

Self-Cultivation and the Concept of German *Bildung*



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Abstract *Bildung* is one of Germany's oldest concepts and unites insights from the fields of philosophy, ethics, pedagogy, religion, and education. However, over time the term *Bildung* has changed and, as such, the different conceptualizations, connotations, and meanings of *Bildung* reflect temporal as well as cultural idiosyncrasies. This article attempts to illustrate *Bildung*'s history by following the term through the ages and places. By zooming in on the educational philosophies of selected German thinkers (Immanuel Kant, George W. F. Hegel, Alexander von Humboldt, and Theodor W. Adorno), this article tries to reconstruct key turns, events, and thoughts regarding *Bildung*. The educational philosophies of the aforementioned thinkers will be contextualized historically, politically, as well as from an intellectual history perspective. With reference to the idea of the "god-term", this article presents an explanation how and why *Bildung* as a theoretical concept could undergo these changes without being replaced and/or obsoleted by other terms. In the final section of the article, *Bildung*'s relationship to modern concepts (i.e., competence-based learning) will be discussed critically. Further, *Bildung*'s compatibility with the international discourse of education will be reflected upon.

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1 Introduction

German is a language with many peculiarities which often cause confusion and sometimes even mockery. One concepts which bears the potential for confusion is the term *Bildung*.¹ Simultaneously, there is an incredibly rich philosophical discourse surrounding *Bildung* intersecting at the domains of self-cultivation, education, schooling, (self-)formation, moral education, and, more generally, philosophy of life. Throughout the ages, *Bildung* underwent dramatic semantic changes and turns. These semantic turns reflect implied concepts of the individual as well as the world. Thereby, no ultimate concept of *Bildung* exists and all existing concepts have to be contextualized historically (cf. Böhm, 2005: 90)—most definitely one reason why *Bildung* is often considered one of German pedagogy's least clarified terms (cf. Dohmen, 1964: 15).

Niklas Luhmann and Karl Eberhard Schorr argue that *Bildung* is pedagogy's "god-term" (1988: 464), a concept vague enough that it enables discourse throughout different times while remaining stable enough that the area of discourse is limited. Similar to God, nobody can claim with certainty whether *Bildung* really exists or define its form, yet rich discourse, discussions, and educational planning is conducted with regard to *Bildung*. According to Luhmann and Schorr, it is less important what *Bildung* actually is but how it is discussed over time. Therefore, this contribution tries to reconstruct Germany's key discourses of the past centuries.

After having discussed *Bildung*'s most relevant thinkers and notions, *Bildung*'s implicitly uttered contributions to moral education and self-cultivation will be outlined and conceptualized by differentiating between *Bildung*'s substrate and superstrate level. This division of the term can partially explain the workings of god-terms in general and *Bildung* in particular. The article will end on a provocative note by arguing that education as we define and act it out in the twenty-first century is not just the archenemy of *Bildung* but also inhibits self-cultivation and societal progress on a larger scale.

2 A History of *Bildung*

In the European context, one of the first comprehensive discussions regarding self-formation and transformation was presented by Plato. In his Cave Allegory, Plato describes mankind's painful transition from limited beings—blinded by illusions and commonsense assurances—to seekers of knowledge, truth, beauty, and the good

¹ As this article will show, the term *Bildung* has no real equivalent in the English language as all possible translations (education, formation, schooling, upbringing, etc.) never fully grasp the genuine concept of *Bildung*. Even though *Bildung* is, in a struggle for words, sometimes translated as self-cultivation (cf. Oelkers, 1998: 50), the authors want to underline the uniqueness of the concept. Therefore, the authors will use the German word throughout the article.

in general (cf. Hall, 1980: 74). This process is tightly knit to and generally associated with pain and sacrifice. According to Plato, thriving for truth, knowledge, the good, and the beautiful permeates all areas of life from personal relationships to the organization of the state and is powered by *Eros*, the inner drive for the aforementioned qualities. It is thereby assumed that deep within human beings, we hold those qualities and they must only be triggered and/or cultivated. Plato argues that through thinking, philosophy, and self-reflection, mankind can leave the sphere of illusion and find these truths. Thereby mankind can reach a higher state of being, a state Aristotle later called *Eudaimonia* (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2008: 2). According to Plato, truth should translate itself into action and all actions should be guided by the principles of truth and the good. Through action, “good is beyond being” (McGuirk, 2008: 170) as it transcends the individual through steady transformation of the community, the state, and mankind. A plethora of eighteenth and nineteenth century educational philosophers and educational planners idealized Ancient Greek society and the works of the Greek philosophers, especially with regard to self-cultivation and what should later be known as *Bildung*. However, in the territory which should later become Germany, these thoughts did not have the impact they have had elsewhere until the concepts of self-formation and transformation were spread in the Middle Ages through Christian belief and teachings.

