

The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation (*Bildung*) and its Historical Meaning

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ABSTRACT – The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation (*Bildung*) and its Historical Meaning. This article aims at analysing the historical meaning of the German ideal of self-cultivation (*Bildung*), considering its different uses and interpretations over time. Based on the historical semantics of Reinhart Koselleck and the bibliography on the subject, it reconstructs the core transformations in its semantic structure from the beginnings in the late Middle Ages to its institutionalization in the German school system in the nineteenth century. The development of the ideal of *Bildung* in Germany is characterised by the tension between its function as means of integration through education and its function as instrument of social distinction. The reflexion on this educational ideal is presented as a counterpoint to some of the contemporary educational practices, based on the imperatives of the market and the neoliberal management of human capital.

Keywords: Self-Cultivation. Germany. Ideal of *Bildung*. Historical Semantics.

RESUMO – A Tradição Alemã do Cultivo de si (*Bildung*) e sua Significação Histórica. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o significado histórico do ideal alemão de formação ou cultivo de si (*Bildung*), considerando diferentes usos e interpretações ao longo do tempo. Com base na semântica histórica de Reinhart Koselleck e na bibliografia sobre o tema, ele reconstrói as principais transformações na sua estrutura semântica desde as origens na baixa Idade Média até a institucionalização no sistema escolar alemão no século XIX. O desenvolvimento do ideal de *Bildung* na Alemanha é marcado pela tensão entre sua função de integração por meio da educação e sua função como instrumento de distinção social. A reflexão sobre esse ideal educacional é apresentada como contraponto às práticas educativas atuais, baseadas nos imperativos do mercado e na gestão neoliberal do capital humano.

Palavras-chave: Formação. Alemanha. Ideal de *Bildung*. Semântica Histórica.

Der Mensch ist, was er sein soll, nur durch Bildung (G.W.F. Hegel).

Bildung ist das, was übrig bleibt, wenn man alles vergessen hat, was man gelernt hat (Werner Heisenberg)

Introduction

The way each epoch defines itself tells us a great deal about its values and ideals, but not so much about its practices and realities. The era of the European Renaissance, seen as the revitalization of classical civilizations, coexisted with the Inquisition and belief in magic. The Enlightenment, associated by its main representatives with values such as rationality and autonomy, was also a time of despotism and mysticism. Our own era, associated with globalization, technological innovation and cosmopolitanism, defines itself as a *knowledge society* or as an *information society* in which education would have the task of realizing the integral development of the human person. This ideal, linked to the German tradition of *Bildung*, is expressed in several national and international educational documents. In Brazil, the Common National Curricular Core (BNCC), for example, says that the document “[...] is guided by ethical, political and aesthetic principles that aim at integral human formation and the construction of a just, democratic and inclusive society” (Brazil, 2018, p. 7). However, in addition to the rhetorical statement of principles aimed at producing effects in the symbolic order, it is difficult to see how the practices that are mobilized and the logic in which they are inserted enable an *integral human formation*. A teaching that devalues humanistic knowledge, centred on the large-scale measurement of *skills* and *competences*, in which teachers lose autonomy to learn and teach, would rather point to a utilitarian education governed more and more by the neoliberal management of human capital.

Pedagogical rhetoric conceals the fact that in the so-called *learning society*, training tends to be fully functionalised by the economic system, in the name of values such as efficiency, competitiveness and flexibility. Nothing could be more opposed to an educational ideal founded on the self-determination of the human subject and on the autonomy of culture and knowledge. Hence the importance of revisiting the German concept of *Bildung* in the present, which should serve not as a model to be followed, of course, but as a counterpoint to current practices and as an exercise in thinking of education in other ways.

Bildung is one of the fundamental concepts of modernity and the most ambiguous concept of German pedagogy, providing a range of uses and interpretations. Other German pedagogical concepts such as *Erziehung* (education) and *Unterricht* (instruction, teaching) lack the echoes and resonances surrounding the notion of *Bildung*. In the words of Georg Bollenbeck (2012, p. 162):

Formation [*Bildung*] can designate a process and a result, a purpose and a state, can be thought of as active, passive and reflexive, individual and (more rarely) collective. In

terms of its meaning, the concept is impregnated by different conceptions, mystic-pietistic, philosophical, aesthetic and pedagogical.

