

Can we please stop talking about ‘*Bildung*’—and for that matter, too, ‘the Humboldtian university’?

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Abstract

*Two terms to be seen especially in the philosophy of higher education, but also more broadly, are those of *Bildung* and the ‘Humboldtian university’. They have taken on a sacred aura, and have become a form of bewitchment, generating a large intellectual industry. Their sacredness is secured much in the way the two terms have been positioned as markers of educational purity, in response to phenomena such as entrepreneurialism, instrumentalism, learning outcomes, and a separation of research and teaching—phenomena that in turn are positioned as profane. Resort to these two terms has appeared successively over the past one hundred years, in the wake of world wars, the emergence of mass higher education, strong state steering, and the intellectual movements of postmodernism and posthumanism. We may understand such intellectual ploys, in returning to ideas of northern Europe with a two-hundred-year history, as defensive gestures possessing a conservative function. The sacredness of *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’ constitutes an ideology that protects certain academic interests. In turn, this sacred aura forecloses on efforts to understand seriously the character of the twenty-first century and to create imaginative educational concepts that are adequate to the complexities that the present century presents. As an example of a more contemporary conceptualisation of higher education, an ecological imaginary is suggested.*

*Key words: *Bildung*; higher education; Humboldt; ideology; university*

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Introduction

Discourse changes, but perhaps it does not always change enough. A dominant discourse takes hold that may be surprisingly enduring and, where that ensues, the question arises as to whether there is space to opt out of such a dominant discourse.

Further, perhaps there are kinds of significant discourse that are lacking. This matter of *discursive immobility* is germane to the field of higher education studies. With little more than a half century behind it, the language of higher education studies and the location and interests of its associated communities exhibit not just movement but counter-movements including those not only of critique but also of resistance.

In these discursive movements, as implied, some terms are repudiated and others embraced, and sometimes rather uncritically in both quarters. *Sacred and profane*: the winds of celebration and repudiation, of veneration and excommunication, may both be felt. Underneath this linguistic turmoil simmer tensions, ideals, and embattled positions. As with all discourses, the discourse of higher education is a carrier of academic ideologies, explicitly critiquing formations but also unwittingly revealing long-lasting associations. In these discursive swirls, academics can be bewitched by language and the images and ideas that it represents. In this paper, I scrutinise just two connected terms of such bewitchment in vogue in the scholarly literature on higher education—in particular, that of *Bildung* but also and somewhat marginally that of the connected term, ‘the Humboldtian university’—and I attempt to uncover some of the social interests they promote, both within the academic field but also in their relationships with the wider society.

The two terms—*Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’—swim multiply in the pool of the sacred and the profane. On the one hand, both terms hold as sacred particular institutional forms and pedagogical practices in higher education and, in doing so, the terms themselves take on heightened sacred auras. Symbol and referent, both become sacred. The institutional forms and practices that they repudiate assume profane aspects, as do their associated linguistic terms. Serious repercussions follow; in solidifying certain imaginaries and their institutional forms, the usage of these two terms foreshortens the prospect of entirely new imaginaries emerging, more conducive to the contemporary age. One such imaginary, which is suggested here, is that of the ecological. The ecological imaginary addresses itself precisely to the theoretical, ontological and practical exigencies of the contemporary age (and so deigns to draw on tropes from much earlier times). This imaginary contains the strains of inter-connectedness, impairment, antagonism, motion, and totality and yet difference. It is further suggested that, in relation to the university, eight mega-ecosystems can especially be identified, in which and through which the ecological imaginary might be carried forward. Adopting such an imaginary—at once real and ideational and attuned to the present age—is to foreswear on any sense of sacredness and profanity.

Preliminaries about the present argument

Before plunging into my argument proper, I should make certain points about its direction. I am not especially wanting to critique individual papers which have focused on either of the two terms in question here (Bildung and ‘the Humboldtian university’), for I am wanting to develop a thesis about this literature as a whole. A Google search of ‘Bildung and education’ is met with an indication that there are 705,000 items under that heading in the literature. A parallel search for items on ‘The Humboldtian university’ indicates 38,300 results. When we see figures of 705,000—or even 38,000 for that matter—we can account for it in this way. While there are texts that flow directly from interests in the philosophy and history of higher education (and I refer to some of them here), papers of that kind must account for a small proportion of the three-quarters of a million texts identified here. The field of the philosophy and history of higher is a highly contained and even marginal field, and comprises (relatively speaking) only a very small number of scholarly papers. References to Bildung and ‘the Humboldtian university’ accordingly are generally *en passant* references, the terms just figuring in occasional sentences.