At an etymological level of analysis, the term *Bildung* is derived from and tightly linked to the concept of the image as one of the earliest translations of the Latin word *imaginatio*—conducted by Monk Notker III of St. Gallen—results in the term *bildunga*² (cf. Dörpinghaus & Uphoff, 2011: 63). From its earliest beginnings, *Bildung* had a religious connotation (cf. Hellmeier, 2016: 73) as God created mankind in his own image (*Ebenbild*). The semantic twist added by Meister Eckart (1260—1328) in the Middle Ages was that *Bildung* not only represents the bodily image after which human beings were created but primarily the process human beings have to go through in order to complete themselves in the from God intended way (cf. *ibid.*)—*Bildung* developed from a descriptor of a state (i.e. an image) to an action or event (cf. Schneider, 2012: 304). Meister Eckart’s concept of *Bildung*, even though it solely focuses on Christian teachings, already incorporates aspects which later definitions should refer to, such as an egalitarian notion—Eckart wrote and preached in German instead of Latin to reach lay people as well as the formally educated (cf. Sturlese, 2008: 19)—, the idea of mankind’s completion through interaction with (Christian) teachings, and the provocative potential of *Bildung* (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 35) as the interpretation of theological matters has always involved a political perspective and has had the potential to undermine existing power structures. Lastly, it should be noted that Meister Eckart’s re-interpretation of *Bildung* also caused a second major shift: *Bildung* as the on-going process of unifying the human soul with God (cf. Bechthold-Hengelhaupt, 1990: 482) focuses exclusively on the divine

² “In Early New High German, the substantive ‘Bildunga’ means ‘creation’, ‘making’, ‘hardening’” (Schneider, 2012: 303), describing primarily the God-given form of an object. From the sixteenth century onwards, *Bildung* was used as a way to describe the process of shaping as well as the natural shape of living objects (cf. Kluge, 1989)—a semantic widening from the description of a finalized state to a more processual descriptor.

individual, his/her dignity, and potential—an idea which shall be one of the core proclamations of the Renaissance and beyond (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 35/36).

Even though the teachings of Meister Eckart were well ahead of their times, the concept of *Bildung* failed to transition to the educational context—the German poet F. G. Klopstock (1724–1803) was the first thinker to use *Bildung* with regard to education (cf. Nordenbo, 2002: 342)—and remained exclusively in the theological realm. As a result, *Bildung* was not explicitly addressed³ until the eighteenth and nineteenth century (cf. Dörpinghausen & Uphoff 2011: 62) when Immanuel Kant and the philosophers of German Idealism started tinkering with the concept of *Bildung*.

2.1 German Idealism in the Eighteenth Century

Germany as a nation state did not exist in the eighteenth century. Instead, more than 300 kingdoms and principalities—Prussia and Habsburg (Austria) being the most influential ones—were in its place. Even though the more than 300 entities shared some loose connections, they lacked a political and cultural center. The emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations had limited influence and was mainly occupied with deescalating conflicts. This endeavor failed in 1618 with the outbreak of the Thirty-Years War (1618–1648); a war which shaped the zeitgeist and intellectual history for the next century. The eighteenth century was also the time of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is widely conceptualized as the transition from Middle Age’s thinking (i.e., religious superstitions) to the introduction of rationality and empiricism as the preferred and accepted mode of operation (cf. Fischer, 1975: 432). The Enlightenment gained momentum all across Europe, either overthrowing or transforming states, and found its way into German law by the policies of Frederick the Great of Prussia, a representative of enlightened absolutism (cf. Birtsch, 1987: 9). Prussia and Habsburg struggled for domination over the German territory and fought multiple wars for marginal territorial gain and strategic advantages (cf. Dotzauer, 1988: 412). Simultaneously, estate-based society gradually transformed itself into a civil society as “[t]his new thinking [Enlightenment] reflected changing economic realities: the rise of private property, market competition, and the bourgeois” (Carothers & Barndt, 1999: 18).

The intellectual history of the eighteenth century mainly consists of two dominant intellectual streams: Pietism and Enlightenment. Pietism (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 16–18) originated from the clash of Christian ideals with the observations during the Thirty-Years War and warned against a lack of belief and spiritual devotion. According to Pietist teachings, this lack could only be overcome through individual spiritual reincarnation/atonement. This reincarnation could only be achieved

³ The German philosopher Moses Mendelsohn states in 1765: “The words Aufklärung (Enlightenment), Kultur (culture), Bildung (formation) are new arrivals in German. They are heard only in the literary language; commoners are unlikely to understand them” (Mendelsohn, 1784/2006: 3; cf. Nordenbo, 2002: 342).

through bible study and the development of an independent religious identity (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 16)—the resurgence of the individualistic perspective in the theological domain. This individualistic perspective was further encouraged by Enlightenment which aimed at the emancipation of the individual from external forces (cf. Weitz, 2015: 470) as well as the maximization of individual freedom, i.e. in thinking and action (cf. Dörpinghaus et al., 2012: 54). In eighteenth century Prussia, torture was abandoned, free exercise of religion was ensured, and mandatory schooling as well as freedom of the press were introduced. All of these can be read as manifestations of the Enlightenment's spirit and the strengthening of individual freedom.

