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# Lost in Translation? *Bildung* between Ideological Debate and Pragmatism: A Response to Julia Campos

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The term *Bildung* is notoriously difficult to translate. Though it is often translated as “education,” this does not entirely convey its meaning nor entirely explain its use in a myriad compounds such as *Bildungssprache* (language of/for education), *Bildungsweg* (path to education), *Allgemeinbildung* (general education/knowledge expectations), *Ausbildung* (education for professional purposes), *Halbbildung* (semi education). Richard Rorty (2009) attempted to transfer this term into English more fittingly by coining the term “edification” as a portmanteau of education and qualification; other translators have focused on its meaning as a formative process (for an individual’s personality).

It may seem that the lexical field pertaining to *Bildung* forms a hierarchy of knowledge and lifestyles that cultivate desirable configurations of knowledge (such as *Bildungssprache*), which includes identifying and “containing” undesirable forms of knowledge such as *Halbbildung* and identifying mobility between different states of knowledge and corresponding personal development (e.g., *Ausbildung*). “Comprehensive knowing” is implicitly embedded within this hierarchy as a transcendent state of being which, though it can never be fully achieved, is an important pursuit in which the individual can gain access to certain knowledge thresholds that are acknowledged by society and, in German, correlate with distinctions within the lexical field outlined above. In social science, the ability to convert the status afforded by these knowledge thresholds into social and material resources is often described as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). A correlation of the *Bildung* terms to social status or milieus would seem to confirm the semantic separation in hierarchical forms of education/knowledge: people who have access to *Bildung* represent the high-income and upper classes and the others are situated between *Ausbildung* (limited social mobility), *Halbbildung* (failed social mobility) or no *Bildung* at all. Consequently, one might assume that within this lexical hierarchy, the education/qualification of migrants, in particular refugees and asylum seekers, would be positioned among the lower *Bildung*-categories. This would concomitantly be a stigma that labels their knowledge configurations as undesirable, dismissing it as potential cultural capital.

Studies on *Bildung* consistently produce statistical evidence for this (admittedly somewhat overgeneralized) portrayal of *Bildung*-distribution in the German(-speaking) societies. Children from migrant families overall show lower success and completion rates in the school system. People with lower *Bildung* in general have lower income, quality of life, etc. However, both the semantic-social status association as well as the findings of statistical studies do not tell the complete story. *Bildung* is indeed one of the undisputed cornerstones of Germany’s – and the other German-speaking societies’ – societal contract. Access to it is one of the most important goals regularly proclaimed in election campaigns. Campos is right, however, in portraying the multi-faceted philosophical, historical, and ideological debates

surrounding that concept as ambivalent and, more recently, as being heavily influenced by neoliberal thinking, much of which is legitimized by standardizing actions of international organizations such as the OECD. As a result, the multi-tiered German educational system displays severe signs of erosion. While nobody would dispute the need for reforms in any educational system, in particular one that has been growing organically for many centuries, the commercialization of the education system, in particular in post-secondary education, is a radical and rapid departure from educational principles, which undisputedly have been a major contributor to Germany's economic, political, societal, and ecological success.

The diversity, transparency, and permeability of the *Bildung* and edification system shows that the system in principle is required to provide a solid education to everyone based on individual interests, strengths as well as talents and – despite various tiers – is permeable in all directions (e.g., by different qualification paths on the second and third *Bildungsweg*, “the second and third path to education”). Instead of one monolithic desirable state of “comprehensive knowing,” several different knowledge configurations are indeed accepted and respected in society as positively sanctioned pursuits for the individual. Though it would be wrong to deny different “tastes” in *Bildung* across the social stratification of different milieus, as a whole, the focus on a plurality of possible knowledge configurations as a primary goal sets the driving concept behind the *Bildungssystem* apart from a more strictly meritocratic educational concept in other Western nations. Designing education around individual “merit” places all responsibility beyond an initial state of “equal opportunity” squarely on the individual alone, showing no interest in creating equal outcomes. This magnifies “tacit” inequality such as different stages of personal development and social backgrounds, a trait that is still present in the German *Bildungssystem* but which is overtly addressed and counteracted to a certain degree. Instead of reducing academic achievement to the automatic unfolding of “innate” talents, *Bildung* acknowledges education as a resource-intensive, problematic social process that will not fit all biographies in the same way. To counter this, in addition to the “second” and “third path” options to diplomas, public education is tuition-free for German citizens and non-citizens alike from preschool to even the most advanced degrees, and there are various financial support programs for low-income students to cover their living expenses. Private schools are rare, compared to North America for example, and are widely seen as elitist but not necessarily “better,” in some cases even lesser in quality than public schools.

