



THESIS - Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 2021

International Research Journal

 Kolegji AAB
CILËSI. LIDERSHIP. SUKSESI

ISSN: 1848-4298 (Print) ISSN: 2623-8381(Online)

Theodor W. Adorno's Criticism of the German Concept of Bildung

Till Neuhaus

How to cite this article:

Neuhaus, T. (2021). Theodor W. Adorno's Criticism of the German Concept of *Bildung*. *Thesis*, 10 (1), 111-133.



Published online: June 30, 2021



Article received March 10, 2021.

Article accepted May 29, 2021.



Conflict of Interest: Author declares no conflict of interest.

Theodor W. Adorno's Criticism of the German Concept of Bildung

Till Neuhaus

Bielefeld University, Germany, Department of Education
E-mail: till.neuhaus@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract

The question of how to conduct oneself in the world is arguably as old as mankind itself. Ancient Greek philosophy, namely the sophists, identified a problem which shaped the world since it was first articulated – the negotiation of internal truth and external application. While neither can truly guide one's way – epistemological relativism and ethical utilitarianism await at the extrema – dialogue of all kinds seems to be a way to prevent the drift and shift towards these extremes. After having framed the philosophical problem, this paper will exemplarily examine Germany's concept of *Bildung* with regard to these extremes. The analysis will focus on the end of the 19th century (*fin-de-siècle*) as this has been the phase of *Bildung* which can, at least in part, be held accountable for the horrors of the 20th century. *Bildung* was and still is a central aspect of German culture and has been the matter of analysis and discussion ever since. One of the most potent criticisms has been uttered by Theodor W. Adorno who analyzed *Bildung* after the Second World War and exemplarily outlined traits of fascist societies. However, Adorno was also influenced by the zeitgeist and did not grasp the problem at the deepest possible level of analysis. Based on but not limited to the intellectual accounts of Theodor W. Adorno, it will be tried to identify commonalities among totalitarian systems and reconnect these with the aforementioned philosophical problem of ethical utilitarianism and epistemological relativism.

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, Halbbildung, Education, Humanities, Fascism

Introduction

One of philosophy's oldest and most central questions is about the conduct of life. More specifically, philosophy reflects on the constituents of the *Good Life*. This question is frequently debated in different disciplines and traditions and does not seem to lose its appeal to academic as well as non-academic audiences. The tremendous success of Jordan B. Peterson's book *12 Rules for Life*ⁱ (2018), in which he outlines and explains principles how to conduct oneself in the world, supports this hypothesis. However, the questions on how to conduct oneself in the world, ergo which standards to follow, which norms to live by, and what goals to strive for are much older than the recent discourse may suggest. Depending on the historical, political, and intellectual environments as well as the divergent zeitgeists, different ideals have been emphasized. In this spectrum of ideals, two extrema can be identified: epistemological relativism – which can be understood as the internal search for truth – and ethical utilitarianism, the urge for real-life application (cf. Böhm, 2010, p. 15). The first part of this article will outline key aspects of these philosophical positions and provide exemplary cases of their manifestations in different areas and disciplines. Further, their co-dependency and ongoing mutual replacement will be discussed.

While the introspective search for truth as well as the outward-oriented application of one's forces have shaped the course of literature, architecture, philosophy, education, politics, and a plethora of other disciplines, some real-life events' impacts are so far-reaching in their scope that basic propositions of academia and philosophy need to be

questioned. One such event was the Holocaust, in which industrial-style efficiency, precision, and technology were combined with never before seen cruelty and malevolence (cf. Frankl, 1977/2019). As a response to the horrors of the early 20th century and the Holocaust in particular, Theodor W. Adorno re-examined philosophy, culture, and education/self-formation (German: *Bildung*ⁱⁱ) and tried to identify central flaws in these. Especially the aspect of *Bildung* is crucial in his analysis as *Bildung* can be considered the intersection of self-cultivation, moralization, and acquisition of skills. The lack of the first two combined with a highly skilled and technologically advanced society led, in part, to the horrors of the 20th century. While having been morally corrupted during the National Socialist's era, the concept of *Bildung* has always been Germany's genuine approach to tackle the question of the *Good Life* and has occupied a central position in public discourse, schools, society as well as German philosophy ever since. *Bildung* works on the same question which also occupied the minds of the sophists, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the aforementioned Jordan B. Peterson (as well as a variety of other thinkers). In his post-War re-examination, Theodor W. Adorno criticizes *Bildung* by introducing a concept which he conceptualized as *Halbbildung* (semi-*Bildung*) and whose emergence he held partially responsible for the detrimental actions of the 20th century and beyond. In his criticism of *Bildung* as well as his conceptualization of *Halbbildung*, Adorno picks up and draws upon the aforementioned sophists' argumentation and positions himself with regard to the dilemma outlined above. *Halbbildung* – as one case study in which application was emphasized over truth – will be outlined and historically framed in the second section of the paper.

