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# Exploring the Historical Dimensions of *Bildung* and its Metamorphosis in the Context of Globalization

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In this article, I endeavor to explore the historical dimensions of *Bildung* by first focusing on the German linguist and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt and his theory of *Bildung*. The article then addresses the transformation of Humboldt's neo-humanistic ideal into a government-run institutionalized *Bildung* aimed at managing and controlling the citizens. This historical transformation of *Bildung* in the late Enlightenment paves the way for a concept of *Bildung* attached to neoliberal ideals, propagating principles of the free market such as efficiency, measurability, and self-entrepreneurship. Although neoliberal principles became so integral to today's everyday practices that thinking outside the neoliberal box is nearly unthinkable, we can observe a metamorphosed kind of *Bildung* that goes beyond the neoliberal parameters. This new kind of *Bildung* is constituted by multimodal, ironic, playful, serious, critical, local, and transgressive forms of expression that are not to be found in textbooks or educational standards but on walls of cosmopolitan cities or diverse social networks. In this article I shall make the case that the conditions in today's age of globalization offer alternative avenues for *Bildung*, which is inherently collaborative, interactive, and social, as once envisioned by Humboldt.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Bildung* and culture are fundamental concepts in the construction of German identity and in its development as a nation-state. To this day, Germany understands itself as a state of *Bildung* and culture (*Bildungsstaat* and *Kulturstaat*); the latter is anchored in the Unification Treaty (1990). The two closely related notions promise a cultivated inner self that establishes a more civil and humane society. The duo of *Bildung* and culture enables the individual to strive for happiness, something other countries sought to anchor politically. For example, whereas the U.S. sought for an ideal the pursuit of happiness, Germany developed the pursuit of *Bildung* (cf. Naumann, 2003). The relevance and significance of the concept has deep roots in German history. To understand this historical dimension I will focus quite narrowly on the philosopher, linguist, and educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt, an influential actor who played a crucial role in shaping the concept of *Bildung*. He is of particular interest since he combined the theoretical and practical ideas on *Bildung*, thus contributing to educational practice in Germany. Furthermore, he understood the process of *Bildung* as being determined by language, an arguably interesting foundation for a theory of *Bildung* in the age of the late Enlightenment.

The first two sections of the present article outline the history of the notion of *Bildung* and subsequently explore how it became the pillar of secondary education in Germany. The subsequent section covers neoliberal influences on the German concept. In the last section, I

turn to a metamorphosed kind of *Bildung* that is interwoven throughout everyday practices, followed by a conclusion.

## THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF *BILDUNG*

What follows is a historical development of the German concept of *Bildung*. This brief backdrop shall make the nebulous and multifaceted concept understandable by, first, outlining its general evolution and, second, by drawing on three core aspects closely tied to the concept of *Bildung*: freedom, agency, and self.

*Bildung* (from Ger. *bilden*: to build) is a German notion which is unparalleled as compared to other nation-states (cf. Tenorth, 1992, p. 469) and thus has no direct translation into English. It was resignified and imbued with new meaning over the course of eight hundred years between the High Middle Ages and the late Enlightenment and is still in transition. The German concept was first influenced by religion since its roots stem from the Bible and refer to the biblical passage of Genesis 1:26-27, which outlines the creation of humankind in the image of God (*Imago Dei*). To be as close as possible to and to reunify with God (*unio mystica*) was understood as a process of building oneself or *Bildung* in the Middle Ages.

Interestingly, the concept further developed as a critical stance towards Christianity's dominant position. Neo-humanists, who highly influenced the understanding of *Bildung*, dismissed the idea that human life derives its meaning from Christianity. Instead they emphasized that life can be endowed through an inward journey, free from external demands. From this point onwards, the German term *Bildung* became a complex and untranslatable notion. Ultimately, *Bildung* was a reaction to the educational upbringing highly influenced by religion that aimed at maintenance of the established social order and its values.

The meaning of the German concept was further shaped and refined by the political and economic emancipation of the bourgeoisie that aimed at distancing itself from the aristocracy through *Bildung*. This middle-class German intelligentsia (*Bildungsbürgertum*) contested the feudal society and insisted that societal influence does not depend on one's native-born social class, but is anchored in intellectual achievement. The educated class consisting of clerks, professors, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and artists, among others, highlighted an internal contrast within German society: the French-speaking nobility, which decided policy and envisioned itself as civilized and the German-speaking bourgeois intelligentsia, which defined itself as educated (*gebildet*) and cultivated (*kultiviert*).

