

2 In search of Isis: general education in Germany and Sweden

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In her aspect as the wife of Osiris she is the chief actor, but only after his death: she finds his corpse at Byblos, she finds the fragments of the dismembered body scattered throughout Egypt, she is the chief mourner at the funeral, she unites the fragments of the body and, by her divine power, brings Osiris to life again.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

In this chapter, I intend to call attention to the German concept of *Bildung* as well as to its generally less well-known Swedish counterpart of *Bildning*. These words have much to tell us about both German and Swedish intellectual traditions. *Bildung* and *Bildning* start their careers at the end of the eighteenth century, and even today they are quite central to actual discussions about school and society. Of course, their meanings have shifted over the centuries, and these changes were closely linked to the social, political, and institutional circumstances in both countries.

The German Ideology of *Bildung*

Culture and enlightenment

In 1784 in the *Berliner Monatsschrift* there appeared some articles concerning the meaning of the word 'enlightenment', its supposed 'real' meaning. Immanuel Kant's little masterpiece, *An Answer to the Question of Enlightenment* (*Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*)¹ is still widely read and commented upon. The great German-Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, contributed to the discussion with a succinct and lucid article called, *On the Subject of the Meaning of Enlightenment* (*Über die Frage: was heisst Aufklären?*).² Mendelssohn started his essay with the remark that the words *Aufklärung*, *Kultur*, and *Bildung* were newcomers to

¹ Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question of Enlightenment', *Werkausgabe*, XI (Frankfurt, 1977), 553-61.

² Moses Mendelssohn, 'On the Subject of the Meaning of Enlightenment', *Gesammelte Schriften*, Jubiläumsausgabe, VI (Stuttgart, 1981), 115ff.

the German language. Ordinary people hardly understood them. Mendelssohn tended to define them in a clear-cut way, declaring that *Bildung* was the more comprehensive concept, standing for the human maturity of a people possessing *Kultur* and *Aufklärung*. *Kultur* or culture was a more restricted term, but only relatively so. It described practical matters, such as standards in handicrafts and arts, but also general character traits, such as industry and assiduity, cleverness and good manners. Enlightenment, on the other hand, was a term that referred to more abstract qualities. For example, a people that was enlightened would possess rational knowledge and have insight into human life and the human mission (*Bestimmung*). The vehicles of enlightenment were science and philosophy, whereas social intercourse, poetry and eloquence or rhetoric (*Beredsamkeit*) advanced culture.

When he applied these ideas to nations, Mendelssohn found that the French had culture and the English enlightenment, while the Chinese, who also had culture, were weak on enlightenment. By contrast with all others, the ancient Greeks possessed both enlightenment and culture and hence alone possessed true *Bildung*.

Mendelssohn's argument was easier to grasp in his own day than in our own because several of his key distinctions and presuppositions were more acceptable to his contemporaries. He made a sharp distinction between man *qua* man and man as a member of society or a certain society. For example, a German peasant and an English professor shared a common human essence (*Wesen*); and insofar as this was the case, both shared common needs. Both, to pursue the example, could be said to be in need of enlightenment (Americans understood this argument in the context of philosophical and constitutional assumptions about the equality of people). Nevertheless, while all people share an essence, they also exhibit cultural differences. The residents of different countries have cultures different from one another, and even within a single country there are cultural distinctions of social ranks and standing. Mendelssohn went on to say that in his essence man *qua* man did not need culture: only enlightenment. However, man as a member of civil society, man *qua* citizen, certainly needed culture in order to participate in the affairs of society, and the kind and quantity of culture essential to the normal everyday functioning of society was determined by rank and position. Enlightenment, on the contrary, was not a 'given'. It was not a concomitant of a person's social standing but independent of it.

Now, according to Mendelssohn there was a latent conflict between culture and enlightenment. Enlightenment was limitless, whereas culture had the task of defining and making clear social limitations and barriers. Both were needed, however, and a State was unfortunate (*unglücklich*) if it

could not harmonise the prerequisites of enlightenment with those of culture.

The emergence of Bildung

The circumstances in which Mendelssohn's and Kant's articles on enlightenment and *Bildung* had their origin have much to say about the milieu in which the German word *Bildung* – a word without a direct equivalent in English or French but borrowed into Swedish as *Bildning* and into Russian as *Образованность* – received its modern, very broad, unstable, but still identifiable meanings. We can trace the origins of the German *Bildung* and its borrowed forms back to the debate on freedom of public speech that emerged in the German *Aufklärung*.

The debate started with a lecture by another representative of the German Enlightenment, J. K. W. Mohsen, given before a Berlin discussion club called the Berliner Mittwochgesellschaft (The Wednesday Society of Berlin). The society, as well as the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, the journal in which Kant and Mendelssohn published their articles, represented the belated emergence in Germany of a real civil 'public sphere', about which Jürgen Habermas has published a famous book.³ The journal and the Berliner Mittwochgesellschaft were significant arenas of discussion because they were regarded as being outside the domain of the State and hence less restricted in their range of reference than other institutions, for example, the German universities.

The point under consideration was no less than the issue of freedom of speech itself. Mendelssohn, Mohsen, and even more explicitly, Kant, defended the importance of such freedom. According to Kant, a sharp distinction was to be made between the private and public spheres. In the first, for example, a university professor instructing his students was obliged to follow the university statutes and regulations instituted by the State. But in the second sphere, represented by journals, books, and lectures, all views were in principle openly accessible, and all people could instruct themselves according to their own convictions. This distinction between 'private' and 'public' may seem strange, but it is rooted in the special circumstances of Kant's time. Kant explained that university instruction, for example, was private because it was directed only to a few who have a special career with special duties before them, whereas a public dialogue was by its very nature an open exchange in which people could participate freely. In order to assure political order and security, it was

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der bürgerlichen Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 9th edn (Darmstadt, 1978).

probably necessary to restrict the freedom of speech of State employees discharging their official duties, but progress and intellectual development – which Kant certainly advocated – were different matters and depended upon freedom of opinion and belief.

In his *Aufklärung* article, Kant did not hint at the possibility that any part of the university would have a special claim to extra freedom. It was only in his later booklet, *The Conflict between the Faculties (Der Streit der Fakultäten)*, that he argued that the philosophical faculty – the faculty of humanities and science – could enjoy a less restricted activity than other university faculties. While theologians were bound to the Holy Bible, lawyers to the law in force, and doctors to the official regulations concerning health, philosophers were only limited by reason itself. In this respect, Kant maintained, the philosophical faculty was surely superior to the others, not inferior as he said was the customary view, wherein liberal education usually took a back seat to professional education.⁴

Neither in his *Streit* pamphlet nor in the *Aufklärung* article did Kant use the word *Bildung* in order to characterise the independence of the public in a free public sphere or put a label on the mission of a philosophical faculty. But, in another booklet, *On Teaching (Über Pädagogik)*,⁵ he very briefly developed his own idea of this new word, use of which was spreading, declaring that *Bildung* encompasses both discipline (*Zucht*) and education (*Unterweisung*). Here, evidently, *Bildung* was much more precisely related to ideas of the formation of individual character than it was in Mendelssohn's article some twenty years before. Kant intended to make a contribution to the intense debate on education going on around 1800. The word *Bildung* was already so common that it was impossible to avoid its use in dealing with the problems of pedagogy.

Kant, like Mendelssohn, used the word *Bildung* broadly to mean not only the intellectual but also the moral and emotional development of individuals. Their younger contemporary, Johann Gottfried Herder, philosopher, historian, and preacher, employed the word in a much wider sense and was very likely the first to use *Bildung* to denote the education of man and mankind generally. He did so, as early as the 1760s, and in his famous *Account of My Travels in 1769 (Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769)* he sketched out a philosophy of *Bildung* which turned out to be seminal for not only his own future but for all German post-Kantian idealist thought. He employed *Bildung* in a universal but also in a dynamical sense, speaking about an 'Universalgeschichte der Bildung der Welt'.⁶ Here the meaning is

⁴ Kant, 'The Conflict between the Faculties', in *Werkausgabe*, XI, 267ff.

⁵ Kant, 'Über Pädagogik', (1803) in *Werkausgabe*, XII, 696–707.

⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, 'A Universal History of *Bildung*', in *Herders Werke*, ed. Ernst Naumann (Berlin, 1908), III, 32.

equivalent to a description of change and development in all aspects and respects – geological, biological, historical, individual. According to Herder's all-embracing conception, every form of development is related to another. The laws of change are comprehensive, uniform, and universal. They operate on all levels of reality simultaneously, and all reality is in fact always in a state of flux.