Even though Adorno's focus was primarily directed at the mechanisms which enabled the two World Wars and the Holocaust, his theory of *Halbbildung* primarily focuses on the economization of culture, cultural goods, and ultimately *Bildung*. Based on his observations, it can be argued that pure rationality – riddled of everything irrational, such as morals, art, culture, or the humanities in general – ultimately leads to totalitarianism (cf. Woodley, 2010, p. 39). Furthermore, Adorno discusses how the economy's logic – as one of the ultimate manifestations of rationality and its preference of impact/application over truth – deforms *Bildung* as well as the corresponding institutions. The last section of this article will deploy the aforementioned theoretical considerations – alongside the exemplary, philosophical case study – to identify and present commonalities of totalitarian ideology and revisit these by reframing them with the philosophical concepts and terminology of this paper.

The Ancient Greek's Ideals and Dilemmas

The Ancient Greek philosophers were united in their belief of moral as well as practical excellence – a state of being, which Aristotle called *Eudaimonia* (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 2). *Eudaimonia* described the most perfect and completely balanced out state of an entity – an imagined state of excellence, wisdom, and virtuousness. *Eudaimonia* was considered to be the ultimate goal of the individual – sometimes referred to as their true nature –, the polis, and the state. Before these insights of the Ancient Greek thinkers were turned into common ideals, thriving for individual perfection used to be a privilege exclusively reserved for the wealthy, powerful, and well-off. The Ancient Greek philosophers however transformed it into an aim which could be achieved by every individual (cf. Böhm,

2010, p. 12). Therefore, the central unit of analysis and target group of these considerations used to be the individual as “moral value is centered within a person” (Birmingham, 2004, p. 316); however, the double-edged nature of virtuousness – pending between the internal and external – was also considered as “one cannot just be virtuous, one must become virtuosity by performing and hence embodying virtuous actions in public” (Hawhee, 2002, p. 187). In order to embody the spirit of virtuousness to the fullest and to reach one’s true nature, the individual had to thrive for theoretical wisdom (*arête*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and technical/creational skill (*techne*) (cf. Nonaka & Toyama, 2007, p. 377/378) – a holistic approach of self-cultivation. Further, the different variations of wisdom served as a link to connect the individual to the wider community as through acting these values/wisdoms out (i.e. in the form of speech) “good is beyond being” (McGuirk, 2008, p. 170). Therefore, through physical, intellectual, and/or verbal actions, values transcend the individual and ultimately transform the polis, community, or state as a whole which, in turn, also transforms the individual – a dialogical relationship between the two, which can either be a vicious or virtuous cycle. By linking the community and the individual through (articulated or otherwise realized) values, a dialogical process of constant renewal, feedback, correction and ultimately improvement is triggered. This understanding of the relationship of the state – or ultimately culture – and the individual also manifests itself in Gaddis’ observations as he states that the “Greeks thought of culture as character” (Gaddis, 2018, p. 44).

However, the sophists’ school of thought identified a problem related to acted out and/or articulated virtues. The problem – yet, also its greatest strength – with the articulated word (*logos*) arises from the fact that it can actually change the

world. The dilemma the sophists identified relates to the concept of truth and opposes the external (impact on the status quo) and internal (quest for truth) direction of truth. Following the direction of external-oriented ethical utilitarianism, truth would be defined by its potential to reach an “individual’s desired end” (Noel, 1999, p. 276); true would be that, which has the highest degree of utility for a person or group (cf. Böhm, 2010, p. 15). The opposing paradigm would be that of inward-directed search for truth, which – in its most extreme and thereby unfortunate realization – could result in epistemological relativism (cf. *ibid.*). In the case of epistemological relativism, every aspect of life is questioned and devoid of its legitimizing real-life basis as truth is tried to be found in the object, action, or thing itself without considering externalities as potentially legitimizing factors. As nothing can really be considered true if stripped of its real-life implications, this approach results in either nihilism or relativism; the latter being fostered by the observation that all interpretations of the world (all truths so to speak) are of equal value – a school of thought which should establish itself roughly 2000 years later as branches of postmodernism. Ultimately, all human actions and manifestations are pending between the extremes of real-life applicability and inward-directed search for truth.

