# Beyond Sovereignty: The twofold subversion of *Bildung*

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I

Few concepts in the German tradition of human studies—the so-called Geisteswissenschaften1—have had the capacity to birth such intense expectations and hopes as the concept of Bildung. Bildung may stand for the unconstrained conjunction of the general and the particular of human self-understanding and world-understanding. It may stand for a rational but nevertheless highly personal interpretation of the world; it may stand for the possibility of transcending human nature; and it may stand for permanent self-transcendence or the complete Gestalt of the mind. Bildung may mostly stand for freedom defined as self-law-giving; or for the orientation towards universal ideals of morality, universal beauty and truth. It stands most often for unity and wholeness or, at least, the struggle for these aims2 (cf. Pleines, 1971, 1978). However, besides such noble 'definitions', there is general agreement that the concept of Bildung includes both an objective and a subjective component. The first refers to 'culture' in its broadest sense (philosophical, scientific, esthetic, moral etc.; in short, rational interpretations of the world), whereas the latter refers to the specific and individual appropriation of the objective substance of culture (Langewand, 1994, p. 69). Hartmut von Hentig compares the significance of Bildung for the individual with the significance that culture has for a nation or a people: providing life orientations by means of reflected and desired principles and by stimulating the creation of moral rules and social systems that make life possible in a civitas (1996, p. 206).

Naturally, in late modern times such classical formulations of the ideals of Bildung are perceived critically and even skeptically—the desire and longing for unity and wholeness may be incomprehensible without basic insights into the discourses of German Idealism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The various discourses of Enlightenment and of romanticism which were strongly influenced by the unwavering affirmation of the idea of subjective freedom entail the consciousness of the high price for modern morality, that is detachment from the ethos (Sittlichkeit) and the security of tradition. However, this longing for the ethos and security of tradition suggests an awareness that symbiotic embeddedness in social networks means not only narrowness, control and a lack of freedom, but also closeness, togetherness and security: qualities of life which were felt to no longer fit the ideals of personal autonomy (Enlightenment) and personal authenticity (romanticism). In consequence, the concept of Bildung also carried the promise

© 2003 Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA and hope of (re-)finding this lost sense of unity and uniqueness at a higher level, a (purely) rational and morally liberal level. The longing of German idealists for re-unification of wholeness (integrity) at a post-traditional level can be illustrated wonderfully by Friedrich Hölderlin's philosophical fragment 'Judgment and Being' (1970, English trans. 1988); the free and liberated human being stands at its core, not only capable of using his or her own reason (autonomy) and listening closely to his or her own inner voice (authenticity), but also reconciled with the world.

Despite its complexity, ambiguity and vulnerability, the classic concept of Bildung was never totally abandoned in educational and philosophical discourse, nor was its transformation into different constructs and surrogates successful (Pleines, 1989, p. 1). Hansmann (1988) convincingly shows why the proposed substitutes for Bildung (theoretical equivalents such as scientific orientation, socialization, qualification, education or instruction) are unable to fulfill their task as an Ersatz. Schweitzer (1988) argues in the same direction (in connection with the proposed identification of the two concepts Bildung and identity). Even though many theorists would agree that one should not replace the concept, one cannot deny that the definition of Bildung is always and necessarily 'complicated' (von Hentig, 1996, p. 73). The multifaceted use of the term, only illustrates its crucial place in social discourses (Musolff, 1989, p. 9). We have to acknowledge with Posner (1988, p. 23) that Bildung, while it is a central concept for many philosophical, anthropological and pedagogical thinkers, is, at the same time, one of the most 'vague' concepts. That does not mean that we have to accept the view of Brezinka who years ago postulated that the concept of Bildung is 'almost empty' (1972, p. 62).