What implications does this have for people entering the educational system from the outside, such as refugees, asylum seekers, or other migrants?

The schooling laws of Germany make no difference between German citizens and citizens of foreign countries when they reside in Germany or – in the case of refugees – who have obtained asylum status. A ninth grade education constitutes the minimum education requirement for everyone. It is usually achieved by age 16, but under certain circumstances the age limit maybe extended to as far as age 25. Currently, this age limit is frequently applied to the thousands of refugees entering Germany every day without comparable schooling in their home countries. As a result, the school system is obliged to provide language instruction and other instructional support measures to adequately integrate these young people. This is, without a doubt, a challenging, sometime insurmountable task: to teach students when they do not understand or speak the language of instruction, when they are not able to communicate with their peers, and when they bring a very different educational background to class, when they are considerably older than their peers. Without question, many mistakes have been made and are being made by a variety of agents when dealing with

this challenge. However, *Ausbildung* under these difficult circumstances seems to be the instrument of choice, or at least an adequate one, to bridge the wide gaps between the knowledge configurations students bring with them and what the educational system requires. This is similar to the situation of German-born students. They too may respond better to, and often excel in, vocational training (“edification”) for any number of reasons.

While Campos’ paper does not elaborate on *Ausbildung*, others criticize it as operating in the interest of a neoliberal agenda. However, to interpret *Ausbildung* as solely serving neoliberal interests because of a prevailing narrative which states that the German economy is in high demand of skilled workers and for that reason strongly supports the dual education of refugees, would be a misrepresentation of the dual education approach itself. By contrast, the fact remains that improving professional prospects for recent migrants with fragile social positions would benefit many of them in regard to their language acquisition and construction of a robust social identity in Germany. In addition to recognizing their existing knowledge configurations and showing students how to convert them into a form that is recognizable to others, the *Ausbildung* model allows learners to use their existing intrinsic motivation for their professions to acquire the German language and relevant German knowledge configurations, if they so wish.

In a Research & Development project geared toward refugees and asylum seekers in particular and funded by the *Mercator Institut für Sprachförderung und Deutsch als Zweitsprache* (the Mercator Institute of Language Enhancement and German as a Second Language) in collaboration with the Education Ministries of Bavaria and other German states, a group of researchers and language teachers at the University of Munich (LMU) and the Technical University of Munich (TUM) are currently developing a comprehensive programme which integrates language learning/teaching and preparatory courses for vocational tiers and which builds on – where possible – students’ previously acquired professional skills. Also, those migrants who bring professional certificates from other countries do have access to particular language courses in their field of expertise in order to expedite their access to professional certification in a German-speaking environment.

Although one could well argue for a creeping, systemic colonization of education through the ideas that emerged through so-called “new public management” and the “accountingization” of public life, I would prefer, here, to close by focusing very specifically on the political agents themselves. The naivety, ignorance, *Halbbildung* and dilettantism often observed in political and administrative circles indicate that many political actors within the system are not even aware of the educational traditions and underpinnings of internationalized, nor of “home grown,” educational philosophies and practices. For instance, the sweeping Bologna reforms in Europe have promoted the myth of an improved, globally calibrated, prêt-à-porter educational system, one that is simply modern as opposed to the “old fashioned” *Bildungssystem*. However, within just a few years it has had to undergo several major reforms itself, as it does not quite fit the conditions and expectations of the organically grown educational worldviews of central Europe. It seems that neoliberal methods and practices have become so engrained in our management of the world that we no longer recognize the contradictions to our beliefs, values, and principles generated by them. The lasting irony is, then, that our world today might never before have been in such desperate need of *Bildung* to get us out of an ever-tightening, vicious circle – a *Bildung* concept hollowed out by the very reforms that tried and continue to try to improve it.

## REFERENCES

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