The solution to the above outlined dilemma was developed by Socrates. According to him, a person could never be a *sophoi* (the knowing) but only the *philosophoi* (seeker of knowledge/truth) – the latter also the name-giver to the discipline of philosophy. Further, all efforts to find truth through exchange of ideas or dialogue, are only approximations of truth. As a result, the process of seeking truth is never completed (cf. Böhm, 2010, p. 20). Socrates understood that external as well as internal considerations were necessary to

find or at least approximate truth. To incorporate both and get closer to truth and ultimately wisdom, dialogue became his tool of choice. Dialogue or, to frame it more broadly, the exchange of ideas and perspectives can take place between individuals, between cultures, or between times. Framing history in this manner, progress in the sciences, humanities, and arts – as well as the intersections of the two – can be read as an on-going dialogue with the past, the world, and others attempting to improve mankind's approximation of truth and wisdom.

As outlined earlier, human's approximations of truth are constantly pending between real-life application and introspective self-reflection. The patterns of this process of pending – so to speak, an on-going dialogue through the ages – can be illustrated in multiple disciplines. Thereby it is no coincidence that truth can also be translated as knowledge, beauty, and the good in general (cf. Hall, 1980, p. 74). An exemplary look into art, literature, intellectual history, or architecture shows that every time beauty or aestheticism has been overemphasized, the next generation's reformation focused on leaner, cleaner, and more functional designs, drawings, or (writing) techniques; in this context the word reformation can be read in its fundamental meaning as bringing something back into its original or purest form (cf. Liessmann, 2006, p. 161). Often times, proponents of this kind of reformation were in search of a model of perfection and found it in the form of Ancient (Greek) architecture, text, thought, or art (cf. Lamm, 2005, p. 93; cf. Oelkers, 1999, p. 28). After such a reformation, the cleaner, leaner, and more functional school of thought/art/writing/design established itself, fossilized, and was then replaced by a new paradigm, which – following the ideal of constant change between internal/external or truth/impact – emphasized the opposing school of thoughtⁱⁱⁱ.

Theodor W. Adorno's Criticism of the German Concept of *Bildung*

As outlined earlier, Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy and cultural criticism has massively been impacted by the observations made during the National Socialist's dictatorship, the Holocaust, and the Second World War. However, his cultural criticism focused primarily on the concept of *Bildung* as it was (and still is) a uniquely German concept and subsumes questions of self-cultivation, moralization, self-formation, and moral education. Furthermore, *Bildung* and the theorization thereof attracted Germany's most prolific thinkers as the accounts of Immanuel Kant, George W. F. Hegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, or Friedrich Nietzsche prove. *Bildung* used to be Germany's unique and highly-valued concept. Therefore, for Adorno the root cause of the Holocaust could only be found in the failure of *Bildung* as a generation educated based on the ideals of (new) humanism committed mass murder (cf. Bulthaup, 2007, p. 60).

German New Humanism and How It Was Corrupted

Before taking a closer look at Adorno's contributions and criticisms, the history – and with it the ideas, ideals, and understandings – of German New Humanism and the failure thereof will be briefly outlined as Adorno takes this particular school of thought as a starting point for the development of his criticism. German New Humanism – primarily shaped by Wilhelm von Humboldt and his ideological allies – can be considered a re-run of Ancient Greek ideals as it oriented itself at the Renaissance and thereby developed a fascination for antiquity (cf. Horlacher, 2011, p. 37/38). According to Humboldt, each person has forces – these days we would call