In this study, we intend to analyse the major transformations in its semantic structure from the beginning of the concept, with the late medieval mystic until its consolidation and institutionalization in the German society and school system in the nineteenth century. The concept of *Bildung* is untranslatable in any other language, so a great deal of the literature in other languages that addresses it chooses to keep it in German. *Bildung* is not equivalent to *teaching* or *education*, but evokes a series of ideas that no single word gathers in Portuguese: interiority, totality, development, vocation, promise, the action of shaping, modelling, deepening and perfecting one's own personality, the construction of a personal culture, etc. In this article, the concept sometimes appears in German, sometimes translated as *formation* or as *self-cultivation*. In this, we follow the already consecrated tendency of W. H. Bruford who, in his classic study on the subject (Bruford, 1975), speaks in the *German tradition* or in the *German ideal of self-cultivation*¹.

Bildung* and the Medieval Doctrine of *Imago Dei

The term *Bildung*, derived from *Bild* (Image), corresponds to the Latin *Formatio*, form being the equivalent to *Bild*. Its use in the sense of *cultivation of the spirit* goes back to the 14th-century Rhenish mysticism, in which it designated the image of God that penetrates the core of the individual and thus *shapes* his soul (Vierhaus, 2004). Rolf Selbmann (1994, p. 1) explains in this regard:

Bildung (ancient German, *bildunga*, medium high German, *bildunge*) originally circumscribed an aura of value and meant the portrait, the simile, the image (*imago*), but also imitation (*imitatio*), form (*forma*) and formation (*formatio*). It always presupposed, in the centre, an image of the deity thought as modelling, according to which man should be shaped. Within the late medieval mystique, *Bildung* became a key concept of the *Imago-Dei* theory in Master Eckhart's circle. In its slightly modified meaning as '*transformatio*', the concept signalled the recovery of paradise lost innocence, but it also meant both the transfiguration of man marked by original sin and the superimposition and reprinting of the divine image in his soul.

In Master Eckhart's writings², *Bildung* already points to the idea of a promise to be fulfilled and of an effort of the individual to deserve it, two marks that will remain in the later semantic history of the concept³. From Master Eckhart's circle, the concept passes to Lutheranism, assuming a central role in the doctrine and pedagogy of Pietists (Lichtenstein, 1966). Pietism grew on the fringes of dogmatic Lutheranism and popularized itself between the end of the seventeenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century in Germany. August Hermann Francke

(1663-1727), professor of theology at the University of Halle, can be considered the most important theologian of the movement. He assigned to the concept of *Bildung* a pedagogical function, having founded a series of educational institutions based on his conceptions. The central idea of Pietist pedagogy was that creation could be perfected through disciplined effort directed at the formation of interiority and the spiritual self-development of the individual. According to Fritz Ringer (2000, p. 33):

The Pietists had an acute perception of the value and sanctity of the individual soul. For them, education meant the maximum possible development of this soul, the careful unfolding of each child's unique potential for salvation.

The Secularization of the *Bildung* Ideal

However, even among the Pietists, the concept of *Bildung* still had a strictly religious connotation. In the middle of the eighteenth century, it began the process of secularization of the concept, which now designates an immanent force of nature. It came into wide circulation and took on a more general meaning only after the translation into German of the work of the Scottish philosopher Shaftesbury, *Formation of a gentle character* in 1738⁴. Lexicometric analyses revealed a still hesitant yet growing use of the concept between 1747 and 1770, and a huge expansion around 1800 in German-speaking Europe (Ricken, 2006). In his text on enlightenment, published in 1784, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1784, p. 1) observed: "The words 'enlightenment', 'culture' [*Kultur*] and 'formation' [*Bildung*] are still newcomers in our language. They belong, to begin with, only to the language of books. The commoner hardly understands them". The concept of secularized *Bildung* becomes one of the central categories of the model of interpretation of the world of the German *intelligentsia*. Even with the passage from the concept of the religious sphere to the secular sphere, however, the theological resonances will remain in the course of its semantic history.

