to incorporate a filter of values, with the aim of understanding the Other. In this respect, many writers exhort us to become more self-critical, dismantle our

colonial thinking, take into account the multiplicity of perspectives on a particular issue that different groups and disciplines may have (multiperspectivity), develop a global awareness, and so on. The foundation of creative thinking can also be linked to action. What is the point of thinking, evaluating and developing alternatives, if not to transform reality for the better? It is essential, therefore, that critical thinking does not lead us into “analysis paralysis”, and that the focus on critical thinking does not impede the construction of alternatives.

Thus, in order to avoid idiocy, we must think critically without falling into the trap of unfounded or purposeless criticism, and we must also learn how to think: not only from a position of rationality, but also with empathy and a focus on action.

## A photofit of critical citizenship: motivation, self-awareness, listening, assertiveness, vision, persistence... and context

In order to exercise critical citizenship, we must train ourselves accordingly. In a society that (deliberately or otherwise) encourages us to be idiots, we require a superhuman effort, both individual and collective, as well as a change of context, in order to exercise critical citizenship. Below, we will explore how people and groups can be trained and how and why contexts can be changed, in order to enable us to exercise this critical citizenship.

If we had to create a photofit of someone who exercises critical citizenship, we could list (as we have in the title of this section) the many skills of the perfect activist. It should be noted, however, that just as it is difficult to exercise citizenship individually, nor should we expect one single person to meet all of these requirements; rather, they are to be met collectively. Participation is much more effective and enjoyable when it is done as a team, free from excessive self-demands. Consequently, the skills detailed below must be viewed as the components of a shared, communal photofit. These skills, on both an individual and collective basis, might include:

**Motivation:** having a sense of transcendence, of fighting for a cause, of connection and belonging to a particular community; and also having fun, dancing... all of these factors are important in order to ensure that citizen involvement becomes a source of enrichment, rather than a burden. Motivation can come from individual interests in relation to particular motives, causes or values, and it can also be fostered in a collective sense.

**Self-awareness:** knowing the strengths, weaknesses, capacities and limitations of each member of a group, and also of the group as a whole, is very important in terms of adapting the strategies that will be used. Within the context of critical citizenship, self-critique and self-assessment is vital. What identity have we constructed, and how does that affect our biases with regard to our perception of reality? Are we making the most of our potential, in accordance with the skills we possess?

**Empathy:** some public debates present an opportunity to opine on what society’s “real problems” are, or to claim that people are manipulated or can be persuaded to take part in

a demonstration for the price of a sandwich and a coach ticket. Generally speaking, people are sufficiently aware of their own needs and do not need to hear the opinions of others (especially if they are handed down from above, from positions of privilege) as to whether those needs are genuine or foolish. This can lead to accusations of moral superiority and, much more sinisterly, to the rise of populist movements that simplify reality (in the best-case scenario) or even promote hate speech. Therefore, it is important to listen —from a position of non-judgement— to a group’s unmet needs, with an openness that favours human understanding; and to give those needs the importance they deserve and take the relevant action, whether by helping to meet those needs or by establishing a dialogue that does not stigmatise or criminalise them.

Assertiveness: if empathy enables us to understand the Other, in terms of the most vital needs, then assertiveness allows us to set limits. Understanding the Other does not imply the absence of boundaries. We must condemn everything that is unjust, discriminatory, unethical or violent, and we must do so in a way that ensures the Other does not feel attacked; however, we must say what needs to be said, and argue convincingly. In this respect, and if we wish to open up space for critical thinking, under certain circumstances it may be necessary to abolish political correctness. In classrooms, political correctness often makes students repeat mantras that they know are expected of them, while preventing them from mentioning issues that truly concern them without feeling judged. This reality, which can also be found in other environments and groups, makes it very difficult to create dialogues and promote sincere critical reflection. However, abolishing political correctness should not imply *carte blanche* to say anything one wishes. As stated above, assertiveness means setting limits, while making sure that what one says does not fall into the traps of hate speech.

Creative vision: one of the functions of critical citizenship is to place on the agenda issues that are or will be key to the planet’s future: to lend visibility to the most pressing challenges and anticipate the blind spots that will threaten humanity in the all-too-near future. Learning about the realities and best practices of other contexts and making comparisons with other paradigms and world views helps us to think out of the box, predict trends in accordance with the inertias we generate, imagine alternative futures, and more. All of these skills, which are linked to creative and lateral thinking, are also key skills for critical citizenship.

Persistence: “Small changes are powerful”, Captain Lettuce used to say. However, even small changes can be difficult to achieve. Today’s culture of immediacy contrasts with the need for long-term commitments to achieve major changes. It is important to have vision and initiative, but our skillset is incomplete without persistence above all else. Bringing about change in society requires many skills related to the planning and organisation (in other countries the term “organising” is often used [4]) of said change, as well as skills related to cooperation, effective group decision-making, decisions regarding non-violent strategies, and more.