Even within the problematic state of affairs, the more or less obtrusive postulates of unity and wholeness are still alive in the contemporary discourses of *Bildung*, apparently trying to convince the public (or rather itself) that *Bildung* without a united, homogeneous *subject* may be neither possible, critical, nor true (Posner, 1988, p. 26). Whether we construe the postulate of unity—as *telos* or *motive* or even *precondition* of *Bildung*—turns the discourse into a highly speculative matter: how should we ever grasp the idea of continuity of personal identity and self-transformation in combination with individuality and participation at the highest level of reasoning; and in combination with historicity and self-transcendence; and all this not only simultaneously but also as a fully non-coercive unity?

But then again, modern individuals are expected to develop reflective identities; they are supposed to become selves who have the ability to define themselves with respect to the social and intra-personal experiences they make. It is crucial for pedagogical thinking in liberal and pluralistic societies that the individual becomes an autonomous agent in his/her own life and an autonomous interpreter of his/her own experiences. The modern notions of the sovereign moral subject and the authentic person are very ambitious in that they imply the ability to enter the center of one's own feelings and thoughts, and in that they imply the existence of such a center in the first place. The autonomous subject as 'self-law-giving' and thus 'self-determined' subject must have a center: to have a center means to have control.

From the Cartesian perspective, the self is conceptualized as a unity detached from the social environment. There is an essential but not necessarily logical link

between conceptions of the nature of the self and the commitment to one political vision or another. 'One might believe that persons are socially constituted whilst advocating a political theory based on individual rights; just as one might be a methodological individualist who urges the forging of community' (Bakhurst & Sypnowich, 1995, p. 9). The cultural acceptance of the individualistic and 'atomistic' model of the self has had great impact on the development of liberal democracy and modern ethics. In consequence, at the level of the individual, to be an authentic and trans-situational consistent self has become a biographical priority and a moral and educational task. This task was first formulated by philosophers of Bildung. However, 'wholeness' and 'uniqueness' may nowadays be described in terms of personal 'consistency'.

The consistency of the self is of major importance for the self-attribution of responsibilities which appear to be a necessity for democratic forms of life. Böhme (1996, p. 332) argues that if one accepts that everything concerning the individual is changing, attitudes and thoughts included, making the individual responsible for actions he or she committed five or twenty years ago-on the one hand-seems an affront to that individual. On the other hand, it is not at all self-evident, but rather a great (cultural) achievement, that people are ready to pay for foolish actions they committed in their youth, or for their weakness and failures under a former repressive political system. The issue at stake is of both ethical and judicial relevance. Thus it appears that the educational goal of developing a democratic mind can be seen as a function of the individual, and of the cultural possibilities which exist (or do not exist) and enable the individual to become a consistent and unified self, a self which can make sense of its heterogeneous and even disconnected experiences—a self that masters itself.

Developmental aims relevant to modern education such as self-reflexivity, selftransparent consciousness, ego-identity, autonomy or sovereignty are terms that describe ideals of mastery (Reichenbach, 1996). Bildung does not need to be described in these precarious terms which have to be looked at skeptically, not only since the irritations coming from the so-called postmodern discourses.

## II

Such skepticism does not necessarily deny that human beings are self-interpreting animals and somewhat obliged to make sense of their lives, and to give a more or less coherent narrative account. It doesn't even call into question the importance of continuity of identity, particularly in modern mass societies, with respect to the readiness and willingness to take moral responsibility for one's own actions. Rather, it may be argued that it is not necessary to hold on to the postulates of unity and autonomy (as a competence of the subject) in order to still think productively and theoretically about the meaning of Bildung in late modern societies.3 With the classical concept of Bildung sensu Humboldt, a sort of pedagogical universality (as opposed to particularity) is claimed. Such a universality might not only be understood as both humanism and totality (in the sense of 'complete wholeness'): is this more than a mere esthetization of Bildung? Why not do without such eschatological orientations in the discourse of *Bildung*? It is possible to show that it is of no importance whether we hold on to the postulates of unity and autonomy. At least, one can do without such demanding preconditions in democratic forms of life (cf. Reichenbach, 2001).