In the German historiography of pedagogical thought, Herder is seen as the founder of the secular ideal of *Bildung*, as the one who imposed the interpretation of the concept that prevailed from the second half of the eighteenth century on. Herder gives it an eminently critical value and derives from it an educational ideal that would have profound repercussions on German thought and society. Herder elaborates the question in his two essays on history, in which he describes the historical process itself as the formation of humanity as a whole⁵. In this, however, Herder does not innovate. The pedagogy of the concept of *Bildung* was already underway in the work of the writers of the German Enlightenment, as in the *Messiah* of Klopstock, published in 1748, in which the figure of the Messiah is described as educator of the young, and in Lessing, who spoke of divine providence as an educator of humanity (Hansmann, 2014)⁶.

What distinguishes Herder's thinking on the question of the formation and unity of humanity is the criticism of the culture in which his reflection is embedded. The underlying problem, which guides Herder's philosophy of history, is how to find meaning for human life in a world increasingly similar to a vast machine of which individuals were merely gears governed by a relentless state bureaucracy. Influenced by Leibniz, Herder opposed the mechanistic view spread by the Newtonian model of the world and instead, proposed an organicist view of life and history interpreted as dynamic phenomena in perpetual becoming. From this conception derives his vision of the individual and of education. The individual is seen by Herder as a process of organic formation and growth and not as an atom of society or as an abstract generic, as in the naturalistic theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Humanity is not a state in which we enter from birth, but a task to be accomplished through discipline and conscious effort (Herder, 2012).

This organicist conception of individuality also assigned all value and meaning to the individual's capacity for judgment and rejected the reference to any external authority as a source in matters of morality and religion. Hence Herder's criticism of the mechanical, soulless character of the modern state. In the absolutist State, as in the army, according to Herder, the individual was reduced to a mere gear of a mechanical whole. For him, the man-species was only an abstraction and the state an artificial creation, in itself empty of meaning. By objecting to the Kantian philosophy of history, which attributed an eminent role to the State, Herder believed that by its artificiality, state organization could not be the *telos* of civilization (Raulet, 1995). For him, each individuality (person, people, nation or historical era) has its own value in itself, and if free to develop, it reaches the utmost possible perfection.

For Herder, it would be the task of the State to contribute to each one's development and fulfilment of all their potentialities and inclinations. This would make each individual better, and thus a better servant of society and of the State itself. In this way, human association would be based on a reciprocal relationship in which the inner development of the individual harmonizes with the social and communal bond, one constantly reinforcing the other. The impulse to perfectibility would be innate and to inhibit it would amount to a betrayal of humanity itself and would, therefore, be a loss that the State would inflict upon itself by depriving itself of more upright and better men.

This conception of individuality and State was developed in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt *The Sphere and Duties of Government [The Limits of State Action]*, published in 1791, two years after the fall of the Bastille. Influenced by liberalism and the ideology of the French Revolution, in this essay Humboldt sees the development of individuality as a natural process that could be both encouraged and impaired by the action of the State (Iggers, 2012). For Humboldt, the harmonious and complete development of the individual's forces could only be achieved through a State which, by limiting its own action, would provide both freedom and circumstances for formation:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the grand and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is besides another essential – intimately connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations (Humboldt, 1986, p. 9).

The State is considered by Humboldt, as well as for Herder, an artificial entity, while society is the natural environment in which individuality can develop and express itself. According to Leibniz's monadology model, translated into social theory, there would be a fundamental harmony between the growing forces and, if state functions were reduced to a minimum, the various individualities could develop in coexistence and fertilize themselves mutually through the most varied forms of reciprocity and association (Reill, 1994; Luth, 1998).

In Humboldt's view, recognition of the oneness and diversity of men should limit the action of the State, which should avoid taking any positive action to achieve useful ends, for it would be impossible to determine what is useful or not for each individual. By virtue of their irreducible uniqueness, each individual should be judged according to his own measure and not through an abstract and outward norm. It would be up to the State to create only external conditions (basically internal and external security) so that the individual can "[...] develop by himself in all his originality" (Humboldt, 1986, p. 12). In particular, the State should refrain from intervening in everything concerning education, religion and morality, leaving citizens with the widest freedom of action in these sectors.

