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The German Concept of “Bildung” then and now^{)}*

1. Seclusion and freedom

“What about Humboldt?” was a question raised two years ago during a student protest at German universities that was to be seen on many posters during the weeks of protest. There were other posters referring to Humboldt. “What about Humboldt” pointed to the apparent threat to higher education originating from the Bologna process. The word “Bologna” sounded no better to German professors, as it stands for a process of educational efficiency deeply alien to the spirit of liberal humanism.

- So: “What about Humboldt?” means “What happened to Bildung?”
- The equation seems to be self-evident: no one in Germany needs to explain what Humboldt has to do with “Bildung”.
- Being a German, what will my lecture be all about?

The German term “Bildung” is not only hard explain, but also nearly untranslatable. “Bildung” has a more extensive range of meanings than “education”, implying the cultivation of a profound intellectual culture, and is often rendered in English as “self-cultivation”. The term originated from the European philosophy of Neo-Platonism in 17th century and referred to what is called the “inward from” of the soul. Humboldt’s concept echoes this tradition even though Humboldt was not a Platonist. But “Bildung” was the key concept of German humanism and was backed by famous philosophers like Herder and Hegel as well as classical writers like Goethe or Schiller. The German “Bildungsroman” - novel of Bildung - shows how “Bildung” should work, i.e. experiencing the world in a free and personal way without formal schooling.

The students’ appeal two years ago was somewhat reminiscent of Advent, as if they were waiting for the arrival of a saviour, something that Wilhelm von Humboldt certainly was not in his real life. His name stands for what German sociologist Helmut Schelsky¹ had called studying in “seclusion and freedom” (Einsamkeit und Freiheit) back in 1963. He referred to a course of study without any pretensions to practical utility or any responsibility by the university to achieve a successful academic outcome. Schelsky invokes Humboldt, but not his fragment on “Bildung”, as is often done today, but rather his plan, which remained incomplete, of the “inner and outer organisation of the higher academic institutions in Berlin”, most likely first written in 1809 (Schelsky 1963, p. 141ff).

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¹ Helmut Schelsky (1912-1984) was most recently professor of sociology at the University of Münster.

Early that year Wilhelm von Humboldt became “Geheimer Staatsrat” (Privy Counsellor) and Director of the Department of Culture and Education at the Prussian Ministry of the Interior. He set up his organisational plan in connection with his request to establish the new University of Berlin, the first draft of the plan was ready on 12 May 1809. Its central question is that of a *universitas*: he insisted that a true “university” must not exclude any discipline, must have its academic rights respected and must not be set up “merely as a practical institution”. “Theory and practice in university teaching” must not be separated, but must refer to each other (Humboldt works vol. IV/p. 31) - whatever that means.

The second draft of his plan for the new university dated from 24 July 1809, it says that the new institution must comprise everything implied by the concept of a university:

“It should, on the basis of correct views of general education, neither exclude any academic disciplines nor start from a higher standpoint of education, as the universities already represent the highest, nor ultimately restrict itself merely to practical exercises” (ibid, p. 115/116).

His organisational plan then goes on to say that institutions of higher education could achieve their purpose only “when everyone, as far as possible, pursues the pure idea of scholarship”. For this reason, says Humboldt, “seclusion and freedom must be the leading principles within its area of concern” (ibid, p. 255).

But that’s not all: withdrawal from the world and independence are not sufficient. The university is also determined by the “collaboration” of individuals in the complete absence of coercion on the basis of recognition of and enthusiasm for each others’ work. Hence the “internal organisation” of the academic institutions must “bring about and maintain uninterrupted and constantly self-renewing but unconstrained collaboration to no externally set purpose” (ibid, p. 255/256). That, says Humboldt, applies equally to both professors and students: “Both are there for the sake of academic work” (ibid, p. 256) - and not for the employment market, as we might add today.

The University of Berlin, which today bears Humboldt’s name and was known as “Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität” from 1828, was founded on 16 August 1809 and took up its teaching work the following year. In the first semester, 256 students were enrolled, who were taught by 52 professors. The three largest German universities in the 19th century were those of Berlin, Leipzig and Munich. In 1850, 1,428 students were enrolled in Berlin, and in 1870 there were 2,208; only after the German Reich was founded did their numbers really begin to rise. In 1893 the University of Berlin already had 4,870 students; the largest single group comprised prospective clergymen, who numbered 620, i.e. mere than ten percent.

In 1910, at the centenary of the University of Berlin, some 10,000 students studied there, accompanied by 456 members of the faculties. The university was then the largest in Germany. In the 1930 summer semester no fewer than about 15,000 students were enrolled at the University of Berlin, including numerous women at this time;² the number of students had dropped by the summer semester 1935 to 8,300. It was the only decline in the University’s history since 1810, and also affected the other German universities. The reason was the dismissal of the Jewish professors, who were often also followed by the Jewish students. Their numbers were considerable. Before World War I, a quarter of the almost 10,000 students at the University of Vienna, for example, were of Jewish origin.

² In Prussia, women were permitted to study in 1908. In 1913, they comprised some 8% of the student body, their number rising to about 16% in 1930.

Wilhelm von Humboldt could naturally have no idea of such developments. I mention these figures in order to indicate that at the founding of the University of Berlin Humboldt did not envisage the mass-scale institutions into which the “higher academic institutions” have gradually and apparently irresistibly developed. Humboldt wrote his plan for a faculty of 52 professors, some of whom he had appointed himself, all of whom knew each other and pursued their own forms of academic social life. In the summer semester of 2011, 27,756 students were enrolled at Humboldt University. In contrast, there were fewer than 6,000 students in Germany as a whole at the end of the 18th century, most of them sons of clergymen or senior civil servants, who were in turn being prepared for ecclesiastical or civil service careers.

Before 1810, universities were vocational schools, not places of science and research, which was the preserve of academies or learned societies. Universities educated students for the academic professions, hence comprised prospective doctors, lawyers, clergymen or classical philologists, who later worked as teachers in humanist gymnasiums. After graduation many of them became private tutors first, which they were obliged to choose if they had studied the wrong subjects or no position as a priest or school teacher was vacant. Famous German philosophers like Immanuel Kant worked as private tutors for years because they found no other job.