This is precisely the starting point and, indeed, the crux of this paper, that there is a sizeable—indeed, vast—literature in which these two terms appear. It is as if scholars feel a need to use these terms and wish to be seen to be positioning their texts in the context of these terms. Commenting on the 200-year literature on ‘the Humboldtian university’ alone, Thorsten Nybom (2003) refers to it as ‘incontinent’. Reflection on, and scholarly exegesis of, Bildung and ‘the Humboldtian university’ has become an industry and, accordingly, it is the presence of this whole inter-connected body of literature that forms my target here; indeed, the very fact that this literature exists. Certainly, within that literature, papers focus on or draw on these terms with varying stances. In relation to the concept of Bildung alone, some papers imply a distancing from the term, attempting a historical and conceptual exegesis of the term (Horlacher, 2004). Some, in that vein, seek to draw out particular long-lasting sediments in the idea, perhaps self-formation (Alves, 2019), the spiritual dimension (Hotam, 2019) or phenomenology (Brinkman, 2016). Others, indeed, delimit it and critique it, with eyes on postmodernism (Koller, 2003; Wimmer, 2003) or on posthumanism (Biesta, 2002b; Taylor, 2016), in attempts to open a space towards contemporary interpretations of the concept or even to reinterpret it as a form of *universal* ‘discursive initiation’ that deliberately runs counter to postmodernism and posthumanism (Stojanov, 2012). Others energetically pick it up and seek out its possibilities in particular domains, such as music (VarkØy, 2010), primary education (Hardy et al., 2015), civic education (Kenner, 2020), chemistry (Sjöström, 2013) and languages (Byram, 2010). Yet

others repudiate the term, while still giving it much air (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003), and so overlap with the present argument.

In this surge of scholarship on the idea and, indeed, the practical matter of *Bildung*, and even in the more critical texts, it remains a generally sympathetic and endorsing literature, tending ultimately to fall back on the term, usually finding some and often much of value in it. Rare, if it exists, is a text offered of the kind that I am mounting in this paper, namely a socio-ontological and futures-oriented critique not just of the term—of *Bildung*—but rather of this whole literature in itself. Such a preparedness to leave entirely behind a favoured concept—and even a whole literature—is, I suggest, vital if educational concepts are to be derived afresh so as to work in the twenty-first century, with the philosophical, ontological, geo-political and ecological landscape that it presents. ‘It is politically suicidal to stand up against [*Bildung*]’ (Prange, 2004, p.502). Epistemological courage is, therefore, called for:

The philosopher is expert in concepts and the lack of them. He knows which of them are not viable, ... which ones do not hold up for an instant. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 4)

Crafting educational concepts for a particular age requires a willingness to strike out anew. It is only by adopting such a disposition that we can evade the bewitchment that individual concepts and even whole literatures sometimes exert, and so free ourselves from their sacred aura.

‘Bildung’ and ‘Humboldt’: Complex concepts and problematic uses

The two terms—*Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’—are to be found in overlapping scholarships, and they are organically linked for both stood for culture and education as cultivation (Anderson, 2020; Readings, 1997; von Humboldt, 2018). Indeed, ‘The University of Berlin [the original Humboldtian university] was the institutionalised form of *Bildung*’ (Wittrock, 1993, p. 317). Both terms are now deployed to combat policy frameworks such as neoliberalism, marketisation, and managerialism. These latter frameworks are profane, critiqued as being dominant in contemporary higher education, and an attachment—or rather a re-attachment—is intimated to older ways of orchestrating and understanding higher education; to institutional and pedagogical forms held sacred.

The two terms are to be seen in slightly different literatures, the one concerned with students’ educational experience (*Bildung*) and the other with

universities as institutions (as in ‘the Humboldtian university’). They also stand rather differently in the policy discourse. Whereas in their public speeches, some institutional leaders—especially in continental Europe—are to be seen, if only occasionally, proclaiming that theirs is an Humboldtian university, they are seldom if ever to be seen as proclaiming that they offer an education that is *Bildung*-inspired. The latter as an idea is being promulgated in the educational literature, especially in texts containing philosophical leanings. Partly, this set of discursive orientations reflects the institutional focus of university leaders, who are less immediately concerned with the philosophy underpinning the study programmes that their university has to offer and more the worldly characterisation of their universities. Be that as it may, both terms have come to take on symbolic functions, in which their adherents are implicitly signing themselves up to earlier (sacred) institutional and educational projects and, in the process, are often explicitly disavowing contemporary (profane) others, which are portrayed as polluted by injurious forces.