Due to the focus on the individual as well as the emancipatory tendencies of the Enlightenment, *Bildung* gained intellectual momentum and was discussed extensively by philosophers and artist such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Joachim Heinrich Campe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann G. Herder, Leopold Mozart, Heinrich von Kleist, Peter Villaume, Gotthold E. Lessing, and George W. F. Hegel. Kant and Hegel are widely regarded as the starting and ending point of the intellectually highly potent phase often referred to as German Idealism. Therefore, their educational philosophies will be illustrated in the following paragraphs.

For Kant, the ideal of Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred *Unmündigkeit*⁴ by the means of rationality (cf. Kant, 1784/1983: 53). Kant's emphasis on freedom and *Mündigkeit* can best be explained by considering societal structures at the time. Man's lack of courage to use his own reason, intellect, and wisdom, combined with institutions attempting to exercise power over people, resulted in lives governed by others (cf. Dörpinghaus & Uphoff, 2011: 38/39). *Bildung* should enable people to free themselves from such mental barriers/ineptitude and ultimately societal structures. External force and internal desire for freedom should define Kant's discourse as he turned *Bildung* into an oxymoron—external force as a means to cultivate freedom and *Mündigkeit* (cf. Baumgart, 2007: 33). Kant splits the process of *Bildung* into three parts: Disciplination, cultivation, and civilization. The first aiming at controlling the animalistic traits of human beings, the second describes the cultivation and fostering of abilities and skills (i.e., writing, reading, or music), while the latter hints at the necessary ability to fit into society and its sub-groups (cf. Kant, 1803: 706). All three can only be accomplished by the application of external force, submission under a guiding scheme, and/or instruction.⁵ In Kant's educational philosophy, these three steps serve as a means for the

⁴ *Mündigkeit* (sometimes translated as maturity) originates from the Old German word "Munt" which is derived from the Latin word manus (hand). In its earliest version Munt stands for control but also protection, usually exercised and granted by God. In the eighteenth century, God was replaced by the real-life father figure who was considered the Vor-Munt and *Mündigkeit* was reached when economic emancipation from the patriarchal household took place. In the nineteenth century, *Mündigkeit* was extended to the political realm as *Mund* (engl. mouth) already hints at the emancipatory political potential of free, verbal articulation (cf. Bernet, 2008: 48–50).

⁵ It can be argued that Kant used the mechanics of Pietism and combined them with the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment.

highest purpose of *Bildung*: Moralization.⁶ Contrary to the aforementioned three stages, moralization is supposed to take place within the human being and is an on-going, never-concluded process consisting of interaction with the world, self-consultation, reflection, and reaction to externalities. Kant is a strong proponent of freedom and *Mündigkeit* but stresses the point that freedom requires a concept of morality. Morality in turn can only be fostered through *Bildung*. Kant follows the Ancient Greek's line of thinking by proposing that individually acted out morality will eventually improve the community as well as the state.

German Idealism was a phase of contradicting ideas. While Kant suggests to employ external disciplination in order to arrive at *Mündigkeit* and moralization, Georg W. F. Hegel's key contradictions circled around the dualisms of alienation/unification, individual/societal, and particular/general. According to Hegel, the introduction of rationality as an ideal of human conduct, led to a split of mankind's perception of the world. As a result, there is rationality and (superstitious) beliefs/traditions which govern thought and action (cf. Siemek, 2001: 214). Hegel sees similar splits in the dualisms outlined above and proposes that *Bildung* has a two-fold task: Cause alienation and, in a second step, enable (re-) unification (cf. Sandkaulen, 2014: 430). Hegel proposes this recursive approach to *Bildung* as the individual voluntarily alienates itself from the natural state (i.e., the culture one lives in) (cf. Odenstedt, 2008: 560), exposes itself to another state, and—after some time—rediscovers itself in that state. Through the combination of the already known and the unknown, a new natural state is created and the process starts anew. This on-going process of constant alienation and re-unification is supposed to create a more reflective and cultivated person. In order to achieve Hegel's ideal of *Bildung*—taking manifold cultures and perspectives into account⁷ (cf. *ibid.*)—the individual is required to temporarily give up its individualistic traits and particularities and is supposed to immerse with other cultural and/or historical milieus. Hegel suggests to expose oneself to ancient Greek culture as it provides the necessary irritation, confusion, and distance to one's own culture while simultaneously having common traits (cf. Odenstedt, 2008: 560). In the Hegelian approach, self-cultivation, culture, and the individual intersect, cause, and influence one another. Thereby, the Hegelian approach to *Bildung* is in accordance with Ancient Greek philosophy as the “Greeks thought of culture as character” (Gaddis, 2018: 44) but also vice versa. The process of alienation and (re-)unification of contradicting perspectives repeats itself throughout life and does not have a pre-defined aim. Kant, Hegel, and the other philosophers of the era raised awareness for a plethora of paradoxical relationships and tried to unite them in their approaches; an endeavor which shaped the term *Bildung* significantly.

