

The Ideal of *Bildung* in the 20th Century: Crisis – Reconfiguration – Erosion?

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Abstract:

The following article addresses a peculiar development, namely the abandonment of the concept of *Bildung* in Germany; the same state where it has been developed, discussed, and refined. This development can be traced back to the 1950s – despite humanistic *Bildung* also being under attack during National Socialism – and be ascribed to different dynamics which mutually reinforced each other. Therefore, this article will cover three key aspects regarding the reconstruction of the here hinted at dynamics: Firstly, it will further sketch out the peculiarity of this specific dynamic and further contextualize it historically. Secondly, it will identify *Bildung*'s main adversaries (the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the empirically-minded educational science) and illustrate their axiomatic presuppositions as well as their coming-into-being. Thirdly, the paper will elaborate on two positions (Reinhart Koselleck and Hans Georg Gadamer) which attempted to argue for the usefulness of the concept despite them ultimately failing, at least nationally. The paper will close with a reflection on key aspects and an informed speculation regarding *Bildung*'s future.

Keywords: *Bildung*, Critical Theory, Humboldt, history of education, self-cultivation, self-formation

An educated (*gebildet*) person is not one whom nature has treated generously; an educated person is one who treats the gifts that he has kindly, wisely, properly, and with the highest regard. He who takes this seriously, he who can bear to look with resolute eyes at his own shortcomings and admit them: this is, in my opinion, a duty and no gift; and it constitutes for me, all by itself, an educated person. (Rahel Varnhagen)

1. Introduction

The German educational landscape features a concept that is unique to its geography, history, and language: the concept of *Bildung*. Despite being grounded in a long philosophical tradition – ranging back to the 11th century (cf. Hedley 2021; Neuhaus & Vogt 2022a) or, depending on the

consulted perspective, Ancient Greece (cf. Böhm 2004) – *Bildung* only entered the mainstream discourse as well as the German educational realm in the 18th century (cf. Nordenbo 2002, 342). Considering the manifold intellectual influences the concept of *Bildung* has experienced over time¹, it can be argued that it serves, at least in part, as a projection space (cf. Luhmann & Schorr 1988) for philosophers, educators, and others to think about important aspects of a good life, proper personal conduct, as well as skills and knowledge to acquire (cf. Pieper, Neuhaus & Vogt 2023).

These negotiations of what *Bildung* means have also been influenced by externalities, such as (geo-)politics or economic realities. As proposed by Horlacher (2011), *Bildung* served as a unifying narrative in the process of state or nation-building (see also Tröhler 2006) providing a “hidden national grammar” (Stieger 2020a), and helping Germany to demarcate itself from its French foes during the Napoleonic Wars and beyond. However, the discourse on *Bildung* has also changed the prior cited externalities as Wilhelm von Humboldt – the creator of one of the most comprehensive and compelling definitions of *Bildung* (cf. Alves 2019) – also created the foundations of Germany’s educational system as he was selected responsible for doing so in 1809/10 (cf. Sorkin 1983). Humboldt’s appointment to the position was the result of Germany’s defeat to France on the battlefield as the emperor attempted to re-vitalize Germany’s potential by transforming its educational sector (cf. Vossler 1954). Depending on the selected perspective, the longevity of Humboldt’s ideas and ideals can be considered the result of a potent philosophy, a convenient political climate, or both.

As briefly illustrated, the concept of *Bildung* has served as a central cornerstone in Germany’s educational philosophy, practice, and public discourse (cf. Horlacher 2012). However, regarding present times, a substantive change can be noted. The term *Bildung* still exists and is frequently referred to – so do compound words, such as *Bildungssystem* or *Bildungsinstitution* –, yet the underlying ideas and ideals have been replaced by more measurable concepts, such as skills and competencies (cf. Vogt & Neuhaus 2021). Historically speaking, this dynamic can be traced back to the 1950s², in which the idea(l) of *Bildung* has been challenged³ – by two adversaries: The Critical Theory originating in Frankfurt and the empirical turn being perpetuated by international education agencies.

This paper aims to reconstruct the dynamics that led Germany’s educational landscape to abandon the concept of *Bildung* (or to be more precise, to only use it superficially). Therefore, this paper follows a threefold structure: Firstly, the already mentioned lines of criticism (Frankfurt School and the empirical turn) will be outlined and further contextualized regarding the associated historical circumstances (section 2). After having illustrated the uttered criticisms, these will be re-evaluated by considering the perspectives provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Reinhart Koselleck (section 3); both argued respectively that *Bildung* cannot be undermined on the Marxist or empirical basis; however, the reinterpretation made by Gadamer and Koselleck were unable to prevent the concept from being abandoned, or at least from losing the centrality it had had in the German-speaking world until the First World War. The paper will close with a critical reflection on the dynamics sketched out in the prior sections and will end with an informed guess regarding the future developments of the idea of *Bildung* (section 4).

