

Bildung-gospels and adult education – reflections on ‘Bildung-gospel: a salvation to wicked problems’ - online seminar on February 9th, 2022

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“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that's all.”

(Lewis Carrol 1871, Through the Looking Glass)

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The pre-seminar ‘Bildung-gospel: a salvation to wicked problems’ on February 9th, 2022, was organised as part of the Finnish adult education research conference, because of the astonishment among researchers about the exploding fashionability of the German word ‘Bildung’ in current practical, political and research discourses in adult education. (<https://events.tuni.fi/aitu2022/pre-seminar-9-2/>). The pre-seminar aimed at encouraging discussion and debate around the current Bildung-hype, and the main target group of this paper are researchers of adult education.

During the planning stage of the seminar, the pre-seminar organisers made a brief mapping of initiatives utilising the Bildung-vocabulary. It showed that they typically aimed at tackling the wicked problems of the current era, such as the environmental crisis, consumerism, individual and social disintegration and spiritual desolation. The initiatives resemble many other post-materialist, metamodernist, integral, in some cases even spiritualist currents and sects, which provide gospels – salvation narratives - through secular religiousness, inner awareness, deep inner consciousness and communality, accompanied with wellness, thrive and happiness, and evolution of new humans.¹

¹ examples of this variety can be found at websites: <https://systems-souls-society.com>, <https://fetzer.org>, <https://metamoderna.org/hanzi-freinacht/>, <https://www.orientierungszeiten.info/>, <https://gemic.com/>,

Beside educational recitals, they typically require revivalist gatherings, immersive, emotional, aesthetic and sensual experiences, mystic retreats and encounters with nature.

The launching of the word 'bildung' as a general concept may exemplify a wider movement against rationalisation and standardisation in education. Initiatives to return to inner - aesthetic, emotional - cultivation of individuality in education, which would emanate to cultivation of societies and the humankind, can be comprehended as suggesting alternatives to mainstream adult education. Yet, the organisers of the pre-seminar wondered, if there was something distinctive in the application of Bildung-vocabulary in adult education. Tentatively this is due to the normative quality of the field as study, practice, and policy. While being more directly linked with economic, social and environmental policies and agendas, compared to so-called formal education, adult education is permanently confronted by the blurring of analytical, descriptive and prescriptive uses of language. transcending contextual and historical meanings.

Among the Bildung-gospels, the initiatives of the Nordic Bildung-organisation are most ambitious and closest to adult education. As projects, run by the organisation, they have also expanded into European and Global Bildung networks. Therefore, the pre-seminar found them exemplary for opening the discussion around the wider topic. The invitation mentioned that the word 'Bildung' doesn't translate into English. Despite mutual influences, words used in Nordic contexts, such as Danish 'dannelse', Swedish 'bildning' or Finnish 'sivistys' are not translations from 'Bildung'. It is difficult to avoid confusing wordings in a short, descriptive paper, but we try to separate between Bildung in its German connotation, Nordic 'Bildung' as a putative Nordic version of Bildung, 'bildung' as a neologism launched for global adult education discourse, and Nordic Bildung as an exemplary organisation for Bildung-gospel.²

The distinctive attraction of Bildung-vocabulary in adult education seems to lie in an appropriation of figures and interpretations of 'bildung' in Denmark and German-speaking countries, and in showcasing Nordic countries as most advanced in the world. They are considered to pave the way towards universal peace, prosperity, democracy and human rights. Consequently, the Nordic

<https://opensciences.org/about/manifesto-for-a-post-materialist-science>, <https://www.presencing.org/>, <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>.

² The diversity inside and between educational and folk-edificational traditions and practices in Nordic contexts, were raised in pre-seminar discussion, and would be a topic for future research.

Bildung-website promises that “based on the very best from the cultural evolution around the globe, we will break away from the kind of thinking that has created the major problems facing humanity... develop models and understandings that people around the globe can use in order to create a meaningful and sustainable future.”³ In fact, the Bildung-gospels in adult education seem to focus on Folk-‘Bildung’, connected to certain theories of psychological development of individuals and cultural evolution of societies.