Humboldt thought the ideal of *Bildung* according to the model of free moral action in Kant. To cultivate oneself, to strive for the continuous self-improvement of one's personality, is seen as an end in itself, independent of any utilitarian or pragmatic reason, a true categorical imperative. The educational reform that Humboldt participated in reflects this ideal (Sorkin, 1983). The neo-humanists opposed the utilitarian and realistic teaching advocated by the Enlightenment, viewing education as the proportioned and harmonious development of the individual's forces. Through education, the individual would develop the concept or *image* of humanity within himself. More than formal instruction, the task of self-cultivation was seen as an endless process, to be pursued throughout life as an end in itself. Thus, it was above the practical realities of everyday existence as work, salary and vocation. The idea is that State and society are better served by educating individuals with complete freedom to develop their unique character than by subjecting them to vocational training, which would make them nothing more than a mechanical system.

***Bildung* as Normative Ideal**

In order to understand the function of the German ideal of formation, it is necessary to analyse the development of German society in the eighteenth century and its reaction to the modernization process. At that time Germany was formed by a patchwork of small autonomous principalities, marked by a rigid social stratification and by the *small despotism* that left no room for individual initiative and stifled cultural creation. This began to change with the rise of Prussia throughout the eighteenth century. With the end of the Seven Years War, in 1763, Prussia emerged as a European power.

In this modernizing society, where the development of sciences and techniques and the increasing division of labour lead to an increasing specialization of knowledge, new forms of integration and social distinction were necessary (Assmann, 1994). The ideal of *Bildung* fulfils these two contradictory functions. On the one hand, *Bildung* is a universalist ideal created by German neo-humanism and represents a reaction against the fragmentation of knowledge and society, proposing forms of integration by education and culture. On the other hand, it expresses the desire for distinction on the part of the German bourgeoisie and functions as the distinguishing mark of the German nation in relation to France and England. I shall now detail these two contradictory functions of the *Bildung* ideal, highlighting some elements of historical context.

The first function of the classical ideal of *Bildung* is integration by education and culture. This function is associated with the normative notion of humanity and the idea of an integral individual as a unifying and totalizing instance. Humanism as normative ideal places itself above social bodies, sexes, religious denominations and nations. Thus, to form oneself, to educate means to reconnect to the image of humanity within itself. In the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt (2012, p. 94):

The ultimate task of our existence is to give as much substance as possible to the concept of humanity in our person, whether in the duration of our life or beyond, through the traits [*Spuren*] that we left behind from our vital activity. This can only be achieved through the linking of our self and the world to the more vivid, free and universal reciprocity [*Wechselwirkung*].

For Humboldt, as for Goethe, the cultivated individual is seen as a symbolic synthesis of all mankind. The idea is that without the cultivation of the self, there could be no individuation. *Bildung* as cultivation is the balanced and multidirectional development of the individual's forces. As each individual would contain all the potentialities of mankind in germ, unfolding their personality and their forces in all directions would be the *inner destiny* (*das innere Schicksal*) of each one.

The most important general question posed by neo-humanist theoreticians of *Bildung* was: how to forge the bond between the person

and his culture? How do material or social artefacts contribute to the development of humanity within one's own person? (Løvlie, 2003). An example is the disinterested contemplation of the work of art. According to Humboldt, aesthetic experience allows the cultivation of the spirit (*Geist*) through interplay (*Wechselwirkung*) with the artistic artefact. Artistic contemplation is an example of an experience that frees the individual from his egocentrism and suspends the closure that makes him live only according to his interests and desires. According to Humboldt, a life dedicated to *Bildung* is a continuous effort of self-improvement as an end in itself, with no external or utilitarian goal. This effort can be compared to that of the artist in the production of a work of art. Like the artist who shapes the raw material in his hands, *Bildung* consists of modelling the plural and spontaneous content of vital experiences into a harmonious and coherent totality.

In its classical meaning, therefore, *Bildung* presents itself as a secularization of religious elements present in the German pietism of the seventeenth century. Reinterpreted in the light of the Enlightenment, the concept acquires a clear pedagogical meaning and is associated with the Enlightenment ideas of perfectibility and progress. It designates a promise of salvation through education and the ascension of mankind to a higher stage, in which it liberates itself from dogmatic tutelage and determines itself in a reflected and autonomous way. In this sense, *Bildung* opposes *Bindung* (obligation, compulsory bond), which designates the relations of dependence and tutelage proper to the societies of estate of the Old Regime.