In the use of ‘the Humboldtian university’, adherents are wanting to distance themselves from tropes of ‘the entrepreneurial university’ or to any down valuing of teaching in a university’s mission, or as Readings (1997) puts it the vapid idea of ‘excellence’. In the use of *Bildung*, adherents are disavowing any allegiance to a sense of students-as-consumers and a discourse of learning outcomes, skills and employability. In both cases, there is a greater sense as to where the adherent wishes not to be placed than where the favoured place is being envisaged. The mention of *Bildung* poses several problems. First, as a specifically educational concept, it emerged in a specific time and place, namely early nineteenth-century Germany, although building on a long-standing conceptual, cultural and religious melange (Alves, 2019). Alongside it are cognate terms in the Nordic languages (Willberg, 2015). As with other significant concepts, it has developed over time, in the context of education and pedagogy in general, and has been taken on in philosophical work that refers to learning processes—even in the public domain—as emblematic of *Bildung*. Second, its complexity contains movements in various directions, with two clusters in it. On the one hand, it contains hints of personal development, of self-formation, of free inquiry, of the development of mind, of rationality, of emancipation, and of education as a good in itself. Although I pick out these sentiments as a cluster, there are, of course, tensions among them. In it, too, on the other hand, is a cluster of sentiments of an institutionalisation of educational processes, of an allegiance to the state, of a worldly project, of citizenship, of a calling out of persons into a wide horizon of being, of culture and even of spirituality and mysticism. This set of sentiments, united as they are by a sense of an education for development beyond that of persons as such, also contains

tensions, in particular as between Bildung being a project of self-formation and a project of the self in some kind of relationality (whether to the state or to an undefined public or otherness).

This extraordinary complexity which could be unravelled much further is often noted in relation to the term Bildung but then, typically, it is varying elements that are picked out and given emphases. Why so? Because it is especially used not in an analytical mode but in a persuasive mode. One way of understanding the meaning of terms as they are being used is to discern the meanings that are being jettisoned or repudiated. Here, although often vague, Bildung is deployed to favour an education that is not waylaid by entrepreneurialism or neoliberalism or an excessive audit regime or a strident managerialism. Anything smacking of instrumentalism is in the firing line (VarkØy, 2010). Bildung is heralded as a true education and granted a sacred status in opposition to the malformations being detected under the sway of any of those other contemporary movements. This situation is problematic enough—a term is deployed that invokes an extraordinarily complex concept, only certain emphases of which are picked out, and is being used to repudiate vaguely some demon held to constitute a deleterious force in higher education. In short, Bildung is being used emotively both as a *hurrah!* term, to celebrate a favoured (if largely unspecified) form of education and, paradoxically, also as a *boo!* term (Honderich, 1995, p. 225), to identify and ward off threats to the favoured education. In its hurrah function, in the celebration of Bildung and promoting its *sacred* character, we receive partiality; in its boo functioning, in contesting the *profane* demons, there is a characteristic vagueness. However, the situation is even more severe than so far described.

As observed, Bildung emerged as a major educational concept in German education in the late eighteenth century. A question then arises: *what role is a concept performing today that emerged in a very particular space and time two centuries ago?* We can say that the role is protective: the term is being drawn upon today in efforts to preserve an education with characteristics—some characteristics at least—that are assumed to have been present in earlier times in Europe. We might add ‘assumed to have been present in late eighteenth century Germany’ and to do so would be at once to point up a particularly problematic aspect of the discourse in question. We are witness here to multiple sleights of discursive hand. There is an attempt here to carry over a set of meanings from one situation to a quite different situation, from one country in process of being formed in northern Europe two hundred years ago to a Europe and even to an entire world today and of a quite different order. This is—to put it kindly—astonishing. That a concept that had meaning in early nineteenth century Germany and northern Europe, with its elitism, its strong education-state ties, and the formation and development of nations and

nationalism, and that grew out of a social order that accorded high status to philosophers as public intellectuals, and is assumed to have pertinence in an interconnected world of global and cognitive capitalism, mass higher education, and instantaneity, and facing multiple world crises, has to be recognised as being highly problematic, if not without substance altogether (Anderson, 2020).

Mis-readings

What we have here is a hankering after a world that is *not* this world. As observed, the aspects of the present world that are of particular concern—the educational profanities of this world—are characteristically unspecified. In a way, the summoning of *Bildung* is a plea for anything but what we have (in neoliberalism or total quality management or whatever the malicious vector is taken to be). The weight of this discursive gambit is on what is being repudiated, vague as it is, rather than what is to be endorsed. It is clear, too, that something is being lost—in the wake of the malicious forces in question—and is now being advocated. Less clear, however, is whether what is being lost is still present today as a residual element from nineteenth century Germany, or is to be resuscitated (having become dormant), or is some kind of cousin to be newly invented. After all, is it really being claimed that, by some extraordinary means, elements of early nineteenth century German higher education have managed to survive over two centuries, through world wars, and through into the emergence of global knowledge capitalism and a digital world?