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, *Bildung* was connected to culture (*Kultur*), mostly because of the development of the "bourgeois public sphere" (Habermas, 1991). It included participation in associations focusing on arts, music, literature, sports, and political discussions, and constituted a golden age of circles where scholars from all over the world met and exchanged ideas. Here, the participants questioned the "monopoly of interpretation" preserved by "church and state authorities" (Habermas, 1991, p. 36). Culture was connected to freedom and autonomy. The promise of both notions was realized by the individual acting autonomously vis-à-vis society. The duo of culture and *Bildung* highly contributed to an emerging national consciousness. "From their ranks," as the sociologist Norbert Elias remarks concerning the bourgeoisie, "came the people on whose account Germany has been called the land of poets and thinkers. And from them concepts such as *Bildung* and *Kultur* received their specifically German imprint and tenor" (2000, p. 15).

Intellectual figures such as Immanuel Kant supported this social class dimension of *Bildung*. The German philosopher was relentless in emphasizing autonomy, reason, and freedom, and challenged the bourgeois population to act upon their intellectual powers. Further support came from Wilhelm von Humboldt, the father of neo-humanism, who stressed the importance of free *Bildung*. Let me clarify the precondition of freedom inherent in Humboldt's conceptualization of *Bildung*. He insisted on university autonomy in order to ensure that research and teaching served humanity and not economic utility. According to Humboldt, any state intervention in reference to *Bildung* "always has a detrimental effect and drags the spiritual and lofty down into the material and lower reality" (Humboldt, 1810, p.2). Humboldt's ideas reflect what is now known as the 'academic freedom' anchored in the German Constitution. His travels to Paris, shaken by the French Revolution, further reinforced Humboldt's insistence on freedom. In his 1792 political work *The Limits of State Action* he emphasized the fact that

whatever does not spring from man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness. (1850/1993, p. 23)

For Humboldt, the individual self-development in the process of *Bildung* can only flower to its maximum when state interference is limited to providing security. Otherwise, the state will cultivate "slaves, rather than a nation of free and independent men" (1850/1993, p. 79).

Having sketched out the importance of freedom inherent in Humboldt's conceptualization of *Bildung*, I shall now turn to the aspect of agency. For Humboldt, freedom is not enough. The unavoidable task of the individual is to *act*, not simply as an agent or an instrument operating as a means to an end, but as an autonomous individual attempting to develop an inner self through *Bildung*. Agency was conceived as an interplay of autonomous self-action in the society and reflexivity which both contributed to the development of the inner self. *Bildung* is understood here as an end in itself and as a process. Its function ceases as soon as it moves towards a specific purpose. The importance of agency is best understood with reference to a quotation taken from Humboldt's 1793 fragment *Theory of Human Bildung*: "action is an attempt of the will to become free and independent in itself" (Humboldt, 1793/2000, p. 58). What he detested in this respect was the tendency of his historical age towards intellectual activity that focused solely on the products of activity and not on the development of the inner self. With reference to scholarly pursuits, he demurred that "a great deal is achieved around us, but only little improved within us" (Humboldt, 1793/2000, p. 58). According to Humboldt, the ultimate objective should not focus on strengthening and heightening individual powers, but on achieving "as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person" (Humboldt, 1793/2000, p. 58). This position underlies the communal orientation towards humanity grounded in the neo-humanistic approach to *Bildung*. A popular German education researcher, Wolfgang Klafki summarizes this argument by saying that "humanity can be realized only in an individual way! But that signifies, at the same time, that the concept of individuality was not understood by the classical theoreticians as being 'individualistic,' as a self-centered isolation" (2000, p. 93). What Humboldt and other neo-humanists emphasized

was the autonomous participation and communication in the public sphere oriented towards the development of the inner self, which in turn served the common good.

Let me now discuss yet another core aspect of *Bildung*, namely the self. Humboldt believed that the inner self was the inner core of any human being, something that is ultimately impossible to grasp, explain or control. Therefore, external powers such as the Church or political absolutism could never hope to fully control human actions. Hence, even if an individual is held in chains, s/he can still be spiritually free. Thus, Humboldt emphasized the importance of freedom in his theory of *Bildung*, for only in freedom can the inner self develop and serve as “the clarifying light and the comforting warmth of everything that he [man] undertakes outside himself” (Humboldt, 1793/2000, p. 59). During a second journey to Paris (1797), at that time influenced by the consequences of the Reign of Terror (1793-94) and the following Directory (1795-1799), which he denounced as a government of self-interest, Humboldt was aware of the unstable and unreliable institutions, traditions, and social guidelines prevailing in revolutionary times. Therefore, he looked for an alternative orientation of the acting individual and was convinced that the inner self should provide such an alternative: “When everything around us falters, then only in our innermost self can we find a safe shelter” (1797/1960, p. 506, own translation).