2. *Bildung* and its Adversaries

As already briefly outlined, Germany's educational science and institutions faced a decisive phase post-1945 in which they either had to re-emphasize old ideals or re-calibrate them regarding their normative orientation. Generally speaking, the idea of *Bildung*, with its grounding in the humanistic tradition, was first neglected and later replaced during National Socialism⁴ (1933-1945) with a concept that catered more towards the fascist political- ideological agenda of the time (cf. Aurin 1983). Speaking for the educational realm, the times from 1933 to 1945 have primarily been characterized by a lack of coherent theories and a pronounced focus on power politics manifesting themselves especially on the institutional level (cf. Kater 1979). After the war, while the Federal Republic of Germany strived to rebuild itself, its educational landscape struggled to identify a new normative orientation. In part, this was also the result of two newly emerging schools of thought, namely the Critical Theory from Frankfurt with their critical framework of *Halbbildung* as well as the emergence of a more empirically minded approach towards education. Both can be considered hostile to the humanistic ideal of *Bildung*. The following sections will outline some key arguments of these schools of thought and further contextualize them with historical observations.

2.1. Critical Theory, the Frankfurt School, and *Halbbildung*

Theodor W. Adorno commences his criticism by laying out Humboldt's main presuppositions, namely that *Bildung* is supposed to be a holistic endeavor that is primarily driven by encountering foreign elements – i.e. knowledge, languages, different disciplines, etc. – and the attempt to incorporate these into one's being⁵ (cf. Dörpinghaus 2015, 467). Through these acts of alienation and subsequent incorporation, the human being is – following Humboldt's ideal – developing its forces to the fullest. According to Humboldt's elaborations, this process of *Bildung* can only take place in a protected space because externalities such as economic woes, considerations of usefulness, the dynamics of power, etc. would hinder and corrupt the process of the individual's free development (cf. Clemens 2020). Creating such a space is very likely to be an utopian task, yet Humboldt aimed to get as close to this ideal as possible by setting the German school system up as a bubble protected from the 'real world' in 1809/10.

The core of Adorno's criticism is the claim that this protective space *Bildung* was supposed to provide collapsed or, more precisely, came too close to the 'real world' and thereby aligned itself with the associated realities and power structures. Adorno conceptualizes *Bildung* as an entity which, in order to exist, needs to oscillate between the inner process of understanding the world and the real-life application of *Bildung*⁶ (Neuhaus 2021, 122). By only focusing on real-life applications (people only spending time on what is most useful, i.e. to earn money or gain power) *Bildung* is not just reduced in its scope but also only perpetuates existing structures and creates social conformity (cf. Hutmacher 2019, 67). On the contrary, if *Bildung* is exclusively located in the realm of inward-facing processes of understanding and only occupied with creating congruence in this theoretical realm, it likely results in a self-righteous ideology that neglects its public responsibilities (cf. *ibid.*). In

the years after the Second World War, Adorno suspected the central crisis of *Bildung* (cf. Hutter 2009, 210) in the one-sided approach towards it, namely the over-emphasis on application-oriented (knowledge) gain. Due to his interest in culture and mass media, Adorno argues that cultural products, e.g. operas, art, or literature, are primarily *consumed* with the aim of application-oriented gains, such as bravado or one's social demarcation (cf. Tischer 1989, 8/9). As Adorno equates culture and *Bildung* (cf. Neuhaus 2021), this mode of consuming or perceiving culture is considered *Halbbildung* in Adorno's lingua. *Halbbildung* should not be mistaken as merely a poor, partial, or deficient education in terms of content or curriculum, instead, it is the diametric opposite of *Bildung* (cf. Bulthaupt 2007) as it neglects an entire dimension of *Bildung* (the inward-facing search for truth). Following Humboldt and, by extension, also Adorno, the key process of *Bildung* is the constant and ongoing oscillation between these approaches or extrema – inward-facing reflection and outward-oriented application –, which is – following Adorno, in the given economic configuration of society – made impossible by neglecting one of the two sides and thereby corrupting the very core of *Bildung*, ultimately resulting in *Halbbildung*.