The pre-seminar was structured according to tentative concerns by the organisers, such as “What is the distinctive intellectual content and educational mission of Nordic Bildung and of the current initiatives of Bildung-gospel?” (Theme 1), “How does the current Bildung-gospel relate to intellectual and educational traditions of Nordic ‘Bildung’?” (Theme 2), “What might be reasons and drives behind the rise of the Bildung-gospel? With what kind of (educational) implications?” (Theme 3). Experts on each theme were invited to provide introductions based on their views and interpretations, followed by small group discussions among participants. In what follows, we briefly describe key issues raised by the presenters. After this, considering group and concluding sessions, we reflect on whether and how our understanding on what is at stake in the current Bildung-gospels was transformed during the event. Both sections are selective and based on our own interpretations, thus not claiming to be representative or doing justice to the diversity of views, opinions and arguments presented during the pre-seminar.

PERCEPTIONS OF BILDUNG-GOSPEL

Anja Heikkinen from Tampere University, Lorenz Lassnigg from Institute of Advanced Studies and Gabriele Molzberger from University of Wuppertal introduced the themes of the pre-seminar through concerns. They questioned whether the current Bildung-networks and initiatives have a distinctive intellectual agenda and educational mission compared to other gospels, which promise to save the world in the face of planetary crisis. Does the distinctiveness lie in their metaphysical explanation about the development of the universe, societies and individuals? Does the circulation of old idealistic ideas attract followers while providing an alternative to current rationalism and

³ <https://nordicbildung.org/vision-mission/> (10.10.2021). The vision has just disappeared from the website, substituted by a new mission statement: “Better Bildung. Better Future. We honestly believe in that: The world would be a wiser, safer, more friendly, sustainable, and meaningful place with more bildung. It would also allow us to create a metamodern future that unites the best from the past and the present.” <https://www.nordicbildung.org/> (10.5.2022).

materialism through spiritualism and emotivism? Or do the 'hidden agendas' of the Bildung-gospels coincide with the contemporary individualist, human-capitalist Education-gospel?

As another concern, they raised the question about purposive exploitation of German Bildung and Nordic 'Bildung'-traditions, which disregards the diverse critical research about them. Do the Bildung-gospels exclude the context of the emergence of the ideas of Bildung/'Bildung'? Is the function of the simplistic selection and interpretation of examples - especially Grundtvig and Danish Folk high schools - to make the Bildung-gospels acceptable? Does this lead to restorative and even nationalist tendencies in the salvation agenda, and undermine the mission of education as a public good and a promoter of critical thinking?

The third concern of speakers was whether the attractiveness of the Bildung-gospels indicate a lack in theory building in educational science, especially adult education. Empirical, policy-led large-scale studies have marginalised philosophical and historical approaches in academia in the previous decades. Therefore, is the floor left to non-university actors and their salvation-agendas, when alternatives to the neoliberal tide are searched for? Does this also indicate a reconfigured orchestration of the public, 'the we', in adult education? Does it demonstrate an expectation for academics to become charismatic figures in the digital media to be successful in the (virtual) attendance economy?

Lene Andersen from the Nordic Bildung-organisation and Christin Cieslak from the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) were invited to speak about the *intellectual agenda and educational mission of Bildung-gospel*. Lene recalled her role as the founder of the Nordic Bildung-organisation, which also runs European and Global Bildung networks. She provided a list of educational and philosophical authors which she has used for her definition of 'bildung'. As the most important scientific source, she mentioned the psychological theory of self-development by Robert Kegan. The exemplary role of Nordic, especially Danish, Folk-'Bildung' was justified by the highest position of protestant countries in World Values Survey and by the economic prosperity of Nordic countries and Switzerland during the 20th century. As an outcome of the intellectual effort of Nordic Bildung, she presented an illustration of the integrated historical advancement of communities, individual self-development, dominant ideologies and versions of Folk-'Bildung'. This suggests that Nordic 'Bildung' currently represents their most progressive, metamodern combination. Christin

showed the website of the EAEA Bildung-project, which gathers many central adult education organisations in Europe around the ideas of Nordic Bildung and Lene's conceptual framework. She emphasised how important and promising they are for us in the adult education community, to promote adult education in Europe.