The concept of Bildung may still be manifold, controversial and fuzzy—this would nevertheless give insufficient reason to eschew the concept or to give up the question of the significance of Bildung in toto. In democratic forms of life, it is inevitable that questions about the good life, the good person and the good polis be asked—and any possible answer to such questions leads to discussion about the criteria of Bildung and about the possibility of 'educated minds'. At least, it seems obvious that Bildung is not a private matter since the Bildung of the subject is only possible in the condition of pluralism. From this perspective, Bildung is the constitution of the 'I' within the 'we', and therefore may be appropriated neither ex nihilo nor by (systematic) instruction or training. This makes Bildung a somewhat thankless theme. However, the subversive moment which makes Bildung uncontrollable, both from the outside and for the self, may only bother pedagogical thinking that seems to need these self-deceptive feelings of educational omnipotence or longs at least for keen theoretical exactitude.

The 'subversion' of Bildung refers to the fact that one cannot make Bildung, one cannot really inform Bildung and one cannot really mediate Bildung. Bildung is always self-Bildung, but that does not make it an autonomous or sovereign process of development. We cannot decide whether or how we will be transformed, touched, affected by an encounter with a person we love and respect or a person we despise, by a book we read, an interesting idea we learn about, a personal experience, and the like ... This kind of 'subversion' can be perceived as an expression of freedom, a freedom that transforms the human being into a person. However, whenever freedom comes into play, theoretical claims have a hard time. This seems especially to be the case for theories of Bildung, and with respect to the insight that anything can be relevant to processes of Bildung, even degenerated forms of culture, fragmented experiences and experiences that can not be shared at all.

Such shadowy aspects of human experience are only worrisome to theories of Bildung which are rigidly fixed to state that moral autonomy as self-law-giving rationality—in the Kantian sense (cf. Kant, 1981)—is and has to be the highest form and telos of Bildung. But with what kind of reasons can we still convince ourselves that Bildung has to be measured by the great individual who is participating in universal rationality and who makes autonomous decisions? Is it still useful and wise to view autonomy as self-determination in freedom, which, of course, is an empirically highly unlikely state of affairs for human beings (cf. Meyer-Drawe, 1998, p. 31)? Wouldn't it be wiser to presuppose a non-sovereign, non-autonomous freedom as a precondition of the possibility of Bildung? And would we really need to look at such non-sovereign freedom as if it were 'not yet developed', 'not yet really shaped', 'not yet really as valuable' as moral autonomy sensu Kant, Habermas, Kohlberg and their followers? Wouldn't it be more convincing to view autonomy merely as a necessary theoretical and practical presupposition, a

non-empirical concept which may never be 'measured' at all (either by psychologists or by other social scientists)? Such a view is, of course, fully compatible with the main responsible thinker of moral autonomy, Immanuel Kant, who knew what many psychologist still do not know and maybe never will: that autonomy is a nonempirical concept, and, as such, cannot be measured, either from the outside or from the inside of the individual (cf. Höffe, 1979; Reichenbach, 1994). If Bildung should be forced to be 'measurable', then, after all, a valuable criterion would be the very fact of how persons deal with this societal, juridical and ethical, but always counter-factual presupposition of being an autonomous subject (or, to put it another way, how persons implicitly or explicitly deal with the presupposition that autonomous subjectivity is a condition of human being or, at least, of being human).

#### Ш

The highly sophisticated and as such truly non-modest concept of Bildung also shows up in more contemporary attempts to reconstruct the concept with a supposedly neutral vocabulary. However, terms such as 'competence', 'ability', 'proficiency', 'willingness to learn' may not prove to be more modest than classical versions. The vocabulary of more recent attempts to redefine Bildung makes obvious how little late modern knowledge about the right, the important and the worth knowing for all participants of modern societies (and not only for the first person singularis) has actually become. One may only need and use these very general notions such as 'key qualifications' and 'key competencies' in a world that is no longer understood, a world in which the knowledge of intentional transformation as a humanistic project—has vanished (cf. Hansmann, 1988; Schweitzer, 1988). If these newer substitutes for Bildung were only to be critiqued on their abstractions, one would have no problem attributing 'neutrality' to them. But, of course, it is the use of words which is crucial, and here it seems evident that the substitutes for Bildung subordinate an uncontrollable degree of interpretations, and, by this, are illustrating only moral meaninglessness. This is the crucial difference between the late modern and the classical notions of Bildung.