that potential – inside him- or herself. It is each individual's duty to cultivate and balance these forces by confronting artefacts in the real world, such as languages, natural science, or history. By confronting these artefacts, the individual grows its forces but also changes the world – a growth-driven dialogue between the individual and the world emerges (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019, p. 50-51). Contrary to the idea of early specialization, Humboldt suggests that these forces need to be balanced as a state of harmony is considered desirable. In this context, the desired balance or equilibrium can be read as a re-emergence of the holistic perspective suggested by the Ancient Greeks. Just as the Ancient Greek philosophers, Humboldt also puts the individual at the center of his analysis and (educational) efforts as he “proposed the reduction of state power to the barest minimum in order to insure freedom for individual self-cultivation [...]” (Sorkin, 1983, p. 55). Further, New Humanism defines the relationship between the state and the individual in Ancient Greek fashion as “the individual and the public must be in harmony. Personal morality and politics are two sides of the same coin” (Nordenbo, 2002, p. 348) – a re-run of the culture as character understanding brought forward by Gaddis (cf. 2018, p. 44). Based on the aforementioned similarities, it could be argued that German New Humanism – the school of thought which preceded two World Wars and the Holocaust – was tremendously inspired by the ideals of antiquity. However, the question remains: How could a system which is based on the ideals of emancipation, self-cultivation, moralization, and the search for truth result in a society which commits mass murder?

Humboldt was German New Humanisms' key figure as he contributed central ideas and paradigms but also realized these by designing Prussia's school system. In its most basic realization, Humboldt's system and ideas can be spotted in

Germany's educational sector until the very day as the emergence of Humboldt's school system temporally coincided with the unification of Germany as a nation under Prussian leadership. The historical context of creation, alongside the educational sector's advantages, partially explain their longevity and continuity as realized in German schools and classrooms. One of these advantages was *Bildung's* potential to unify the, at this point, relatively young German state. At the times of unification, Germany was divided among many lines and *Bildung* served as an external demarcation, primarily against the courtly and, from the German perspective, highly suspicious French culture. Even though *Bildung* draws from a diverse range of intellectual traditions, it was during the time of Germany's unification that *Bildung* emerged as a uniquely German philosophical concept. Simultaneously, the *Kaiserreich* "appeared to be a strange mixture of highly successful capitalist industrialization and socio-economic modernization on the one hand, and of surviving pre-industrial institutions, power relations and cultures on the other" (Kocka, 1988, p. 5; cf. Wehler 1973). This kind of internal disruption opened up possibilities for the middle classes to rise in social status as well as prosperity. This could either be achieved through mercantile endeavors or by joining the state administration. For mercantile as well as administrative ascension through the ranks, formal education in the institutions designed and realized by Humboldt seemed essential and *Bildung* thereby became a tool for economic, social, and political advancement of the individual. As such, *Bildung* opened doors for wider parts of society which have been closed during aristocratic dominance of the state. Thereby, the emerging role of *Bildung* can also be read as the cautious introduction of meritocratic ideals into German society.

Over time, a new social, political, and economic class emerged: The *Bildungsbürgertum*. This (upper middle) class legitimized their success by the efforts they invested into their education and the *Bildung* they received – a meritocratic argument. By the end of the 19th century however, the class of *Bildungsbürger* fossilized, abandoned their meritocratic ideals, tried to demarcate themselves from others, and were primarily occupied with defending their position in society. What used to be a dynamic, active, growth-oriented, and risk-taking society became a wary, dull, and defensive bunch. Especially the abandonment of meritocratic ideals and the overemphasis on material wealth led critics, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, at the *fin-de-siècle* to the observation that the “triumph of the middle class” and the “crisis of values” are the “the seeds of the destruction of European civilization” (Washburn, 2019, p. 173). In the same line of argument, he criticized the deformation of *Bildung* as it was merely seen as a tool for economic and political gain (cf. Horlacher, 2011, p. 63). The cruel irony of this development seems obvious as a generation formally educated in institutions inspired by the Ancient Greek ideals of truth and wisdom, reduces their education to a tool for monetary gain, influence, and power.

The reasons for wars are always manifold, interconnected, and cannot be reduced to a single factor. However, one often neglected factor is the fossilization of (value) structures and the reduction of concepts and/or institutions to a single cause. In this particular case, it is the reduction of holistic education/*Bildung* to a tool for the acquisition and protection of material wealth as well as social status. In the case of Germany, the concept of *Bildung* serves as a magnifying glass to reconstruct the societal and intellectual patterns which led to the horrors of the 20th century as *Bildung* was not just tightly attached to an institution but also to a

certain class of people while constituting a core element of the German state and society at the time. This omni-presence and relevance of *Bildung* led Theodor W. Adorno to put *Bildung* at the center of his analysis.