Palle Rasmussen from Aalborg University and Christian Stifter from Austrian Archives for Adult Education commented extensively on the *relation of current Bildung-gospels to intellectual and educational traditions* of Bildung and Nordic 'Bildung'. Palle argued that against historical realities, the overtly positive, idealistic presentation of 'bildung' in the gospels is misleading, silencing social differences and actor perspectives. The ideas and implementation of Bildung/'Bildung' have primarily promoted values and ways of life of the elites, conveyed through an invisible pedagogy which has been inaccessible to the working class. Furthermore, Palle found it inaccurate to label Danish Folk-high school as Nordic 'Bildung', since it still is representative for Folk-enlightenment (folkeopplysning). In tackling wicked problems of the current era, programmatic and universalist use of the 'bildung'-concept is detrimental, setting aside other more pertinent educational traditions and ideas, such as curriculum and competence-approach, characterised by Oscar Negt.

Christian provided a critical historical review on manifestos and publications by Nordic Bildung. While utopias for universal solutions to maladies of humankind are no novelties, he considered the political and economic contradictions of the current ones to require special attention. He pinpointed fallacies and false consequences in the agenda of Nordic 'Bildung,' caused by ahistorical and decontextualized borrowing from bourgeois and elitist concepts in the German-speaking Bildung-tradition. It shows the ignorance about the vast research around Bildung, which indicates its roots in the conservative and nationalist political and economic agenda of the German Bildungsbürgertum. The neo-humanistic interpretation of Bildung, as impartial and individualistic concept, developed in opposition to the enlightened Volksbildung of the working class, favouring scientific, secular and realistic education. Furthermore, Christian stated that in front of the historical evidence, many statements about linkages between German Bildung and Nordic 'Bildung' are literally false. He warned about taking the Nordic 'Bildung'-agenda as the guideline for the future of adult education, due to the eclectic combination of psychological concepts and historical rhetoric, and its propagation by the recent economic and social success of Nordic countries. Instead,

Volksbildung would be a wider concept, not limited to adult or continuous learning, emphasising education for all and enlightenment as an egalitarian process of individuals and societies.

Eeva Kallio from University of Jyväskylä, Henrik Nordvall from University of Linköping and Christine Zeuner from Helmut Schmidt-University commented on *reasons and drives, and educational implications* of Bildung-gospels. Eeva localised the Bildung-gospels into current fashions in psychology and education, focusing on vertical development, self-growth, spiritualism and wisdom, in opposition to mechanistic materialism and technological rationalism. Bildung-gospels are typically inspired by certain developmental psychological theories, which seem close to the concepts of metamodernity. The Bildung-movement may include emancipatory elements, while emphasising self-reflection and wisdom. Yet its educational contribution remains controversial without self-critical, genealogical analysis on its inherent values and hierarchical, Euro-centred views about psychological and societal progress.

Henrik reminded that Bildung-gospels, especially as oversimplified narratives about Nordic Folk-‘Bildung’, is a wider and older phenomenon than Nordic ‘Bildung’. Danish Folk high school and Swedish study circles have been propagated by popular adult educators and policymakers as universal solutions to problems of democracy, democracy, inequality, bad health, social marginalisation, racism, fake news and so on. However, research has shown the difficulty in transferring Nordic solutions to other contexts. The current Nordic ‘Bildung’-gospels seem to differ in gathering transnational enthusiasts, consultants and entrepreneurs instead of actors from universities, NGOs or international aid. Instead of criticising the phenomenon, Henrik invited researchers to develop alternative research-based narratives, short publications on Nordic Folk-‘Bildung’ in relation to social and political change, which would be accessible to a wider, also international public.

Christine assumed that Bildung-tradition attracts European adult education communities, since it provides them positive metaphors such as emancipation, maturity, self-determination. They can function as collective justification for their existence better than neo-liberal discourses on lifelong learning. The approach in propagation of ‘bildung’ seems normative and universalist, ignoring the inner contradictions of modern societies, which cannot be solved by education. To understand the

context and contradictions of the Bildung-gospels, critical thinking and dialectical methods needs to be promoted in academia.

NEW (OR OLD) INSIGHTS ABOUT BILDUNG-GOSPELS

The pre-seminar included two group discussion sessions and a concluding session for reflections and recommendations, with an opportunity to chat. We speculate that due to the digital format and improvised nature of the event, the atmosphere was reserved, and participants avoided critical confrontations. Still, our impression from the reactions and discussions was that most participants were rather stuck in their approach to Bildung-gospels.