It must be noted at this point that Humboldt’s focus on the inner self has provoked much criticism (e.g., Litt, 1959). It was argued that his preoccupation with the internal development of the self estranged people from public life and even led to an apolitical acceptance of authority during the Third Reich. This narrow interpretation fails to consider that the concept of *Bildung* does not demand acceptance of authority, but rather aims to reverse any kind of sovereignty over man through its emancipatory aspiration. *Bildung*, conceptualized by the neo-humanists, required an interaction of self with the world. Indeed, the inner self derives its meaning only from acting in the world. Humboldt, as one who detested political absolutism, was not an advocate of political passivity, but on the contrary, he reclaimed an agency for the self that had been stymied by the Catholic Church.

The interaction between the self and the world prompts a further, interesting discussion that is related to Humboldt’s theory of *Bildung*. The German philosopher and linguist extended his theory of *Bildung* by connecting it to his linguistic observations. In the last years of his life, he understood the process of *Bildung* as being determined by interaction and collaboration through language. He envisioned a progressive self-cultivation that benefitted from a free and self-determined interplay among individuals.

## **BILDUNG AS THE PILLAR OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN GERMANY?**

The institutionalization of the concept of *Bildung* took place in the Napoleonic era, which was also the era of reformation in Prussia and among the German allies (Confederation of the Rhine). It was a time of top-down “defensive modernization” (Bollenbeck, 1994, p. 167, own translation), which aimed at preventing a bottom-up revolution, as had been the case in France. The significant historical incident that triggered the reformation in Prussia was its defeat in the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in 1806 by Napoleon’s forces. A year after the Prussian defeat, Frederick Wilhelm III exclaimed that the “physical powers, which the state has lost have to be compensated with intellectual powers” (as cited in Bollenbeck, 1994, p. 167, own translation). The important point to note is that the Prussian reformation took its impetus

from the *Bildung*-ideal formulated by neo-humanists. The belief that Prussia failed because of its focus on military, social efficiency, and utility made the intellectuals believe that a shift to the inner and moral self was indispensable.

In 1809, the Prussian state offered Humboldt the opportunity to undertake an educational reform, a task that he rejected at first until Frederick III insisted he accept the post of the Secretary of Education. What Humboldt disliked was the fact that his department was not independent and of equal ranking with other departments but was controlled by the Department of the Interior. Consequently, Humboldt's ideas were not taken into consideration whenever the Emperor's power or the existing order of the state was questioned.

His major endeavor was to make *Bildung* accessible to all citizens independent of social class. Therefore, Humboldt and his liberal collaborators on educational reform prioritized a humanistic *Bildung* (*allgemeine Menschenbildung*), which aimed at overcoming class barriers and enabling political and social emancipation. This idea was radical and opposed by many thinkers of his time who favored a selective school system suitable for each social class. Humboldt's way out of this social and political situation was to disseminate knowledge at large and to give the individual the possibility to achieve an inner form that would prevent her/him from turning into an object of absolutism, economy, or society. Thus conceived, *Bildung* was not only a reaction to the predominance of the Church, as mentioned before, but also a revolt against the constraints imposed by political absolutism.

Humboldt conceptualized an education system consisting of elementary school, secondary school, and university. He aspired to make the Prussian population literate and raise a first generation able to calculate, read, and write in their native language. The imperative of Humboldt's educational system was first to learn, and then to learn how to learn, so as to gain independence from the teacher, and later from any social constraints (cf. Menze, 1985, p. 102).