What is clear is that the term *Bildung* is being used defensively, to protect the citadel of true education, assumed to have been present in the past. As observed, but hardly ever acknowledged, that education was a system for the formation of elites, was built around a tightly framed pedagogical relationship with a sharp separation between teacher and taught, was actually highly individualist, and rested on epistemologies that were abstract and that shunned connections with the wider world. It was an education of and for high culture. Here, too, in higher education, the contiguous idea of ‘the Humboldt university’ comes into play for that term is characteristically used to depict an institutional form exhibiting a tight interplay between teaching and research. Once again, we run into severe problems. The idea of there being a close and harmonious set of interconnections between teaching and research has always been suspect; indeed, a ‘myth’ (Anderson, 2020; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Hughes, 2005). Even within a single university, departments can vary considerably in the extent to which there is any kind of relationship between the two functions (Coate et al., 2003). And where there is a relationship, it may be a

pernicious relationship as—in different universities—teaching vies against research or research vies against teaching. But this idea of research and teaching understood as being in harmony and in a close relationship with each other in nineteenth century Europe is faulty for three reasons.

First, the contemporary meaning of research is very recent, having developed since World War II, and really over the past half a century; and continues its evolution into a massive bio-digitally oriented structure, dominated by big pharma, artificial intelligence, computer-based engineering, robotics and the life sciences (Peters, 2013). In turn, the meaning of the very term research has narrowed to take on connotations of digitisation, large data sets, the physical sciences and related fields in informatics and artificial intelligence. As such, the humanities are falling outside the field of research. Second, research as a systematic function of the university, has long been favoured above teaching in a number of respects, in institutional evaluations, in reputations, in academic trajectories and in internal staffing policies. Research and teaching have seldom stood in a relationship of equals. Third, German universities were slow to take up a research function, not least since the state came to promote research through dedicated research and development capabilities—especially in the Max Planck Institutes (Peacock, 2016)—that were established outside the universities in Germany. As a result, far from teaching and research being equal and being partners, research took relatively less priority in German universities and, until recently, just two to three German universities were placed in the top one hundred universities of the major world university rankings (Huang, 2011).

In short, use of both of the terms *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’ are defensive ploys, although they have slightly different discursive functions. And, in both cases, their use denotes a grave mis-reading of the situation. On the one hand, *Bildung* is an appeal to an education that, to the extent that it existed, was to be found in a system not just radically different from that of today but harbouring forms of pedagogy and possessing social and national functions that can legitimately be repudiated today. They were pedagogies that were relatively closed and served nationalistic and elitist interests. On the other hand, ‘the Humboldtian university’ is an appeal to a fantasy of a university—one that never existed (Anderson, 2020). For institutional leaders and administrators who invoke it (as in proclamations of the kind: this university is Humboldtian in spirit), the term serves as a pretence that teaching and research are on a level and that they are working well together and complementing each other (when there is little or no evidence to support such a claim).

It might be tempting to suggest that *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’ are becoming empty signifiers (Szkudlarek, 2007) in higher education

scholarship, to be taken up in a multitude of discursive ploys. Characteristically, I have been suggesting, they *are* empty, devoid of any proper infilling, leaving the reader to imagine what is being suggested. These have become empty terms, being used in unspecified ways, to register half-spoken intimations. However, while there is a conceptual emptiness about these terms in their current usages, they are replete with emotional and persuasive power, deployed in rhetorical flourishes to command assent to an argument and to evoke hostility towards an often vaguely specified danger. The problems of the use of this kind of discursive ploy are, however, not yet exhausted. There is a yet further disquieting stance being taken up in their usages.

I have pointed to the historicity of both of these terms. Neither can be taken on board without at least a doffing of the cap towards their emerging out of spaces and times a long way in the past. Doubtless and assuredly, the current age has much over which to be concerned, not least for those concerned for the potential of higher education. Phenomena that have been long and rightly critiqued in the literature include the marketisation of the pedagogical relationship (Molesworth et al., 2011), extreme competition and stratification between higher education institutions, an instrumentality in the deep epistemology of knowledge inquiry, especially within capitalism (Bernstein, 2018), an overly tight managerial regime (Doherty, 2015), the use of learning analytics and learning outcomes, lack of fairness in admission systems, rising levels of tuition fees, poor quality systems, the diminution of the humanities and the undue imposition of the language of skills and employability. However, the summoning up of terms to evoke the past in no way addresses such phenomena. At best, these terms stand for a dual misreading, a misreading of the pertinence of historical tropes to the contemporary world and a misreading of the contemporary world itself.