The *true-believers* were not affected by the academic arguments, rather they seemed a bit offended by being questioned. They argued for the dynamic and open definition of 'bildung', letting people interpret and modify it for their individual and collective purposes or providing tools for emancipatory adult education in less developed or authoritarian political, social and educational systems. The *critics* pointed out intellectual, political or pedagogical problems, failures and dangers of the gospel. Cautions were raised about the plausibility of Bildung-gospels as the salvation to wicked problems confronted by adult education, due to the diversity of popular adult education itself, but also to neglect of major areas of vocational adult education, work-based training and human resource development in companies. A concern was also raised about certain 'bildung'-discourses becoming hegemonic, marginalising other approaches to current challenges in adult education. The *light-minded* found the gospel as harmless, indifferent or even a positive phenomenon while raising interest in Nordic popular adult education. They considered the distance of discourses and realms of research, policymaking and practice legitimate and even beneficial for each party. The Bildung-gospel activism may promote the status of (popular) adult education in the academy and in policymaking and encourage adult education researchers to move from competition to collaboration, and to connect with policymakers and practitioners.

The pre-seminar confirmed the *ambivalence of concepts of Bildung and Nordic 'Bildung'* in the Bildung-gospels, problematising also how we used them in the pre-seminar invitation. They are utilised to give concrete universal answers to the wicked problems global society is facing. In the agenda of proponents, the adaptability of concepts to all kinds of discourses and practical functions and individual interpretations, follows their praiseworthy aim to be ready for any encounters and

discussions to disseminate their message. One of the intellectual cores of Bildung-gospels is the concept of metamodernity, which is shared by many groups (beside Nordic Bildung, such as Metamoderna and Perspectiva) applying Bildung-vocabulary, and some research communities in psychology and education.⁴ The concept of metamodernity integrate interpretations of cultural or societal evolution with developmental (ego)psychology, following figures such as Robert Kegan, Ken Wilber and Otto Scharmer. The pre-seminar confirmed the belief of these ideologies in universal “cultural meme” and ‘value’ hierarchies. The Nordic (and Swiss, to some extent German and US - protestant) societies are seen to represent the highest stages of cultural and psychological evolution, thus it is justified to take them as examples for salvation of humankind and the planet. The Bildung-gospels resemble other spiritual doctrines in their belief that striving for deeper inner awareness and higher spiritual stages is the path towards cultural and psychological betterment. This seems to protect them from recognition and analysis of their elitist and chauvinist elements.

In Bildung-gospels, Danish Folk high schools as a showcase of (Nordic) ‘Bildung’ look like a decoration to their distinctive psycho-political ideology, providing a concrete example for adult educators, who are searching for a lifebelt to justify their unique and exceptional place in education and society. Yet, in the pre-seminar, the proponents of the gospels considered Nordic welfare states also accountable for the decline of the ‘proper’ Nordic ‘Bildung’, despite their highest position in the cultural and psychological hierarchies. According to the gospel, Nordic ‘Bildung’ is interpreted as being at the forefront in moving towards ‘bildung’ as metamodernity. Therefore, the mission seems to be that the rest of the world should become as Nordic as possible, to advance beyond the era of the welfare state. Due to the fuzziness and ambiguity of the agenda, the distinctive contribution of Bildung-gospels for addressing wicked problems of the planet - such as environmental degradation, economic and social injustice, forced migration - gained hardly any attention in the pre-seminar. Still, a detailed analysis of its salvation potential would be most important.

Because the pre-seminar was attached to the Finnish conference and the speakers and participants mainly came from Nordic countries, it was understandable that Bildung-gospels were primarily