Theodor W. Adorno's Theory of *Halbbildung*

Adorno grounds his criticism on the developments, hopes, and promises of German New Humanism as the introduction of *Bildung* (and the widespread availability thereof) promised an equal, free, and meritocratic society. While some individuals got educated/received *Bildung* and ascended the hierarchies of business, administration, or academia, the overarching dynamic of the less-privileged versus the privileged remained largely intact (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019, p. 97). Thereby, it can be argued that *Bildung* only created the illusion of meritocracy and convergence (cf. Tischer, 1989, p. 7). The reasoning behind this observation is hidden in Adorno's specific understanding of *Bildung*, which is loosely related to the sophists' dilemma outlined above. Adorno conceptualizes *Bildung* as an entity which – in order to exist – needs to oscillate between the inner process of understanding the world and the real-life application of *Bildung* (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003, p. 95) – the re-emergence of the sophists' dilemma with special emphasis on the Socratic idea of on-going dialogue between the two extrema. However, Adorno's argumentation for the need of oscillation differs from Socrates' as he adds a Marxist twist to it. If *Bildung* only focuses on the inner workings, the individual closes its eyes for real-life injustices and thereby legitimizes these. In the case of German New Humanism and beyond, the version of *Bildung* realized by the *Bildungsbürgertum* focused almost exclusively on the real-life application, which constitutes the other end of the extrema and exemplarily stands for the other side of the sophists'

dilemma. By only focusing on real-life application and impact (i.e. the accumulation of wealth and power), this corrupted version of *Bildung* adapted itself to the system in power and thereby (in-)directly legitimized it (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003, p. 104). In order to remain its integrity, *Bildung* needs to be free-floating between the poles of application and truth. As soon as an institution or state defines *Bildung's* aims, declares its outcomes, or sets up structures to realize it, *Bildung* contradicts itself. Look at from this perspective, the institutionalization of *Bildung* can thereby be considered Humboldt's greatest mistake even though he "proposed the reduction of state power to the barest minimum in order to insure freedom for individual self-cultivation [...]" (Sorkin, 1983, p. 55).

However, *Bildung* was not just deformed and corrupted by its institutionalization but the institutionalization should rather be understood as the manifestation of a larger problem. As argued earlier, *Bildung* is a highly personal process which was being turned into an award, a certificate, or a skill. Thereby, *Bildung* turned from an introspective endeavor into a signaling device being presented at job interviews or in social settings. Adorno argues that the main driver for this development – which has started in the late German New Humanism phase and was continued in post-War societies – is the commodification of *Bildung*, which is perpetuated by the capitalistic system as well as the mass media (cf. Liessmann, 2006, p. 9) and can be considered a self-reinforcing mechanism. The implications of this argument cannot be overestimated: the driver of moral corruption, which ultimately contributed to two World Wars and a Holocaust, is one of the few aspects which survived the wars and was not only continued but also gained in relevance and scope.

For Adorno, the outward-oriented application of *Bildung* has always been associated with the logic of the economy,

commerce, and capitalism as these permeate – at least in Adorno’s worldview – all levels of analysis. Even though less-privileged people can go through the motions of experiencing *Bildung* – i.e. reading the same books and watching the same movies or theatre plays as the privileged classes – they will, due to their lack of economic and cultural capital, never get the same in-depth experience out of it (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2019, p. 97). Due to *Bildung*’s potency to open certain opportunities for the middle class, *Bildung* – and culture, which Adorno uses almost interchangeably – will eventually be reduced to its mere economic value. Following this line of thought, Adorno argues that the consumption of cultural artefacts under a capitalistic paradigm only allows a shallow experience, an experience Adorno coined *Halbbildung* (semi-*Bildung*) (cf. Tischer, 1989, p. 7). By definition, *Halbbildung* is not the half of the original concept but its fiercest antagonist (cf. Gruschka, 2001, p. 30) as culture and *Bildung* are consumed with the sole intention of social demarcation, bravado, and intention to signal belonging to an assumed to be prestigious group (cf. Adorno, 1959/2003, p. 115; Gruschka, 2001, p. 18) – the ultimate opposite of *Bildung*’s original intentions.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the capitalistic mode of operation deforms *Bildung* and culture alike and degrades cultural productions to amusement, which ultimately intends an emerging degree of conformity among citizen and producers of culture alike (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2008, p. 153). If reduced to their economic value and/or operating under a capitalistic paradigm, culture and *Bildung* turn themselves into propaganda of the, at that moment, dominant worldview. As stated, Adorno argues that capitalism and the related concepts can be considered the dominant paradigm of the past as well as the present. The omni-presence and longevity of capitalistic ideology – it was the only ideology

which survived two World Wars and in fact thrived after them – and its power to engage in and permeate almost all areas of life made Adorno “abandon[ed] the hope that education for humanity [...] could retain its normative power in our time” (Lovlie & Standish, 2002, p. 317).