The limitations of critique

As observed, those who adopt the two rhetorical devices in question here are doing so often in a spirit of critique. Both the terms of *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’ are drawn upon to claim distance from contemporary malformations as they are judged (of neoliberalism, of marketisation, of students being positioned as customers, of managerialism, of the separation of teaching and research, or whatever it may be). Those malformations are being critiqued through the very use of either of the two rhetorical devices. However, the critique on display in such rhetorical devices is characteristically limited and superficial, and in two respects. First, the use of either of the two terms is accompanied by a disinclination seriously

to delve into the malformation in question. As stated, there is typically a vagueness here, as to the actual malformation that is in our rhetorician's sights. But even where the malformation is specified, rarely do we see an attempt to examine in any depth the malformation in question. For instance, the term marketisation (or market) may be used, but the customary ploy is to assume that the use of such a term is both self-explanatory and self-sufficient. This rhetorical voice speaks loudly but deigns here, for example, to examine the breadth, depth and character of markets (plural) in higher education. Rarely, are we given any intimation in this literature that there are multiple markets in higher education (for example, as between research and teaching; or across disciplines; or as between the Global North and the Global South), none of those markets is a pure market, each being a quasi-market with some state steering and/or limitation (Brown 2011), and those markets are in part sustained by the higher education sector, it being in the interests of the dominant institutions of higher education to maintain the paraphernalia of competition, institutional stratification, rankings and so forth. Markets are not uncommonly taken to be and are implicitly presented to the readers as unitary and single-dimensional phenomena, and entirely outwith, and bearing in on, the higher education sector, when all of these aspects are actually complex and debatable.

This reluctance to tarry (Zizek, 1993) with the actual complexity of any situation in question—in the company of the tropes of *Bildung* and 'the Humboldtian university'—goes even deeper. For example, occasionally one sees reference, especially in support of the use of *Bildung*, to the student-as-customer. But what might it mean to call up *Bildung* here? Just what kind of pedagogical relationship is being sighted as the epitome of the teacher-student relationship? Is a return to that characteristic of early nineteenth century being mooted, whatever that may be? But even more seriously, important matters are evaded with this rhetoric. Assume that the culprit here is that of marketisation (as preventing the presence of *Bildung*). Where, in such discursive moves, do we see any serious attempt to disaggregate the different issues here? There are issues, say, of the pedagogical space currently available to students. Examples can be seen, even in heightened marketized regimes, of study programmes being designed in the direction of open learning situations, with students being encouraged and prompted to take on exploratory and imaginative learning demeanours (Schwittay, 2021). Against this background, talk of *Bildung* can imply only that such alternative pedagogical spaces are limited, if not entirely obliterated, and so the term can act as a defence against trying for imaginative new pedagogical arrangements and relationships.

One could go further and claim the summoning up of the idea of *Bildung* is an avoidance strategy. Resorting to such a historical theme acts as a means of avoiding not only a serious examination of the contemporary higher education

landscape but of the possibilities that may be emerging. The use of *Bildung* condemns its users to live in the past at just a moment—perhaps—when new spaces may be opening. There is a lack of realism here, in the technical sense. These rhetoricians are failing to peer into the Real of the world, with its layers and hierarchies and ‘generative mechanisms’ (Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 48–50). It may just be that, while still much present, as a global force, marketisation is waning or is at least being dented, with new and quite different spaces opening. Certainly, cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2011) and its heavy reliance on markets, not least in social and public services such as higher education, is still present in large measure. To that extent, many of the concerns of our rhetoricians are legitimate. The iniquities of markets, the disfigurement of the pedagogical relationship, and the transformation of learning and knowledge into commodities to be traded—via a degree certificate—remain as massive tendencies. However, the world moves on, and is increasingly being taken up by contending tropes of justice, climate change, fairness, concern for others and for Nature, wellbeing and authenticity, tropes that are picking up across the world.

The world is moving into an ecological age, as we may put it. Ecology here can be understood as inter-connectedness and relationality. Markets and an ecological shift in public understanding: both may be present at the same time. Moreover, it is not simply the case that markets and entrepreneurialism constitute an unstoppable force in higher education. Those emerging and contending frames and tropes of justice, ecology, fairness, wellbeing and community may be beginning to gain significant traction. Certainly, this wider sense of ecology as interconnectedness itself can take on an ideological form (Charbonneau, 2018). Nonetheless, resorts to historical pedagogical and institutional forms act as conservative stances, overlaying an unwillingness to consider progressive possibilities that the world may be offering.