⁶ Moralization could be described as the guiding mechanism of mankind. According to Kant, a moralized person chooses *good* aims and occupations, while the notion of good is closely related to Kant's categorical imperative (cf. Kant, 1803: 701).

⁷ Hegel characterizes this process as “sich allgemein machen” (making oneself universal) by incorporating as many different cultures and times in one self as possible (cf. Hastedt, 2012: 24).

2.2 *The Nineteenth Century and the Rise of (Neo-)Humanism*

While the thinkers of the eighteenth century tried to emancipate the individual from external as well as intellectual restrictions, the nineteenth century started with a triplet of real-life, high impact events which changed the ways philosophers of the time perceived the state as well as the individual. These events, which tremendously changed the course of Europe, were the French Revolution and the succeeding reorganization of the state, the end of the Holy Roman Empire of German States, and the defeat of Napoleon including the reorganization of Europe at the Vienna Conference (cf. Kissinger, 2014). All three events emphasized the importance of the nation state. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, it was attempted to unify Germany. First as a loose association called *Deutscher Bund* (1815), followed by failed attempts in 1848/1849, and later in 1871—due to necessity caused by ongoing war with France—as an empire under Prussian leadership. Germany became a nation state comparatively late (cf. Plessner, 1959). Yet, once Germany was unified, it tried to narrate and define its unique historical, cultural, and political patterns, sometimes, referred to as the German *Sonderweg* (cf. Kocka, 1988: 3/4).

Simultaneously, Germany needed to form a national cultural identity and demarcate itself from other states. *Bildung* became Germany's way to demarcate itself from the courtly and—from the German perspective at the time—highly suspicious French structures (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 40/41). Further, emerging nation states required civil servants for their administrations and institutions, which created opportunities for citizens to rise through the ranks of public administrations through the acquisition of formal education, performance, effort, and persistency. This presented an opportunity unheard of in prior times of inherited status and social position and marks the rise of meritocracy (cf. Vogt & Neuhaus, 2021: 119). Through the reorganization of the state and the newly emerging class of citizens and civil servants, *Bildung* not just gained in importance but also became a marker of social distinction as certain educational paths were required for particular positions (cf. *ibid.*). In the nineteenth century, *Bildung* served Germany as a marker of cultural and historical identity as well as an internal social distinction mechanism. This distinction also contributed to already existing tensions as the *Kaiserreich* “appeared to be a strange mixture of highly successful capitalist industrialization and socio-economic modernization, on the one hand, and of surviving pre-industrial institutions, power relations, and cultures on the other” (Kocka, 1988: 5; cf. Wehler, 1973).

Influential thinkers and philosophers of the nineteenth century were Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, Johann Wilhelm Süvern, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx. Humboldt changed Germany's educational landscape like no other thinker as he established Germany's unique school system, which reflects his approach toward *Bildung*. Due to Humboldt's crucial contributions, his educational philosophy will be outlined in the following section.

Wilhelm von Humboldt “studied at Göttingen, the intellectual center of political science favored by aristocrats headed for government careers” (Sorkin, 1983: 57). As such, Humboldt embodied the newly emerging, intellectual upper-class of the nineteenth century. Contrary to most of his peers, he was also influenced by in-depth readings of Kant and Romantic scholars as well as by conversations with countless intellectuals of the time. Especially the study of Romanticism caused an inward turn (cf. *ibid.*) and Humboldt started to question core beliefs of the Enlightenment and the state itself—an ironic turn as his formal education qualified him primarily for public positions. Humboldt—later in charge of Prussia’s educational sector—assumes that every person possesses certain forces or powers. These forces can be cultivated by confronting different artifacts of the world (i.e., natural sciences, languages etc.). By studying and engaging with these artifacts, the individual transforms his/her potential into a growing force (cf. Böhm, 2013: 91). Simultaneously, through the exercise of one’s forces, the individual changes the world. Conceptualizing *Bildung* as such, it becomes a dialogical concept in which the world changes the person and vice versa (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 50/51). Contrary to the idea of early specialization, Humboldt proposes that all of human being’s potential forces should be cultivated and co-exist in harmony. Harmony⁸ is a recurrent theme in Humboldt’s works and permeates all levels of analysis as “the individual and the public must be in harmony. Personal morality and politics are two sides of the same coin” (Nordenbo, 2002: 348). While the thinkers of the Enlightenment have argued for the betterment of society through *Bildung*, Humboldt solely focuses on the individual as his approach toward *Bildung* aims at self-cultivation not vocational training, the ability to think scientifically not the accumulation of knowledge, and intellectual self-activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) and not the reproduction of already existing thoughts (cf. Zehnpfenning, 2010: 124). According to Humboldt, the highest aim of *Bildung* and the meaning of life are the cultivation and balancing of each individual’s forces (cf. Humboldt, 1792/2002: 64), a process without a pre-defined aim.