The Frankfurt School and its Critical Theory, spearheaded by Adorno and Horkheimer, saw and still sees the underlying (primarily economic) realities as the key factor inhibiting actual processes of *Bildung* as well as deep, meaningful engagement with the arts. Also, a certain part of society is primarily held responsible for this degenerative process, namely the *Bildungsbürgertum*. This group consists of people who advanced in society due to their achievements in educational arrangements and institutions, translated these achievements into higher social status as well as economic resources, and then closed the door behind them trying to demarcate themselves from the rest of society (cf. Neuhaus, Jacobsen & Vogt 2021). In Adorno's analysis of society, he indicates that the *Bildungsbürgertum* first emerged in the 19th century resulting from Humboldt's educational plans and, in line with Nietzsche's prediction, that the "triumph of the middle class" and the "crisis of values" will be the "the seeds of the destruction of European civilization" (Washburn 2019, 173). The cruel irony in this prediction is that a generation educated on the ideals of (new) humanism committed (or, at least, enabled) mass murder (Neuhaus 2021, 118) during the times of National Socialism. The key problem of the idea of *Bildung* did, according to Adorno and his disciples, not vanish after the end of the war, but just transformed itself in scope and aim. Lundbye Cone (2018, 1025) summarizes these ongoing and/or underlying problems as follows:

Witnessing the rise of modernity and individualism through the twentieth century, Adorno picked up the notion of *Halbbildung* as a pertinent picture for describing what he experienced as an increasing narcissism and quasi-engagement amongst the bourgeoisie in Western Germany in the years following the Second World War.

Considering Adorno's criticism of the idea of *Bildung* as well as its degeneration in modern societies into *Halbbildung*, it can be suspected that *Bildung* lost appeal not just as a cultural and philosophical framework but also as a normatively set goal for educational endeavors as well.

Accordingly, the abandonment of the concept of *Bildung* after the war can be considered the result of its suspected enablement of National Socialism but also the result of Adorno's substantial criticism which brands *Bildung*, at least in modern, capitalistic societies, as an impossible endeavor; people still following the paradigm of *Bildung* are thereby deemed as elitist and pseudo-educated (or, following Adorno's lingua, *halbgebildet*).

2.2. The Empirical Turn of Educational Science

While the criticism from the disciples of Critical Theory originated in Germany and heavily referenced German history as a reason to abandon the concept of *Bildung*, *Bildung*'s second adversary, the emergence of empirical educational science, has been imported from the United States. However, there were also contextual factors that helped this approach to become dominant in Germany.

The backstory of the empirically-minded approach can be traced back to the early 20th century USA, in which two fronts – the administrative progressives and pedagogical progressives – fought for the transformation of the United States' educational landscape. The pedagogical progressives can be considered the continuation of Dewey's child-centered ideals in which "holistic form" is regarded as important and "where multiple domains of skill and knowledge are integrated into thematic units and projects" (Labaree 2005, 281). On the contrary, the administrative progressives focused on standardization, assurance of quality through management, and measurement. Disciples of this branch aimed at a kind of educational instruction that would be free from philosophical or ideological positions and debates (cf. Tröhler 2019, 8). Primarily "social efficiency" (Labaree 2005, 281) and job readiness were considered relevant factors.

The self-characterization of the administrative progressives as "ideology-free" (Tröhler 2015) supposedly manifests itself in the methodological approach as large quantitative studies only analyze the objective data at hand without putting a distinctive spin on it; at least, that is the (questionable) claim. As such, the administrative progressives found a natural ally in behaviorism as both approaches shared methodological considerations but also ideological viewpoints as they agreed that "American teachers had been seduced by the false ideals of progressive education instead of becoming committed to a modern technological worldview" (Tröhler 2013a, 5). B.F. Skinner (1954, 27), a leading figure in behaviorism, comments on the educational situation as follows: "Skills are minimized in favor of vague achievements, educating for democracy, educating the whole child, educating for life, and so on."

These two diverging approaches, the administrative and pedagogical progressives, have been in a constant struggle for supremacy. However, in 1957 the Sputnik shock unbalanced the dispute as politics, driven by the dynamics of the Cold War, favored the output-oriented administrative approach focusing on improving learning (especially in the STEM fields) and helped it gain momentum by setting up national large-scale tests and later relating the results of these measurements to school funding (Neuhaus & Vogt 2022b). Also, relevant positions – educational planners, supranational institutions, etc. – have been given to people who either stemmed from the camp of administrative progressives or looked with favor on it (cf. Tröhler 2016). The Sputnik shock affected not just the

American educational landscape but, through international organizations such as the OECD, its subsection the CERI (the Center for Educational Research Innovation), as well as the United Nations⁷, also manifested itself globally (cf. Tröhler 2013b; Neuhaus, Jacobsen & Vogt 2021). Accordingly, the majority of globally operating testing, evaluation, and monitoring agencies can be considered off-shoots from the initiatives based on this bureaucratic mindset and launched in the 1960s (cf. Tröhler 2016).