An academic ideology

How, then, might this situation be understood. A situation in which historical sentiments are conjured and promoted, and historical concepts and practices venerated and held sacred and yet others uniformly portrayed as profane. There are two immediate options. On the one hand, as suggested, these images from history serve as a defensive posture, to ward off malevolent forces. The implication is that these historical images herald the essence of higher education and the university, and that holding to them, even if they are just residues, represents the true faith. On the other hand, there is a quite different defence at work here, namely, to deflect

considerations to the effect that, in the interests of education, the university, and the wider society change might actually be contemplated on educational grounds.

How might this be, that there might lurk, under these historical evocations, a disinclination to develop pedagogical and institutional arrangements that could advance educational interests? I suggest the following explanation. The hidden reluctance to consider significant pedagogical and/or institutional changes that are fitting for the twenty-first century is—to use a particular sociological term, albeit in a precise sense—functional. This reluctance serves the interests of its adherents. It is not just that its adherents are reluctant to change. They are that, but it is the deeper issue as to the cause of this reluctance. And that lies in the dominant interests of our historically-minded pedagogues and the academicians. For those interests include precisely institutional and pedagogical hierarchy.

The higher education system of the early nineteenth century was characterised by a tight pedagogical frame, reflected in a sharp separation between teacher and taught, notwithstanding Heidegger's (2004) advocacy that the teacher's stance towards the student should be to 'let learn' (p. 15). Indeed, the technology and the teaching practices were framed in this way (to which the presence of lecture spaces and teaching arrangements were testimony). The very concept of lecture points to this separation. Moreover, books produced by the professors over the next two centuries were often book-length forms of their preceding lectures. Note, too, that if *Bildung* is supposed to imply a challenging and an opening of mind, legitimate questions may be raised as to whether such teaching practices were seriously meeting such ends in those much earlier times. Generously, we may say that, if *Bildung* was being exhibited in this pedagogical milieu, it was a highly restricted form of the idea, limited to a cognitive emancipation for a student body drawn from socio-economic elites.

What, then, is to be gained by summoning historical terms redolent of such pedagogies and pedagogical relationships, not least in an era of ontological challenge? That which is to be gained—in drawing on the idea of *Bildung*—is a sedimentation precisely of a pedagogical relationship in which power resides with the teacher. It may be said in response that this is not what is being presupposed in referring to *Bildung* and that it is quite legitimate both to hold onto *Bildung* and to proclaim the virtues—say, of active learning or problem-based learning or work-based education or a flipped classroom form of pedagogy, or a more heutagogical form of the teaching-learning relationship (Adams & Barnett, 2022). Or even to couple *Bildung* to a nuanced examination of possible interconnections between research and teaching. There is nothing rivalrous, it may be suggested, between *Bildung* and innovative forms of teaching and learning and experimentation in the pedagogical relationship.

However, that kind of argument is virtually never—if ever—on the cards; and that would make for an interesting argument since it would require a precise specification of the elements of *Bildung* that were to be preserved and developed and that were akin to the educational aspects of the teaching approach or learning style being espoused and encouraged. But it would call also for a realist and ecological framing of the discussion which is so far in short supply in the *Bildung*-focused literature. What we commonly have, then, in resorts to the term *Bildung* is less a concept (whatever sophistications are on offer) and more a beguiling term, the function of which is argumentative closure. This is, as intimated and in the strict sense, an ideology, albeit an academic ideology (Barnett, 2003). As with all seemingly plausible ideologies, the term appears in a reasoned argument and it seems to have reason—some reason—on its side, even if the term is seldom cashed out in any serious way. It rides on the back of hidden interests, namely the interests of (certain parts of) the academic community who are sure that the best way of maintaining academic standards is that of holding to tropes of ages long-past. That the twenty-first century might legitimately call for pedagogical relationships and institutional forms different from those of two hundred years earlier rarely disturbs our rhetoricians.

A world in motion

At this point, I want to clarify my argument and to broaden it. The world, and being with it, is in motion (Nail, 2019), and in conflicted motion at that. Conflict, antagonism, and incompatibility are to be seen at multiple levels and domains. Conflict is to be seen in Nature as well as among human life (Cassegard, 2021); and the category of human is itself disputed. Within the human world, conflict is to be seen among the systems, institutions and processes at local, national and global scales (and all intermediate scales). And it is to be seen among frameworks of interpretation and for understanding the world, and for action in the world. Antagonism and deadlock—key concepts in the work of Slavoj Žižek (cf. Žižek, 2009)—are to be found both in the complexity of systems and in the supercomplexity of rival frameworks. It is part of the task of the university to be a space for complexity and supercomplexity, and to withstand the tensions that they produce (Barnett, 2000).