What had in the 19th century been called “Brotstudium” and was looked down upon,³ - “bread and butter studies” or studies for exams and practical purposes only - determined learning at the German universities, which were often so small that they would have been unable to survive without their “Brotstudenten” (“livelihood students”). The universities served the academic professions, not vice versa. And “Bildung” was no topic. Humboldt wanted to change that.

More precisely, Humboldt wanted a state university *as* a learned association without an obligation to practical professions. That’s why he says in his organisational plan:

“What are called... institutions of higher learning represent, emancipated from the state in all forms, nothing other than the cultural life of human beings whom external leisure or internal endeavour leads to scholarship and research” (ibid).

The state provides the funds but does not intervene. To the contrary, the state has to ensure that academic activity is maintained “in its most active and intense vitality”, which requires the unconditional autonomy of the university. It administers itself. But the state must also ensure, that the university, as Humboldt says, does not “degenerate”. It must not become a school but must be absolutely separated from it. It should do nothing else than research and reasoning; the state becomes “a hindrance” whenever it intervenes in the internal matters of the university (ibid, p. 256/257).

Humboldt had already developed his view against the intervening state in 1792 in his famous *The Spheres and Duties of Government*. This first manifesto of German liberalism asked what “major *unfavorable* or *pernicious* consequences” result from a “positive provision by the state for the wellbeing of its citizens” (Humboldt works Vol. I/p. 83; highlighting J.O.). These bad consequences of good intentions primarily concern the “limitations of freedom”

³ “Livelihood study” (Brotstudium) is also the title of a frivolous poem by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, that was published in 1843 in the anthology *German Songs from Switzerland*.

that the state accepts as a trade-off when it assumes more and more tasks for which there is, however, absolutely no necessity (ibid, p. 84).

“One source of mischief in particular cannot be ignored, because it concerns human beings and their education so intimately, namely the resulting entanglement of the administration of government affairs which, if it is not to lead to confusion, requires an enormous number of detailed arrangements and employs just as many people. And what’s more, most of them deal merely with the signs and formulas of the things to which they correspond” (ibid, p. 85).

This produces state officials who merely administer government business, which expands more and more precisely due to this administration. Humboldt describes the consequences as follows:

“This leads to many, even first-rate minds stopping thinking for themselves. Many otherwise useful employees are withdrawn from any real work; but their mental powers also suffer from their occupation, which is both vacuous and one-sided” (ibid).

When Humboldt wrote these lines, the German universities had almost no administration, an office for enrolling and deregistration was sufficient, administered exclusively by men, with a supervising porter, plus bookkeeping and housekeeping services (Bornhak 1900). The “Chairs” were the professors themselves, they had no assistants. All that changed during the 19th century; and it happened precisely as Humboldt had predicted: the growth of tasks led to a burgeoning administration, and in practice invariably by way of provisional solutions which gradually became permanent. In addition, funding for the universities was never sufficient.

Humboldt applied his thesis against the rampant state to the entire administration - not only to that of the educational institutions, which was as I said comparatively weak around 1800. What he envisaged was the development from informal self-administration in local communities to a formalised bureaucracy of the central state that would emancipate itself from those it was meant to represent. This was in fact a fundamental process taking place during the whole 19th century, which Humboldt - with some misgivings - described as follows:

“A new and regular occupation is now arising, namely administering state business, and this makes the servants of the state so much more dependent on the governing part of the state that pays them than on the nation as such. Experience shows with the greatest clarity the further undesirable consequences to which this leads: waiting for aid from the state, a lack of independence, false vanity, even inactivity and indigence” (Humboldt works Vol. I/p. 85).

Such lines coming from a liberal would have pleased people like Ronald Reagan or Milton Friedman but are hardly designed to justify today’s student protest, which does not attack the social state but only the poor administration of a specific state business known as the “Bologna process”. However, Humboldt had already pointed out that the modern state tends simply to accumulate “tools of efficiency” and thus to neglect the living forces (ibid, p. 86). This well describes today’s insane urge to evaluate everything that goes back to an approach known as “New Public Management” whose core simply means more administration, but of a more efficient kind. Humboldt was the first author to anticipate what today is called the “audit-society”.

It should not be forgotten, Humboldt had said, that:

“once pernicious effects are present, ruin approaches with ever accelerating steps” (ibid, p. 88).

He at least is good for quotations - But it's not Humboldt the state theorist who is the guiding spirit of today's protest, but the educational theorist. The relevant passages are quoted from his organisational plan without asking when they might actually refer to an experienced reality. But we involuntarily agree today when we read:

“As soon as we cease to seek true scholarship, or believe that it does not need to be created from the depths of the human spirit but can be compiled by the extensive collection of data, then everything is irrevocably and for ever lost: lost to scholarship, which - if this process is long continued - flees so that it even leaves behind language and so culture like an empty coat, and is lost to the state” (Humboldt works Vol. IV/p. 258).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau for example, who was a passionate botanist and hence a great collector, would never have been able to write a significant book on the basis of this logic because the “depths of the human spirit” would have been denied him. The German phrase is “Tiefe des Geistes” which again is untranslatable. For Humboldt the phrase is linked to something essential, namely *Bildung* or the inward form of man.

“For only scholarship, which originates from within, and can be inculcated into the inner man, transforms the character” (ibid.)

So this was the theory, what about the reality? “Bildung” refers not only to the inner man but also to institutions, and they did not develop according to Humboldt's theory. He founded a whole new university, and the criteria for it was excellence and not “scholarship from within”.

2. *University and gymnasium in the 19th century*

The professors whom Humboldt had personally appointed or who were appointed shortly after his time included famous names:

- The jurist Friedrich Carl von Savigny, the founder of historical jurisprudence,
- The polymath Albrecht Daniel Thaer, founder of modern agronomy,
- Carl Ritter, who together with Humboldt's brother Alexander founded the scientific study of geography,
- The medical scholar Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, founder of the polyclinic and first Dean of the Medical Faculty, and
- The classical philologist August Boeckh, who founded the social history of the ancient world.