In order to realize Humboldt’s idea of *Bildung* certain preconditions must be provided and Humboldt, as a high-ranking Prussian government official, was able to implement some of these conditions. For Humboldt, the two core conditions for successful *Bildung* are freedom and the chance for social interaction/the exchange of ideas. Apart from that, “Humboldt proposed the reduction of state power to the barest minimum in order to insure freedom for individual self-cultivation [...]” (Sorkin, 1983: 55). Following Humboldt’s concept, the individual educates and forms itself as independently as possible while the state is only supposed to enable this endeavor. Enabling of these processes happens through the acquisition of fundamentals (i.e. reading and writing) in corresponding schools and should be made available to all

⁸ Similar to Hegel, Humboldt suspects pre-existing harmony, an idea he borrowed from natural science, in Ancient Greek society. To some extent, the idealization of Ancient Greek society can be explained by the *zeitgeist* as German New Humanism oriented itself at the Renaissance. Thereby, it developed a fascination for antiquity (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 37/38). While being in constant search for a model of perfection to thrive towards Humboldt assumed perfection in Ancient Greece times/philosophy (cf. Oelkers, 1999: 28).

children, independent of their social rank (cf. Tenorth, 2013). The institutions imagined, designed, and implemented by Humboldt can be found in Germany until the very day. Humboldt implemented a variety of new institutions and approaches and, at least initially, democratized *Bildung*, introduced the idea of general knowledge, and redefined the relationship between the state and the individual.

2.3 *The 20th Century Pending Between Nihilism and Reformation*

By the end of the nineteenth century, the newly emerging class of citizen, which legitimized their position by the acquisition of *Bildung*—often referred to as *Bildungsbürgertum*—, fossilized. Branded as an elitist project, *Bildungsbürgertum* was criticized by all political fronts. Further, *Bildungsbürgertum* was equated with a lack of morals, enhanced materialism, and a lack of belief. The corresponding institutions of formal education were considered antiquated and often portrayed as lethargic (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 63/64).

Friedrich Nietzsche, who foresaw many of the twentieth century's horrors, observed these *fin-de-siècle* resentments and “believed modern society changes rapidly, but in the wrong direction” (Washburn, 2019: 171). Also, Nietzsche considered the “triumph of the middle class” and the “crisis of values” as “the seeds of the destruction of European civilization” (Washburn, 2019: 173). Further, Nietzsche (among others) criticized the corruption of *Bildung* as it was reduced to a tool for economic and/or political gain (cf. Horlacher, 2011: 63). The rise of Adolf Hitler, 12 years of national-socialist dictatorship, the horrors of the concentration camps, and two World Wars, proved Nietzsche's prophecies to be correct and scholars who conceptualized *Bildung* primarily as a means for betterment of the individual, community, and state saw themselves confronted with an immense paradox as a generation formally educated under the paradigm of humanism committed mass murder (cf. Bulthaupt, 2007: 60).

The reaction toward these atrocities split the community of philosophers and educational scientists into two camps. Educators and philosophers of *Reformpädagogik*⁹ argued that the suppression and thereby absence of humanistic *Bildung* during the times of fascism enabled the above-mentioned abhorrence. They proposed a revitalization of *Bildung*—referencing Johann A. Comenius, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or John Dewey—with a particular focus on

⁹ *Reformpädagogik* (Progressive Education, Nouvelle Education) already existed before the Second World War. In fact, the most fruitful intellectual contributions were made between 1890 and 1932 (cf. Skiera, 2010: 2/3). However, its real-life implementation into Germany's educational landscape was marginal and it was banned/actively avoided during the national socialist's dictatorship. After 1945, *Reformpädagogik* experienced a wider public appeal. In the course of the twentieth century, variations of *Reformpädagogik*, such as Montessori or Waldorf pedagogy, established themselves. In East Germany, formerly the GDR, *Reformpädagogik* was also banned during the socialist dictatorship until the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989/1990 (cf. Scheuerl, 1997: 186).

democratic values, emancipation, and the child as an individual. For representatives of *Reformpädagogik*, it was rather a matter of how to cultivate *Bildung*. Well-known spokes-people of this school of thought are Heinz Joachim Heydorn, Rudolf Steiner, Hartmut von Hentig, Herman Nohl, and Berthold Otto. In the following section, *Reformpädagogik's* general propositions will be presented.