In his *Journal*, Herder outlined a broad programme for individual *Bildung*. Like Kant, he was very impressed by Rousseau's *Emile*. In contrast to Kant, however, who also learned from Rousseau and agreed with him that all men fundamentally have the same ethical capacity and insight, at the same time rejecting Rousseau's love for original, 'primitive' man, Herder sought for precisely the original, the unchanging constitution of human nature. Rousseau had said that this nature was to be found in the child, and the teacher's task was to preserve it, or, more correctly, to extract all its slumbering qualities in the process of learning. But this process of teaching always presupposed the active participation of the pupil. Knowledge and insight were not external qualities which could be later attached or acquired. They existed internally in the pupil and had to be encouraged or developed. Like Rousseau, Herder criticised the traditional forms of education such as the teaching of ancient languages for their coerciveness and neglect of the child's inner capacities, including natural innocence. As with many of the later romanticists, Herder's attitude to Latin as a main school subject was very negative, and he advocated the study of living languages, as well as other kinds of knowledge close to the pupil's own immediate experience.

These pedagogical ideas were new in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Swiss reformer Pestalozzi was their most remarkable and foremost advocate. He too, in fact, was one of the prominent philosophers of *Bildung*, even going so far as to maintain that *Bildung* was suitable for the lower classes in society.⁷ It is important to keep this radically democratic or at least egalitarian view of *Bildung* in mind, as its part in later German and still more in Swedish development is absolutely central.

Two directions for Bildung

These early examples of how the word *Bildung* could be used in the late eighteenth century might seem more bewildering than clarifying. Most of all, they seem to demonstrate the enormous breadth of the word and its

uses, although the central or crucial characteristics of the philosophy of *Bildung* have been touched upon. But before elaborating these further, we must add some remarks on the etymological origin of the word itself.

Bildung is constructed out of *Bild*, which here has to be translated as 'image' rather than 'picture'.⁸ The origins of *Bildung* must therefore be searched for in mysticism, where the idea that man has to be an image of God (*imago dei*) is fundamental. However, in the eighteenth century these ideas were secularised. For example, they were used in Germany to clarify the meaning of the aesthetic ideas of the seventeenth-century Englishman, Lord Shaftesbury, whose idealist thinking heavily influenced German intellectual life, penetrating many fields of learning. Even in biology, *Bildung* became a common word. The German biologist, J. F. Blumenbach of the University of Göttingen, called the supposed vital force in all living creatures their *Bildungstrieb* or life principle.

In order to understand the success of the new word, it is necessary to realise that it seemed to be in accord with traditional German ideas about macro- and micro-cosmos, the individual person reflecting or being an 'image' of the historical development of mankind. Traditional ideas seem to have been especially important for Herder. A *gebildeter* man, that is to say, a man who possesses *Bildung*, is thus an image of mankind in its true reality. However, the strong stress on historical process in Herder's thinking represents something radically new. A willingness or tendency to see everything as changing and developing was indeed a constitutive feature of the new meaning of the word *Bildung*. In the changing historicistic environment of the time, a dynamic connotation was virtually a prerequisite for the word's widespread acceptance in both academic and social discourse.

Thus *Bildung* came to signify either a process or the result of a process – it might be a process in nature or history or in an individual's life, but development of some kind is always essential to the word's use. In this chapter, the educational meaning of *Bildung* will be particularly emphasised; but that is fully in keeping with the historical origins, development, and actual employment of the concept. It is the use of the idea in the broad context of education – and not in, say, the life sciences – which has survived the more than 200 years separating us from its modern beginnings.

It has been shown⁹ that the word *Bildung* replaced such words as 'education' and 'information', both of course of Latin origin and in their familiar meanings not radically different from the English understanding

⁸ In fact, *Bildung* has affinities with 'imagination': *Einbildung*, the German counterpart of the English word, is central to its early philosophical formulation.

⁹ Ilse Schuurschmidt, *Der Bedeutungswandel der Worte "bilden" und "Bildung" in der Literatur-Epoche von Gottsched bis Herder* (Koenigsberg, 1931), 46.

⁷ Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, 'Die niedere Menschheit', in *Abendstunden eines Einsiedlers* (1780), republished in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Artur Buchenau et al. (1927), I, 267.

of 'education'. The English 'education' and the German *Bildung* also possess similarities. There is certainly overlap in meaning, since 'education' also carries a dynamic implication. It too can refer to a process; but it is also a word with static connotations and can be used to describe an existing state or condition, a process that is in fact ended or complete, as in the phrase an 'educated person' or someone whose 'education' has been professional, technical, or liberal. Perhaps the difference is only one of emphasis, but it is useful to remember that *Bildung* is always forceful. It nearly always means or meant a process (or the result of a process) and implies, as 'education' invariably does not, the tacit cooperation of the pupil or student in the learning experience. The subjective side of acquiring knowledge is stressed. The role of the teacher is never to impose knowledge on the pupil, but rather to elicit talents and predispositions which every human being possesses. Therefore, the process of learning in this context means self-fulfillment, as the boy or girl (or adult student) who gets *gebildet* learns to actualise something which he or she already potentially has.

This idea that all genuine education is self-education is the hard core of the well-known pedagogical projects of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and many others. It is strengthened by the totally new, activist theory of knowledge, which Rousseau sketches in his *On Inequality Among Mankind* – the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar* and which Kant achieved in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*). According to this treatise, even pure sense-perception is an active process, man never merely mirroring or passively depicting the external world through his senses – Kant's response to the Enlightenment English associationists and Lockean, who subordinated ideation to sensation for their own political purposes.

In the revolutionary decades just before and after the turn of the eighteenth century, these conceptions about learning and knowledge had a certain affinity with ideals about the active citizen. This was true of most Rousseauists in the French Revolution, Robespierre being their head, and it was also true of many early German adherents of the revolutionary process. However, the stress on *Bildung* as an inner process could lead to the opposite conclusions, too. The internal world could be seen as the real one, where man was unbound and creative, whereas his life in State and society had to follow fixed rules.

It would be a mistake, however, to presume that *Bildung* was an exclusively subjective affair. Literally, by the process of *Bildung* a man's life was an 'image'. To be *gebildet*, his development had to correspond to a certain ideal, be it his real essence or the ideal of the true artist, the loyal and conscientious civil servant, or the perfect Christian. He had the capacity within himself to reach such objectives. Indeed, it was an

obligation for him to do so, but the goal itself was not regarded as automatically achievable. It was seen as an external standard that had to be positively striven for.

The subjective-objective character of the concept of *Bildung* was its strength – but also its weakness. As far as the subjective and objective worlds could be kept together, the correlation was very efficient. Learning was not a personal affair. True self-fulfillment meant correspondence to an objective, external standard. But real knowledge was also man's own knowledge, and the process of learning was active in the sense that it required both hard work and the pupil's whole attention and creativity.

The complexity of the concept, balancing the two worlds of subject and object, was its weakness. It could easily turn out to be either something merely internal or *innerlich* or (which was more common) wholly external, in which case the process of self-realisation essential to *Bildung* stagnated, becoming machine-like, repetitious, a question of a fixed curriculum, or prescribed behaviour and social position. In light of the later eighteenth-century preference for 'organic' over 'mechanical' thinking and images, this prospect for *Bildung* was particularly unfortunate. As a concept, therefore, *Bildung* could go in two directions. In its ideal form, it was educationally radical; but in its second form, both conservative and conventional.

There is also another ambiguity or duality in the concept of *Bildung* which could in fact be noticed from the beginning. To Herder, the pioneer, *Bildung* was opposed to enlightenment, where enlightenment stood for reason. To Mendelssohn, as we have already seen, enlightenment in the eighteenth century meaning was a central part of *Bildung*. In its long history, thereafter, the concept could be used to signify both rationalist and irrationalist ideals.

Bildung and the German university

To Moses Mendelssohn, the guarantee of *Bildung* appears to have lain in the public sphere. To Pestalozzi, it was the elementary school, open to poor and rich alike. For many others, the institution that appeared to have the most potential for encouraging the spread of *Bildung* was the university.

In the early nineteenth century, a whole series of important philosophers and scientists followed the example of Kant and wrote booklets, essays, or articles on the real purpose or meaning of universities. Due both to the French Revolution and the ferment preceding it, many basic institutions were being questioned, and higher education was certainly no exception. In Revolutionary France, the old universities were by-passed as centres of innovation and importance and their place taken by a specialised group of

institutions called *grandes écoles*. As in the case of religion, when Napoleon broke with the past, he created new forms and institutions as replacements, so in the first instance he established a new kind of highly centralised higher education system, abolishing 'universities' while however retaining their faculties structure.

In Germany, especially in Prussia, university reforms went in another direction: The foundation of the University of Berlin was decisive, and *Bildung* played a role in its conception. Berlin was the first university in the world where research and not only instruction was regarded as a primary duty of its professors.¹⁰ According to the founder of the university, Wilhelm von Humboldt, research and instruction were naturally inseparable. They were also endless processes. Just as a student could never complete his education because intellectual (or spiritual) development was endless, so too was research a never-ending story.