They were first class scientists and at the new university they pursued their respective disciplines, which were no longer subsumed by a general concept of education. At the time of founding the University of Berlin, it seemed to be no longer possible to derive the internal

organisation of a modern research-based university, then only in its beginnings, from a theory of education or to refer it to such a theory. “Bildung” was by no means the connecting link between agronomy, geography, history, medicine and classical philology.

What convinced Humboldt’s professors of the concept of the new university was, apart from the support given to their work and their salaries, the connection between research and teaching. The earlier universities resembled schools where teachers read aloud from textbooks, whereas lessons could now be shaped in a freer way and referred to the lecturer’s own research. Some disciplines, but far from all of them, saw the gradual disappearance of a practice that is being reintroduced today, namely the study of textbook knowledge. This is a real Bologna-effect. However, the renewed teaching at Humboldt’s university was addressed to an elite who had had to undergo a rigorous process of selection at the gymnasiums in Germany.

The gymnasiums called themselves the schools of “Bildung”. And in fact they shaped higher education in Germany. “Higher education” means education a high risks. The schools were selective in a way that is difficult to believe from today’s point of view.

- In Prussia there were 113 gymnasiums as of Easter 1839, attended by 21,728 pupils.
- These schools were small and by no means prepared most of their pupils for university.
- No more than 631 Prussian school leavers went on to university in 1839, whereas 2,249 chose “vocational occupations” (Droysen 1846, p. 4).

And far from all the pupils who attended a gymnasium actually gained a school-leaving certificate. This was the reality of “Bildung” at the time when Humboldt invented the concept.

In the last third of the 19th century, the proportion of gymnasium pupils was less than three per cent of the entire school population, to which it must be added that only a minority of them actually achieved the objective of their studies.

- In 1885, the proportion of school leavers who received a university-entrance certificate from the gymnasiums was 14.3%, or expressed in figures:
- On 1 April 1885, 29,330 pupils left the Prussian gymnasiums, 4,204 of whom gained a university-entrance certificate.

The rest changed schools or left without a certificate. They left, as the well-known physiologist and school reformer William Preyer (1888, p. 235)⁴ noted, “completely immature and without any qualifications”. In this sense, those whose education stopped at elementary school were better off, as they were not exposed to the “competition for formal qualification” of the academic establishments (ibid).

For the school year of 1889/1890, we have the following figures for Prussia:

⁴ William Thierry Preyer (1841-1897) was professor of physiology at the University of Jena and a well-known school reformer.

- Only 20.5% of pupils who left all institutions of higher education in that school year reached their goal, namely a certificate qualifying them for university entrance.
- 40.2% finished with a certificate for the one-year military service
- and 39.3% left school without even this certificate (Lehrpläne 1891, p. 67f.).

Humboldt had set out the educational mission of the gymnasiums in 1810 as follows: they must consider the “harmonious cultivation *of all* the capabilities of their pupils”. Their intellectual powers were to:

“...be applied to as few objects as possible, as far as possible in all their aspects, and all this knowledge should be inculcated into their minds so that their understanding, knowledge and mental creativity acquire their appeal not through external circumstances, but by their intrinsic precision, harmony and beauty” (Humboldt works Vol. IV/p. 261).

I fear that this type of idealism is not well suited to contribute to clarifying the practice of education, because it covers not the key problems of schooling, e.g. the curricula, the process of selection or the hourly division of the lessons. To “prepare the mind for pure scholarship”, Humboldt - who had never attended a school - particularly recommended mathematics, which ought to be learnt starting from the very first exercises designed to develop the ability to think.

But what pupils actually learned at German gymnasiums in the first third of the 19th century was Latin combined with Greek, and for that the same justification of “developing the ability to think” was used. And the forecast of success at the humanistic gymnasiums did not differ from what Humboldt expected of mathematics:

“A mind prepared in this way will then take up pure science or scholarship of itself, whereas the same application and the same talent developed by any other mode of preparation would, either immediately or at the end of the educational process, run aground in mere practical activity and would consequently make the pupils unsuitable even for this, or be dissipated in scattered facts without any higher academic striving” (ibid).

The 1905 edition of the famous Meyers Encyclopaedia defined “bread-and-butter-studies” in similar terms as

“external study pursued solely for examination and practical purposes with no true scientific interest”
(Meyers Vol. 3/1905, p. 464).

This may be read today as a comment on the Bologna process, but the key question is how many students in the 19th and 20th centuries did *not* study for examinations and practical application. The negative expression “Brotstudium” is equally untranslatable: it stands for a remoteness from practice which was precisely *not* on the programme for most disciplines. Image medicine, agriculture or law without a close relationship to their fields of practical experience.

In 1877 the famous Berlin physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond⁵ published an excoriating critique of the gymnasiums⁶ that compared their rhetorical aims with what the students could actually do when they embarked upon their university studies. Humboldt's educational idealism is present here as a value standard, as are all the clichés that continue to determine the discussion of education in Germany until today.

- The struggle of education against advancing “Americanisation” is present,
- The “impending dangers” of modern culture are addressed
- and the ability of the gymnasiums to select the competent students is questioned.

The list of shortcomings is long. A particular reproach is that gymnasiums have managed to exercise a “truly despotic power over the family” due to their performance requirements. Today the accusation of “family hostility” is known as the *Turboabitur*, which has already led to the downfall of many a state government in Germany. They stumbled over their own administration, which Humboldt would certainly have seen as an irony.

Du Bois-Reymond said, that after a quarter century of overseeing medical examinations with more than three thousand candidates, he was personally able to determine the pernicious fruits of gymnasium teaching. The results were terrifying. The “humanistic education” of the “average doctor” left much to be desired, they could not manage Latin or Greek, but their formal education was equally deficient. He noted:

- “Ungrammatical” and “tasteless” German,
- uncertainty in spelling
- and “neglect of their native language”,
- plus “an often astonishingly low level of familiarity with the German classics” (Du Bois-Reymond 1974, p. 146ff).

Other descriptions of the “miserable schooling” provided by the gymnasiums (ibid, p. 151) can be added, without dwelling on the fact that the gymnasiums were very diverse with regard to their resources and were unable to provide a “humanistic education” simply because they had no clear aims to do so. The gymnasiums had curricula with certain avowed goals, but no operational targets. Each was a small kingdom with great autonomy and little amount of control.