Contrary to the representatives of *Reformpädagogik*, the other camp of philosophers was less optimistic about the future of *Bildung* and rather (fore-)saw a deformation of *Bildung* in the twentieth century and beyond. This camp of scholars does not criticize the *how* but rather asks *if* the concept of *Bildung* can be realized—a more fundamental criticism of *Bildung*. The fiercest critics on the conceptional level of *Bildung* (and its commodification) can be considered Theodor W. Adorno, Konrad Paul Liessmann, and Jochen Krautz. Arguably, Adorno presented the most profound criticism of *Bildung* as he “abandoned the hope that education for humanity [...] could retain its normative power in our time” (Lovlie & Standish, 2002: 317) and whose key criticisms will be outlined after the illustration of *Reformpädagogik's* central propositions.

From 1933 to 1945—for East Germany (GDR) this period has to be extend until 1989/1990—Germany and its educational sector were governed by totalitarian structures which abandoned the idea of *Bildung* and replaced it with drill, obedience, and a none questioning attitude toward the system and leaders in power. After 1945/1990, *Reformpädagogik* was, at least by educational planners, considered the counter-approach to totalitarian education (cf. Tenorth, 1994: 585) as *Reformpädagogik* tried to cultivate reflection, introspection, and a critical attitude toward the social and cultural status quo (cf. Ullrich, 1990: 895). *Reformpädagogik* focuses on the child as an individual and tries to provide opportunities to learn from (for the learner) meaningful real-life artifacts. The aim of *Reformpädagogik's* holistic pedagogy is to cultivate theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, as well as introspection (cf. Ullrich, 1990: 893/894). Thereby, *Reformpädagogik* opened pedagogy's perspective and added a plethora of methods, artifacts, and modes of learning to schools' repertoire, such as project learning, cooperative arrangements, experiments, field trips, and the alike (cf. Schulze, 2011: 764). The attentive reader recognizes many of *Reformpädagogik's* aspects as components of aforementioned thinkers. This observation led critics (i.e., Oelkers, 1989) to claim that *Reformpädagogik* is not a distinct and original phenomenon but only the logical continuation of humanistic *Bildung* of the last 200 years—a dispute which will never be resolved.

Advocates of *Reformpädagogik* suspected pedagogy's problem primarily in the mode of how *Bildung* should be cultivated. Theodor W. Adorno on the contrary criticizes *Bildung* on a conceptional level and grounds his criticism on the promise of the nineteenth century to create an equal, meritocratic, and free society through *Bildung*. While some individuals rose through the ranks of science, business, or administration, the general dynamic of a privileged against a less privileged class largely remained intact (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 97). *Bildung* just created the illusion of convergence (cf. Tischer, 1989: 7). This illusion is caused by Adorno's philosophical understanding of *Bildung*. He frames it as a double-edged concept describing the inner processes of understanding the world as well as the real-life application of

Bildung (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003: 95). Basically, a re-run of the sophists' dilemma of ethical utilitarianism and epistemological relativism. According to Adorno, it is of utter importance that *Bildung* oscillates between these two poles because as soon as *Bildung* serves only one purpose—either introspection or real-life application—it is corrupted. If *Bildung* only focuses on the inner workings, it is blind for the real-life injustices and thereby silently legitimizes these, whereas if it only focuses on the real-life application, *Bildung* adapts itself to the system in power and also legitimizes it (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003: 104). The contradiction of autonomy and freedom on the one side and the strict societal orders and structures, in which *Bildung* can take place, on the other side, denies *Bildung's* existence because as soon as *Bildung* is defined as a societal aim, it already contradicts itself (cf. *ibid.*).

For the twentieth century, Adorno primarily criticizes the commodification of *Bildung*, which is fueled by mass media and solely allows the mode of consumption (cf. Liessmann, 2006: 9). Consumption of *Bildung* has to be seen as the process of going through the motions (i.e., reading a book, visiting a museum or theater, etc.) without the in-depth experience of the action. The experience of the less privileged can only be shallow due to their lack of economic and cultural resources necessary for an in-depth study of the works being part of *Bildung* (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 97). Due to the given economic mode of operation, in which *Bildung* opens doors for citizens and the middle class alike, *Bildung* is reduced to its mere economic value. Under such circumstances *Bildung* is commodified and follows the logic of trade and business. The perception of artifacts in this economically shaped mode is considered *Halbbildung* (semi-*Bildung*) (cf. Tischer, 1989: 7). Thereby, *Halbbildung* is not the half of the original concept but its fiercest enemy (cf. Gruschka, 2001: 30) as the recipient of *Halbbildung* consumes culture with the sole intention of delineating him-/herself from the (perceived to be) uneducated, yet she/he only knows few bits and pieces and uses those only to arrogantly show-off and signal belonging to an assumed to be prestigious group (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003: 115; cf. Gruschka, 2001: 18). The corrupt status quo is reinforced by amusement provided by mass media aiming at conformity of citizen as well as producers of culture alike (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2008: 153).