Humboldt was not only a university reformer but also a philologist and a philosopher and by far the most influential of all ideologists of *Bildung* in this period. His influence was due to his rare way of combining theory and practice. During his years as a high-ranking civil servant responsible for education and culture in Prussia, he was able to translate his ideas into actual institutions and regulations. While his thoughts about *Bildung* were not very original, his way of transforming them into concrete institutional arrangements was special.

The Berlin type of university was unique because the research mission added to the official duties of the professor. But it was also unique because, just as Kant once proposed, it made the philosophy faculty central. It was most of all there that the student received *Bildung*, and it was also there that research had its natural home. Remarkable, too, was the crucial role allotted to philosophy itself. The spirit of philosophy was intended to imbue all branches of the university; the universality and unity of the university were to be guaranteed by philosophical research and the

¹⁰ A huge secondary literature exists on the foundation of the University of Berlin and its importance. A classic overview is expressed in Stephen d'Irsay, *Histoire des universités françaises et étrangères des origines à nos jours* (Paris, 1932), II, where significant comparisons are made. The more recent, largely English-language literature is well summarised in Björn Wittrock, 'Dinosaurs or Dolphins? The Rise and Resurgence of the Research-oriented University', in *The University System*, ed. Björn Wittrock and Aant Elzinga (Stockholm, 1985), 13ff. A good survey of the development of the German University is Charles E. McClelland, *State, Society, and University in Germany, 1700-1914* (Cambridge, 1980). A fairly recent, very influential German interpretation of Berlin's history and still more of the university ideology represented there is Helmut Scheelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit, Idee und Gestalt der deutschen Universität*, 2nd edn (Düsseldorf, 1971). Scheelsky's interpretation of Humboldt's ideas has been fundamentally challenged in Manfred Riedel's succinct article, 'Wilhelm von Humboldt's Begründung der "Einheit von Forschung und Lehre" als Leitidee der Universität', *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 14 (1977), Beiheft: *Historische Pädagogik*, ed. Ulrich Herrmann, 231ff.

philosophical training of students. Moreover, according to Humboldt, the new university should realise the old but seldom fulfilled ideal of academic freedom, and this view appears to have achieved some success. In the course of the nineteenth century, the German university acquired a reputation for *Lehr- und Lernfreiheit*, i.e., for the freedom of the teacher to disseminate those theories deemed true, and the freedom for the student to choose both subjects of study and professor with whom to study. Of course, both liberties had their limitations and flaws in the highly illiberal Prusso-German society; but in comparison to other European and to North American universities of the day, the license, especially in religious matters, was substantial. The student really could choose a favourite teacher.

In order to comprehend Humboldt's contributions to the history of *Bildung*, it is more fruitful to study the documents concerning the institutional framework of the university than to scrutinise his philosophical writings on the topic. During his years in power, Humboldt composed a whole series of proposals, memoranda, and instructions. In many respects, the most down-to-earth is a report concerning the examination of State officials. Here, Humboldt stressed the necessity to assess both the candidate's natural talents and his acquired *Bildung*. The amount of cramming must not, says Humboldt – implying that it has usually been the practice – be decisive for the fate of the examinee. Needless to say, the candidate must have a certain amount of knowledge fitted exactly for his occupation *in spe*. However, this, the 'slavish' part of the examination, does not catch much of Humboldt's attention. It is the general part of the examination which excites and leads him to make some very interesting remarks.

It is definitely not expert, still less encyclopaedic knowledge that Humboldt insists upon. Even the future financier may be excellent in his job without a full understanding of statistics, and a good diplomat does not necessarily need to master history. Two kinds of insight are, however, absolutely indispensable. Humboldt labels them the 'really material part' and the 'formal'. Central to the first is that portion of 'practical philosophy' (i.e., ethics and politics) upon which the law in force is founded and which concerns the aim and purpose of mankind and, in accordance therewith, of the State. Humboldt, whose ideas of *Bildung* mainly and in contrast to Herder and Mendelssohn, not to mention Pestalozzi, are limited to the university sphere, declares that 'nothing is as important to a high-ranking civil servant' as the conception that he 'in all respects has of mankind, its dignity and its ideal in its entirety'. Decisive here is both the 'intellectual limpidity' and the 'warmth and sensitivity' with which the civil servant can express his insights. Even respect for the

'lower social classes' is needed, and the examiner should be able to discern if the future civil servant will be a reformer or a conservative. Humboldt openly prefers the former, calling him 'liberal'¹¹ as contrasted to the 'narrow-minded' (*bornierter*) conservative. Humboldt stresses in a way very typical of the ideology of *Bildung* that the examiner must not follow any fixed questionnaire when evaluating the fundamental general knowledge and attitudes of his examinee. There are, he argues, thousands of ways to determine if the candidate is sufficiently open-minded. The formal portion of the required general knowledge of course is naturally always easier to mark. Here, the student's delivery and discourse are decisive, as is his capacity to follow and summarise an argument.¹²

From this document, we can see what *Bildung* according to Humboldt would be like in actual life. Reality itself, represented by the Prussian State and society in its rapid but far from harmonious development from the first decade of the nineteenth century up to the *Reichsgründung*, the formation of the German Empire in 1871, transformed Humboldt's design for a university and examination system. But while the new arrangements certainly had some remarkable traits in common with the original project, substantial differences existed. In the early nineteenth century the reshaped higher education system was intended to give spiritual strength to a country which had been subdued in a degrading war. In 1871, the new German empire was a dominating political and military power in Europe. Its economic and industrial growth was precipitous, and its universities – especially that of Berlin – and its *Wissenschaft* or output and methods of learning commanded the highest international esteem. In such a society, neither the university nor *Bildung* could possibly play the same role or be the same as before.

The best presentation of the German university at its apogee is still Friedrich Paulsen's far from objective but still marvellous account, *Essence and Historical Development of the German Universities* (1893) and *The German Universities* (*Die deutschen Universitäten*), published in 1902. But here we will follow the line of argument in a more eloquent and less comprehensive presentation, that of Hermann von Helmholtz' 1887 oration, *On the Academic Freedom of German Universities* (*Ueber die Akademische Freiheit der Deutschen Universitäten*). With this speech, Helmholtz, the famous physicist and physiologist, commenced his duties as Rector of the Berlin University.

¹¹ 'Liberal' as used here has the general meaning of open-hearted, generous, unprejudiced, and progressive. Not until some years after 1809 did it become the name of a political ideology.

¹² Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Gutachten über die Organisation der Ober-Examinations-Kommission', in *Werke in fünf Bänden* (Darmstadt, 1960), IV, 79ff.

Helmholtz the scientist begins with the admission that historically the humanities not the physical sciences have been the centre of gravity of the German university. The physical sciences may therefore be regarded as intruders, pushed along by their accelerated growth in the nineteenth century and challenging the traditional organisational and philosophically curricular framework of the university. But he also maintains that the sciences have been successfully integrated into the university, and he points to his own rectorship as evidence of that fact.

A substantial part of his oration consists of a comparison between German, English, and French universities. In England, Helmholtz says, the students are trained to master their own language in a marvellous way, and the universities take special interest in the physical health and strength of undergraduates. Especially in the last respect, Oxford and Cambridge are far superior to the German universities, where duelling and fencing are the only sporting activities.

The French university, he says, is different again. It is a very rational construction. Helmholtz does not hide the fact that he greatly dislikes it. There, all research is located outside the universities, in special institutes, and university training is substantially vocational. Conventional talent is favoured at the expense of creative talent.

To Helmholtz, it is especially remarkable that the French university professors hold their positions quite independently of the approval of their students. Since attendance at lectures is compulsory, numbers are no proof of the teacher's success. How different in Germany! There, the students have their famous *Lernfreiheit*. When studying a subject, they have always several professors to choose from. In some cases, lectures and classes are compulsory – but this is never due to the demands of the university, but to the requirements of the State examination system. Furthermore, outside the university the student is totally free to behave as he or she desires, the penal code being the only limit on personal freedom.

Evidently, to Helmholtz *Lernfreiheit* formed the absolute prerequisite of *Bildung* which the university must further among its students. Another prerequisite was the *Lernfreiheit* of the professors, which meant, for example, that in 1877 it was possible to propagate both the crudest materialism and the dogma of infallibility. However, while Helmholtz can state that the freedom to learn and the freedom to teach are essential prerequisites for obtaining *Bildung*, he cannot actually define the content of this compelling yet elusive conception.

Helmholtz is not unaware of the limitations of the university which he represents. It is far from a wealthy institution, and already this fact makes it dependent on the State. But as a typically loyal German professor of his day, he prefers to believe that the patronage of the State is propitious and

that the State itself does in fact respect and guarantee university autonomy.¹³

The political context of Bildung

So far, we have only followed the German conception of *Bildung* in some of its German manifestations. Now, we must broaden the perspective. We need, for example, to compare *Bildung* with something called 'liberal education' and its varieties in Britain and the United States. Only comparative history can truly explain or illustrate the singularities of German intellectual development.