The interpretation of the historical meaning of the concept has already been the subject of much research and controversy. Ernst Wehler and Fritz Ringer, adherents of the German *Sonderweg* theory⁸, tend to see it as the central category of the world view of a specific class, while Reinhart Koselleck interprets it as a metapolitical concept, above ideologies and classes. According to Fritz Ringer (2000), it is a pedagogical ideal that expresses the system of references and values of the German cultured bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) in a historical moment in which, in Western Europe, it moves from a stratified society to a functionally differentiated one. From the French revolution onwards, the estates and corporations of the Old Regime give way to modern bourgeois society, where feudal ties of traditional loyalty give way to a direct legal relationship with the state (Wehler, 1995).

Contrary to the *Sonderweg* thesis, Reinhart Koselleck (1990) highlights the emancipatory elements of the *Bildung* ideal. He demonstrates that between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first one of the nineteenth century the concept of *Bildung* have had a markedly emancipatory function, and was strongly associated with ideas such as the independence of all external authority (churches, State, parties, all those that claim the role of *tutors of humanity*, to use Kant's expression), the liberation of the hierarchies of estates, which at that time still regulated social relations in Germany, and the rejection of theological precepts and dogmas, both Protestant and Catholic.

In his historical-semantic analysis, Koselleck considers *Bildung* a dynamic metaconcept that cannot be associated with any particular ideology, intellectual current or specific social stratum. As a supra-political concept, *Bildung* circulated in diverse ideologies and is socially open, compatible, in theory, with any social stratum, because it appeals to all individuals, regardless of their origin or social condition. Nevertheless, the concept is socially conditioned in its content, since not everyone is in a position to appropriate cultural artefacts to build a personal culture (Engelhardt, 1990; Timm, 1990). Even so, it would be a methodological mistake to circumscribe it to the context of its emergence, around 1800, and to the neo-humanist, neo-classical and romantic discourses that gave it support in this period.

According to Koselleck, the interpretations that associate the classic concept of *Bildung* with traces like introversion, passivity and apoliticism only disfigure it. As a full development on all sides of the human person, *Bildung* does not lead to the passive contemplation of high culture, but compels the individual to act in the world, to communicate and to commit all his energy for the good of society. Stimulus to the *vita activa* and not to the selfish cultivation of interiority. Therefore, sociability is one of its constituent elements.

Education was seen as the basis for the emergence of a new society, no longer founded on birth privileges, but on individual merit and talent. For this reason, it should be a general and formal education and not vocational training for a given career, which in a society of estates was always linked to the origin and social condition of each one. The goal was to free people from the *roles* predetermined by the order of estates and corporations. It was precisely the detachment of this ideal from the world of work that gave it an emancipatory character. It was believed that education would liberate the individual to freely choose his occupation, substituting authority and tradition for the personality and autonomous judgment of each one (Nipperdey; Nolan, 1996).

The Institutionalization of the *Bildung* Ideal in the School System

As we have seen, in Germany between 1770 and 1815, *Bildung* presented itself as a cosmopolitan and universalist ideal that was associated with the ideas of individual autonomy and self-determination and with the image of an integral individual endowed with an aesthetically harmonious personality. In an idealistic key, this conception of education also echoed the ideals of pure and disinterested knowledge, unrelated to external purposes and utilitarian objectives.

This ideal found a propitious occasion to materialize in the set of reforms that succeeded Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat of Prussia to France in 1807. Under the influence of liberalism and that of the revolutionary ideal of civil equality, measures were taken such as the liberation of the peasantry from servitude and the emancipation of the

Jews. Humboldt and the neo-humanists were called by Ministers Stein and Hardenberg to reform the Prussian educational system according to their ideal of humanity (*Humanitätsideal*). In primary schools, the pedagogy of Pestalozzi was adopted, taking into account the needs and specificities of the child. At the secondary level, the *Gymnasien* were instituted based on the study of the Greek classics and the ideal of harmonious individuality. In 1810, the University of Berlin was founded, based on the principles of freedom of research and teaching; it would serve as a model for the reorganization of all the other German universities.

This period of the reforms is considered by Georg Bollenbeck (2012, p. 158) as a phase of pedagogical experimentation:

For historical semantics, this is less the time of idealistic systems and more a 'phase of experimentation' between the Revolution and the Restoration, in which philosophically educated practical men sought to implement their pedagogical concepts in the hope of reaching a 'cultural State' [*Kulturstaat*].