⁴ <https://systems-souls-society.com>, <https://metamoderna.org/hanzi-freinacht/>; for ex. <https://www.integralpsychology.org/>; <https://mindsatwork.com/what-is-maw/>; <https://eusg.org/imprint/>; <https://eaea.org/project/bildung/?pid=14923>

discussed in *relation to Nordic traditions*. The critics showed how simplified and misleading its narrative is in comparison to the diversity and controversies between different forms of Folk-‘Bildung’ (or enlightenment) and different Nordic countries. Since more widely, the Bildung-gospels build strongly on German-speaking tradition, the lack of detailed discussion on distinctions inside and between German-speaking countries was unfortunate.⁵ A critical point raised by the German speakers was the confusion between concepts and traditions of Bildung and Folk-‘Bildung’, which leads the wishful audience to adopt intrinsically contradictory aims and ideas of adult education. The pre-seminar was still left at showing mistakes and scholarly failures, but not yet analysing the intellectual and educational content of the Bildung-gospels in relation to diverse traditions. While this would require systematic theoretical and empirical research in the future, opinions about the need to react to the eclectic adoption of traditions, without recognition of their elitist and discriminatory effects on social history of education, varied. Many true-believers and light-minded found the interest in Bildung and Nordic ‘Bildung’ positive and beneficial in itself or saw it better that academics concentrate on popularising their own research about Bildung and Nordic ‘Bildung.’ However, considering the publishing policy of contemporary competition universities, the suggestion sounds rhetorical.

The discussion on interpretations of Bildung and Nordic ‘Bildung’ reduced time from reflections on *reasons, drives and educational implications of the Bildung-gospels*. However, the assumption, that these relate to eroding and weakening disciplinary and theoretical status of adult education in academia, was confirmed. Participants seemed unanimous that an important reason for the attraction of the gospel is the growing dissatisfaction with the economist and neoliberalist tendencies in adult education. Paradoxically, despite individualisation and competition, the quest for grand narratives, which would provide unity and personal meaningfulness, is intensifying in front of global crises. While researchers and scholars are not responding to the need, most participants assumed that this requires some shared umbrella concepts, which could be achieved through discussion about conceptions and meanings of ‘bildung’ and underlying values, between researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Yet, the avoidance of problematic political and educational implications of the gospel, especially to traditional adult education institutions, was one

⁵ One difference in encountering Bildung-gospel between German-speaking and other countries is that ‘Bildung’ has become a generic term, referring to any educational, training and instructional activities, similarly as ‘education’ in Anglo-Saxon countries, or ‘schooling (koulutus)’ in Finland. An additional confusion originates from the conventions in the English language use of capitals.

of the most striking results of the pre-seminar. The critics were cautious, whether the purposeful search for consensus is desirable. Whether and why the Bildung-gospels should be called Gospels, would require serious historicizing, comparative or cross-cultural analysis and debate. This could make visible the diversity and controversies of political, social and educational agendas, images of humans and society, linked to Bildung/'Bildung'-theories and concepts.

It was striking how unquestionably most speakers and participants had adopted a 'we'-discourse, as if there would be a homogeneous community of researchers, practitioners and potentially policymakers, defending joint ideals and aims of adult education. The desire for consensus and avoidance of disagreement in front of imagined shared enemies – such as rationalised and standardised education policies and systems -, seems more pertinent than the common rhetoric about encounters between opposing arguments and ideologies. Yet, discourses on adult education are inevitably language and power games in research, politics and practice, representing diverse and opposing political, economic and social positions. If the 'we' builds on shared opportunism in definitions and interpretations of 'bildung', the battle on hegemonic interpretation is left to the attraction markets.

To sum up, the pre-seminar reinforced our preliminary concerns. The intellectual agenda of Bildung-gospels is an eclectic selection from Bildung/'Bildung'-literature, celebration of the history of Danish Folk high school, attached to a metamodern and ego-psychological explanation of world history. It largely ignores (especially critical) research, and therefore provides misleading and simplistic representation about Bildung/'Bildung'-traditions. Initiators may sincerely believe in the salvage through their gospel, but there are also suspect motivations and educational implications. On the one hand, the activities are predominantly business-driven, and the marketing of 'bildung' through Nordic and German exceptionalism has potentially nationalist and racist implications.

In conclusion, the pre-seminar participants agreed on continuing and deepening discussions on Bildung-gospels and related issues at different forums and events. It remains to be seen, whether this will happen separately among camps of true-believers, critics and light-minded or are they able and willing to new encounters. If the academics do not want to leave the language game to attraction markets, they should take responsibility for developing (self-)critical, empirical, conceptual and historicizing argumentation at diverse public forums.

Link to PowerPoint presentations of the pre-seminar:

[Seminar presentations 9.2.2022](#)

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