It was in the Reformation era that German universities acquired a strongly humanistic character.¹⁴ The ideal was, however, far from that of Renaissance Italy. It was not the universal and harmonious man that was aimed at. According to the dismal Lutheran conception, after the Fall man's nature was destroyed by sin, and only divine grace could save him. The humanities, therefore, acquired a fundamentally different purpose, more immediate and more narrowly focused. Luther's own view of the usefulness of the humanities seems to have been rather down to earth. When talking about education, he exclaims: where are the preachers, jurists, and physicians to come from, if grammar and other rhetorical arts are not taught? Philip Melancthon, his follower and the 'preceptor Germaniae' was a decided Aristotelian and paved the way for the Lutheran orthodoxy with its stiffness, intolerance, and strong sense of logical order and classification. In this special version of Aristotelianism, Aristotle's secular ethics played a limited role.

The devastating effects of the Thirty Years' War on German society and culture are well known. The negative effects on German language and German cultural self-confidence were far-reaching. It is instructive that the first German intellectual giant in the period after that war, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, wrote in Latin or French and not in German. His pupil Christian Wolff was the first to make the German language peculiarly amenable to philosophy.

Prussia, which soon became the strongest single German state, underwent a rapid change in the eighteenth century. State power was strengthened not only through a very efficient army, but also through massive bureaucratization requiring civil servants educated at universities. In the school and university reforms which followed, subjects seen as especially marked by their utility were decidedly favoured.

¹³ Hermann von Helmholtz, *Ueber die akademische Freiheit der deutschen Universitäten. Rede beim Antritt des Rektorats an der Friedrichs-Universität zu Berlin...* (Berlin, 1977), 50f.

¹⁴ Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York, 1986), 90ff.

In a rather peculiar way, this very practical and somewhat ruthless tendency was sometimes counteracted by, sometimes helped by, new religious trends running somewhat counter to the effects of the Reformation. Most of all these were of a Pietist character distinguished by unworldliness, inner-direction (*Innerlichkeit*), and sentimentality. Life tended to be split up into private and public spheres, each with very different ideals: one favouring efficiency, the other meekness; one inclined towards activity, the other towards passivity; one leaning towards rationality, the other towards irrationality.

The Enlightenment came late to Germany and acquired its own direction for both political and religious reasons. It was nearly without exception favourable to religion but also propagated tolerance, openness, and once again *Innerlichkeit*. Politically, it was not very revolutionary (at least not before 1789) but aimed at the greater extension of freedom of speech, as we have already seen in the cases of Kant and Mendelssohn.

Given this rather humbling ancestry, it is not a simple task to explain how a period of remarkable cultural prosperity followed after about 1780. However, this epoch with all its great philosophers, scientists, writers, artists, and composers was the one in which the conception of *Bildung* thrived. As in the culture generally, *Bildung* itself was characterised by a tension between outer and inner, between activity and passivity, all of which could be traced back to an earlier epoch.

In his book *The German Catastrophe (Die Deutsche Katastrophe)*, written immediately after the collapse of Hitler's 'empire', the noted historian Friedrich Meinecke, who was himself a representative of the old German tradition of *Bildung*, described the long period from 'die Goethezeit' as an ominous decline, reaching its logical culmination in the Nazi Reich. Originally, he says, there was a balance between reason and emotion and between power and intellect. Militarism, industrialism, and the mass movements – socialism and nationalism above all – destroyed a formerly prosperous culture, leaving only ruins in 1945.¹⁵

Meinecke's conception of history is a highly idealistic one. To him, ideas and ideals reign in the world and determine political, social, and economic circumstances. However, there is much that favours his view of German development. In the case of *Bildung*, the original, brittle balance between subjective and objective moments was lost, the *Bildung* became either something highly *Innerlich* or an attribute easily defined by university degrees, marks, and social rank.

The German university, about which Helmholtz uttered such impressive words, tended to be a free zone where freedom of speech was much more

¹⁵ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Leipzig-Wiesbaden, 1946).

recognised than outside and where the search for an even 'higher' or *höhere Bildung* liberated students and teachers from the otherwise stiff demands for exacting and immediately useful work.

As Fritz K. Ringer has shown in his famous study of the 'German Mandarins', university educated people and most of all the professors defended their position and privileges against all changes. Especially after the World War, this defensive struggle was fierce and embittered, and it is remarkable that the allegedly unique *Bildung* accessible only at the universities was used as a weapon by the conservative defenders of the university.¹⁶

It must not be denied, however, that there were also earnest endeavours to revive the classical concept of *Bildung* in the 1920s. Eduard Spranger published a whole series of books dealing with the original philosophy of *Bildung* and its possible modern applications. Although an outspokenly conservative adherent of the German-university system, his conception of *Bildung* cannot be called superficial in any respect.¹⁷

Originally, as we have shown, *Bildung* was the heart of the faculty of philosophy, and the subject of philosophy was regarded as the one which pre-eminently united all the different branches of learning. Yet in the nineteenth century, the great systems of integrated knowledge descending from the days of Schelling and Hegel divided into specialised studies. Epistemology, ethics, psychology, and the many other disciplines of the faculty of philosophy ceased to provide a unitary perspective. Historical study itself came to be regarded as yet another separate and privileged field of knowledge, although the advance of a historicist viewpoint brought with it a belief that as nothing could be understood except in an historical context, so the history of a discipline was the best method for understanding it. The philosophers themselves were after all historicists, and in actuality history and philosophy merged into one field of *Bildung*.

Classical studies and especially Greek, whose position was once central to the Humboldtian conception of *Bildung*, retained their prestige but turned out to be more and more specialised as separate philosophical or archaeological fields.

Despite fragmentation of the old philosophical faculty, so strong was the inherited belief in the special character of philosophy itself that its defenders continued to maintain the former premise that only through the study of philosophy could one become *gebildet*. Philosophy, they claimed,

¹⁶ Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 87, argues that *Bildung* was the singlemost important tenet of the mandarin tradition.

¹⁷ Eduard Spranger's main work is *Lebensformen. Geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit*, 7th edn (Leipzig, 1930).

featured the basic principles behind all knowledge and provided a fundamental overall perspective. The strength and tenacity of this view is best demonstrated by saying that despite the growth of specialism in the German university, philosophy as a subject managed to retain its unique position in the German examination system.

After the World War, some radical university professors headed by Carl Heinrich Becker, who also served as minister of cultural affairs in the State of Prussia in the 1920s, faced up to the fact of the disintegration of the philosophical ideal of universal knowledge and tried to introduce sociology as the new unifying subject. Their efforts were not really successful in a Germany on the threshold of Nazism. Nor, one might add, could the classical Weberian conception of sociology as a comprehensive and historically-oriented science of society in its cultural, political, and economic evolution compete with the strength of formalised, self-referential systems of discourse in the economics of neo-classical marginalism and a correspondingly influential legal positivism. In fact, in the 1920s German sociology gradually developed in the direction of an equally formal and ahistorical mode of inquiry in the wake of efforts, most notably by von Wiese, to create a 'pure' relational and behavioural sociology.

The difficulties of bridging the widening gap between different specialities at the university were quite the same in Germany as in Britain and the United States. In all countries, specialism and professionalism made the idea of a fundamental stock of knowledge difficult to achieve. The simplest solution to this dilemma was a patchwork quilt of bits of knowledge from all or many different branches of knowledge. Sometimes, this kind of broad education was called *allgemeine Bildung*, the German counterpart of the Anglo-American notion of 'general education'. However, the history of *allgemeine Bildung* is rather more 'honourable', that is to say, represents a more forthright or sustained attempt to broaden a university education for technicians such as engineers than the piecemeal efforts characterising the history of general education in the English-speaking world, particularly America. For example, in the nineteenth century when subjects such as history and philosophy were introduced at the new universities of technology, it was to give future engineers the necessary *allgemeine Bildung*.¹⁸ As in the case of *Bildung*, the humanist content of *allgemeine Bildung* was predominant.