In the early 1960s, the dominant narrative in the Western industrialized countries was that the West was falling behind in education and would, without intervention, also fall behind in the relevant fields of the hard sciences and thereby lose its position to the USSR as a political and economic powerhouse. The narrative of economic failure and the inability to compete with other states also manifested itself in Germany, powered by Georg Picht's book '*Die Bildungskatastrophe*' (The Educational Catastrophe) published in 1964⁸ (cf. Lambrecht 2008). While Picht started his career with a strong belief in humanistic education (cf. Schmoll 2013), his experiences in educational policy but also his reception of OECD data (cf. Herrlitz 2002) turned him into a supporter of the bureaucratic policies focused on measurable indicators as tools of decision-making.

Picht's arguments seem to resonate with the *Zeitgeist* as his criticism sparked debates on the state and goals of the educational system; these debates later resulted in the establishment of newly founded monitoring and consulting agencies as well as structural changes in the educational system. One such agency is the 'Max Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung' which was first founded as a subsection of the Max Planck Institute in 1963 and has operated as an independent institute since 1971 (cf. Tenorth 2023). Another relevant agency from the field is the DIPF (Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung) in Frankfurt, founded in 1950/51 with the support of US expertise (cf. Behm & Reh 2016). Both institutes operate until the present day and can be considered powerhouses; also, the themes of measuring and optimizing educational instruction resonate strongly in these institutions and dominate their research profiles (cf. *ibid.*).

The here-outlined international as well as domestic dynamics resulted in an environment that was keen on measuring and improving educational instruction to produce highly skilled or, following the empirical lingua, competent students (cf. Vogt & Neuhaus 2021b). International pressure on Germany has amplified over time and culminated in 2001 when Germany received, based on its self-understanding, relatively poor PISA results resulting in public outcry and yet more rhetoric of crisis (cf. Schwager 2005). While the dynamics from the 1960s onwards favored research and politics stemming from the empirical-quantitative field, the PISA shock in 2001 amplified this tendency yet another time (cf. Grigat 2012). As such, the status of humanistic *Bildung* is further denigrated, neglected, and replaced by the internationally more transferable framework of competencies and competence-based learning (cf. Liessmann 2012).

3. In Defense of *Bildung* as a critical and reflexive concept

In its golden years, between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 20th century,

the core objective of the ideal of *Bildung* was to foster personal uniqueness through self-development while also harmonizing it with communal ties (cf. Alves 2019; Böhm 2004). As such, it encompassed a comprehensive agenda for societal change and reforms through the recasting of the relationship of individuals with themselves and the cultural realm. Its cohesive influence stemmed from its aspiration to reflexively incorporate into the individual core cultural goods and knowledge contents, thus bringing together subjective and objective culture. The concept's semantic flexibility and strong evocative capacity permitted diverse applications and understandings across time, facilitating its enduring relevance.

However, as outlined in the prior sections, the cultural climate in the post-war decades became increasingly hostile to the ideal of *Bildung*. On the one hand, the classical ideal of *Bildung* was denounced as the false consciousness of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, averse to politics, which had been responsible for the rise of Nazism and the catastrophe that resulted from it. On the other hand, the educational anxiety resulting from the acceleration of scientific and technological change led to the bureaucratization of the educational system. The language, still with theological echoes (cf. Bühler, Bühler & Osterwalder 2013), of interiority and personality formation gave way to the language of educational investment and the formation of human capital.

Some of the arguments used against *Bildung* at that time have been repeated ever since. In an article, Masschelein and Ricken (2003) state that in the 'learning society' the concept of *Bildung* has lost any appeal it may have had in the past and is no longer capable of playing any critical role in the field of education. Gruschka (2001) also considers *Bildung* to be an outdated and dysfunctional pedagogical concept. The problem would be its normative content, always linked to the idea of an unfulfilled promise. In Gruschka's view, the concept of *Bildung* implies a normative 'idea of humanity' that functions as a mechanism of control and exclusion in our contemporary societies. Biesta (2002, 2003) sees a certain value in the concept of *Bildung*, as it allows us to explore how education can be more than just the transmission of content from one generation to the next. However, in Biesta's view, *Bildung* was a specific response to a specific question in the German-speaking territories in the 19th century, namely, how to create unity and citizenship in a fragmented society undergoing rapid modernization. For him, the modern conception of *Bildung* as 'rational liberation' is no longer possible in a world where difference and multiculturalism are taken seriously.

In the last two decades, however, we have also seen an attempt to rehabilitate the concept of *Bildung*, not only in Germany but also in other countries (in English-speaking countries, *Bildung* is connected to the tradition of 'liberal education'). The concept of *Bildung* is seen as a way of designating the qualitative aspects that are irreducible to any attempt at quantification and measurement and would be an essential pedagogical concept that we could not give up.