A question arises: To what degree was his educational reform successful? In fact, *Bildung*—as Humboldt envisioned it—never became a pillar of the German educational system. Already in 1810, fourteen months after his recruitment, Humboldt quit his job as Secretary of Education for political reasons (Benner, 1995). The educational reform failed not only because of the resistance of the aristocracy, who had to provide the tax money to fund the educational reform, but also due to the lack of free and autonomous individuals. The idea of leading an independent life was just too radical and hardly achievable in that historical period. For example, Humboldt's introduction of compulsory education failed in part because children were an inevitable work force for the lower class. Parents feared that they would not be able to provide for their family. In addition, the Prussian State and conservative thinkers were concerned that the rural population would move to the cities and disregard its primary occupation which was to serve the landowners and the lords to whom they belonged. Consequently, a countermovement of conservative thinkers evolved that was bound by the belief that abandoning the estate-based society, as formulated by Humboldt, was a threat to social cohesion rather than a form of social progress. The conservative thinkers, fearing anarchy, were convinced that the individual was in need of religious guidance and thus should act according to God's will and not according to personal convictions. They emphasized obedience and the respect of authority.

Since Humboldt's department was controlled by the Department of the Interior, most of his neo-humanistic ideas were simply rejected or reversed, which strengthened the

conservative countermovement as well as the Prussian State. According to Humboldt, instead of estate-based descent, only *Bildung* should lead to prestige and social standing. In his mind, this could be achieved through examination. The guiding question during the exams in educational contexts should be: How much does acquired knowledge contribute to humanity? What mattered was the examinee's stance toward and rational evaluation of the acquired knowledge in relation to humanity. As it turned out, Humboldt's insistence on exams was the demise of his neo-humanistic *Bildung*-ideal. Two major consequences resulted from the practice of testing. First, autonomous and free *Bildung* gave way to unreflective rote studying due to the development of an extensive examination. Second, a school administration functioning as a state regulatory body was formed which controlled and determined the content to be examined (Menze, 1975). Thus, *Bildung* was co-opted by the State and was rationalized, mechanized, and standardized. *Bildung* as a criterion of equality and social community was replaced with *Bildung* as a criterion of selection and distinction. The goal of abolishing estate-based inequality failed. Instead, a new kind of social exclusion and inequality emerged, namely *Bildung*-inequality (*Bildungsungleichheit*).

## THE OUTCOME OF THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM

I now examine the outcome of the educational reform along the three axes of freedom, agency, and self by referring to Theodor W. Adorno's work *Theory of Pseudo-Culture* (1959/1993).<sup>1</sup> The German philosopher and sociologist's essay revolves around the bourgeois concept of *Bildung* which "was supposed to benefit the free individual – an individual grounded in his own consciousness but developing within society" (Adorno, 1959/1993, p.19). Here, it becomes clear that Adorno concurs with Humboldt concerning the definition of *Bildung*. Both conceptualize the individual cultivating her/himself not in isolation but in exchange with the world. According to Adorno, the advent of half-*Bildung* coincided with the separation of the intellect from practical everyday experiences. Due to this disengagement from human activity, *Bildung* became measurable and independent from human affairs, or to put it in Adorno's words, it became "self-sufficient" (Adorno, 1959/1993, p. 16). Divorcing the individual from the experience of social activity led to the degeneration of the concept of *Bildung*. This detrimental development had its roots in the emancipation of bourgeois society, which gained its social status only through intellectual work tied to the purpose of achieving socially respected labor. Thus, *Bildung*, that had been conceptualized originally as an end in itself, became instrumentalized, i.e., "untrue to itself" (Adorno, 1959/1993, p. 19). The disengagement of the intellect from daily human practice can be traced back to Prussia's educational reform in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and its system of state-run examinations. Here, *Bildung* that stood for freedom and autonomy turned into an intellectual and rationalized exercise.

Freedom, originally conceived in the form of autonomy, turned into heteronomy. "Instruction and guidance," necessitated by the increased examination, led to "alien" and "mechanical" behavior as prophesied by Humboldt (1850/1993, p. 23). The inquiry

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas the German term *Halbbildung* is translated in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979) as "half-education," the English translation of *Theorie der Halbbildung* (1959) has it as "pseudo-culture." The divergent translations are due to the untranslatability of the term. Here, for the sake of continuity and because this article exclusively deals with *Bildung* and not with education or culture per se, I will use the term "half-*Bildung*."

approach, promoted in the course of educational reform, replaced judgment. Moreover, state intervention, which, according to Humboldt, “drags the spiritual and lofty down into the material and lower reality” (Humboldt, 1810, p.2), utilized the educational reform by setting up techniques controlling the content to be examined. Exams became a means capable of disciplining, regulating and observing the students (cf. Foucault, 1977). Thus, Enlightenment discourse that highlighted freedom of reason turned into instrumental rationality aiming at an increase in efficiency that led to “the all-inclusive economic apparatus” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p. 30) of modern times.