After World War II the old ideas of *Bildung* and *allgemeine Bildung* met still more difficult obstacles when confronted with mass education. Even the outstanding spokesman for the old conceptions, Helmut Schelsky,

¹⁸ Mikael Hård, 'Forskning, skoling, bildning. Carl Linde som teknikers institutionsbyggare' ('Research, Schooling, *Bildung*'), *Daidalos. Sveriges Tekniska museum årsbok*, 55 (1986).

whose *Solitude and Freedom (Einsamkeit und Freiheit, 1910)* is still the standard work on the classical German university tradition, seems to have surrendered to the increasing difficulties as indicated by the introduction to the second edition of his work in 1971. However, Schelsky found at least one remedy in interdisciplinary research, and the interdisciplinary University of Bielefeld is his creation just as much as Berlin is Humboldt's.¹⁹

Swedish *Bildning* in idea and practice

The social context of Bildning

As already mentioned, the German *Bildung* had its immediate counterpart in the Swedish *Bildning*. After only a few years, Herder's way of using *Bildung* to signify an educational process first and foremost was introduced into the Swedish language,²⁰ and a rich and varied use of the word *Bildning* especially distinguished the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. This period, labelled the Romantic or even the Neo-romantic in Swedish intellectual history, was characterised by heavy German influence. Kant, Schelling, and Hegel were the epigones, Goethe's and Hölderlin's poetry was imitated, German political ideas were introduced, and pedagogical ideas from the German-speaking world heavily influenced the school system at all levels.

German models succeeded a period in which France had been the cultural paragon. French influence, however (as is not surprising), had been strongest at court, capital, and among the nobility. German influence had its stronghold in the small towns of Uppsala and Lund, where the only universities were situated, and their character (as we might expect) was much more bourgeois, perhaps even petty-bourgeois, than aristocratic.

In modern Swedish, there is a fairly clear distinction between the words *Utbildning* (the German *Ausbildung*) and *Bildning*, the first denoting vocational training or at least a learning process aimed at a clearly-defined actual or practical goal. In short, one became *utbildad* in order to be a doctor or a lawyer, or to master Italian conversation or shorthand. *Bildning* is a word which, after some years of disrepute, has now been reintroduced to signify a learning process which is less narrowly 'useful' and where the subject's own leanings and interests play a substantial part in discerning what is to be learned. Although the distinction between *Bildning* and *Utbildning* was not often clear cut in the early nineteenth

¹⁹ Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*, and Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Interdisziplinarität: Praxis - Herausforderung - Ideologie* (Frankfurt, 1987).

²⁰ See *Bildning* in *The Dictionary of the Swedish Academy* (SAOB).

century, in time *Bildning* assumed the German meaning as both a process and the outcome of a process which results in a person of wide orientation and cultivation, who may even possess a keen critical ability.

Bildning was applicable to all forms of education, early as well as gymnasium and university. Its widespread acceptance has in fact much to do with its general connection with the question of Swedish literacy. In Sweden, as in many other European countries, discussions about compulsory primary education were very active in the early nineteenth century. The alphabetism of the Swedish people was already at an astonishingly high level, the result of the efforts of a highly dominant and committed Lutheran State Church (far more dominant than in religiously divided Germany) which had assumed an obligation to take care of the fundamental schooling of common people. A debate occurred, however, between those groups which simply wanted to raise the existing standard of schooling and those which argued that such efforts would only produce *Halvbildning*, that is to say, a half-educated populace not really conversant with serious issues. Such a situation, they said, was politically and socially dangerous.²¹ In 1842 Parliament resolved the debate by creating a system of compulsory primary education which spread slowly through the large and sparsely populated country. This reform was parallel to many other fundamental changes in early nineteenth century Swedish society, such as urbanisation (which preceded slowly), the development of business and commerce (industrialisation, however, did not begin until the 1880s), and the increasing political and social influence of the bourgeoisie.

Many changes also occurred in the structure of secondary and higher education as a consequence of the spread of French revolutionary ideas. These resulted in the constitutional changes of 1809 which replaced royal absolutism with mixed government. Well before the constitutional changes of 1809, however, actually as early as the 1680s, members of the bourgeoisie had been penetrating the lower nobility, and the lower nobility itself had been aspiring to civil service careers generally dominated by the higher nobility. After 1809 legislation was passed stipulating that all government offices should be within the reach of every qualified aspirant. While the high nobility was not thereby totally replaced, the opportunity structure was greatly liberalised, putting new pressures on secondary and especially university education and producing changes in the curriculum and examination system.

²¹ Nils Runeby, 'Vårken fågel eller fisk: Om den farliga Halvbildning' ('Neither Bird nor Fish: On the Dangers of Quasi-Bildning'), in *Vetenskapsens träd. Idéhistoriska studier tillägnade Sten Lindroth*, ed. Tore Frangsmyr (Stockholm, 1974), 157ff.

Historically, the university examination system was relaxed, consisting for the most part (as elsewhere in Europe) of a set of 'disputations' where the student argued and defended several 'theses' or perhaps an entire dissertation, which either he or his professor had authored. The standards were low, and the examination itself had little effect on chances for upward occupational and social mobility. Noblemen's sons entered the university as adolescents of fifteen or sixteen or even younger. They were instructed by personal tutors, generally older students of humble origins, visited lectures of their own choosing, and moved on to posts in the military or government without much ado.

Improving the examination system by making it both stricter and more impartial had limited results, but major changes did in fact occur in the course of the nineteenth century. Around 1800, oral examinations became more frequent, difficult, and in most cases decisive for the professional future of the student. Earlier, eloquence and elegance – a courtly style used in conjunction with a scholastic exercise – in the art of defending and attacking different types of academic theses in front of an academic audience had been the main requirement. Henceforth, the capacity to memorise the content of a series of lectures and textbooks became essential. Students themselves regretted the change, but so did many professors, rising in Academic Senate meetings to denounce eloquently the 'examination frenzy'. One of the consequences of a more demanding control system was that the different subjects tended to become much more separated than before, and specialisation started to appear. Each professor began to claim that his subject required more insight and rigour from students than those in neighbouring fields. In short, stricter examinations and specialties went hand in hand.

Evidence for the growth of specialisation and the diversification of the university curriculum can be collected from other areas of academic life, but is particularly apparent from the history of professorial chairs. In the eighteenth century, most professors occupied more than one chair. They started their professorial life in one subject and changed chairs in order to improve both income and status. The most successful ended their academic careers as professors of theology.

The progression from chair to chair was made possible because in some sense the general education of a Swedish academic provided the kind of intellectual flexibility which allowed him to roam from subject to subject, that is, assuming the subjects were reasonably connected in the first place. Thus, a typical career in the philosophical faculty might start with the teaching of Latin poetry, oriental languages, or ethics (all of which were low-paying) and go on to Latin declamation, logic and metaphysics, ending in the first chair in the prestigious faculty of theology, which also

carried with it the deanship of a cathedral. Even many professors of jurisprudence began their academic careers in the philosophical faculty.²²

However, the pattern was different in the medical sciences, where chairholders were likely to remain. The great Linnaeus at Uppsala could not even begin to entertain the possibility of a chair of theology to be bestowed after a migration of three or four chairs. Almost by their very nature technical and practical, and less clearly associated with a general academic education than the subjects of the philosophical faculty, the medical, natural, and experimental sciences lent themselves to specialisation; and professors in these subjects could not easily exchange inferior for more lucrative and prestigious posts.

Nevertheless, even within the philosophical faculty, the pattern of migration so characteristic of Swedish (and German) universities became a rare phenomenon after about 1800. This rather dramatic change, which was not much commented upon at the time, coincided with the introduction of the stricter examination system. The cause of the shift was without doubt the deepening cleavages between most subjects, each of which demanded some unique competence from its chairholder.

It is hardly surprising that the spread of specialisation at the universities is related to the acute interest in *Bildung* and *Bildung* that one encounters in Sweden and Germany in the early nineteenth century. Likewise, those who most fiercely attacked the new examination system in Sweden were identical with those who were most eager to find a new higher *Bildung*. We must not err in thinking that such critics were merely reactionaries in educational or other matters, whose thoughts harkened back to the old university. On the contrary, they were very unhappy with the earlier state of affairs, which according to them was characterised by pedantry and a misplaced predilection for 'useful' knowledge. The leading ideologists of a university *Bildung* were trying to find a new solution to the problem of using education to develop a common fund of knowledge.

Most of them represented the subjects belonging to the group which earlier had formed a philosophical unity. However, in the Romantic period, there were important exceptions. Friedrich Schelling and his followers, who played a very important part in Sweden too, searched for an organic unity consisting of all branches of knowledge, including those of artists. Schelling developed his ideas in a booklet published in 1803 called *Lectures on the Methods of Academic Studies (Vorlesungen über der Methode des Akademischen Studiums)*, which in fact is one of the most

²² I have studied this career pattern in detail in my book, *Den synliga handen. Anders Berch och ekonomistämman vid 1700 – talets svenska universitet (The Visible Hand: Anders Berch and Economics at the Eighteenth-Century Swedish University)* (Stockholm, 1986), 74–80.

important anticipations of the University of Berlin.²³ Several adherents of his programme were natural scientists who tried to rescue their own subjects from the kind of isolation which characterised science in the eighteenth century. Their remedy was to purge them of their mechanistic, Newtonian direction, which for nearly a century had heavily influenced the world picture in Sweden as well as in Germany, and to open them to the influence of the new organic, romantic philosophy.

