

BILDUNG – the Freedom of the Educated

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Abstract

The German idea of education (“Bildung”) was formed and refined in the late 18th and in the 19th century. In the paper some of its philosophical implications (German Idealism), its cultural context (Lutheranism) and its policy (Humboldt’s “Freie Universität” in Berlin) will be outlined. The current educational theory and practice in Germany will be discussed only with reference to the origin of “Bildung”. Objective of the paper is not to draw a picture of a historical period, but rather to trace some ideological aspects of the opposition of “useful” vocational training and “aesthetic” education.

The crisis and its discourse

There is at least one good reason for writing about the German *Bildungsidee* (idea of education). It is, as is propagated in the media, that the Federal Republic of Germany has entered another crisis of education. This crisis floods the country at regular intervals. Adorno mentioned it in 1959. Everybody wrote about it at the beginning of the seventies. Back then arguments were basically the same as they are today. The education system did not produce what the employment market needs. Maybe the crisis was ongoing and simply re-enforced by times of economic slowdown.

Nowadays, Germany has to cope with the “sound” proof of the failure of its school system. According to the PISA study German pupils are among the lowest in the European charts of mathematics, reading and writing skills and abstract thinking. Another result is the lack of integration of the weaker pupils in Germany. As far as the universities are concerned, the Methusalean age of the average German graduate is a well known awkward fact. After an era of glory for lifelong learning, doubts were raised recently about the usefulness of most training courses for the unemployed. Some politicians recommended cutting subsidies in the sector of further education.

The repeated reaction in educational policy to the disturbing insights suggests a more rational and market-oriented planning in educational institutions. In the newly founded *Forum Bildung*, important representatives from state, church, polytechnics and universities, unions and employers organisations agree upon the terms for an educational reform. Schools will have to lay the foundation stone for the development of autonomous self-organised individuals. These would later in life be more than students but rather clients of educational institutions - Clients who are ready to pay tuition fees for good (career) service. Quality of the teaching products will be guaranteed by internal and external evaluation. Continuing education and modular courses will get a more significant status within the frame of lifelong learning. The universities will have developed alumni-systems and sources of private sponsorship. They will have grown into their roles as ‘entrepreneurial acting science companies’, as the education minister of Lower Saxony Thomas Oppermann put it.¹ US American universities are of course the role model for this concept of the ‘survival of the fittest’. In the wake of the so called *Bildungsreform* comes the explicit intention to harmonize (international) economic growth, social integration and individual needs. But - within the turmoil of each crisis, an academic discourse comes into being wherein it is formulated that the only criteria of entrepreneurial thinking is economic growth and nothing else – certainly not individual or social freedom. This means, on the free market no individual is free to follow his or her needs. The discourse shows that educational reforms always call for a counter reform. In spite of profound critique of the élitist practice of the educated classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*) even anti-capitalist thinkers, like T.W. Adorno, referred to the *Bildungsidee* – the old idea of freedom coming from within – as a concept of some value.

The word *Bildung*

The word *Bildung* is not translatable. The meaning of *Bildung* as education is quite young and was established in the 19th Century. Later a second term, *Erziehung*, was used for education in the sense of upbringing. So that now the word *Bildung* is essentially reduced to signifying institutional education at mainly schools and universities. However, the former richness of the word lives on in many minds of academics. In the Middle Ages, *Bildung* meant shape, form, or appearance, especially of a human being. *Bild* was the noun attached to man or woman. *Bild* was also a holy picture. (Today, *Bild* means image, picture or metaphor.) It was normally used in relation to the verb *bilden*, which meant to build, to shape, to form and to create. The sense was closely connected to the act of creation: God created man in his own image (*Bilde*). The mystics were the first to associate *bildunge* with the mind to describe a vision. This was the link for the philosopher J. G. Leibniz when in 1738 he translated Shaftesbury’s “formation of a genteel character” as “*Bildung* eines edlen Charakters” and “inward form” as “*innere Bildung*”.

When *bilden* appears in the wider sense of educating within the humanist context of the 18thC, it evokes forming and creating a mind, and in the reflexive form it evokes an act of self-creation. In the second half of the 18th Century, the word circulates among philosophers, theologians, pedagogues and poets. Goethe uses it after the fashion as *Bildung* of mind, heart, taste, morality, reason, manners, virtues, skills and body.