The question that needs to be addressed next is how the developments of the educational reform affected autonomous agency. What the reforms revealed was that *Bildung* is situated within antinomies. On the one hand, it presupposes autonomy, meaning acting independently so as to cultivate the inner self. On the other hand, this can only be realized in pre-given and heteronomous social orders. Thus conceived, the individual has to act autonomously in a heteronomous society. This is difficult to realize since the conditions for judgment and thus for subjective freedom are replaced by trivial learning leading to conformist behavior. As Adorno pointedly writes: “...the a priori of the essentially bourgeois concept of culture – autonomy – had no time to develop. Consciousness goes immediately from one heteronomy to another” (Adorno, 1959/1993, p. 20).

In terms of the inner self, it can be argued that the development of an autonomous inner self as conceptualized by Humboldt has expired. This is due to the instrumental relationship the individual has appropriated to the world, which increasingly excludes self-determined experiences. This relationship was facilitated among others by the increase in examinations and the rationalization of education. “Experience –the continuity of consciousness in which everything not present survives, in which practice and association establish tradition in the individual – is replaced by the selective, disconnected, interchangeable and ephemeral state of being informed” (Adorno, 1959/1993, p. 33). Thus, knowledge is reproduced and not awakened in the mind.

The primary sense that we should take away from this historical account concerning the implementation of the educational reform is that, on the one hand, *Bildung*, as a product of the Enlightenment, originally aimed at individual freedom and democracy since the concept was a reaction to social and political constraints; on the other hand, this same critical stance and its implementation brought about an attitude towards educational control achieved by state intervention which culminated in the paradoxical concept of *Bildung* that is being debated today. As Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*: “The Enlightenment, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines” (1977, p. 222).

## **BILDUNG IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE**

After having outlined the concept of *Bildung* in general and the implementation of the educational reform in particular, I shall now turn to the development of the three aspects of freedom, agency, and self in the era of neoliberalism. It is useful to expand on those notions to address the question of how *Bildung* is conceptualized in the neoliberal framework.

Today, *Bildung* functions as a servant to sustain Germany’s “future viability” (CDU, 2014a), economic “competitiveness” (CDU, 2014b) and social “prosperity” (CDU, 2014a), in the words of the ruling party, the Christian Democratic Union. When analyzing this market discourse within which *Bildung* is contextualized, we can say that the classical form of



*Bildung* ceases to exist. This was already the case when the instrumentalization of *Bildung* was promoted by the Prussian state. However, the classical ideal is still present in people's minds as the neoliberal discourse shows. Here, the resilience of the concept is utilized by framing the neoliberal kind of *Bildung* as a means to achieve "autonomy" and "freedom" of the self. Let us take a look at the case in more detail by dealing with the three notions of freedom, agency, and self in turn.

To begin with, freedom in today's educational system does not aim at subjective freedom but at governed freedom. *Bildung* has become re-learnable, re-adjustable and re-structurable, ready to serve the needs of the market. It became an accumulation of competencies and skills consistently refined according to external purposes. The individual has to be flexible and efficient in managing those skills and competencies in order to achieve self-emancipation and self-creation and be able to carve out a suitable space in society. Here lies the essence of the neoliberal paradox. On the one hand the neoliberal subject acts in her/his own interest, in freedom, so to speak; on the other hand, s/he can only act through the "same authorities from which it must become autonomous" (Bröckling, 2005, p. 9). The submission to those authorities is a precondition for entrepreneurial freedom. Thus conceived, self-government is operated through a "governable form of freedom" (Simons & Masschelein, 2008, p. 54). Although restrictive, self-government is not a contradiction to freedom but is conducted through governed freedom.

In light of this background, agency cannot be seen as a constant interplay of self-action and reflexivity but as submission. In the neoliberal sense, individuals are proclaimed to be autonomous, independent, and in charge of their futures. The entrepreneurial self is supposed to succeed in society through her/his own rational acting and choice making. Thus understood, responsibility for personal success is thrown back on the individual. Briefly, the self is made responsible for her/his own actions and choices. Consequently, poverty or social failure occur due to a personal inability to invest in functional skills and competencies needed to achieve a bright future.