Bildning and Swedish popular education

There were, however, Swedes like Carl Adolph Agardh who developed their own ideas of *Bildning*; and while perhaps Romantics, were not themselves necessarily followers of Schelling. Agardh is particularly interesting because he illustrates for us what was and perhaps still remains the substantial difference between Swedish and other intellectual traditions there at stake, namely, the greater interest in popular education that continues to this day.

By training a natural scientist, Agardh earned (and retains) international renown as the 'Linnaeus of algae'. The chair which he held at the University of Lund combined botany with economics in a way reminiscent of the very utilitarian Swedish eighteenth-century university practice. He ended his career as a bishop, and he started to study theology in such an assiduous way that after some years he became a prolific author. In rare and personal fashion, he seems to have realised his own *Bildning* programme.

In his view of the university, Agardh came very close to the original German ideal represented by Berlin. In the Swedish *Riksdag*, of which he was a member, he eloquently argued that all vocational training should be separated from the university. He expressed this view in the debates going on in the 1830s about the preparation of future clergymen. As in the case of the famous German theologian Ernst Schleiermacher before him, he maintained that all professional training should be located outside or at least at the periphery of the university, the chief educational task of which was to remain the free, universal, and undirected *Bildung* of its students.

In this debate, Agardh also claimed that Swedish universities had been destroyed by frequent and unnecessary compulsory examinations, which only encouraged pedantry inside and served the ends of control outside. In

²³ The cited works by Schelling appear in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg, 1859), I:5. The *Vorlesungen* have also been published separately or in other collections dealing with university questions, for example, *Die Idee der deutschen Universität. Die fünf Grundschriften aus der Zeit ihrer Neubegründung durch klassischen Idealismus und romantischen Realismus* (Darmstadt, 1956).

Germany, Agardh told the *Riksdag*, there was a sharp dividing line between real university instruction and the examination of future civil servants. This cleavage was necessary since the tasks of research and *Bildung* on one side and practical life on the other were incompatible.²⁴

Turning to the question of the curriculum itself, Agardh argued that the value of classical languages was seriously overestimated and the value of the natural sciences greatly underestimated. He did not advocate the study of the natural sciences because of their superior utility – a defence common at the time – but because they were an essential aspect of *Bildning*, and he asked that their position in the curriculum of elementary schools and gymnasium be appreciably strengthened.

Agardh was also a keen supporter of popular education, in his youth being one of those who introduced Pestalozzi's ideas to Sweden.²⁵ In his old days as a bishop in Karlstad and in this capacity the head of the school system in his diocese, he worked intensely to amend the instruction in science at all levels of schooling, claiming that ordinary people, because they mostly dealt with practical, material affairs, could more easily acquire a knowledge of nature than of human affairs.²⁶

The narrowing of the ideal and practice of Bildung

In 1852, after a long series of public debates and royal commissions wherein it was held that the existing higher education system did not correspond either to the scientific or practical demands of the time, all Swedish universities were reformed in a way which corresponded fairly well to what Humboldt and others had brought about in Germany some decades earlier. Research and not just teaching was declared a primary duty of the professors; and in order to receive degrees, students now had to write their own theses. *Bildning* remained, none the less, being regarded as necessary for acquiring flexibility in life, direction, and maturity. The

²⁴ See the remarks of Carl Adolph Agardh in the debates in the Clerical Estate of the *Riksdag* in 1834 as reprinted in *Handlingar rörande presbiterien i Lunds stift, samt presbiteringen vid Lunds universitet (Proceedings Concerning the Seacery of Clergymen at the University of Lund)* (Lund, 1836), I:71 and 58ff. A special copy deposited in the Uppsala University Library (K138a) is also accompanied by a collection of letters, booklets, and other documents which altogether form the most comprehensive view of Swedish ideas of a university to be found in the early nineteenth century.

²⁵ Agardh and his friend Martin Bruzelius translated Pestalozzi's *Elementarbücher* into Swedish (published as *Elementar-Bücker* at Lund in 1812). In his introduction to the volume, Agardh interpreted Pestalozzi's ideas in his own way.

²⁶ Agardh, *Föreläs till en Statsökonomisk Statistik* (Essay on a Statistical Survey in Political Economy) (Karlstad, 1852), I:1, 168. My portrait of Agardh appears in an essay on the relationship between him and the famous chemist, Jöns Jakob Berzelius, and between him and Israel Hwasser, the 'romantic' Professor of Medicine. Forthcoming in a volume on Berzelius edited by Evan Melhado.

problem, as in Germany, was to combine it with a certain emphasis on specialised work. The solution adopted was to institute a series of preliminary degrees for future doctors, priests, and lawyers, which, according to the reformers, would furnish the students with knowledge and skills necessary both for their general cultivation and future profession. Even for those who only studied in the philosophical faculty but intended to be schoolmasters, a compulsory programme of studies was specified.

Philosophy was still central in most preliminary degrees (ethics for the students of law, theoretical philosophy for the others) but also history and mostly Latin. In fact, this system came rather close to what had been practised in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Still, it is a highly interesting curriculum as it tells us about the current ideas of what a good academic general education or *Allmänbildning* was thought to be. As Wilhelm von Humboldt had already argued, the future State official had to know not only current rules and regulations but also their philosophical foundations. In the same way, the doctor could not be a good doctor without knowing something about the position of nature according to the views of philosophers, and the vicar was in the grip of superstition if he did not base his faith on the solid ground of idealist speculation.

As many notes from lectures given to students preparing their preliminary degrees are preserved, we have a good idea about the education they received. In philosophy, the world was explained in terms of that kind of idealist philosophy which was especially dominant at Uppsala University, whose most important representative was Christopher Jacob Boström (1797–1866). According to Boström, sensorial knowledge was misleading and illusory if not guided in the first instance by thought. External or 'objective' nature played a very limited and secondary part in his system, where everything which really existed only existed in the form of 'persons' defined as entities possessing self-consciousness. The highest person was no less than God, and the second highest was the State viewed as an organic unity. The State, Boström said, was the highest part of the 'official' or 'public' society (*samhälle*), whereas the people as a whole constituted the highest private person or society. The lower private persons were (in proper order) the Four Estates, the municipalities, and families. Boström's social philosophy was strictly hierarchical, and those who occupied an inferior position in his classification could not fully understand those holding a superior one. The higher the position, the higher the intelligence ascribed to it. Altogether, this established the premise that a person lower in rank could never properly criticise one who was higher.²⁷

²⁷ On Boström, see Svante Nordin, *Den Boströmska skolan och den svenska idealismens fall* (The Boström School and the Decline of Swedish Idealism) (Lund, 1981); Christoffer Jakob Boström, *The Philosophy of Religion*, translated with introduction by Victor

The hierarchical philosophy of Boström and his followers almost naturally evoked protests. For other students, however, their doctrine gave some kind of philosophical justification for their own favoured social position. In a period when industrialism, materialism, and other 'enemies' of the traditional university seemed more and more threatening to the self-confidence of future civil servants, it was comforting to hear that in reality those challenges were either illegitimate or mere fabrication.

The historians, who most students also encountered when preparing their preliminary degrees, were much more empirical than Boström, but their instruction was none the less highly idealist. In Latin, another compulsory subject, students had to re-learn what they had learned earlier at school and to improve their skill in translating a Swedish text into Latin.

By and large, this meant that in practice the obligatory university *Bildning* which the students received was highly traditional; but it scarcely fulfilled the subjective side of the original concept of *Bildning* as conceived by Agardh and others. Most of all, the degrees prepared students for a future position far above the social level of most Swedes. The entrenched position of this curriculum in the Swedish university system meant that new and fresh intellectual currents in the late nineteenth century did not substantially influence the degree programme. Intellectual innovations such as Darwinism were of course available to all Swedish students from the 1870s or at least the 1880s onwards, but nothing thereof was said in lectures necessary for the preliminary degrees.

Compared to liberal education in Britain or the USA, the university *Bildning* in Sweden, just as in its counterpart in Germany, had a predominantly intellectual content. In Sweden and Germany, the university assumed no responsibility for the other dimensions of education. Neither the Swedish nor the German university stood *in loco parentis* to undergraduates, and the physical or psychological health of students was a private affair to be handled outside the official boundaries of the university. Residential institutions on the English or American collegiate models did not exist. Students customarily rented separate rooms in the apartments and houses of burghers.