Conclusion and Reflection on the Nature of Totalitarian Systems

Every journey or endeavor – may it be personal, political, spiritual, or intellectual, just to name a few – starts with two consecutive questions: Where do I/we go to and, after the first question has been answered, how do I/we get there? The question concerning the destination is value-driven as the aim should reflect one's idea of the highest possible good. Thereby, the choice of destination is (or should be) primarily guided by one's idea of *arête*. As argued earlier, all attempts to thrive towards *arête* are solely approximations. Approximations, by their very nature, involve uncertainty and require constant reflection and revision; the moral compass can only provide a general direction while the person in charge has to decide how to get around the immediate hurdles and obstacles. The second question – how do I/we get there? – is a question related to procedures, tools, and approaches as application is at its very core. While the question of what constitutes a worthwhile destination can never be ultimately answered, the question of how to get somewhere can be answered, at least for a certain temporal-spatial point of reference. The question of destination requires *arête* (wisdom) while the second is a combination of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (technical skill). In case that the two dimensions of ideals and realized procedures are aligned and directed into the same (or similar) direction, the

person, group, community, or state is on its way towards Eudaimonia.

Adorno's analysis of German society prior to the World Wars and beyond has shown that one key problem of culture and *Bildung* has been its deformation by the surrounding economic system and workings. Under a capitalistic framework, the consumption of culture can only result in *Halbbildung*. In case that individuals and societies adopt this framework and adjust their deeds, lives, and institutions accordingly, both will end up cleansed of meaning and moral guidance, yet they will be highly functional in realizing their aims – *phronesis* and *techne* without *arête* to guide them. At this point, all it needs is a detrimental idea or destructive ideology to take over such societies. Adorno's analysis stops there. The same holds true for Critical Theory and Marxist's approaches as they primarily criticize capitalism and the economic logic as the root cause of evil (cf. Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 477). However, Friedrich Nietzsche, who foresaw many of the horrors of the 20th century, argues that these horrors were not caused by the moral deformation provided through capitalism but by an overemphasize of rationality itself. Arguing from Nietzsche's point of view, the lack of morals, beliefs, and ethics – which ultimately caused the two wars and the Holocaust – stem from mankind's over-rationalization. Famously, Nietzsche states that mankind has killed God with the help of rationality, science, and technology (cf. Cybulska, 2016, p. 196). Following Nietzsche's line of reasoning, science and technology murdered introspection and made moral guidance obsolete as even these questions were reduced to a matter of scientific realizability. It can be argued that not capitalism deformed *Bildung* and ultimately led to fascism but the victory of rationality ridded of morals – capitalism being one manifestation thereof – over

subjective introspection, personal doubt/insecurity, and the desire to find truth.

Exposed in such fashion and without moral defense, societies all across Europe – instead of thriving for wisdom – fell for simple and all-encompassing answers presented by totalitarianism. Further, due to the lack of belief, doubt, and reflection of morals and morality, human capacity for evil could fully unfold multiplied by the power of technology. Contrary to Adorno's analysis, these evils were not limited to capitalistic societies: Stalin's, Mao's, and Pol Pot's dictatorships (and their measures) killed approximately more than 100 million people in the 20th century (cf. Phillips 2018). These were countries which actively opposed capitalism, yet they all emphasized rationality, efficiency, and exhibited a lack of – what Richard Feynman called – productive doubt (cf. 2005, p. 28). Therefore, the question must be asked: What are the underlying similarities of Mao's China, Stalin's Russia, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and Hitler's Germany?

On the most abstract level, totalitarian societies have in common that the question of moral destination is no longer asked. Their aims are set in stone as their ideology^{iv} provides the blueprint for all decisions. If (Western) civilization is based on the Ancient Greek philosophical ideas outlined above and societies generate progress through discourse and dialogue of ideas, then totalitarianism can be considered the “reversal by which progress turned against itself” (Sauer, 1967, p. 405). Totalitarian societies abandoned the idea of approximating *arête*; totalitarian ideologies assume that they know *arête* as their ideology does not leave room for any kind of doubt. They are, as the label *totalitarian* indicates, total, all-encompassing, and complete. As soon as the aim or destination is clarified, all other aspects are degraded to matters of technicalities. This could be one reason why totalitarianism – independent of its ideological