Two collections bear witness to this renewed interest in *Bildung*. In *Educating Humanity: Bildung in Postmodernity*, authors such as L. Løvlie, K. P. Mortensen, and S. E. Nordenbo, among others, come together to think about how the classic idea of the education of the self can make sense of the education of humanity in the information age – an insight which is echoed in further

collections of this sort (e.g. Kergel et al. 2022; Pieper & Neuhaus 2024). The contributors to the collection share the premise that the legacy of humanist thought is still necessary and relevant for dealing with the dilemmas of today's society. Another collection, published in Germany, *Was ist Bildung?* (2012), is an anthology of texts on the subject, from classics such as Herder, Humboldt, and Schiller to contemporary authors. The collection also tries to bring classical German humanism closer to the perspectives of Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Judith Butler. Rebekka Horlacher's studies on the history and uses of the concept of *Bildung* are also worth mentioning. Horlacher (2011, 2012, 2017) takes issue with the ways *Bildung* is increasingly acknowledged in current debates on educational matters, including issues such as standardization, teaching to the test, evidence-based policy, and high-stakes testing. Her books and studies aim to dispel confusion and misunderstandings about *Bildung* by exploring the concept's origins and its historical applications. By doing so, she provides educators with a clear understanding of *Bildung* and its potential benefits, paving the way for its effective implementation in education.

Part of the misunderstandings about the meaning and historical role of *Bildung* are due to a partial and superficial reading of the concept. More recent approaches tend to clarify the debate, dissolving old prejudices and arguments. Because of their analytical depth and conceptual sophistication, two central references for this revival of interest in the concept of *Bildung* are the classic studies on the subject by Gadamer and Koselleck. Gadamer chooses the concept of *Bildung* as a central reference in his proposal for a philosophical hermeneutics that should serve as a framework for the human sciences. Unlike the natural sciences, whose purpose is to make the world predictable, the human sciences aim to understand the human and incorporate it into us as a formative experience. For this reason, the human sciences cannot give up the humanistic tradition, as well as the classic concept of *Bildung*, connected to it.

According to Koselleck, the link with notions like autonomy, self-determination, and reflexivity constitutes a foundational and enduring aspect of the *Bildung* concept. This association has persisted despite the catastrophes of the 20th century and the societal shifts brought about by advancements in technology and the rise of consumerism. Consequently, its capacity for critique endures, notwithstanding the pushback it received in the post-war era. Within pedagogy, *Bildung* remains a fundamental framework for rethinking the objectives of education beyond the utilitarian managerial focus on human capital development and large-scale testing. Below we will analyze Gadamer's and Koselleck's positions in more detail.

3.1. Gadamer – Truth and Method

The fundamental claim of *Truth and Method* is that the advancement of modern science and technology has transformed how we perceive the world and ourselves, causing us to overlook other experiences of truth embedded in the tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and art. In the book's first part, Gadamer opposes the Enlightenment's conception of the method to the humanist tradition's search for *Bildung*. Gadamer argues that the obsession of the modern human sciences

with objectivity and method has obscured that which constitutes the truth and the positive significance of the humanities: that they inevitably involve the understander in their understanding. While the natural sciences aim to offer explanations that enable us to predict the behavior of a phenomenon seen as an ‘instance of’, the human sciences aim to “understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness.” (TM⁹, 4). For the human sciences, the knower cannot be separated from that which she knows.

Thus, the hermeneutic circle is not an obstacle to be eliminated for the sake of objectivity, but the very condition of knowledge. Accordingly, in his theory of hermeneutic experience, Gadamer argues that any understanding begins with our preunderstanding and prejudices, thus rehabilitating tradition and authority as sources of knowledge. The understanding happens when there is an encounter of traditions, a “fusion of horizons” between the subject and the object. To achieve this, we have to become aware of the silent work of history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) that shapes our historical constitution as linguistic beings that can only relate to the world through the medium of language.