3 The Different Layers of *Bildung*

As shown in the prior sections, *Bildung* is a multifaceted term which underwent tremendous historical change. Some aspects of the god-term *Bildung* can be found in almost all realizations/concepts of *Bildung*, others are only temporarily present. In order to conceptualize the workings of the god-term *Bildung*, we differentiate between stratum of *Bildung's*, a superstrate and a substrate. The superstrate is *Bildung's* time-stable core while the substrate underwent change. It is argued that due to the unique entanglement of *Bildung's* super- and substrate-layer, it became Germany's solution to one of the most crucial philosophical problems relating to self-cultivation.

3.1 *The Superstrate*

At the superstrate level, it can be argued that all concepts of *Bildung* directly or indirectly refer to the idea of *arête*, the imagined state of personal excellence and virtuousness (cf. Böhm, 2010: 12). Excellence and virtuousness are not limited to a chosen few but are stages at which every person, who is willing to make the proper sacrifices, can arrive at. This egalitarian notion is emphasized even in the earliest concepts of *Bildung* (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019: 35/36). *Bildung*, just as *arête*, permeates all spheres of human interaction starting at the individual and reaching all the way up to the state level. Due to its egalitarian notion and impact on the individual, the polis, and the state, *Bildung*, as a way to approximate *arête*, is closely related to the concept of *paideia*. Further, *Bildung* has always understood itself as the combination of introspectively arriving at values but also acting these virtues out as “one cannot just be virtuous, one must become virtuosity by performing and hence embodying virtuous actions in public” (Hawhee, 2002: 187)—a combination of theoretical wisdom (*arête*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*).¹⁰ Another time-stable trait of *Bildung* is that it—in accordance with its Ancient Greek tradition—focuses first and foremost on the individual as the unit of analysis as “moral value is centered within a person” (Birmingham, 2004: 316) and from there on alters the community and/or state. *Bildung* and thereby the development, rejuvenation, and renewal of the individual and ultimately all following social arrangements needs to be understood as a bottom-up process. Lastly, all concepts of *Bildung* share Socrates’ notion that they are framed as on-going and never-ending processes (cf. Böhm, 2010: 20).

3.2 *Bildung’s Substrate and the Problems It Has Solved*

However, the sophists already hinted at the potential dangers of verbalized and acted out virtues. The dilemma the sophists illustrate is the tension between ethical utilitarianism and epistemological relativism. This tension can be considered the pending between truth and impact of the performed and/or uttered virtues. The ever-changing understanding of *Bildung* in Germany mirrors the negotiation of *Bildung*’s pending status between the search for truth and *Bildung* as a means for an “individual’s desired end” (Noel, 1999: 276). From a historical perspective, *Bildung* oscillates between these two poles. Every time introspection (as the search for truth) was overemphasized, *Bildung* became worldlier and vice versa.¹¹ Germany and its territorial predecessors established this mechanism by (unconsciously) incorporating Socrates’ idea

¹⁰ Using Aristotle’s lingua, it could be said that *Bildung* tries to unite the search for *episteme* (truth), the cultivation of *techne* (creational skills), and the creation of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) (cf. Nonaka & Toyama, 2007: 377/378).

¹¹ This observation can be supported by the references used in the discourses on *Bildung*. Every era of worldly change and challenge is followed by a time of intellectual reformation—read in its

of dialogue/maieutic. Through consultation and intellectual exchange with varying people, thinkers, times/epochs, and artifacts, an approximation of truth and virtuousness should be reached (cf. Böhm, 2010: 20)—an idea which can be found in the accounts of the aforementioned scholars and thinkers as “knowledge creation requires [...] practice and dialogue” (Nonaka & Toyama, 2007: 377).

At the superstrate level, the process of *Bildung* unites the Ancient Greek ideals of *arête* and *phronesis*. However, German *Bildung* is more than that. The substrate level of *Bildung*—the concepts which underwent change and were illustrated in the prior section—helped these superstrate ideals to remain relevant and prominent over time. One problem of secular approaches toward morals is the lack of imperative force compared to religious doctrines (cf. Anscombe, 1958). As outlined in the prior section, Germany received the teachings of the Ancient Greek thinkers through the translations provided by the Christian churches. At the beginning, the Christian church used the idea of self-cultivation, self-formation, and *Bildung* as a blueprint for its teachings, later the thinkers of the Enlightenment emancipated themselves from the fossilized church doctrine. However, the underlying teachings on self-formation and cultivation remained intact and found their application in new approaches. Through that unique mode of reception, *Bildung* and thereby the ideals of the Ancient Greek philosophers have a quasi-religious imperative force and anchoring in society¹² while having developed into secular concepts.