positioning – is highly compatible with all tool-like disciplines, such as the sciences or economics (cf. Sauer, 1967, p. 405). Further, this could explain the observation that totalitarian dictatorships operate with such efficiency as outlined by Victor Frankl (2019/1977) in his accounts of the Holocaust. In their very nature, sciences and economics solve problems, are highly output-oriented, deliver quantifiable results, and only need a direction/aim to work towards (cf. Wolin 2015). On the contrary, the arts, humanities but also religion are about introspection, deliver far less quantifiable outputs, and their results cannot be categorized as right or wrong but should rather be regarded a matter of perspective. But, if done with the necessary degree of seriousness, the arts, humanities, and religion can chip in some much-needed wisdom and serve as a moral corrective. However, if the arts and humanities submit to a predefined (political) aim and operate with certainty (which, by definition, they cannot), they become propaganda (cf. Arnold, 2003).

Almost all totalitarian systems have in common that they operate with certainty as they assume to know (with certainty) the cause of any problem at all times. As the alleged truth has been found, the totalitarian ideology is then perpetuated without question. Ideologies have an agenda, which is based on a rationale. This agenda is then carried it out with hyper-efficiency – an uninformed and unwise understanding of rationale and rationality as totalitarianism actively avoids dialogue with doubt-creating and/or truth-seeking disciplines.

Truth needs tools to be unfolded in the real world and tools require guidance to direct them towards the *right* purpose. Both extrema, truth and application, need each other. This holds true for the individual as well as society as a whole. Following Isaiah Berlin's differentiation, a good ruler/system requires hedgehogs – people with long-term vision/aims

(referred to by some as *arête*) – as well as foxes, people who can solve the day-to-day problems with their practical as well as technical wisdom (cf. Gaddis, 2018); basically, the healthy mixture of *arête*, *techne*, and *phronesis* which can be considered a key feature of the functional individual, group, community, and ultimately state. By cultivating this equilibrium of the different forms of wisdom, neither perspective – the rather truth-seeking or the application-oriented one – can exercise too much authority in a given problem. The Ancient Greeks knew that self-cultivation requires both of these extrema as they incorporated the fine arts and rhetorical training as well as physical education and technical skills in their version of education aiming at a balanced human being. This idea was later adopted by Humboldt and, through him, found its way into the German school system as well as German (higher) education. Based on the Ancient Greek's as well as the Humboldtian understanding of self-cultivation and *Bildung*, most universities are designed as campuses – the architectural manifestation that humanities, arts, and science need to co-exist while allowing active dialogue among the disciplines and the involved individuals. Even though the economy and capitalism – as one proponent of rational disciplines – are currently governing and structuring huge parts of the world, the truth-seeking disciplines should not forget their task of creating uncertainty by asking the right kind of questions and chipping in some much-needed wisdom by enlarging society's perspective.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1959/2003). Theorie der Halbbildung. In: R. Tiedemann (Ed.), *Adornos Gesammelte Schriften. Bd VIII: Soziologische Schriften* (pp. 93-121). Frankfurt am Main.
- Arnold, K. (2003). Propaganda als ideologische Kommunikation. *Pub* 48 (63). Springer Verlag.
- Birmingham, C. (2004). Phronesis. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(4), 313-324.
- Böhm, W. (2010). Geschichte der Pädagogik - Von Plato bis zur Gegenwart (3rd ed.). München: C.H. Beck.
- Bulthaup, P. (2007). Einige Überlegungen zu Adornos Theorie der Halbbildung. *Pädagogische Korrespondenz*, 36.
- Carnegie, D. (1956). How to win friends and influence people (Repr.). Kingswood: The World's Work.
- Cybulska, E. (2016). Nietzsche Contra God: A Battle Within. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 16(1-2), 195-206.
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Hedonia, eudaimonia, and well-being: An introduction. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(1), 1-11.
- Feynman, R. (2005). The Meaning of it all: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist. New York: Basic Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (1977/2019). Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen – Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager. München: Penguin/Random House.
- Gaddis, J. L. (2018). On Grand Strategy. Penguin Books.
- Gruschka, A. (2001). Unvermeidbar und ohnmächtig. Thesen zum Bedeutungswandel der Bildung. *Pädagogische Korrespondenz*, 28, 5-31.
- Hall, D. (1980.). Interpreting Plato's Cave as an allegory of the human condition (2nd ed., Vol. 14, Apeiron). Edmonton: Alta Publishing.