To some extent, the absence of a parietal element in Swedish higher education was attributable to the rising age of undergraduates (although the same phenomenon did not equally affect nineteenth-century ideas of moral guidance in Britain and America). After 1830 age at entrance seldom

Emanuel and Robert Nelson Beck (New Haven and London, 1962); and my book, *Air förändra världen – men med måtta: Det svenska 1800-talet speglat i C. A. Agardhs och C. J. Boströms liv och verk* (To Change the World – But Moderately: Sweden in the Nineteenth Century as reflected in the Life and Work of C. A. Agardh and C. J. Boström) (Stockholm, 1991).

fell below eighteen. Many students were, in fact, even older and did not require the kind of personal superintendence associated with younger students. The situation had been somewhat different in prior centuries. Earlier, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many (and mostly aristocratic) students arrived at the university at a quite young age, and a personal tutor supervised and to some extent watched over them.

But another reason for the absence of a fully developed system of officially recognised residence has to do with the social composition of Swedish universities and of Swedish society generally. Sweden never had a large, broad-based gentlemanly class of wealthy landlords whose wastrel sons, as in England, drove up the social costs of residence. In fact, a 'folksy' tone was already evident in the universities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as large numbers of sons of farming families began to enter the universities. The numbers of them increased substantially in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Students of humble origin attended the Swedish universities in far greater proportions than in England or Germany, and the so-called 'peasant student' (*bondestudenten*) was a well-known figure at Uppsala or Lund. Such students required lower-cost instruction. Their economic resources were very limited. In the nineteenth century especially, many poor students attended lectures irregularly and only for short periods, having to earn a living as private tutors for the sons of wealthier people living outside the university towns.

Bildning and Folkbildning

In 1902, the state of preliminary or first degrees was debated in the Riksdag. According to reformers, the university education of lawyers, physicians, and teachers took far too long. They claimed that future professionals wasted a good part of their lives as students and therefore suggested that preliminary degrees be abolished. In Sweden, they argued, the value of *allmänbildning* or general education was over-stressed. 'Abroad', critics said, having in mind most of all Germany and the other Nordic countries, professional training was just professional training and nothing else.

The advocates of reform were highly influential, the most important of them being Ernst Trygger, Professor of Law at the university in Uppsala and a member of the First Chamber, where he eventually became the leader of the conservatives. After a few years, he resigned his chair and began a career as a State official, obtaining the highest possible appointments, and eventually he was made University Chancellor.

Trygger was the leading proponent of the view that the concept of *Bildning* and the programme of studies following from it was highly

impractical. The State, he and others asserted, did not really have any need for supposedly educated people who only possessed a hodgepodge of very general insights. At the university, *Bildning* had become virtually identical with the preliminary university degrees, whose content had dwindled into a rather *jejeune* mixture. Professional education, said Trygger, was the real task of the universities.

Trygger and his adherents were victorious; and after some reports by a government commission, preliminary degrees in the faculties of law and medicine were discarded. In the faculty of the sciences and the arts, a new type of degree specially designed for future secondary school teachers was established. Even there, the importance of general education or *Bildning* was reduced, while professional training was favoured.²⁸

Even though for some university teachers the reforms meant a lesser or reduced position for their own subjects, especially for philosophy, whose long-standing privileged status now came to an end, the government changes evoked astonishingly few protests at the Swedish universities. University representatives, it is true, sat on the government commission, but as loyal civil servants they acquiesced in the decisions of the majority. It is also the case that philosophy achieved a special importance in secondary education by becoming an autonomous subject at the gymnasium; but this was meagre compensation, for its role there was decidedly secondary. To the reformers, however, this level seemed to be the correct one for general education. Humboldt's and Agardh's idea that the university should be the place for the free cultivation of mind was far away.

In one respect, the successful reformers in Parliament were wrong. Even before the reform, the position of general education at Swedish universities was somewhat weaker than in neighbouring countries, and after the change it was weaker yet. In Germany, where higher education was the self-evident model for most Swedes, the position of philosophy remained particularly strong. In other Scandinavian countries, the preliminary degree was saved. In Denmark, in fact, this degree lasted until the early 1960s, and in Norway the so-called *philosophicum* still exists!

Seemingly, the conclusion from such facts would be that all the grand Swedish ideas about *Bildning* and *allmänbildning* dating from the nineteenth century were fading away around the turn of the century. Goal-oriented 'useful' professional education was introduced everywhere at the highest educational level. If at the German technical universities, philosophy and history were seen as necessary for the future engineer's educational breadth or *allgemeine Bildung*, the Swedish engineer was

²⁸ On the commission and its results, see Sven-Eric Liedman, 'Civil Servants Close to the People: Swedish University Intellectuals and Society at the Turn of the Century', *History of European Ideas*, VIII (1987).

taught to pay little respect to basic knowledge in the arts and sciences, except for those portions of mathematics, physics, and chemistry deemed necessary for his occupation.

To this, two substantial observations are now required:

Discussions about *Bildning* carried on at least up to the 1950s in Sweden. But now this talk rather unambiguously concerned only education in subjects conventionally regarded as humanistic. It is true that the word *Bildning* really did first of all denote such studies as Greek and Latin, philosophy, history, and literature, but Agardh was far from alone in arguing that the natural sciences (and, of course, mathematics!) likewise had much to do with the process of self-education called *Bildning*. In the twentieth century, when the humanities lost ground to natural science, technology, and after World War II to the social sciences, the case for *Bildning* tended to be only a detail in a broad defensive strategy of protecting support for the humanities. But once upon a time *Bildning* had been a word associated with personal emancipation and dignity and a dedication to public life. By and by the conception narrowed and degraded; it came to mean the preservation of old memories, preparation for the meditative life, and singularly good manners.

We must look elsewhere in Swedish culture and history to find much more of the original vigour of the idea of *Bildning*. It was in fact preserved in the different popular movements so typical of modern Sweden. Most of all, this means the Labour Movement, which includes the trade unions, the social democrats, and, from the 1920s, the communists. The temperance movement was also an important part of the modern history of *Bildning*, especially in the decades just before and after the turn of the century.

In all these popular movements in Sweden, adult education was a central concern, and in Swedish adult education is called *Folkbildning*, which means the *Bildning* of the common people. According to a formerly widespread idea, *Bildning* was important for all facets of social and political life. It was essential for furthering human dignity and was as important in this respect as political rights or influence, social security, and humane working conditions. In fact, all kinds of knowledge were important and desirable. Consequently, in study circles and at folk high schools everything from astronomy to poetry was studied. Cheap books – good novels and solid popular science – were published and widely read, and temperance lodges and local trade unions collected volumes which formed decent libraries open to their members. Here, therefore, the concept of *Bildning* was just as alive and vital as it had been among learned people a century earlier. Of course, the subjects studied were not the same as then. Classics played a much more modest part if at all, as did philosophy. But natural science and technology were always important to the *Bildning* of

the workers; the social sciences, economics, and political science were also valued.

Needless to say, a good portion of these studies for the sake of *Bildning* were undertaken out of practical considerations. Many young workers dreamed of being mechanics or even (civil) engineers, and not a few realised their cherished dream. For many, the studies served the political cultivation of the working class and enabled them to undertake such civic responsibilities as chairing meetings, taking minutes, or speaking in public. Many popular guides about such matters were published and widely circulated. In his spare time, the Swedish labourer instructed himself in how to be an efficient committee man.²⁹

The upper classes, educated at school and university, did not need adult education to give them self-assurance. Therefore, the idea of compulsory schooling providing worker's children with the same good start in life was an attractive idea. However, disagreements about how to proceed divided social democrats. In the 1930s the Social Democratic minister of education, Artur Engberg, strove for the preservation of the old school system with its sharp dividing line between a compulsory school and a highly selective junior secondary school leading on to gymnasium and university. Of course, Engberg wanted to give the workers' children better opportunities than before to reach the elite school, the preservation of which was still thought necessary for the survival of a traditional *Bildning*. Most of all, Engberg stressed the importance of the ancient classics.³⁰

After the war, Engberg's programme was less attractive to later social democrats and Swedish society generally. The ideas of a comprehensive school open to all became strong and soon victorious. At the same time, a highly utilitarian view of knowledge became dominant. All ideas of *Bildning* for its own sake – or, better, for the sake of self-cultivation – seemed outdated. Dead languages, history, and literature lost ground rapidly, whereas social science, economics, natural science, and technology assumed a much stronger position. For obvious reasons, German influence, so pervasive for more than a century, weakened drastically, whereas ideas, vogues, and styles from the United States became popular. In many respects, the new comprehensive school, which finally was realised in the early 1960s, was constructed on the American model. Of course, this

²⁹ Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Den skötsumme arbetaren. Ideer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkskommunhålle* ('The Conscientious Worker: Ideas and Ideal in a Sawmill Village in Norrland' (1988), 115ff).

³⁰ See Berndt Gustafsson, 'Socialism och bildning. Artur Engbergs ideologi' ('Socialism and *Bildning* – The Ideology of Artur Engberg'), in *Ideologi och institution. Om forskning och högre utbildning 1880–2000*, eds. Sven-Eric Liedman and Lennart Olausson (Stockholm, 1988).

influence was highly selective, as a comparison of the different forms of general education today makes quite clear.