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However, all of these skills, whether individual or collective, encounter an obstacle when it comes to implementation. This is because the context, or the circumstances, also conditions the exercising of citizenship [5]. The accelerated societies in which we live, the long working days that require us to juggle the various parts of our lives to achieve balance, leave little space for engagement with social issues. Our country's political culture, in which the political class rarely accedes to society's demands, is also a contributing factor to demobilisation. Often, it can be useful to stop and think about the individual, collective, local and global priorities and redirect our actions and energies accordingly. Thus, some of the conditions under which individuals and groups can exercise critical citizenship are related to the promotion of different skills that involve critical thinking, and at the same time a context that favours participation.

## Critical citizenship: educating and leading (by example)

Building critical citizenship and achieving a critical mass of groups that is sufficiently large to bring about social changes of a local and global nature is a shared responsibility; a responsibility, moreover, that starts with each and every individual who forms part of a society and continues via the educators of that society.

Firstly, we have the citizenry itself, which ranges from the sleeping citizen (the idiot) to the eternal activist, who is often burnt-out and overwhelmed. Each citizen must find a space in which they feel comfortable. It would be beneficial if each individual, as part of the resolutions they make at the start of the new year or term, could decide which social cause (or causes) they will devote their energies to in order to improve their surroundings or the planet. The causes do not necessarily have to be altruistic; many social issues, whether of a local or global nature, affect us deeply at a personal level, and often our involvement in a social issue that affects us can contribute to the common good. Society itself also has a role to play in citizenship, in terms of how it consumes, how it saves (if it is able to do so), the variety of sources from which it gets its information, the openness with which it accepts points of view that are different to its own, and how it questions those who are responsible for public policy.

Secondly, families, as the agents of our earliest socialisation, have the ability to turn away from ideological endogamy and to reflect and show appreciation for diversity, embody the complexity that surrounds us, eschew judgement and demonstrate the desire to understand opinions that are different to our own. Families can also lead by example and share their spaces of citizen participation.

Thirdly, owing to its extensive reach, we have the education system. On paper, the Catalan

education system education gives sufficient priority to the skills of critical thinking and citizenship [6]. The Ministry of Education places significant emphasis on these basic skills at both primary and secondary level, in areas such as knowledge of the natural, social and digital environments, the teaching of values, languages, and even entrepreneurship. The environmental, social and cultural knowledge acquired at primary level fosters citizenship and the associated areas of critical thinking, responsible consumption, justice and solidarity, probably on a much more consistent basis than the knowledge of social issues acquired at secondary level. In practice, however, it is difficult to affirm that a critical approach is systematically promoted in classrooms. Many teachers approach certain aspects of their subjects with methodologies that promote reflection and argumentation (critical commentaries, debates), but very few practice thinking routines and habits, meta-reflection, or other mechanisms that make students aware of their own thought processes.

The education system is able to use methodologies that combine four essential elements for critical citizenship: (1) the analysis and observation of social issues; (2) awareness of the emotions that these situations arouse in us; (3) cognitive reflection, linking what is observed and felt to theoretical concepts and frameworks; and (4) the identification and, where possible, the putting into practice of creative alternatives to the situation in question. These four elements can be explored and developed using many different methodologies, such as project work, service learning, exploring controversial subjects, socio-affective group dynamics, etc.; and with the help of tools such as thought routines and/or instruments to facilitate meta-reflection.

In the current times, the media and certain NGOs make an abusive use of story telling, by explaining social issues through the emotional exploitation of individual stories instead of fostering an understanding of the structural causes of the issues in question

The media and certain NGOs also warrant particular attention owing to the way in which they make use of stories. The abuse of storytelling, by which we mean explaining social issues through the emotional exploitation of individual stories, often of a dramatic nature, is detrimental to fostering an understanding of the structural causes of the issues in question. Although it is true that empathy with certain individuals or groups can promote engagement and action, this should not come at the cost of oversimplifying messages and concealing the complexity of the reasons that lie behind every social phenomenon.

And lastly —this has already been suggested, but it is worth insisting— public administrations must transform their political culture and management practices so that more attention is paid to the needs of citizens.

## Conclusions

There are many social, local and global issues that deserve the involvement of each and every one of us in order to transform them. Of the various models of critical citizenship, the planet and its people deserve the most engaged, motivated, self-aware, empathic, assertive, persistent, creative and visionary. We must be critical, but not criticisers; we must critique, but also act. It is in the hands of each and every one of us.

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