The positivistic obsession with the method has led to the rupture of the connection to the humanistic tradition, which has become increasingly strange to us. So, one of the main tasks attributed by Gadamer to his book is to restore the meaning of the tradition, i.e., to state what this tradition consists of. He summarizes the humanist tradition by remembering four key concepts that he refers to as its guiding ideas: *Bildung*, common sense, judgment, and taste. Among these, *Bildung* is the first for it reminds us that the humanities aim to give form to the individual, her personality, and her mind, i.e., the proper function of the humanistic tradition is to provide her with a culture or education. So considered, *Bildung* offers the individual common sense, a capacity for judgment, and taste according to the models and lessons of history. According to Gadamer, the idea of *Bildung* was “perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is the concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences in the nineteenth century, even if they are unable to offer any epistemological justification for it.” (TM, 9). The idea of *Bildung* is initially intimately associated with the idea of culture. He recalls the basic definition Herder has given of the idea of *Bildung*: “rising up to humanity through culture”, or as Gadamer rephrases it “the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities” (TM, 10). But, in Humboldt’s times arises an increasingly sharp difference between *Kultur* and *Bildung*, which Humboldt deems a “disposition of mind” that is “both higher and more inward” (Humboldt quoted in TM, 10). Now the word evokes the mystical view that “man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself.” (TM, 10). *Bildung*, in this sense, describes the result of the inner process of formation and cultivation rather than the process *per se*. Consequently, *Bildung* is viewed not merely as a way to cultivate one’s talents, i.e., as a means to an end, but instead as a continual, never-ending process with no goals outside itself.

To substantiate his definition of *Bildung*, Gadamer relies on Hegel’s understanding of it (Nielsen & Lynch, 2022; Odenstedt, 2008). Like other authors in the German classicism tradition, Hegel envisages *Bildung* as a rise up of ourselves to the idea of humanity inside us¹⁰. In Hegel’s view,

the goal of *Bildung* is to surpass nature by instilling beliefs, norms, and customs until they become ingrained habits. This process of *Bildung* challenges the child's insistence on prioritizing its own beliefs and desires. However, the second nature developed through this *Bildung* can later be refined through formal education, creating what Hegel describes as a 'third nature'. Hegel suggests that this is one of the objectives of studying history. An individual who has undergone *Bildung* no longer unquestioningly accepts the validity and significance of their culture. Instead, they achieve reconciliation with it by adopting a more reflective, universal perspective.

But Gadamer rejects Hegel's contention that this universal perspective amounts to achieving absolute knowledge, i.e., an unconditioned state that grants us a kind of intellectual mastery over the world. Gadamer argues that being an educated (*gebildet*) individual is best understood as a transition toward maturity. As we reach this mature state, we become so educated that education itself becomes, as the ancient Greeks would have said, an *ethos* – a fundamental aspect of our character, our fundamental beliefs, and our way of existing.

Thus, Gadamer envisions *Bildung* as a process induced by the incorporation of particular perspectives of the other that continually defies our established beliefs and compels us to broaden our perspective:

That is what, following Hegel, we emphasized as the general characteristic of *Bildung*: keeping oneself open to what is other - to other, more universal [allgemeinere] points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality [*Allgemeinheit*]. To distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them. [...] The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated man [*der Gebildete*] keeps himself open are not a fixed applicable yardstick but are present to him only as the viewpoints of possible others. (TM, 16)

By exploring what is unfamiliar, foreign, and different, we broaden and enrich our limited perspective and historical context. In this journey of personal development, self-awareness is attained through a dialogue with the other. In this interaction, we aim to merge perspectives and to fusion of horizons. Gadamer holds that the mature state, so achieved, i.e., the *ethos* of the educated person, is precisely what makes possible the experience of truth in the human sciences and what distinguishes them from the natural sciences. While the goal of the natural sciences is to validate universal knowledge claims using the scientific method, the human sciences aim to justify interpretations of individual human experiences through the broader understanding that can only be provided by *Bildung*. Accordingly, whereas in the natural sciences, the method is what assures the universal validity of knowledge, in the human sciences the universality dwells in the acquisition of the capacities for common sense, judgment, and taste, which are necessary to orient us in the world and to make sense of the human experience.

3.2. Koselleck's Conceptual History of Bildung

Koselleck's main treatment of the concept of *Bildung* is to be found in his text "On the

Anthropological and Semantic Structure of *Bildung*”, which was published as the general introduction to the four-volume work on the history of the cultivated bourgeoisie in the 19th century Germany, [German: *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*]. In contrast to Gadamer, Koselleck is not fundamentally interested in making *Bildung* part of a new philosophical framework, but more modestly in retracing its historical and semantic trajectory using the tools provided by the conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*).

Perhaps precisely because it is more descriptive in nature, Koselleck’s text sheds light on the historical role of the ideal of *Bildung* and helps to dispel various misunderstandings resulting from a superficial and reductive reading of the concept. Koselleck begins his investigation by observing that *Bildung* cannot be reduced to its institutional preconditions, nor can it be dismissed by the critique of ideology as the false consciousness of those who believe themselves to be educated.