The young American student receives a general education while an undergraduate in university colleges of letters and science (or arts and science) or four-year liberal arts colleges. The Swedish homologue of general education is, as we already know, *allmänbildning*. According to the official position, *allmänbildning* is provided at the comprehensive school, whereas the gymnasium and university curriculum are predominantly vocational.³¹ While historically speaking this may not make sense, the present-day rationale of the distinction is quite clear. From the moment that it was first conceived, the comprehensive school was expected to provide pupils with what in an earlier day the lower classes had to arduously learn as adults. The fact that the stock of knowledge which nowadays is taught at comprehensive school differs substantially from the old radical conception of *allmänbildning* does not change the official position. *Per definitionem*, the comprehensive school furnishes all Swedes with their general education.

Reviving Bildning at the university

In everyday Swedish, the words *Bildning* and *allmänbildning* became much less frequently used from the 1940s onwards. When in the 1940s and 1950s they tended to disappear from everyday language, the world *Bildning* had either degenerated into a slogan in a reactionary critique of every endeavour to broaden access to higher education, or it had been merely a reference to a kind of superficial gentility. *allmänbildning*, which once was the catchword for radical popular movements aimed at the important role of the diffusion of all kinds of knowledge among ordinary people, had lost all of its strength and now meant just the activity of collecting a great many bits of knowledge, the intellectual counterpart of stamp-collecting.

But in the 1980s *Bildning* and *allmänbildning* made an astonishing recovery. The words appear to have regained some of their original vigour. Why?

To a large extent, their revitalisation is part of the traditions of Swedish social democracy which adopted *Folkbildning* and *allmänbildning*. While weakened, these traditions nevertheless survive since they are so strongly associated with Swedish politics. Also, the interest in *Bildning* can be viewed as a reaction on the part of some to the ongoing crude

³¹ See Mac Murray, 'Utbildningsexpansion, jämlikhet och avlänkning. Studier i utbildningspolitik och utbildningsplanering 1933-1985' ('Educational Expansion, Equality, and Policies of Diversification: A Fifty-Year Perspective of the Swedish Educational System'), *Gothenburg Studies in Educational Science*, 66 (1988), 137ff.

disparagement of knowledge as such. Among most politicians and industrialists, research and education are highly valued if economically profitable but not as vehicles of self-cultivation. Art and literature are seen as superficial ornaments – and as objects of investment. Mass media favour exactly the kind of passivity and immediate, thoughtless satisfaction which the old philosophers of *Bildung* and *Bildung* detested so ferociously.

Not a few critics, alarmed at the declining quality of political culture and standards of public debate, fear that unless arrested this decline will inevitably endanger Sweden's unique democratic culture. They notice that as portrayed on television, a political party is not distinguished by its principles and values so much as by the party leader's prevailing media image. Social problems are not treated as central issues to be faced by an informed polity but as some sort of scandalous 'affair' with its special scoundrels and heroes.

In this respect, the background to the revival of *Bildung* seems to resemble what had been happening in the United States in the 1980s, although debate there on liberal education was more intense than in Sweden. But the similarities notwithstanding, there still appear to be substantial differences between the two countries, differences rooted in their distinct social structures and separate national histories. The new Swedish debate on *Bildung* and *allmänbildning* has its roots in the modern development of Sweden. If *Bildung* most of all denoted the cultivation of civil servants in the nineteenth century, *allmänbildning* was a central concept in the popular movements so typical of Swedish modernisation and democratisation. Especially after World War II, a definite solution about how to inculcate *Bildung* and especially *allmänbildning* seemed to be found in the establishment of the new comprehensive school.

The comprehensive school was especially attractive to those who still believed in the original idea of *Bildung* that learning and knowledge derived from a combination of objective and subjective factors. Ideals of knowledge existed objectively, as it were, but in striving to gain them, an individual expanded his own self-awareness and over time developed into a unique human being. This was a life-long or continuous development (and hence has some affinities with American 'continuing' education, as adult university extension programmes have been re-christened). The goal was no less than the older goals of *Bildung* and *allmänbildning*. The goal in their historical derivation, appear to mean much more for individual growth than the English phrase 'general education' connotes. Those who embraced the comprehensive school as the twentieth-century purveyor of nineteenth-century ideas of personal development naturally deplored the widespread notion that the value of an academic subject could only be determined by a direct and narrow utility aimed at the pupil who was

facing a concrete life situation. They also rejected the idea that the importance of an academic subject was measured by its supposed intrinsic difficulty. According to this attitude, only two kinds of subjects could ever exist, 'hard' and 'soft' ones. The former were essential for the practice of a profession like engineering or medicine, or for the performance of a skilled trade. Subjects like history, geography, and literature, the old arts and humanities subjects generally, were 'soft' and hence dispensable.

But however exhilarated are the present-day supporters of *Bildning* about the possibilities of the comprehensive model of schooling, they have had to face the competition of their old enemy from the nineteenth century. The supporters of *Utbildning* have refused to leave the comprehensive schools to them. The quarrel or debate between two different conceptions of knowledge has gone on in Sweden since the nineteenth century, as we have seen, as indeed it has gone on in England and especially the United States, and, making allowances for the different conceptions of general education, in broadly similar ideological fashion.

The common difficulty is in finding a way to make ideals of general education or self-cultivation or breadth of outlook operative in the highly specialised and highly technical world of the late twentieth century, of discovering a way to gain a perspective on the scattered fields of human knowledge as a possible opening to wisdom and creativity. To the old exponents of *Bildning*, the study of philosophy seemed to offer such perspective. Later on in the nineteenth century, history was the favoured medium. In this century, not a few have claimed that sociology has the capacity to offer integrated and comprehensive views.

But despite a flurry of interest in the 1980s, the discussion about a unifying discipline seems outdated in the Sweden of today. The reputation of sociology has reached a nadir. An interest in philosophical questions is increasing, but more philosophers are themselves highly specialised. Perhaps to many, an historical perspective, especially on science and on political ideologies, is a correct and possible approach.

But no one disciplinary solution appears to be sufficient for Sweden, and certainly the 'traditional' American liberal education panacea of a hodgepodge of self-contained modules, some electives, some requirements, is not compatible with the Swedish school or university system. In Sweden the training of a doctor, an engineer, or a teacher starts immediately after arrival at university; he or she has no preliminary undergraduate studies to encounter before career training commences.

However (and predictably), one American experiment has attracted Swedish attention, and that is the 'core curriculum' as advocated at Harvard in the Henry Rosovsky Report of the 1980s. At the University of Lund, the first steps towards such a curriculum have been taken. It is even

called a 'core curriculum' in Swedish, a fact which must be seen as the sign of the faulty knowledge of Swedish intellectual history. Of course, what is intended is a revival of the old Swedish preliminary degree, the Norwegian *philosophicum* of today. This also seems to be the most appropriate Swedish name.

It does not seem sensible to argue that a new Swedish *philosophicum* would offer any solution to the problem of *Bildning*. In the full sense of the word, *Bildning* presupposes a free choice. In this respect, the American elective system seems more acceptable than a core curriculum, but only as an idea, not as a curriculum composed of a huge list of modular fragments of what in Sweden would be wholly autonomous course subjects. The Swedish choices would more properly resemble the English single-subject courses – history, philosophy, physics, astronomy. All to a certain extent could be made available throughout higher education, even in the professional faculties.

It may be objected that these disciplinary subjects still remain specialities. Of course, this is true. But at the same time, every subject has its perspective-opening traits, which make it a candidate for *Bildning*. It contains theories and puzzles which are connected with still more encompassing theories and puzzles. It raises questions which are linked to still broader questions. One may say that each subject has its philosophical, i.e., epistemological, logical, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. Similarly, if a field of study has a future, it also has a history; and this history cannot simply be handed over to the historian, since the historian needs the assistance of the practitioner of the field in question. In many respects, a subject is an enclosed world, functioning as a society in miniature. It is, as Burton Clark says in his contribution to this volume, a 'small world'. But every subject also has a social context or set of wider relationships that must be studied and understood, and there are neighbourly disciplines on its borders requiring attention, not to mention neighbours with whom relations are still in need of cultivation. Furthermore, an academic subject needs resources from outside, and its practitioners are consequently part of a much larger universe of institutions and social arrangements. Approached in this way, a single-subject university curriculum becomes a broad and integrated education. The whole topic is indeed worthy of attention from the sociologists of knowledge.

There is also the question of whether a 'general' curriculum is, in the present Swedish context, rather too elementary for university work. These are difficult questions, but we must at least avoid one common error. General knowledge only appears to be 'elementary' when contrasted with specialised knowledge as represented today in the disciplinary organization of universities. To this, I would say that all the subject matter which we