Let us now turn to an examination of the notion of the self in the neoliberal framework. Already at an early age students acquire a managerial mindset in terms of learning. Continuous self-evaluation and examination serves to monitor learning results. The focus on the self seems to be given, as was the case in Humboldt, but with an external and economic purpose. The students are asked "to invest in human capital, to learn or to add value to the self and to find ways of productive inclusion" (Simons & Masschelein, 2008, p. 54). The outcome is a disciplined entrepreneurial self managing her/his actions at the same time as her/his actions are being managed by the neoliberal system. The self-entrepreneurship described here does not function as "the clarifying light and the comforting warmth of everything that he [man] undertakes outside himself" (Humboldt, 1793/2000, p. 59). Instead it inculcates a particular way of thinking, one that is managerial and strategic. This form of subjectivation (Foucault, 1977), in which self-government is sold as a practice of freedom, is the fundamental precondition of today's concept of *Bildung*.

In sum, although neoliberal *Bildung* seems to include the core aspects of freedom, autonomy, and self, we can argue that they are so significantly altered as to become hardly recognizable. Neoliberal education blurs the meaning of central notions of *Bildung* by associating them with control and heteronomy. It postulates self-government instead of freedom, submissive agency instead of autonomy, entrepreneurial self instead of autonomous self. These paradoxes serve to gloss over neoliberal educational undertakings as

being neo-humanistic in order to maintain credibility. Consequently, the core aspects of *Bildung*, freedom and autonomy, have lost their power to enlighten the inner self.

Ultimately, the advent of rationalization in the age of Enlightenment finds its ossification in the age of neoliberalism. This rationalization is impeded today by knowledge-based economies. As a result of globalization the world's economies are increasingly moving towards interdependency which leads to an increase of competition in the global market. Employees need to be vested with competencies and knowledge to preserve the competitive advantage of the company. In order to ensure this advantage, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) implemented the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 in order to establish regulated educational standards maintained through global testing, ranking and controlling. In other words, what Humboldt feared on the local level, namely the Prussian state intervention, is happening today on a global level through global commoditization and standardization of education (cf. Blommaert, 2010).

## **METAMORPHOSIS OF *BILDUNG* IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION**

Thus far, we have encountered a transformation of *Bildung* from a neo-humanistic ideal to government-run institutionalized *Bildung* aiming at managing and controlling the citizens, and finally to a concept attached to neoliberal ideals propagating self-government. In this section, I turn to a different kind of *Bildung*, one that can be found in concrete examples of human activity undertaken by young people around the globe.

*Bildung*, as envisioned by Humboldt, is inherently collaborative, interactive, and social since language is an essential component of the concept. However, language in the late Enlightenment was seen as a unifying element, holding together nation-states by clear and sharable meanings. This belief in “shared sameness” (Pennycook, 2010, p.40) and the concomitant cultural and political insecurity in Humboldt's time caused by French hegemony facilitated the rise of nationalism.

Today, greater international mobility, transnational residency, large scale migrations, and new technologies are facilitating communication across national borders, thus transforming the structure and function of language. Hence we are confronted with language that is historically, socially, and culturally layered because of its mobility across various time and space-scales. Those layers are constantly re-contextualized at an incredibly high speed in online spaces (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, What's App, YouTube), in the streets of multilingual cosmopolitan cities (e.g., transgressive graffiti, linguistic landscapes, street performers) or on TV (e.g., hip hop, stand-up-comedy, poetry slams). In the following I discuss concrete examples of everyday practices constituted by language described above. Here, I shall make the case that *Bildung* is interwoven throughout those practices.

### **Example 1: Memes in Online Spaces**

The first example refers to Jay-Z's popular hip hop song “99 Problems” which was released in 2004 and became famous through the lyrics to its chorus “If you're havin' girl problems, I feel bad for you son/ I got 99 problems, but a bitch ain't one.”



Figure 1. Martin Luther “99 Problems”. Google Images, downloaded February 28, 2015.

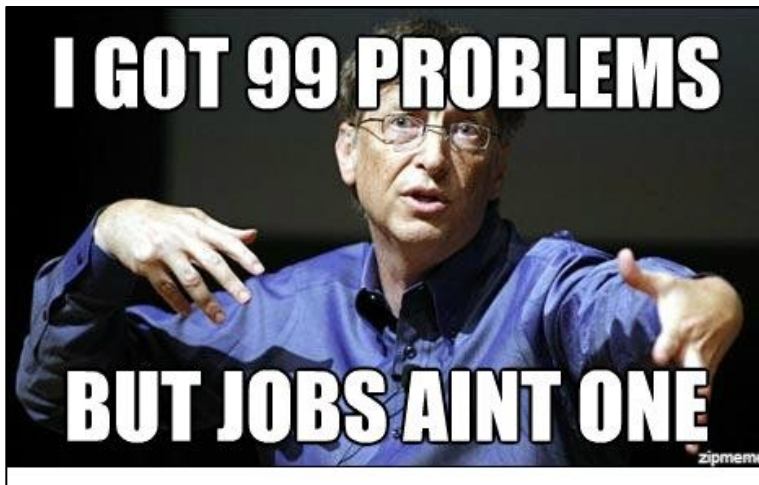


Figure 2. Steve Jobs “99 Problems“. Google Images, downloaded February 28, 2015.