Classical notions of Bildung were never construed as morally neutral or meaningless. But today's pedagogical and political plea for the strengthening of social competencies, self competencies and subject-related competencies is morally and politically 'toothless' in every possible world. Pedagogy will not get dirty hands with such noble and toothless discourses, but it will rob itself of any hands, to borrow a metaphor from Jean-Paul Sartre. Notions of competencies lack a critical against-the-world power which was always central to the classical versions of Bildung. Today's totally 'unbulky' substitutes for Bildung leave themselves blind to the freefloating discourses of power and the market, and they may freely serve to judge the late capitalistic virtues such as flexibility, disposability, and a willingness to engage in lifelong learning. This potential of critiquelessness (i.e. value neutrality) is, of course, extremely untraditional. But a theory of Bildung also in times of late modern soberness has to remind itself of its core theme, the freedom of human beings, whether we think of that freedom as a counter-factual presupposition, a goal of development, or the possibility of human action. Without the notion of freedom, the term *Bildung* may indeed be substituted by whatever. The dignity of the concept depends on the moment of freedom which was a matter of course in prior versions of the concept. Even if the immodesty mentioned above and the helplessness of the traditional concept of *Bildung* were viewed as pure nostalgia, the concept would still at least stand for a counter-concept to mere adaptation to a post-Enlightenment realism; it would still be a repressed 'hypergood' sensu Taylor (1996) which cannot easily be wiped out of the human heart. *Bildung* is not only a productive and reflective *appropriation of world* to one's self but—and this is a special case of productive-reflective appropriation—*Bildung* may also include a firm *rejection of world*, even if such an act may appear quite narrow-minded under specific societal and cultural conditions.

Since Bildung seems impossible without a subject being deeply moved by values and non-values which document the happiness and misfortune in human life, and since it also seems quite inadequate that such emotions can or should be thought of as sovereign acts or that affective attachments to values could be described as competence, one might ask whether Bildung might also be thought of in terms of non-sovereignty,4 and even in an a-humanistic sense (to risk being misunderstood with this last consideration). Of significance to such a view is the genuine subversive element of Bildung, the non-controllable moment of every process of Bildung which is never mere development or maturation. At the same time, Bildung of the self—in the classic view, Bildung is always Bildung of the self—remains a task which can never be accomplished or fulfilled in a sovereign way. Besides all individual experiences and appropriations, the entanglement of self-understanding and worldunderstanding in the process of Bildung (that is the subjectivation of human beings) always implies non-controllable elements or moments of becoming a self which we may best call freedom. Such freedom expresses itself neither as a state nor as a trans-situational competence; rather, it is expressed as a productive act. Eugen Fink wrote in his Erziehungswissenschaft und Lebenslehre (Educational Science and the Teaching of Life): 'Freedom does not exist apart from its use' (1970, p. 123). Freedom is a productive act because it does not find, but invents, it neither finds the self, nor finds the norm or the right, but, rather, it invents them, not arbitrarily and not in whatever situation, but in situations of need in which the person experiences that her know-how, her know-that, what she has learned, what she knows and agrees upon etc. are insufficient to handle the situation or seem questionable and even dubious. Freedom in this sense is the freedom to invent what turns away the need (the 'Notwendende').