In the estate system of education, each one would receive the education appropriate to their social condition and their vocation, becoming a servant of society and a loyal subject of the State. Neo-humanists were opposed to vocational education and instead defended the unitary school (*Einheitsschule*) and universal formation (*allgemeine Bildung*), whose goal is the balanced and free development of the individual personality (Peukert, 1987; Oelkers, 1999). In this way, it would be possible to modernize the German society, transforming passive subjects into autonomous and responsible citizens.

In Humboldt's conception, in the ternary system of the German school, *Gymnasium* and university should constitute a unique path and enable everyone, even the poorest, to receive an integral human formation. This social egalitarianism was accompanied by an injunction so that every citizen should seek by all means to educate and to cultivate her or himself, thus freeing themselves from the tutelage of religion and the State (Jarusch, 1982). The task of education was not to adapt the individual to the world, to train him with useful knowledge and skills, but to awaken the inner forces, creativity, and critical judgment to transform the world and to realize within itself the ideal of humanity.

However, an important change in the semantic structure of the ideal of self-cultivation occurs after the Restoration period (1815-1848). The bureaucrats of the Restoration used Humboldt's measures to extend state control over the educational system in order to watch the society and repress any political manifestation against the regime in force. In 1819, the so-called Carlsbad decrees restricted the civil freedoms of press, association and expression in response to socialist and nationalist agitation, especially in student leagues (*Burschenschaften*). In fact, the Prussian reformers, as opposed to Humboldt, never relinquished State dominance over the school system, which controlled all its aspects: internal organization, curriculum, finance, examinations,

and teachers. This is what enabled the system to be functionalized by later Prussian nationalism.

Bildung becomes, then, more and more an instrument of distinction between social groups. The Prussian General Code of 1794 already established the rights and duties of classes and instituted the basic legal framework for teaching activities. However, the decisive step was the instrumentalization of the *Gymnasien*. Having classical studies as the core, the *Gymnasium* was above traditional schools and was the only secondary education institution to be able to apply the *Abitur*, an examination that gave access to German universities. Beside the *Gymnasien*, the *Realschulen* (royal schools) were created, which trained for technical and bureaucratic functions in commerce and industry. In addition to Latin, the *Realschulen* emphasized *realist* disciplines, useful to the profession, such as mathematics, natural sciences, and modern languages. The graduates of the *Realschulen* were barred from access to universities and public offices, reserved for the *Bildungsbürgertum* egress the prestigious *Gymnasien*. About this process, says Fritz Ringer (2000, p. 40):

The formal elevation of the Gymnasium above other secondary schools was only the beginning of a tragic process in which the ideas of the period of reforms were gradually routinized and transformed into defences of social privilege. Rigid curricular specifications have taken the place of the enthusiasm of neo-humanists.

Insofar as it was institutionalized in the school system, *Bildung* became synonymous with general culture and its function of social distinction was evidenced to the detriment of its integrating and socializing function. It is what distinguishes Germany from other European nations, especially France and England. Concepts such as those of *Bildung* and *Kultur* were used to designate the German singularity, characterized by qualities such as depth, interiority and sincerity, as opposed to concepts such as civilization and politeness, which would refer to the merely external aspects of and social life (Elias, 1976; Lepenies, 2008). In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the growing climate of nationalism and the movement for the unification of Germany, the concepts of *Bildung* and *Kultur* were linked to the instrumentalization of the spheres of culture and education for the glorification of the Bismarckian authoritarian State.

In this period, *Bildung* also becomes the distinguishing mark of belonging to the so-called cultured bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*). What gives it this symbolic status are the exams and university degrees. *Bildung* becomes the common denominator of this heterogeneous social group, formed by diverse professions and religious confessions, conferring on it a common identity and a *habitus* characterized by the same system of values. In this reading key, the concept of *Bildung* becomes equivalent to the possession of general culture and comes to be seen as a status symbol that confers social distinction and establishes the barrier that separates the *cultured* middle class from the *uncultivated*

social strata. Associations with ideas of self-determination, autonomy, and emancipation take second place to the extent that the ideal of *Bildung* is appropriated by the Prussian State and becomes the hallmark of the upper classes. This transformation in the semantic structure of the concept is analysed by Ulrich Herrmann:

The formation [*Bildung*] which the German gymnasium mildly intermeditated did not contain any more recollection of what, at the beginning of the century, was understood under the expression *Bildung*: enlightenment [*Aufklärung*], capacity for criticism and judgment [*Kritik- und Urteilsfähigkeit*]. In this sense ... it is in the place of the cultured individual [*Gebildeter*], of the bourgeois of culture [*Bildungsbürgertum*]: with a collection of quotations under the arm, little intelligence in the head, accommodation and spirit of subject [*Untertanengeist*] as marks of its *habitus*, almost incapable of political judgment ... the bourgeois of culture became the target of contemporary satire and scathing caricaturists (Herrmann, 1991, p. 97).

The degradation of the concept of *Bildung* in synonymous with general culture and instrument of social distinction was strongly criticized by a philosopher like Nietzsche, who from his earliest writings satirized the *cultural philistinism* of the German bourgeoisie and the spurious alliance between State and culture of the Bismarckian period (Assmann, 1994; Weber, 2006). The bourgeoisie and the instrumentalization by the State of the ideal of self-cultivation that occurs at that moment is seen as a betrayal of the Humboldt humanist ideal and a harbinger of the *fall into barbarism* of German society in the twentieth century.

Closing Remarks

The ideal of *Bildung* had as its fundamental objective to enable the affirmation of the individual singularity through the cultivation of the self and, at the same time, to reconcile it with the community bond. It implied a whole program of social transformation through the inner transformation of individuals. Its integrative force was in the ambition of reflectively incorporating to the subject the cultural goods and the contents of knowledge, uniting subjective and objective culture. The semantic opening of the concept and its great evocative power allowed a diversity of uses and interpretations over time and contributed to its circulation to the present. In Koselleck's words:

No definite knowledge and no isolated science, no political position or social data, no religious confession or connection, no world view or philosophical preference, nor any specific aesthetic inclination in art or literature can characterize *Bildung*. In relation to all concrete determinations in the world of life [*Lebenswelt*], *Bildung* is a metaconcept that constantly incorporates within itself the empirical conditions that make it possible (Koselleck, 1990, p. 23-24).

According to Koselleck, the association with ideas such as autonomy, self-determination and reflexivity is one of the basic and structural features of the *Bildung* concept, which was maintained even after the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the transformations in social life resulting from the development of technoscience (Koselleck, 1990). Its critical potential, therefore, in spite of the misuses, remains in the present. In education, it remains one of the fundamental models for thinking about the purposes of education beyond the immediacy demanded by managers, markets and governments.

Rebekka Horlacher (2011, p. 19-20) also highlights this critical potential that guides certain re-readings of the concept of *Bildung*:

Today, *Bildung* serves as a key word in the struggle against PISA and the logic of quantitative evaluation as an argument in the political debates about application or obstruction of new curricula or as a counterpart to 'knowledge', with knowledge, in this case, negatively indexed to mere know-how, while *Bildung* indicates something positive that transcends mere utility [...] *Bildung* has become a kind of gravitational force at the centre of educational discourse, used to support very different positions, arguments, and objectives.

As a value, *Bildung* represents a supplement of meaning, an essentially qualitative process that, although occurring in institutional contexts such as schools and universities, cannot be measured or quantified. However, educational discourses and practices that shift the centre of gravity from the formation process to the process of evaluation and measurement of acquired skills, jeopardize the formative task advocated by the whole German tradition of self-cultivation, as well as by its derivations as, for instance, the liberal studies in North American schools and universities (Arcilla, 2003).

Forgetfulness of the ideal of *Bildung* is interpreted by some as a symptom of the contemporary crisis of culture and education. According to Konrad P. Liessmann, the *knowledge society* is characterized by the contradiction between the universal availability of knowledge and its extreme fragmentation, which leads to the loss of any normative idea of education and, consequently, drives a process of diseducation (*Unbildung*):

That no one else can say what the formation [*Bildung*] or the general culture [*Allgemeinbildung*] consists of, does not constitute a subjective fault, but is the result of the thought that formation must be reduced to instruction [*Ausbildung*] and degraded knowledge [*Wissen*] to a measurable index of human capital (Liessmann, 2012, p. 213).