Within the supercomplexity of higher education, narratives jostle with each other. As intimated, the tropes of ‘the Humboldtian university’ and *Bildung* jostle with those of markets, innovation, employability, learning outcomes and other such tropes that seek to describe and legitimate the dominant patterning of market-driven

and heavily managed higher education systems. These tropes may be legitimately understood as defensive ploys, to resist and counter the dominant jargon and movements. They are literally reactionary in they are re-acting in the milieu of our current age, and they may even be characterised as conservative, in the valuable sense in which Roger Scruton (see Kearns, 2018) used that term, of ‘adapting what is best in the past to the changing circumstances of the present’.

Two questions are raised by this analysis. Are there other legitimate and responsive tropes that might do more justice to the earlier values (associated with higher education and the university) that are being lost from sight? And secondly, are the tropes—of *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’—really the most substantial set of rhetorical gambits for pedagogies and institutional forms appropriate to the world as it unfolding? How, very briefly, might we describe the world as it is unfolding? As stated, it is a world in motion, and conflicted motion at that. By world I now mean planet Earth, since it has become apparent—if it was not before—that the totality of its entities is interconnected. It may be noted that Stojanov (2012) attempts to root a conception of *Bildung* in the world, but where world’ is understood as a universal and ideal realm that transcends (...) everything that is factually given’ (p. 76) but that the idea of world and its associated sense of *Bildung* is then entirely separated from this ontic Earthly world. Moreover, we can legitimately portray the world as being constituted by massive ecosystems that are dynamic and that are themselves inter-connected. Further, of any ecosystem, on even a superficial perusal, it can be seen that it is either impaired and/or is falling short of its possibilities in the twenty-first century. Partly, their impairment arises through the hierarchies that have formed in each ecosystem.

I would suggest that eight ecosystems are especially significant in relation to the university and its (higher) education processes: knowledge, learning, social institutions (society), individuals, culture, the polity, the economy and Nature (Barnett, 2018). As intimated, each of these ecosystems is impaired or is falling short of its potential in the twenty-first century. Moreover, some of that shortfall and/or impairment is attributable to the frameworks, systems and actions of universities, as they have played out their parts, in particular over the past two hundred years of so. Instrumental and discrete epistemologies, limited conceptions of learning, inadequate levels of understanding in the public sphere, a separation of the knower from Nature, a lack of any sense that higher education and the university are part of the cultural apparatus of society, a highly limited sense of the economy—understanding it as the knowledge economy, thus ‘making invisible’ (de Sousa Santos, 2016, p. 119) economies that are characteristic of collective and cooperative communities (Ostrom, 1990), including but going well beyond indigenous society.

These are just some of the impairments to those eight ecosystems, the university being intimately associated with all of them.

If we look briefly, just by way of example, at the knowledge ecosystem, we find not only is it driven by an excessive instrumentalism, but it is also characterised by a hierarchy of knowledges, both within the academy (with the humanities being relegated to a lowly position) and beyond (as the knowledges of the Global North dominate those of the Global South). This is the world into which university graduates are moving, and many of them will quite soon find themselves in situations of responsibility and leadership, at whatever level. Many will find themselves in professions and other settings where challenges and possibilities will be present, where there is only openness, ambiguity, haziness, dynamic and conflict. They will also be in situations where new possibilities may be imagined, and difficulties discerned not otherwise present. Under such conditions of a total eco-world (in the sense of ecology being suggested here), resorting to tropes of the nineteenth century is totally inadequate. And such resort has, therefore, as indicated, to be understood as harbouring a disinclination to accommodate to this new-world order in which not only are systems globally intermingling and changing and are matters of dispute, but so too are the frames of understanding through which those systems are to be comprehended.

Humanity—and that term itself is now problematic (Haraway, 1992)—is confronted by a world without conceptual and ethical anchors. As such, what is required are conceptions of learning and what it is to be a student on the one hand, and what it is to be a university, on the other hand, to shift from paradigms of knowledge (epistemology) and skill (praxis) to a paradigm of being (ontology), of an orientation towards what there is in the world and the character of the totality of life on this planet Earth, including what it is to be as persons in such a world. To put the matter briefly, what is called for here is a shift from Wilhelm von Humboldt to his brother, Alexander von Humboldt. Wilhelm's brother, Alexander, was also an educationalist in his own way, being concerned to encourage a careful attitude to the totality of the natural world, which he studied in much detail and across the world. Alexander was a scientific naturalist and explorer who wanted to alert others, even two hundred years ago, to the fragility of the (natural) world (Ette, 2018). Alexander, in other words, was a transdisciplinary thinker, actor and educator well before the term transdisciplinarity was born. Understanding the world was to be derived, in the first place, from the world itself; indeed, from the Earth, from this planet.