As we proceed further into the 20th century, three factors remained unchanged in the development of German education:

- the gymnasium as a type of school for the elite,
- the associated concept of “humanistic education”
- and the complaints of the professors.

The most famous critic of higher education in Germany was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who attended one of the foremost German schools and later defended rigorously the elitist approach of German “Bildung”. Nietzsche studied at the “Landesschule” of Schulpforta

⁵ Emil Heinrich du Bois-Reymond (1818-1896) had been professor of physiology at the University of Berlin since 1855. He is one of the founders of electrophysiology.

⁶ *Cultural history and science* - a lecture held in Cologne on 24 March 1877 at the Association of Scientific Lectures (Du Bois-Reymond 1974, pp. 105-158).

which was founded in 1543.⁷ He was 24 years old, when he was called to become professor of classical philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland, before he even finished his dissertation work. In Basel he defended what we had learned at Schulpforta. But his defence of “Bildung” was far from unique, it was, on the contrary common sense in the vast literature on German “gymnasium”.

At that time we find two different types of gymnasiums, the humanistic and the scientific, which had different goals and different interests. So the often furious discussion about the true “Bildung” was one between two interest groups, each of them wanted to secure their resources, no more and no less. Nietzsche simply took part in this dispute that lasted until World War I.

3. *Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of “educational institutions”*

In 1844, Dresden gymnasium teacher and later revolutionary Hermann Köchly⁸ contested the exclusivity of the gymnasium humanist ideal and proposed to justify the task of science- and humanities-based gymnasiums on the basis of the real division between their subjects, i.e. without a specific educational ideal. Science-oriented schools were called “Realschulen” or “Realgymnasien”, they were introduced to prepare their pupils for studying science, whereas their humanities-oriented counterparts aimed at the historical disciplines. There cannot be a conflict of aims as long as the claim of humanistic education to be superior to other forms of schooling is abandoned.

“The gymnasium ... sends its pupils off to study the historical disciplines, the Realgymnasium as an equal sister does the same for the scientific ones, preparing them for university. If we have understood the true mission of the gymnasium in this way, this also confirms the necessity of a thorough study of classical antiquity as the basis of gymnasium education” (Köchly 1845, p. 5).

This division, which, except for university access, corresponds to the situation that Friedrich Nietzsche found in Basel when he was appointed there in 1869, had been hotly contested in Germany, for instance by Johann Gustav Droysen,⁹ historian at the University of Kiel and former gymnasium teacher. The Gymnasiums, said Droysen, are by no means institutions “whose aim is to prepare their pupils for university”. Rather:

“Their aim, their mission is to achieve a specific intellectual and moral education by means of teaching and discipline, namely one that can act as a general basis for the

⁷ After being transferred to the fourth grade of the cathedral school in Naumburg, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) attended Pforta Landschule from October 1858 until he graduated on 7 September 1864. Moritz von Sachsen founded one of three “Fürstenschulen” in Pforta in 1543, which developed into the elite school for German Protestantism, with students such as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, August Ferdinand Möbius, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Leopold von Ranke. During Nietzsche’s time at the school, there were some 200 male pupils on the roll, organised in six classes. (Friedrich Nietzsche 2000, p. 45-110; cf Dorf Müller/Kissling 2004).

⁸ Hermann Köchly (1815-1876) had been a schoolmaster at the Kreuzschule in Dresden from 1840. He was involved in 1848 in the preparation of the new liberal Saxon school law and in May 1849 in the formation of the provisional government in Saxony. When it fell, he had to flee to Switzerland. As a Hellenist, he became a professor at the University of Zürich in 1850 and accepted a position in Heidelberg in 1864.

⁹ The well-known historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), who had been appointed to Kiel in 1840, taught at the Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster in Berlin from 1829 to 1840.

higher professions, as the common precondition for all those who are members of the cultured classes” (Droysen 1846, p. 4).

Precisely this claim was renewed by Friedrich Nietzsche in Basel, where delivered 1872 famous lectures against the institutions of higher education in Germany. Many authors believed that the Gymnasiums were intended for the cultured classes and pursued no other purpose. Education can refer only to itself, it is of classical origin and presupposes “a small number of highly talented ... minds” (Lattmann 1873, Part I/p. 7).¹⁰ “True culture is reserved for the few” was the standard statement in the Gymnasium literature; technical schools were responsible for educating “average minds” (Hartmann 1875, p. 16).¹¹ There could not be two kinds of higher education (ibid, p. 22).

In 1870 the “Zeitschrift für das Gymnasialwesen” (Journal of Gymnasium Education) printed a critique of a memorandum by a Berlin school inspector, in which a reform of the curriculum was proposed that should strengthen science and modern languages. The critique used a metaphor that was also to appear two years later in Nietzsche’s speeches. With the extension of the Gymnasiums, especially the science-based ones,

“the stream of education had reached a width... that could almost fill us with dread as to whether the solid banks would not disappear completely from view; the question only remains whether this stream has not lost in depth what it has gained in width” (Schütz 1870, p. 2).¹²

The “broad extension of education” was not pushed through due to “pure enthusiasm” but to increase access to civil service jobs and to the military (ibid, p. 3/4). The consequences of the enlargement of access are devastating:

- Most pupils are only “moderately” gifted and consequently attain only a moderate standard (ibid, p. 5).
- Only a “comparative few” can cope with the demands of learned education,
- in other words the Gymnasiums “suffer from being overfilled with weakly or at least only moderately gifted pupils” (ibid, p. 8).

A strong suspicion of educational levelling permeates the entire discussion of German “Bildung”, reinforced by an “aristocratic” view of Greek antiquity, which sees the apogee of education in terms of a radical narrowing to a tiny minority who have to withdraw from the mass and are only really educated when they can do that.

So the polemics of Nietzsche’s Basel lectures *On the future of our educational institutions* of 1872¹³ had been well prepared. Nietzsche was 27 years old, had been in Basel for three years¹⁴ and addressed a republican public that was far from enthusiastic listening to

¹⁰ The classical philologist Julius Lattmann (1818-1898) was a schoolmaster at the Gymnasium in Göttingen. In 1870 he became headmaster of the Gymnasium in Clausthal.

¹¹ Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906), the son of a General, was one of the best known German philosophers of the 19th century. His *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869) was most sharply criticised by Friedrich Nietzsche.