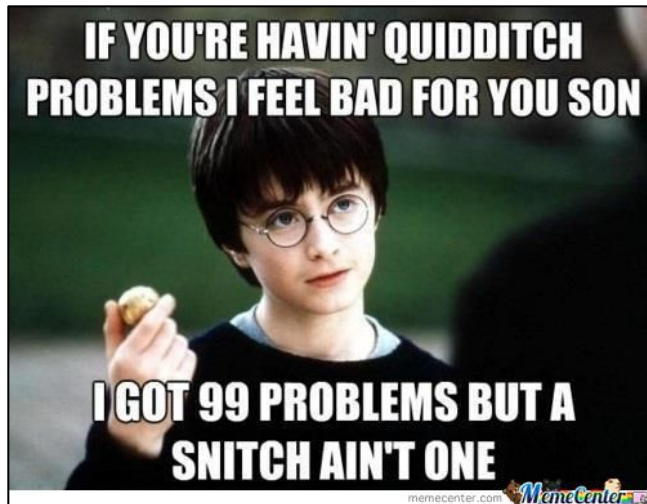


Figure 3. Harry Potter “99 Problems“. Google Images, downloaded February 28, 2015.

Memes are multimodal resources in the sense that they include text and images. Those resources exemplify the mobility of signs across various time and space-frames involving visual and textual adjustments which alter significantly the function and the meaning of the memes related to Jay-Z’s song. While the adjustments are done locally, the uptake takes place globally through the sharing and eventually re-adjusting of memes on social networks. What we can observe is that all the memes relate to each other intertextually by re-using recognizable textual elements such as “99 problems” or “ain’t one” but they differ graphically. The Martin Luther version is maximally altered concerning its textual and visual features but is still recognizable because of the widely known song and the related memes. Also, the memes call to mind the original situation which the image represents itself. However, all three memes add various layers of contextualization to the original meme thus leading to re-semiotization, that is, a process of repetition that involves “an entirely new set of contextualization conditions and thus results in an entirely ‘new’ semiotic process” (Blommaert & Varis, 2014, p. 8). In other words, repetition allows for a different appropriation of textual features and a re-localization of original expressions.

### Example 2: Street Art

The second example refers to a street art I came across in Exarchia, a district in Athens, home to left-wing and anarchist movements, students, and intellectuals. It displays a man reminiscent of Theodoros Kolokotronis, the leader of the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) against the Ottoman Empire. The features that remind of the famous leader in the armed struggle are the traditional shoes, the skirt, and especially the headpiece. It builds on the popular street art piece known as *Flower Chucker* (Bethlehem, 2004) created by the subversive British street artist Banksy. The *Flower Chucker* displays a protestor throwing a bouquet instead of a rock or a grenade, showing hope for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. The similarity between the two street art pieces lies in the posture of the protesting men and in the covered face. However, in the Greek version the protestor is holding a grenade in the shape of the Euro-sign that is already lit, thus pointing to the Greek government-debt crisis.



Figure 4. Street art in Exarchia, Athens. Google Images, downloaded February 28, 2015.



Figure 5. Street art in Bethlehem, by Banksy, 2004. Google Images, downloaded February 28, 2015.

In both cases, street art emphasizes “the mobility of signs across time and space, combined with a strong sense of the local” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 22). Locality creates here a very different meaning and effect, due to practices that are not only local and social but also historical. For example, we can observe that further historical layers were added to the original street art: the layer of long history (War of Independence) - connected to the national frame of time and space - dramatically affects the layer of recent history (European debt crisis). In sum, similar representations found in Bethlehem and Athens were produced as a result of different social and historical processes in different places and at different times.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The examples above show a new kind of *Bildung*, one that is constituted by multimodal, ironic, playful, serious, critical, local, and transgressive forms of expression that are not to be found in textbooks or educational standards but on walls of cosmopolitan cities or on diverse social networks. These sites are transformed into dialogical spaces that make visible what young people absorb, perceive, and receive in their environment. It seems that the young are shedding fresh light on language by challenging the clear and unidirectional meaning of signs upheld by modernist thinkers. This modernist view is also reproduced by language education. Here, it is argued that language functions in a unidirectional way, that is, denotational meanings (dictionary meanings) in combination with correct language use generate correct and understandable meanings. The memes and street art above exemplify that today's youth deploys a different understanding of meaning, one that is no longer linear, stable, and denotational but fragmented, layered, and delocalized (cf. Blommaert, 2014; Pennycook, 2010).