Conclusions

Ideologies are not just to be seen in the wider world, beyond the academy; nor even just inside the academy as features in which the wider world has infiltrated and is changing the academy. The tropes of markets, students-as-customers, learning outcomes, and impact and so forth are symptoms of that inflow of ideologies which, in turn, has come to affect the sheer language of higher education. However, ideologies are to be seen within the university as home-grown phenomena, even if in response to the ideologies of the wider world that are now camping inside the academic walls. These responsive ideologies are strictly academic ideologies, expressing and exerting the interests of sections of the academic interest and they bubble up in some of the language of higher education. The terms *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’ are two examples of such terminology. As with all ideologies worthy of the name, they hide their real intentions. Their adherents deploy these terms avowedly to assure us that they are the defenders of the real university for any institution worthy of the appellation of university. A university, we are being led to believe, is one that hangs onto—or returns to—the idea of a higher education as a process of *Bildung* and is one that honours the principles of ‘the Humboldtian university’. The two terms take on a sacred aura, their very mention conjuring a sense that their referents—pedagogical and institutional forms of another place, and another time—are not to be touched.

The two ideas have been summoned at varying moments of crisis in the modern evolution of the university, notably after each of the two world wars, with the emergence of mass higher education and postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century and now, in the twenty-first century, by posthumanism (Taylor, 2016). At each moment, efforts are made to try to shore up these two ideas and to preserve their sacred status. However, as noted, and as is characteristic of ideologies, there is typically an acute vagueness as to what is intended in the calling up of either of these tropes. Moreover, and again as is typical with full-blown ideologies, this vagueness allows multiple and disparate parties to sign up to the programme being tacitly mooted. This possibility arises because, as we have seen, both terms are complex, move in multiple directions, and possess multiple pedagogical, organisational, educational and societal leanings. In both, too, they harbour complexities of relationships between persons, education and the state.

That such terms might be put into play in the contemporary debates about higher education and the university requires some explanation. These were terms that had their moment in early nineteenth northern Europe, in Germany and—suitably translated—in Scandinavia. They were terms of another age, another milieu, another society. It was an age characterised by unequal pedagogical

relationships, and a pedagogy that rested on textual facility within an elitist system in which the humanities were dominant and where research was barely recognised. The two terms, therefore, can be understood as defensive ploys to sustain or, even to recover, past senses of the university and its educational processes, and to do this for therein lies security, familiarity and known hierarchy (both in the pedagogical relationship and in university stratification). Such a discourse is to venerate as sacred the terms—here, *Bildung* and ‘the Humboldtian university’—and provide them with an untouchable aura.

It is striking that so many contemporary scholars, even those who wish to critique the idea of *Bildung*, are continuing to be drawn to it, and seek ways of retaining it, with skilful circumlocutions. Rorty (1980) sidesteps the matter by proposing the term of ‘edification’ (p. 360). And these philosophers are much inclined ‘to keep the conversation about *Bildung* going’ (Biesta, 2002a, p. 344). They are like the astronomers of the Middle Ages who, faced with evidence that Earth-centred models of the universe were problematic, would seek continually to refine the model itself (by adding more and more epicycles) rather than abandon the model. The problem with treating as sacred particular terms in the study and practices of education is not merely that it hankers after a past—either long-gone or which never existed—but that it implicitly cuts off serious consideration that the world of the twenty-first century is profoundly different from its situation of two centuries ago. Its contemporary complexity, supercomplexity, malformations, motion, globality, and inter-connectedness call for new kinds of university and of pedagogical ventures. If there is a concern to forge concepts and practices for the twenty-first century, then let that be the philosophical and educational challenge, with an interest in seriously understanding the character of the present age.

The world in general, and here, higher education and universities, are faced with serious challenges; but a proper response cannot lie in a retreat to past terms. Rather, a depth analysis of the present, preferably sensitive to the ecological age, and an ideational creativity and discernment of future possibilities, are all called for if we are to derive ideas and practices for universities that come close to the challenges now before the world. Making sacred the terminology and institutional practices of the past and rendering as profane—and, therefore, not worthy of examination—much of the contemporary world of higher education, is a profoundly non-educational manner of proceeding.

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