¹² Karl Schütz had been headmaster of the Gymnasium of Stolp in Pomerania from 1863.

¹³ *On the future of our educational institutions. Six public lectures* (Nietzsche 1980, pp. 641-752). Only five of the six planned lectures were actually held. They had been commissioned by the Basel “Academic Society”. They were held on 16 January, 6 and 27 February, 5 and 23 March, 1872 (Friedrich Nietzsche 2000, p. 258ff.).

¹⁴ His appointment to the University of Basel had been decided by the small council of the canton on 10 February 1869. Nietzsche started his teaching programme as associate professor on 20 April 1869. He was promoted to full professor on 9 April 1870 (Friedrich Nietzsche 2000, p. 188ff.).

his speeches (Bollinger/Trenkle 2000). Nietzsche taught not only at the University but also at the Gymnasium of Basel, but he did not refer to his own experience - he was quite a successful teacher - but to the general notion of “Bildung” and so the discourse that attacked modern science education and defend classical scholarship as the basis of all studies.

Nietzsche said: No one would strive for “Bildung” knowing “how unbelievably small the number of truly cultured people ultimately is and ever can be” (ibid, p. 665). However, the “present situation of our educational institutions” (ibid., p. 667), is dominated by two completely different tendencies that will inevitably have a “pernicious” effect.

- One tendency aims at the “extension and broadening of education” i.e. its democratisation, aiming ultimately to include everyone.
- It is necessarily associated with the other tendency of “reduction and weakening” (ibid), which makes education ineffective and shallow.

The more higher education is spread, and this is done on the basis of economic considerations,¹⁵ the more it is weakened, i.e. fails not only to reach the level once attained but at the same time loses its standards and thus its inherent power.

For Nietzsche, “Bildung” is then made attainable to everyone and thus dragged down to the level of egalitarianism. Its standards then plummet. And then came famous quotes:

- “The rights of genius are democratised in order to avoid one’s own cultural efforts and penury” (ibid, p. 666).
- “True education” (ibid, p. 698) is “laborious” and makes its practitioners “lonely” (ibid, p. 682, 668),
- it takes a lot of time before yielding any benefits, and has no purpose beyond itself.
- So it serves neither a state nor a republic, “Bildung” serves *itself*, and is accessible only to the few whom nature has selected.

The path of true “Bildung” is a return to the origins. There is, says Nietzsche, only one single “cultural homeland”, and that is “Greek antiquity” (ibid, p. 686). Today’s education is merely a “fashionable pseudo-culture” (ibid, p. 691) that endangers and dissolves the “aristocratic qualities of the human spirit”. The aim of modern pseudo-education is the “emancipation” of the masses, and that is precisely what corrupts the free spirit of “Bildung” and leads to the servitude of the mind (ibid, p. 698).

Education for the masses requires state organisation und thus bureaucracy, which converts the freedom of “Bildung” to mere didactics. Methods of teaching became more important than the traditions of antiquity (ibid, p. 709/710). But institutions of “culture” cannot simultaneously be designed to allow their pupils to “earn a livelihood” (ibid, p. 717ff.): if these two principles are not separated, the condition of the educational institutions can only be “pitiful” (ibid, p. 727).

¹⁵ “This extension is among the most popular economic dogmas of the present. As much knowledge and education as possible – thus as much production and necessity as possible – thus as much happiness as possible: - that is more or less the formula” (Nietzsche 1980, p. 667).

There are two ways for the future: The first one appeals to the large “flock” which follows the spirit of the “times” (Zeitgeist) and thus finds its approval. It is the path of training or utility in terms of “rank and file”:

“The immense flock that surges to attain its aims by the first route sees education as a tool through which its members are arranged in rank and file, and from which everything that could possibly strive for higher and more remote aims is cut off and detached” (ibid, p. 728).

For the “other smaller band”, a “Bildungsanstalt” (institution of “Bildung”) is something quite different. All who participate in true “Bildung” under the umbrella of a “permanent organisation” are committed to complete their “work” and so to purify it from the “traces of the subject” and attain the “eternal and unchanging essence of things” (ibid., p 729). This sets the genius, who can only be born in the institution of true “Bildung”, on his way, supported by lesser talents, which serve him.

“All who belong to that institute should also join in the endeavour to prepare the way for the birth of the genius and the creation of his works by such a purification from the subject. Many, even from the ranks of second and third rate talents, are destined to assist in this way and only come to live out their purpose in the service of such a true “Bildungs” institution”” (ibid., p 729).

Ten years later in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche called this lonely genius “Übermensch”, who is thought of as the teacher of his true followers, who will spread his teachings.

As Nietzsche’s lectures were not published in his lifetime,¹⁶ it was impossible for anyone to respond to them. It is difficult to assess the actual level of education of the elite around 1870 historically or to deduce this from examples. Presumably, Nietzsche was simply referring to Schulpforta and his own education, but this can hardly justify the wide-ranging criticism of the decline of education due to the opening-up of access. Theories of decline along these lines are frequently formulated without having any longitudinal historical data available, which would also be difficult to produce.

But “Bildung” survived and is still used as a concept that refers to “seclusion and freedom”, without taken into account what happened after Friedrich Nietzsche astonished his republican listeners in the democracy of Basel. I will ask in my next step how and where democracy was connected with education.

4. *Democracy and Bildung*

Around 1870 the concept of “democratic education” (“Bildung”) is scarcely to be found in European pedagogical literature, let alone any influential advocate to postulate in favour of the concept and present it effectively on the public stage. It is not by chance that major movements for reform aimed at the democratisation of education grew up, particularly after the American Civil War, in the United States. It was not until the end of the century, that

¹⁶ The five lectures are passed down in a handwritten manuscript for printing. Nietzsche considered publishing them in 1872 but then decided against this. A selection of the Basel lectures was first published in Part Three of the “large octavo edition” (Vol. XIX).

the concept of “democratic education” (“Erziehung”) appeared in European pedagogy, and then very hesitantly and as a marginal element in the literature.