Bildung may therefore be understood as non-sovereign processes of self-transformation, processes of non-arbitrary self-inventions and non-arbitrary attempts of self-determination, and, as such, Bildung is the expression of human freedom. (Reichenbach 2001, p. 61)

With such a definition its seems quite pointless to discuss freedom 'for itself' (an sich) or to talk about Bildung 'for itself'; rather, one can only discuss concrete

freedom, that is freedom in its use. In the light of such transformation processes the 'subject' is condemned to be an incompetent and non-sovereign actor. This is also due to the fact that the self never goes through the same processes of (self-)transformation more than once: there are no repetitions in the process of Bildung. That is just another way of saying that the practice of freedom is always

From such a view it may become evident that Bildung can not be 'domesticated', either from the subject itself or from the outside (for instance by educational interventions). This 'twofold subversion' is a feature that both Bildung and the political life have in common: an uncontrollable moment of freedom. Politics is about the collective use of freedom, and political action always affects the selves in question, as well as the world that it is focused on. Just as, in the case of Bildung, one may reconstruct politics as self-interpretation, not of a single subject but of a collective, which practices freedom to convince and persuade others and itselfand, by this, attempts to change something in the social world (that is the organization of freedom between subjects). These are some hints to a better understanding of the meaning, role and function of Bildung for the political life.

This view of the subject of Bildung may be linked to characteristics focused on by Axel Honneth (1994) in his examples of the Hegelian ('developmental') idea of a struggle for recognition: the subject constituting itself within such struggle, in which it may gain self-respect. In recent times Alain Touraine (1997, p. 103) claimed that in the act of more or less radical self-declaration as a subject, one may experience personal freedom, personal will (volonté), and even moments of happiness (bonheur). Even accepting such a view of Bildung, Pilot may still be right when arguing with Kant that self-assertion against others can not be identified with moral self-assertion (1991, p. 231). At the same time, nevertheless, the combination of free self-determination on one's own behalf (experienced as an act of personal autonomy) with resistance against others may provide very special experiences of happiness (p. 233).

Fortunately, most participants in modern life have been liberated from 'dull bondage' (Schäfer, 1998, p. 41), so that they are able to experience self-determination as morally right, morally good and even as a moral necessity. This is situational good fortune: to be an actor, a subject. But it might be seen as a misfortune of modern life that subjects are not capable of controlling this special relationship to their selves and may only experience their own freedom as a subject in situations of non-sovereignty in which the person feels the necessity or even the coercion to become a subject (nobody becomes a subject just for the heck of it). The personal experience of such coercion is an important indication for subjectivity, for a personal will, and also a provisional result of former experiences of being a subject; that is, of former processes of Bildung. Subjectivity is always a result of resistance, and the subject may only constitute itself in the struggle for her own recognition (as a subject). In a world full of harmony and content, freedom and Bildung would neither be necessary nor possible. The motive for Bildung is always the same: moved by the scandal of life, the person constitutes herself as subject and stands, in whatever way, against the superficiality of mere realism and acceptance.

#### **Notes**

- 1. Geisteswissenschaften may best be translated as human studies. The term Geist can as well be translated as spirit used as in 'holy spirit' (heiliger Geist) or as in 'spirit of the age' (the so-called 'Zeitgeist'), or as in the history of idea (Geistesgeschichte) or as mind (as in das geistige Leben, die geistige Welt) which would better be translated as 'the cultural world' (cf. Rickman, 1967, p. 275).
- 2. It seems that most concepts important to society (such as 'democracy', 'justice', 'identity', 'self', 'education', 'culture') are rather imprecise, diffuse (cf. Tenorth, 1986, p. 7), or at least they are provisional and changeable products of reflection. The German term *Bildung* may be used as 'formation', 'development' and/or 'creation'. A *gebildete* person may as well be translated as a 'cultivated' or 'well-educated' person, a person with a 'broadened mind' (the opposite of a 'narrow-minded' person).
- 3. A quite opposing view is expressed by Heim (1997, p. 80).
- 4. 'Sovereignty' is not an educational concept. The term has a long history in political thinking philosophy, and it may be used in such discourses to describe institutions or states. A person may be said to be sovereign if he or she exercises authority over every other person or institution in the legal system (cf. Benn, 1967, p. 501). Modern notions of the sovereign moral subject and the authentic person are very ambitious in that they imply the ability to enter the center of one's own feelings and thoughts, and in that they imply the existence of such a center (of control) in the first place.

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