Although it uses the same material (vocabulary or grammar of established English language) as its 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestor, this kind of *Bildung* does not cohere with today's neoliberal *Bildung*; it remains heterogeneous to it. For instance, in case of the memes we can observe that people have created a dialogical space that functions only in an indexical or metapragmatic mode (cf. Blommaert, 2014). The meaning of signs does not depend on the correctness of their grammar but on their indexicality. It cannot be ascertained without the social and cultural knowledge of a given context. Here, the young generation seems to be transforming the dominant representation of *Bildung* as serious intellectual pursuit into a playful, ironic, multilayered semiotic activity.

Moreover, in both examples creativity is based on repetition of other's expressions or images. For instance, by repeating elements from Banksy's *Flower Chucker*, the Greek street art is not creating sameness but difference that is imbued with another historicity and locality. Here, heterogeneous and hybrid constructions generated by repetitions and local practices challenge the modernist understanding of cultural authenticity. What we can observe are moments of self-action that are not managed or affected by instructions and language policies. Young people seem to be reclaiming the agency that had been undermined by the separation of the intellect from practical everyday experiences in educational institutions. From the perspective of state-governed language education, the practices in the examples above are decried as being meaningless and shallow - a degradation of *Bildung*. What critics often fail to see are the multilayered meanings deployed by today's youth and the complexities behind their meaning-making practices.

In the following I attempt to elucidate this metamorphosed kind of *Bildung* by returning to the three core notions of freedom, agency, and the self. Concerning freedom, it is reasonable to say that individual freedom and government power cannot be seen as polar opposites as has been done by Humboldt in his theory of *Bildung*. Instead, both sites are entangled with one another since *Bildung* is responsible for both the ideals of freedom and democracy and for today's neoliberal ideals of instrumental rationality and efficiency. Thus, *Bildung* cannot be understood as a counter-ideal, as an ideal of freedom. Instead, the moment of freedom lies in self-action within dominant and heteronomous orders.

However, the kind of *Bildung* observed in the examples above operates in dispersed self-actions which are visible but not as hegemonic as the neoliberal kind of *Bildung*. That is not to

say that this kind of *Bildung* is without value; on the contrary, it cuts loose from the established neoliberal *Bildung*, traverses time and space-scales and builds networks of signs circulating, fusing, overlapping together and establishing a high degree of creativity and plurality. In fact, agency present in the new kind of *Bildung* is very much reminiscent of the “tactics” described by Michel de Certeau, which he described as “indeterminate trajectories that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move” (de Certeau, 1984, p.35).

It seems that young people across the world are inventing another kind of *Bildung*, one that allows expressing oneself in various spaces. Apparently, the self is not simply managed by the neoliberal system; maybe this is what Humboldt meant when he maintained that the core of the inner self is untouchable and uncontrollable. The examples above show that the self is able to subvert the disciplining powers for brief moments by adapting to the environment dominated by those very powers.

The conditions in today’s age of globalization indeed offer alternative avenues for *Bildung*. New technologies and globalization processes make the tactics visible which were perceived as “quiet” and “quasi-invisible” by de Certeau (1984, p. 31) in the eighties. This visibility sheds some light on the cracks of social media and public spaces that have been exploited for self-action beyond academic abilities; in turn, visibility brings about a reflexivity that enables increasingly self-conscious practices. The reflexivity of those practices enables the young to perceive themselves not only as passive consumers in a global neoliberal economy but as active producers of formal and creative tactics; it enables them to act slightly differently from what is expected of them by the dominant orders.

This is precisely what Humboldt recognized as a constitutive element in the process of *Bildung*. Thus, we have to take seriously those “local practices” (Pennycook, 2010) visible in social media, rap sessions, subversive lyrics, linguistic landscapes and other venues (see also Blommaert, 2014; Canagarajah, 2012; Pennycook, 2007). They show evidence that a new kind of *Bildung* is emerging; we just need to be willing to see it.

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