The culture of education among the European middle classes is a product of Enlightenment in the first place. The rising bourgeoisie replaced the “nobility of birth” by the “nobility of merits”. The ground of Libertè and Égalité in society was supposedly each separately illuminated individual. In comparison with France and England the middle class in 18th Century

¹ *Beträge zur Hochschulpolitik*, HRK, 15/2001.

Germany was underdeveloped and their political influence insignificant. It is one reason why the German thinkers emphasized the value of education for the individual, of *Bildung* as a cause in itself. This is the most conspicuous and most criticized characteristic of the *Bildungsidee*. One part of Kant's ethics and aesthetics – reason and beauty cleansed from any purpose – supported this notion. Kant's late work, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* was also the text which started off a series of publications in between 1790 and 1800 that were particularly relevant for the *Bildungsidee*.

The *Bildungsidee* owes much to J.J. Rousseau's notion of education, the development of all the multiform natural forces in man. The influence of Rousseau echoes the suspicion of German thinkers against rationalism, the reign of reason. The idea of getting power over nature for the progressing evolution of mankind was seen in relative terms due to the opposite desire to get "back to nature".

In 1794, F. Schiller wrote his letters about the aesthetic education of man.² The perception of a work of art enables the reconciliation of the two powers of reason and sensuality in the individual. Thought is evoked by the sensation of beauty. According to Schiller, the aesthetic state creates a liberating balance; whereas a degenerated individual is dominated by either reason or nature. Art has no didactic function, but it opens the mind for reason. It is important to keep in mind that Schiller is not an aesthetician, the impulse of enlightenment is essential. In the introduction, Schiller states that his thoughts about the creation of an aesthetic world are a counterpart to the "creation of a true political freedom" – and actually lead up to it. The idea of phylogenesis of mankind is reflected in the idea of the ontogenesis of the individual. Ideally the individual – in analogy to phylogenesis – goes from the physical state to the aesthetic state and finally to the moral state of being. For Schiller, the aesthetic state is imbued with, what he calls, the "playful instincts" of the ancient Greeks. The central status of ancient Greece in the *Bildungsidee* is constant throughout. In J.G. Herder's history of the development (*Bildung*) of mankind, ancient Greece symbolizes youth, it is clearly the golden age that anticipates the resolved energy of manhood, represented by ancient Rome.³

The German *Bildungsidee* was from the beginning accompanied by the moral conflict of the relationship between "inward form" and the demands of the world. The importance of inner life is indebted to the Lutheran tradition of self-observation and self-contemplation. The exploration of conscience was a common practice in the life of a protestant, and a duty of great complexity for a Lutheran theologian. During the reformation theology, not bound to a papal council any longer, was established as an academic discipline at German universities. It became an academic's task to find his own ethical conviction in a pluralistic system of German small states. Science was linked to conscience – this influence spread to other disciplines. Being true to one's own principles – for the romantics 'being true to one's own nature' – is since then deeply rooted in German culture.⁴

What was valid for the religious principles was applied to the humanistic world view, *Weltanschauung*. Idealism, romanticism and the classical period are imbued with inner world transcendence. A secular consecration is bestowed on the mediators between the mind and the world, like nature, art and music. Under ideal circumstances, the individual mind should be given a shape in which it can perceive what is good, noble and beautiful. This can only be achieved by a mind which is in itself noble. These minds are endowed with the urge to give the beauty they perceive back to the world, which is to shape their environment according to their vision – aesthetically and socially. An educated mind wishes to be impressed and to express.