The only exception was Switzerland. In Swiss history, “regeneration” relates to the phase of social modernisation between 1830 and 1848, which laid the foundations for the current Swiss state. Although this took different forms in the various cantons, the consequences were similar. The regeneration was led by the Liberals and began after the 1830 July Revolution in France. The reforms marked a watershed for the education system, which was henceforth under state control and led to the development of a quasi-comprehensive school in the “Volksschule”, where all children except a few could learn. The “Gymnasium” myth never existed in Switzerland, nor of course did any German concept of “Bildung”.

On 28 September 1832, the *Gesetz über die Organisation des gesammten Unterrichtswesens im Canton Zürich* (Law on the Organisation of the Entire Educational System in the Canton of Zurich) was passed - in present-day terms the first Swiss law on comprehensive education and probably also the first law in a German-speaking country to use the term “Volksschule” in a positive sense. In the 18th century, the “gemeine Volk” (common people) was another expression for “Pöbel” (mob) whereas the lawmakers in Zürich now foresaw an integrated school *for* the people with the key paragraph worded as follows:

“The “Volksschule” is intended to educate children of all classes of the people based on common principles, forming them into intellectually active, socially effective and morally devout human beings”
(Law 1832, p. 313).

The establishment of the “Volksschule” signified the rejection of any form of class-based education as was still prevalent at the time throughout Europe. The Law made a distinction between the general and upper “Volksschule”; the former was to be run as a local school with three grades, covering ages five to fourteen, with the third grade for repetition only (ibid., p. 347). The purpose of the general “Volksschule” was to “convey to the entire youth all knowledge and skills necessary for the fulfilment of the purpose of education” (ibid., p. 313). The “Upper” “Volksschule” corresponded to the present day secondary grades, which were not compulsory at the time.

What is meant by the “necessary knowledge and skills” is set out briefly, in a manner which would be unimaginable today - in a list of four areas of learning on a single page.

- an *elementary education* in the areas of language, arithmetic and music is specified,
- a *practical education* in subjects including teaching on “citizenship”,
- together with an *artistic education* in singing, drawing and calligraphy
- and finally a *religious education* covering “selected Bible stories” and “preparation for religious teaching by the church” (ibid., p. 313/314).

The 1832 law foresaw independent, autonomous teachers (ibid., p. 326), responsible for educational achievement and requiring scope to deliver this. They were to be measured not by the content of the curriculum, but by the achievement of the goal.

The first Zurich school law also contains other provisions that are startling from a present-day perspective including

- annual public examinations for all students (ibid., p. 321),
- statutory holidays of a minimum of four and a maximum of eight weeks (ibid., p. 323),
- obligation for “students in the higher grades” to assist with “teaching” (ibid.),
- acceptance of absence from school only in the case of immediate justification and the existence of “serious grounds” (ibid., p. 324/325),
- obligation for teachers to undergo further training (ibid., p. 331),
- and also school taxes and finally a “marriage donation, payable by each marrying couple amounting to at least two francs to the school fund of their local community” (ibid., p. 338/339).

On the other hand, the Law did not make any pronouncements or even give any indications as to what would appear to be the highest priority nowadays, i.e. individualised learning, nurturing of a wide variety of talents and integration of students from different social backgrounds. The reason for this is simple: there was no cause for such pronouncements because although society was made up of different classes, the environment of the individual schools was largely homogeneous in both social and religious terms.

At that time, there were no signs whatsoever of *democracy* in state education in Germany. Here “Volksschule” was a government project, to be understood in paternal terms. Its origin lies in the absolute rather than the democratic state. Far from threatening the higher concept of “Bildung”, the extension of education through the expansion of the “Volksschule” protected this. Enclaves or monasteries of “true Bildung” were discussed in various ways in German pedagogical reform before and after the First World War, merely representing ambitious theories, designed as a “bulwark” (Nietzsche 1980, p. 729) against decadence and the decline of education. According to Nietzsche, such education was to be described as “quasi-sectarian” (ibid., p. 731).

And he further said that a “proper, rigorous education” could not be acquired without “obedience and habituation” (ibid., p. 685), an idea which is prevalent in the literature about the German “Gymnasium”. Many authors express concerns about the “decline of good taste” and “falling standards” (ibid., p. 685). Many would also have agreed with Nietzsche, had they been able to hear what he had to say in Basel:

- A “definite requirement of education, having become customary, instilled through correct upbringing” is “primarily obedience and habituation to the cultivation of genius” (ibid., p. 720).
- Presumably they would also have had no objection to allowing more room for the German classics if this would facilitate the development of the “home of learning” (ibid., p. 686f.).
- Finally, the question frequently arises in the literature of whether the present day “Gymnasium” has moved away from the idea of “education in the humanities” and is thus on the decline (ibid., p. 689).

In 1874, the then headmaster of Schulpforta, Carl Peter,¹⁷ published a proposal “for the reform of our “Gymnasien”. The proposal sets out to distinguish between the “teaching methods and subjects taught” for the lower and upper “Gymnasium” grades. The lower grades were to be strictly taught and kept to “mechanical learning by rote” as befitted the “nature of the child” (Peter 1874, p. 10). Here, teaching must be “practised vigorously and

¹⁷ The classical scholar Carl Ludwig Peter (1808-1893) was the headmaster in Schulpforta in Nietzsche’s time.

consequently” (mit Nachdruck und Konsequenz) (ibid., p. 14), whereas in the upper classes, “more scope could be allowed for the freedom and individuality of students than in the past” (ibid.).

Peter did not see the cause of the frequently lamented plight of the “Gymnasium” as lying in the “introduction of so-called practical subjects” (“Realien”) such as modern languages and natural sciences, which was justified to a certain extent, but in overcrowding and misunderstanding of the purpose of education. There were “Gymnasien” with over 750 students¹⁸ who were neither willing nor suited to study (ibid., p. 5). Only around 15 out of 100 students achieved the goal of the “Gymnasium”, and the cause of these “symptoms” was to be sought where the original goal had gone astray. The “general public”, and also several authors of literature about the “Gymnasium”¹⁹ see the “Gymnasium” “not as a preparatory school for university, but as a self-contained school offering a general education” (ibid., p. 7). Accordingly, “standards are measured in relation to the curriculum” and a lack of standards is to be seen as the “source” of the “major aberrations” (ibid.).