In his historical-semantic investigation, Koselleck views *Bildung* as a dynamic meta-concept that transcends any specific ideology, intellectual trend, or particular social class. As a supra-political concept, *Bildung* is found in various ideologies, and is theoretically compatible with any social stratum, as it appeals to individuals regardless of their background or social status. According to Koselleck, the permanence of the concept and its semantic stability for two hundred years is precisely due to its reflexivity, openness, and resistance to easy reductions:

No definitive knowledge and no single discipline, no political stance or social pre-given, no denominational affiliation and no religious tie, no ideological option or philosophical preference, not to mention any specific aesthetic inclination in art and literature, is sufficient to characterize *Bildung*. With respect to all concrete exemplifications in its life-world (*Lebenswelt*), *Bildung* is a metaconcept that constantly adapts to the empirical conditions of its own possibility (Koselleck, 2002, 184).

However, the concept’s content is socially influenced because not everyone is in the condition to appropriate cultural elements to effectively build a personal culture. Nevertheless, as Koselleck points out, it would be a methodological error to limit *Bildung* to its emergence context around 1800 and to the neo-humanist, neo-classical, and romantic discourses that supported it during this period.

According to Koselleck, the *Sonderweg* interpretations¹¹ linking the classic concept of *Bildung* with traits like introversion, passivity, and apoliticism distort its true meaning. As a holistic development of the individual, *Bildung* doesn’t lead to passive contemplation of high culture but rather urges individuals to engage with the world, communicate, and dedicate their energy to the betterment of society. It stimulates the *vita activa* rather than the selfish cultivation of inner life: “*Bildung* does not lead to contemplative passivity but instead always necessitates communicative achievements, leading to the *vita activa*” (Koselleck 2002, 181).

Koselleck also emphasizes the critical and emancipatory nature of the concept of *Bildung*, which was considered the foundation for the emergence of a new society, no longer based on birth privileges but on individual merit and talent. Therefore, education should be general and formal rather than vocational, as vocational training, in a society of estates, was always tied to individuals’ origins and social status. The aim was to free people from predetermined roles dictated by the social

order. 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 empower individuals to freely choose their profession, replacing authority and tradition with personal autonomy and judgment.

Hence the link between the concepts of *Bildung* and *Aufklärung*. As Koselleck emphasizes, in contrast to the strong anti-clerical character of the French Enlightenment, in Germany, the language of Enlightenment remained theologically impregnated. Both concepts emerged at the same time, in the last third of the eighteenth century, and both were associated with the hope of redemption and the educational imperative of perfecting ourselves as a path to progress and societal change. Koselleck states that *Bildung* is both the result of Enlightenment and an answer to it. *Bildung* is, in a way, nothing other than *Aufklärung* turned inside out to generate the conditions for the self-realization of the individual in society.

The Kantian demand of self-determination, a morally general obligation, was pluralized, historically reproduced, and individualized, without, however, loosening the tether to the Enlightenment. Kant's demand: "Have the courage to use your own understanding!" – this motto of the Enlightenment was directed at the whole person and his self-formation (*Selbstbildung*). "*Bildung* of the mind without *Bildung* of the heart and of taste results just in Enlightenment." With this, Enlightenment was not bid farewell, as little as upbringing (*Erziehung*) was separated from the means of formal education (*Ausbildung*). Rather, both were integrated into a communicative process [...] (Koselleck, 2002, 180).

Contrary to the so-called *Sonderweg* thesis, Koselleck also 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* 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.

The ideal of *Bildung* had as its fundamental objective to enable the affirmation of the individual singularity through the formation and development 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. 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).

4. Reflections on the (Im-)Mortality of Bildung

This article's aim was to reconstruct the dynamics which led to the downfall of the German concept of Bildung. As it could be shown, the two presented adversaries – the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory as well educational science's empirical turn – played a major role in the obliteration of Bildung. Summarizing, it can be stated that the term Bildung is still frequently used in the German language, yet it has very little to do with the concept as outlined by German philosophy's greats. The renunciation from the idea and ideal of Bildung took place despite powerful, intellectual agents – as presented here, Gadamer and Koselleck – advocating its usefulness.