J. W. Goethe describes this attitude in his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* with the word *Weltfrömmigkeit* (world piety). *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is regarded as the first Bildungsroman, a novel genre which exists as such in Germany only. Being inspired by Pietistic journals, the novel encompasses the development of a character, a learning path, up to a certain stage of completeness. Pietism, at the time a highly influential religious movement in Germany, intensified the meaning of the individual, unique experience of belief in relation to religious doctrine. The young hero, Wilhelm, who is in many parts an alter ego of Goethe, is not religious, but he dedicates himself to his own *Bildung* with a worldly piety. Every new profound error (temptation) he overcomes leads him further on his way to his true inner form (choosing). In order to dedicate himself fully to the forming of his personality he leaves his father's profane world of trade, a realm of necessity, behind and becomes an actor instead. The plot mirrors in a slightly ironic manner the escapes in the life of many educated men of the time, such as W. von Humboldt's escape from the Prussian civil service, Herder's escape from the teaching profession, Schiller's escape from his profession as military doctor. All those thinkers spend a large part of their life with "self-creation", and another part in influential public positions. In 1792, Humboldt published a text wherein he described the benefits of his idle years for his education and the priority of the individual above the demands of the state.⁵ Later, Humboldt was particularly important for the educational policy of Prussia as minister of education and the arts. In 1806 he founded the model University of Berlin, where all sciences were subordinated to philosophy, and especially to the German strand of speculative idealism.

Goethe's literary figure Wilhelm is exposed to the dangers of enthusiasm before he finds his way back to a *vita activa*. Nevertheless, the escape is an indispensable step towards the development of his "inward form". Only after having found himself he can make a sensible contribution to the affairs of the world. In the end he acquires some bourgeois virtues not by moral pressure but naturally in correspondence to his needs.

Bildung and Leisure

² Friedrich von Schiller: *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, published in the magazine Horen in 1795

³ Johann Gottfried Herder: *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zu Bildung der Menschheit*, 1774

⁴ Cf. Wilhelm Richter: *Der Wandel des Bildungsgedankens*, Colloquium Verlag Berlin, 1971

⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Staatschrift*, 1792

Bildung is inconceivable without leisure. Therefore it never reached the lower classes. Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss pedagogue, is regarded as the father of national education (*Volksbildung*) also in Germany. But, obviously, the idea of personality development cannot really find a place in the reality of elementary schools.

The philosophically orientated education of Humboldt's university was reserved for the materially privileged. This tradition of educational policy naturally provokes justified criticism.

A turning point in the history of German academics was the failed revolution of 1848 and the end of the so called parliament of professors, who were trying to establish a constitution for a German republic. After the failure the educated withdrew from the political scene altogether. The idea of education was separated from the social purpose. Humanist education leads to aestheticism.

The historical role of academics in Germany was open to attack, especially after World War II. The metaphor of the ivory tower for the world of academics symbolizes the gap to political and social reality. The student movement from 1968 distanced themselves from the *Bildungs-idee* for this reason. The most important demand from this side was political education for everybody. The exclusive aesthetic attitude was regarded as a source of political indifference or naiveté of the educated class towards the rise of fascism. It was stated that the phenomenon of educated murderers of the national socialist regime has proven the *Bildungs-idee* a failure anyway.

But – as Adorno states in 1959 in the face of another educational crisis, only the old bad system is a measure for the new bad system.⁶ What Adorno calls *Halbbildung* (semi-education) is the misuse of *Bildung* in mass education. *Bildung* remains as an empty shell and it is deprived of the tension between the individual and the world.

Indeed, since the seventies have passed with revolutionary ideas about political adult education the educational offers tend more and more towards conformity. The contents of education have become far less important than the learning of behaviour and methods of effective learning. How to adapt as smoothly as possible to the working life and its machinery is the most relevant goal, especially in the continuing education sector. The North American concept of the self-organized individual has nothing in common with the educated individual of the *Bildungs-idee*. The “inward form” of the modern subject is about to merge with the outward system. It is a horrifying vision that hardly anybody should be able to show resistance to our forms of working life. The new bad system might become far worse than the old bad system.

It is, however, interesting that the materially privileged are no longer in possession of the most vital power for *Bildung* that is leisure time. Leisure time becomes more and more an asset of the lower classes, or of pensioners. Most people are certainly unaware of the value of their leisure time. But some consciously choose to be unemployed in the sense of an escape from a deformation by outward pressure. In the present situation these groups are potentially the new *Bildungselite*. The strong individuals that are actually able to reshape, rebuilt and to change a working life that has become intolerable to individual needs. The disposition of the thinker and of the aesthete should be accepted as a virtue in a hyperactive system. The economic man, it seems, is only theoretically gifted with reason and senses but does not experience it any more. Remains of subversion within the educational system can only belong to the “counter-reform”. The leading question could be: how can widening participation be more than widening conformity?

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno: *Theorie der Halbbildung*, 1959