One of Peter’s pupils was Friedrich Nietzsche. He resolved the conflict in his own way: ““Realschulen” and the so called upper “Bürgerschulen” ” should be given equal status. The time was not far away “when the universities and public office would be open to such pupils to an equal extent as previously applied to the students of the humanistic “Gymnasium””. However this conclusion has a “painful sequel”:

“If it is true that the “Realschule” and the “Gymnasium” are generally so unanimous in their current goals and only differ from each other in minor aspects and thus are able to count on total equal opportunities in the forum of the State - this means that we totally lack a particular type of educational establishment: the “Bildungs” institution!” (Nietzsche 1980, p. 716/717).

At the very least this is a reproach against the “Realschule”, which has pursued “much lower, but highly necessary trends with enthusiasm and honesty”. Shame should be attached to the “Gymnasium”, an institution that has been “outrageously degraded” since the day of reformation (ibid., p. 717). Even the cleverest apologists could not gloss over “the starkly barbaric, sterile reality” (ibid.).

This is also a view commonly expressed by critics. They argue that the “Gymnasium” and the “Realschule” are incapable of equipping their students with a sufficiently rounded “general education” because they both incorporate an element of specialist education “in their curriculum for specific occupations” instead of concentrating entirely on “Bildung” (Hartmann 1875, p. 13). Neither type of preparatory school for university “fulfils its task because both are too one-sided”. Neither is able to offer people “an allround education, developing all of their strengths” (Meyer 1873, p. 34).²⁰ The mass of subjects students have to

¹⁸ “Gymnasien” of this size at the time included the Magdalenen-Gymnasium in Breslau, Münster Gymnasium, the Mariengymnasium in Poznan, the Ratibor Gymnasium and the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in Berlin (Wiese 1869, p. 522 ff.).

¹⁹ Those referred to include Mützell (1850). The classical scholar Wilhelm Julius Carl Mützell (1807-1862) was a teacher at the Joachimsthales Gymnasium in Berlin. He later became Royal Provincial Superintendent of Schools for the Province of Brandenburg and published the journal for the “Gymnasium” system on behalf of the Berlin Association of Gymnasium Teachers.

²⁰ Lothar Meyer (1839-1895) was Professor of Chemistry at the Polytechnic in Karlsruhe from 1868 onwards. Meyer was a graduate of the “Realgymnasium” in Oldenburg and studied medicine in Zurich from 1851. He is one of the co-devisers of the periodic table for chemical elements.

cope with each day leads to the “dulling of their understanding”, as do purely external cramming which do not penetrate the heart of the subject (Sallwürk 1872, p. 673).²¹

However the “simplification of teaching” (Meyer 1842)²² was constantly mentioned, along with constant complaints about “overburdening” with too much teaching materials. In 1843, the *Allgemeinen Schulzeitung* reported that the main problem with school teaching and the associated “physical and mental weakness of youth” lay in “mechanical learning by rote” and “memorising of piles of words” (In dem mechanischen Anlernen 1843). The “starkly barbaric” or “sterile” reality not only of the “Gymnasium” is constantly mentioned (Schmitt-Blank 1873)²³, but this rhetoric of the bad neither changed theory nor practice

The unremitting criticism of the lack of true “Bildung” and thus true “Bildungsinstitutionen” overlooks the progress and shifting of the demands which were not, like Nietzsche thought, “eternal and unchanging” after all. So my last point is a look at the development of real schools and not only of visions of them.

5. *Real development of Schools in Germany*

The beginning was very poor. For example, the General Decree on Elementary Education of the Kingdom of Württemberg of December 1810 stipulated

- that “every school with 100 children or over ... (requires) more than one teacher” (Eisenlohr 1839, p. 232).
- Teachers must not be employed below the “age of 16” (ibid., p. 233).
- Programmes for teacher education did not exist.
- School teachers’ conferences and reading societies were established for the further education of teachers (ibid., p. 235/236).
- Three salary grades applied to teachers and they were promoted on merit.
- Part of teachers’ remuneration was paid in kind (ibid., p. 239).

Subjects taught and teaching methods were prescribed by the state (ibid., p. 241 ff.) and supervision was the responsibility not only of the inspector of schools but also of the local priest (ibid., p. 246 ff.). One hundred years on, most of the problems associated with these rules have been resolved, without the criticism surrounding ““Bildungs” institutions” having decreased.

One target of the critics is the “three parted structure” of the German education system which first arose with the “National Compulsory Schooling Act” of 6 July 1938 and is therefore the creation of Nazi education policy, which left the “Gymnasium” largely untouched. After the war, there were two developments in German education, leading to competing systems. The “Compulsory Schooling Act” of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) of 15 December 1950 did not abolish the “Abitur” but introduced an eight-grade

²¹ At that time, Ernst von Sallwürk (Sallwürk von Wenzelstein) (1839-1926) was headmaster of the Upper Bürgerschule of Hechingen in the Zollernalbkreis. From 1873 he was Dean of the Polytechnic in Karlsruhe and later made a career in the Baden civil service.

²² Johann Friedrich Ernst Meyer (1791-1851) was a senior master at Halberstadt Gymnasium and later headmaster of the Gymnasium in Eutin.

²³ Johann-Karl Schmitt-Blank (born 1824) was a senior “Gymnasium” master in Freiburg/Br. and Heidelberg. In 1857 he became Principal of the Herzögliche Lycee in Mannheim.

elementary school which was later expanded into a ten-grade polytechnic secondary school. The “Abitur” remained highly selective - between 1950 and 1970 seven to ten percent of a year were eligible to go to university - in 1989 the proportion of students taking the “Abitur” in the GDR was 14%. So the system remain highly selective. .

In West Germany, the comprehensive school of the GDR was seen as a socialist “levelling device”, an expression already used in the educational battles of the 19th century and therefore well-tested. The Organisation of the gymnasium teachers is called “Deutscher Philologenverband” (German High School Teachers’ Association). This association issued *18 Statements on the Situation of Secondary Education* on 31 May 1957. This is what they said about the West German school system:

“The tripartite nature of the German school system (primary school, middle school, secondary school) is a mature system that reflects the intellectual laws of our world and the constant natural reality of the distribution of talents. It is not, as is often claimed, the outdated result of a disintegrated social structure” (Resolutions 1957, p. 152).