In the introduction, we stated that Luhmann and Schorr argue for *Bildung* as pedagogies god-term. God-terms are specific enough that a conversation about them can take place while exhibiting a certain degree of flexibility. The superstrate aspects outlined above are the temporally stable, while the substrate consists of the fluid, elements in the god-term *Bildung*. Linking the Ancient Greek’s teachings about self-cultivation to the god-term *Bildung* also solved the problem of relevance and presence in the public discourse. Due to *Bildung*’s omnipresence, relevance, and its connectivity to public as well as academic discourse, Germany found a subtle way to incorporate discussions about self-formation, moral education, and self-cultivation into all areas of life.

4 Education’s Attempted Murder of Immortal *Bildung*

Historically, *Bildung* oscillated between truth/introspection and worldliness/extrospection. Its potential to adapt to varying times and places made it an extremely potent and long-lasting concept. However, from the second half the

original meaning as return to its original and purest form (cf. Liessmann, 2006: 161)—with (often times) strong references to Ancient Greek philosophy (cf. Lamm, 2005: 93).

¹² This could be seen as an analogy to Max Weber’s hypothesis that Protestant teachings lay the foundational work for the development of modern capitalism. After time, the religious shell dissolved but the underlying structure (in his case the Protestant work ethic) remained intact (cf. Weber, 1920/2010) just as Christian teachings used Ancient Greek ideas to inspire self-formation. The religious connotation disappeared but the process was deeply ingrained into society.

twentieth century onwards, an increasing number of scholars has tried to replace *Bildung*. The reasons for these efforts are manifold: *Bildung* has undergone too much historical change and is no longer clear-cut in its aims (cf. Gieseke, 1970), *Bildung* is untranslatable and does not allow connection to international discourse, *Bildung*, due to its definitional vagueness, invites misuse of the term (cf. Thomä, 2012), just to name a few. The substitute of choice in the twentieth and twenty-first century is the concept of competences, which refuses to refer to *Bildung* and its history at all. Instead competences focus solely on functional knowledge and skills to be used in every-day situations (cf. Höhne, 2007). Competences, contrary to *Bildung*, split interest and passion from the artifact and reduce the occupation with an object or artifact to the mere act of gaining transferable skills. The degree of desirability of these skills is dictated by the market (cf. Grigat, 2012: 76). On the contrary, *Bildung* aims at self-cultivation, igniting interest, becoming a more complete human being, and the mastering of life and oneself on multiple level of analysis. This is a deeply personal process which carefully positions the individual on the line between the known and unknown, order and chaos, the self and the world. Competences on the other side—embedded into the broader discourse of education—are universal, neglect individual differences, and are defined from the outside. This is also reflected on the linguistic level: One ‘gets educated’, ‘receives an education’, or ‘was educated’ while ‘*sich bilden*’ requires a reflexive pronoun and is an active verb, just as *Bildung* is a reflexive and active endeavor. Due to the standard setting from the outside, education and competences can be tested, measured, and compared—an impossible attempt with *Bildung* as it does not produce standardized outcomes. Therefore, *Bildung* and its outcomes are infinite in its potential. *Bildung* enables progress, game-changing discoveries, and paradigm-shifting thoughts while education and competences are capped as they aim at reproduction of already established thoughts and procedures. Thereby, education and competence hinder intellectual disruption and ultimately progress.

Due to the global standard setting of institutions, such as the OECD and the corresponding PISA studies, competences became the gold standard in global educational rankings and comparisons. These approaches are incompatible with *Bildung*. However, due to the global incentive structure from markets, employers, companies, and ultimately the OECD, *Bildung* has been abandoned in German schools. As argued earlier, *Bildung* does not require schools; however, for most citizens, schools have been at least one station in their *Bildungsbiographie*. Momentarily, *Bildung* seems to be at its weakest point, yet human beings seem to require and thrive for a concept more holistically oriented than mere competences. Based on the general framework of Greek philosophy as well as *Bildung*, contemporary philosopher Wilhelm Schmid maps out an approach he named “the art of living” (cf. Schmid, 2005) which aims at living “a beautiful life” (cf. D’Olimpio & Teschers, 2017: 4) and thereby contrasts current educational trends and fashions. Schmid’s philosophy represents the gentle resurgence of holistic ideals concerning self-cultivation, *Mündigkeit*, aestheticism, and self-reflection in the twenty-first century.

For the moment, it seems to be the case that the global rise of education and competences slowly but surely kills the concept of *Bildung*. However, if history has

taught us one thing, then that *Bildung* has an enormous transformative potential, is deeply rooted in Germany's history as well as its culture, and has risen from the ashes of prior systems multiple times before. It is extremely likely that we will see *Bildung* resurrect yet another time.

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