Some authors (Masschelein; Ricken, 2003; Gruschka, 2001) consider that the ideal of *Bildung* is outdated and no longer serves as a point of resistance and critical principle in the face of new social and educational realities. The problem would be its normative content (the idea

of humanity as a promise to be fulfilled) inseparable from the ideal of *Bildung*, which would condemn it to be merely a glorification of the bourgeois individual centred on himself and *immunized* against the presence of the other. Others argue that reflection on *Bildung* is of great importance to offer meaning and guidance to the new generations in societies such as ours, in which technological development causes an accelerated process of transformation and loss of references (Ruhloff, 1993; Peukert, 2003).

One of the main problems would be to reinterpret the ideal of self-cultivation, leaving aside its normative content, in a world in which multiculturalism forbids the establishment of universal norms (Nordenbo 2003; Koller, 2003; Wimmer, 2001; 2003). Gert Biesta (2002; 2003) thinks that the German ideal of formation maintains its actuality and its critical potential, but only on the condition of being reinterpreted in the light of the idea of difference. According to Biesta (2003), the concept of *Bildung* was an educational response to a very specific political question of Germany: how to think citizenship in an emerging civil society marked by fragmentation. In the same vein as Koselleck, Biesta emphasizes that the meaning of the concept cannot be thought of as static or objective, insofar as it accepts many uses and interpretations. So, it would be up to us to make a diagnosis of our own time to question what kind of *Bildung* is still possible in a world of plurality and difference, where the idea of a universally valid norms has become problematic. This task, however, goes far from the immediacy and pragmatism that has guided educational reforms and the construction of the school curriculum in Brazil. I hope, with this study, to call attention to other ways of thinking about education in order to deepen the debate on the ends and means of education, a debate that has been blocked by the managerial imperative and the bureaucratization that characterizes educational policies in our country.

This paper was translated by Alexandre Alves and proofread by Ananyr Porto Fajardo

Received on May 20, 2018

Approved on July 11, 2018

Notes

- 1 *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation. 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann.*
- 2 In his 40th Sermon, Master Eckhart thus describes the doctrine of the imago-Dei: "When man releases and uncovers the divine Light which God created by his nature, then the image of God is revealed in him. At birth the revelation of God is known. To say that the Son was born of the Father means that the Father, in paternal form, reveals his Mystery to him. That is why: the more and more clearly man becomes the image of God, the more clearly God is born in him. The birth of God is understood as such: the Father puts the Image into the open and shines in the man" (*apud* Boff, 199, p. 36)
- 3 On historical semantics, see: Koselleck (2006).

- 4 The historical research of Rebekka Horlacher (2011; 2012) highlighted the importance of Scottish philosophy and, in particular, of Shaftesbury in the elaboration of the German ideal of *Bildung*: “Shaftesbury’s approach offered a concept of the inner formation of the subject [*innere Selbstbildung*] and not of education in the sense of creation or instruction. Formation [*Bildung*] in this sense was not only (acquisition of) knowledge, but describes the process and result of a broad inner transformation, at the same time ethics and aesthetics, aimed at the realization of truth. In this reading, the concept of formation is clearly distinguished from the enlightened conception of education, which is based on useful knowledge” (Horlacher, 2011).
- 5 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774); *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91).
- 6 *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, published in 1780, is considered Lessing’s major work, in which he mixes philosophy and religion to try to explain the unity of humanity in the multiplicity of its manifestations.
- 7 *Ideen zu einen Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*.
- 8 An object of intense controversy among historians since the 1960s, the *Sonderweg* theory (particular or specific way) was used to explain the historical roots of Nazism and the Holocaust. Its supporters maintain that unlike the other core nations of Western Europe (England and France), Germany would have followed an antiliberal and authoritarian path to modernization, keeping power concentrated in the hands of the feudal and military aristocracy until the early twentieth century. The German bourgeoisie, which failed to take power from the hands of the aristocracy in the nineteenth century, would have developed an antipolitical world view, in which the impossibility of political participation gives way to the idealization of the sphere of culture and interiority. The result would be the escape of the individual into her – or himself –, indifference to everyday politics and passivity in the face of the barbarities committed by the Nazis. Critics of the *Sonderweg* thesis hold that there is no general or normal path to modernity; each country would have its unique and specific experience based on a complex mix of factors. On the debate around the *Sonderweg* theory, see: Kocka (1988).

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