This declaration determined the educational policy for decades to come. It is opposed to a “unified system” (Einheitsschule) and in favour of maintaining the “*traditional forms of our school system*”. The German Gymnasium is still described as the only “school for an introduction to academic study”, a “normal requirement” for study at university and therefore also for academic and professional careers “on whose intellectual performance the cultural standards of our nation depend” (ibid.). Since Humboldt this has been the central argument of educational policy, meeting with broad approval due to competition from the GDR in the 50s. The “Abitur” figures for the GDR were never mentioned.

In order to carry out its “important political task” the gymnasium requires a “*closed educational period of nine years*”. This could be neither interrupted nor “undermined”. All attempts to alter secondary school structure should be rejected. Neither should there be a “differentiated central structure” of the lower stage nor a two-tier secondary school system. The final examination (Abitur) must retain its function of ensuring unrestricted access to university. On the other hand, reductions of teaching materials were announced and the “restriction to essentials” demanded. “Unjustified egotism on the part of certain subjects” is to be countered (ibid.). How this is to happen is not stated.

The “unhealthy pressure” for the “Gymnasium” could be lamented at a time when the “Abitur” pass rate still stood at around 5% per year. Moreover, no thought was given to the future demographic situation, which naturally increased pressure and was foreseeable. Instead, secondary school selection was defended, both internal and external. The justification for the notorious student dropout rate leading up to the “Abitur” is exactly the same as that put forward by the “Gymnasium” a hundred years before.

“In response to the frequent accusation that only a certain percentage of secondary school students graduate, it should be asserted that a certain decline in numbers leading up to the higher level is a completely natural process for a selective school and a result of social functions, a phenomenon affecting all types of school” (ibid.).

The formula of the “selective school for gifted students” determined the strategy of justification since more than one hundred years, but it was not very convincing given the real distribution and exploitation of privileges. Secondary schools *were* schools based on social

class, calling for a social “distribution of talents”. The system should just stay as it is, without discussing the internal processes of selection, the high rates of drop outs and the consequences of inequality.

But the system changed. Ralf Dahrendorf’s (1965) study of the low representation of working class children at German universities was one of the foundations of the policy of opening up the “Gymnasium”, which must be equated de facto to the expansion of the existing schools and founding of a series of new types of school. Reformers such as Georg Picht or Ralf Dahrendorf envisaged a rise in the “Abitur” pass rate, which was not to exceed 15 to a maximum of 20% per year.

In an IEA study²⁴ on performance in mathematics teaching from 1964, it was documented that social selection in Germany was stronger than in any other education system (Postlethwaite 1968), findings that immediately raised the issue of equal opportunities. The OECD study of the Federal Republic of Germany reached similar conclusions in 1971: working-class children had virtually no access to university and had severely reduced chances of achieving higher educational qualifications. In the mid-60s, working-class children made up more than 50% of the school population, while, according to Dahrendorf’s study, just 5% of university students were of working-class origin. “Equal opportunities” therefore did not apply in the field of academic education (Kaelbe 1976).

Developments since then can be illustrated by several figures reflecting the massive change:

- In 1960, just 6.1% of school leavers passed the general university entrance examination (“Hochschulreife”), exclusively at “Gymnasien”.
- By 1991, this proportion had risen to 26.9% and continued to hover around this figure, which was reached precisely once more in 2002.
- Although the “Gymnasium” remains the main pillar, the general university entrance examination can also be taken at other schools.

Besides the “Gymnasium”, there is another way to pass the university entrance examination, the “Fachhochschulabschluss” (a kind of college examination). The first graduation - which went almost unnoticed at the time - occurred in 1970, when 0.5% of those graduating in a year passed this examination. This figure rose to 10.4% by 1991 and reached 11.5% in 2002 (Fundamental and Structural Data 2004, p. 91). For the same year, school graduations as a whole reveal a dominance of intermediate qualifications required for courses leading to attractive professional careers and subsequently also opening up further educational possibilities. The growing crisis for the lower parts of the secondary school system is apparent from this development. The “Volksschule” became the “Restschule” (sink school) which is now to be abolished and has already been abolished in many federal states.

²⁴ *International Project for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)*. The study of mathematics covered the countries of Australia, Belgium, England, the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, France, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Scotland, Sweden and the United States. The international cost was financed by the US Office of Education. The project was led by Torsten Husén (University of Stockholm) and coordinated by the Hamburg UNESCO Institute. The German data was collected by DIPF in Frankfurt. The tests were developed under the leadership of R.L. Thorndike (1910-1990) (Teachers College Columbia University). This formed the nucleus of the later TIMSS and PISA studies.

Concerning university access, we now talk about the “number of students eligible for university”.²⁵

- This figure describes the number of students passing the Fachhochschule entrance examination *and* the university entrance examination compared to the resident population of the same age.
- In 2006, this figure was 43.1%, slightly up on the previous year. It reached 45.1% in 2008.
- The figure indicates who has gained access to Fachhochschule and university, as graduating from Fachhochschule normally ensures further study at university.

Almost half of graduates from German secondary schools can therefore embark on further study, although large regional and even local variations must be taken into account. The bare figure for graduates is not very revealing, as is clear from the problem of *unequal* rather than equal opportunities. The chance of taking the “Abitur” in Hamburg is far higher than in Bavaria, but so is the chance of secondary school graduates not finding an apprenticeship and becoming unemployed. In regions with a high proportion of craftsmen, the apprenticeship situation is very different than in major cities with a rapidly declining proportion of industrial companies. The service sector responds to educational qualifications again differently.

If almost half of a year group goes to university, we end up with a university for the masses whether we want to call it that or not. Humboldt offers little help with tackling the problems of the university for the masses because the basic assumption for his theory, a narrow, more or less well-selected elite of 2 to 5% of a year group, no longer exists. Because there is no route back to this, the route to Humboldt’s University of 1810 is also closed however much the rhetoric of “higher education” or “Bildung” in Germany may make sense. And of course “Bildung” still makes sense in a College of Liberal Arts. But this would be a different lecture.

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²⁵ All persons registered in Germany between the ages of 18 and 20 were included who had passed the appropriate school leaving examinations.

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