However, while some observers consider Bildung to be relict of the past (cf. Biesta 2002; 2003), others argue that at least some aspects of Bildung – Vogt and Neuhaus (2021a, 162) differentiate between Bildung's superstrate and substrate layer – have temporal-spatial continuity as they address universal human dynamics, such as (but not limited to) moral education/ acquisition of wisdom (cf. Jakubik 2023), critical thinking/ reflection (Elmborg 2022), or goal-setting (Sanderse 2024). Such claims of universality are echoed when Bildung is being ascribed "archetypical" traits (cf. Neuhaus & Vogt 2022a); the same authors (Vogt & Neuhaus 2021, 164/165) further speculate that Bildung – despite currently being "at its weakest point" – will "resurrect yet another time". Instead of summarizing ideas of this article or providing a, more or less generic, outlook on future research, we would like to further specify the speculation by the authors mentioned: Bildung's resurrection will not take place within Germany but primarily outside of it as – shown in the preceding discussion – adversarial positions are too pronounced in Germany at the time. However, outside of Germany, an empirically-minded and output-oriented educational sector has dominated long since, a phenomenon Biesta (2022) has tried to describe as learnification. Simultaneously, this system has also been hijacked by a neoliberal agenda (cf. Mintz 2021; Ambrosio 2013) and, again following Biesta's (2022) argument, has actively excluded meaningful areas of life from the educational realm (cf. also Teschers, Neuhaus & Vogt 2024) creating highly skilled, yet disenfranchised, disoriented, and disappointed graduates. Bildung is suspected to create a counter-balance to this current tendency (cf. Hardy, Salo & Rönnermann 2015) by inspiring educators, students/ learners, and others to think outside the given box and (re-)imagine educational endeavors which are holistic in nature. Bildung is a promising candidate to serve as an inspirational force, yet primarily outside of Germany.

Endnotes:

1. As illustrated by Vogt and Neuhaus (2021a) as well as by Alves (2019), the concept of *Bildung* has been defined and negotiated by a plethora of scholars, philosophers, and others and has often incorporated new aspects corresponding to the *Zeitgeist*. Especially the period of German Idealism and Humanism have proven themselves to be of extensive value regarding the discourse on *Bildung*.
2. Here it should be noted that during the Third Reich (1933-45), the concept of *Bildung* – with its focus on individualization, self-cultivation, etc. – was canceled by the National Socialists and replaced with *Erziehung*, which focuses more on drill, emulation, and obedience (cf. Benecke & Link 2022).

3. Regarding the development of the concept of *Bildung*, it should be noted that Germany's educational science landscape has not fully abandoned the idea of *Bildung* as the works of Koller (and colleagues) on a transformative theory of *Bildung* (cf. Koller 2023) have shown. Yet, the transformative theory of *Bildung* is considered by some (e.g. Stieger 2020b) rather the expression of a continuous struggle of *Bildung* instead of its re-vitalization.
4. Nickel (1970) points to the fact that there have been some attempts to amalgamate Germany's humanistic tradition and National Socialism in the educational realm, yet none of the attempts has widely been adopted and education during National Socialism was primarily oriented towards drill and obedience; thereby diminishing and undermining the idea of *Bildung*.
5. Adorno's reception of Humboldt's ideas is, at least in part, influenced by the reading of Hegel (cf. Clemens 2020) as both – Humboldt and Hegel – rely on processes of estrangement/ alienation and incorporation/ atonement (cf. Sandkaulen 2014).
6. It can be argued that this problem has already been identified by Schiller in his attempt to reconcile *Bildung* by sketching out his idea of *Herzenbildung* (cf. Alves & Neuhaus 2023).
7. Almost needless to say, these institutions have primarily been staffed with scholars from educational psychology, psychology, and economics, as well as further empirically minded (read as quantitatively-oriented) fields (cf. Ydesen & Andreasen 2021). While the selection of relevant disciplines for the global re-design of education may appear odd at first sight – teachers/ practitioners, educational historians, and others have completely been excluded –, it should also be considered that, within the dynamics of the Cold War, the OECD claimed that education was “too important to be left solely to the educators” (OECD 1961, 35).
8. Picht also wrote a series of articles, comments, and opinion pieces that catered his views to larger audiences.
9. All Gadamer's quotes are from the Weinsheimer and Marshall translation of *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*, Bloomsbury, 2004), abbreviated hereafter as TM.
10. In the words of Humboldt: “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*]” (Humboldt, 1994, 12). For authors such as Humboldt and Goethe, the cultivated individual is seen as a symbolic synthesis of all mankind. The point is that without the cultivation of the self, there could be no individuation. *Bildung*, thus, designates the process of the balanced, all-round, and multidirectional development of the individual's forces. Since 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 of each and every one. (Alves, 2019).
11. A subject of intense debate among historians since the 1960s, the *Sonderweg* theory (special path) was used to explain the historical origins of Nazism and the Holocaust. Proponents of this theory argue that, unlike other core nations of Western Europe such as England and France, Germany followed an anti-liberal and authoritarian path to modernization. They argue that power remained concentrated in the hands of the feudal and military aristocracy in Germany until the early twentieth century. The German bourgeoisie, unable to seize power from the aristocracy in the nineteenth century, allegedly developed an anti-political worldview. In this worldview, the impossibility of political participation led to the idealization of cultural and internal spheres. As a result, individuals withdrew into themselves, showing indifference to everyday politics and passivity in the face of the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

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