BEING ONE’S OWN SELF IN A FRAGMENTED LIFE. ON THE PROBLEMS OF THE CLASSICAL IDEALS OF BILDUNG UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF CURRENT SOCIAL REALITY

Rainer Adolphi

1. Reflection and Reality

The idea of education, encapsulated in the German concept Bildung, is perhaps the only one of the projects and concepts of modern times that remains uncontroversial to this day. Reason, subjectivity, ‘freedom’, society, science, progress, but also ‘family’ and the idea of emotive intimacy, the understanding of autonomous art and even the concept of ‘man’ have been questioned. All great legacies of modern times have aroused suspicion. As ideas, they were seen as sharing the same fate as the ideologies. Namely they were suspect of suppressing what is different from themselves, of obscuring factual relations and mechanisms and of participating in supporting dominant ‘falseness’. The suspicion that these ideas raised was that they would collapse into a dialectic of their own and not be able to reach their own fulfillment.

Bildung is possibly the only concept in this group for which this does not hold. The potential of this concept remains vigorous. All that is summarized by Bildung—what is ascribed to it and expected from it—seems to remain constant throughout the changes in content that has experienced. And in cases of rethinking the idea of Bildung, its ‘dialectical’ aspects or at times even its ambivalent aspects are present as much today as they were at the outset. In a nutshell, the thought and legacy of education and Bildung remain a vital, contemporary concept. This concept of modern times did not lose any of its appeal. In this concept the modernity of modern times is still present.

Nonetheless today the ideas of education and Bildung are facing critical inquiry, with challenges and revisions that go beyond any of the earlier reflections.

This is firstly a positive sign; it is the result of a positive process, because Bildung and the understanding of it are essentially also the practical experiences with Bildung. To name a few of the great educational undertakings: the introduction of compulsory education, vocational education, opening all education for women, founding scientific,
technical and agricultural higher education systems; the awareness that Bildung and learning are not a temporary juvenile phase of life that ends before or upon entering society, but a life-long task (as well as opportunity), that, among other benefits, preserves the connection to changing society; and the current educational offers for migrants. Secondly, the empirical study of all of the above is also inherent to the concept of Bildung. This is, more specifically, knowledge of how to improve educational institutions, what concrete educational way is truly effective and also the study of the differences between national or federal systems of education, educational landscapes. Thirdly, another aspect that is currently essential to Bildung is the respect for the dignity of the pupil; the abolition of (or at least official social frowning upon) discrimination on grounds of social class and the humanization of the education environment: from Rousseau, Basedow’s Philanthropinum, the Francke Foundations to the abolition of corporal punishment and other cruel punishment that breaks an individual’s spirit.

All of the above has enriched our concept and understanding of Bildung. Bildung, once—in the modern period—only an idea, a vision, is today no longer a merely intellectual phenomenon, an idealized concept of a (‘philosophical’) world of thought. It has become reality. As such, it is clearly be interwoven with real social processes.

The conceptual field of our thought and debates reflects this. Today, empirical and sociological concepts belong to the discourse about education and Bildung as a matter of course. Addressing this issue requires a continuum of questions and explanations, in which the ‘philosophical’ elements—which include not only philosophy in the narrower sense but also other disciplines from the humanities and cultural studies—stand alongside the actual social state of affairs. The discourse concerning education and Bildung is free from the resolute boundaries that are present in virtually all other pressing questions. ‘Philosophical’ reflections regarding what Bildung should be and what ‘image of man’, goals and values should be conveyed all belong to the understanding of Bildung in the empirical research. And conversely, theoretical contemplations never take place without including concrete phenomena of real social states of affairs and processes.

Thus the reality of education and Bildung is surrounded by reflection. The questions are a reaction to reality. But this by no means implies an essentially common attitude towards the task and the goal of Bildung. Instead, the fight over the fundamental principles and issues causes each to excommunicate the other from the discourse. The multiplicity