- Hawhee, D. (2002). Agonism and Arete. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 35(3), 185–207.
- Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. W. (1944/2008). *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Horlacher, R. (2011). *Bildung*. Bern: UTB Verlag/Haupt Verlag.
- Kocka, J. (1988). German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23(1), 3–16.
- Lamm, J. A. (2005). The art of interpreting Plato. In J. Mariña (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (pp. 91-94). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liessmann, K. P. (2006). *Theorie der Unbildung*. Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag.
- Lovlie, L. & Standish, P. (2002). Introduction: Bildung and the idea of Liberal Education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36(3).
- McGuirk, J. N. (2008). Aletheia and Heidegger's Transitional Readings of Plato's Cave Allegory. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 39(2), 167–185.
- Noel, J. (1999). On the Varieties of Phronesis. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 31(3), 273–289.
- Nonaka, I. & Toyama, R. (2007). Strategic management as distributed practical wisdom (phronesis). *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 16(3), 371–394.
- Nordenbo, S. E. (2002). Bildung and the Thinking of Bildung. *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, 36(3), 341–352.
- Oelkers, J. (1999). The Origin of the Concept of 'Allgemeinbildung' in the 18th century. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 18(1), 25–41.
- Peterson, J. B. (2018). *12 Rules for Life – Ordnung und Struktur in einer chaotischen Welt*. München: Goldmann.
- Phillips, J. (2018, June 4). Communism Killed 100 Million People in the 20th Century: Don't

- Flip Off a Memorial for Its Victims. Retrieved September 2, 2020, from https://www.theepochtimes.com/communism-killed-100-million-people-in-20th-century-dont-flip-off-a-memorial-for-its-victims_2237739.html
- Purvis, T. & Hunt, A. (1993). Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology... *The British Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 473.
- Rieger-Ladich, M. (2019): *Bildungstheorien Zur Einführung*. Junius Verlag.
- Robbins, A. (1991). *Awaken the giant within*. New York: Summit Books.
- Sauer, W. (1967). National Socialism: Totalitarianism or Fascism?. *The American Historical Review*, 73(2), 404.
- Sorkin, D. (1983). Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (Bildung), 1791-1810. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44(1), 55.
- Tischer, M. (1989). Veraltet die Halbbildung? Überlegungen beim Versuch, die Theorie der Halbbildung zu aktualisieren. *Pädagogische Korrespondenz*, 6, 5-21.
- Vogt, M. & Neuhaus, T. (2021). Self-Cultivation and the Concept of German *Bildung*. In:
- Peters, M.A. (Eds): *Moral Education and the ethics of self-cultivation*. New York: Springer.
- Washburn, P. (2019). Nietzsche and the Catastrophe of 19th century democracy. In D. J.
- Rosner (Ed.), *Catastrophe and Philosophy* (pp. 171-190). Lanham New York: Lexington Books.
- Wehler, H. U. (1973). *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871 - 1918*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Wolin, S.S. (2015). *Democracy Incorporated - Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

Woodley, D. (2010). *Fascism and Political Theory: Critical Perspectives on Fascist Ideology*. New York: Routledge.

ⁱ It can be observed that the genre of self-aid books – and genres related, such as self-improvement or self-help books – have had a mass appeal in the 20th century and beyond. From Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1956) to Anthony Robbins *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991), the demand for literature of these kinds seems to be increasing over time. For the introduction, Jordan B. Peterson was chosen as a reference as he is the latest and currently most successful, international author of this genre.

ⁱⁱ As shown elsewhere (cf. Vogt/Neuhaus, 2021), *Bildung* is distinctively different in its direction, history, and outlook from the global discourse of education. Simultaneously, translation as well as incorporation into the global discourse seems to be impossible. Therefore, I will use the German word *Bildung* throughout the text.

ⁱⁱⁱ The author acknowledges that, over time, the paradigms decrease in amplitude as each paradigm is a comment on the prior and thereby incorporates aspects of the prior. One reason for that could be that we, as a society, gradually improved our approximation of truth and thereby the follow-up school of thought does not need to correct everything but only certain aspects of the prior school of thought. Further, it can be observed that the life-cycle of a paradigm, today these would be labeled as trends, decreases.

^{iv} Purvis/Hunt (1993, p. 477) differentiate between „positive“ and “negative ideology”, the first being the creation of social consciousness (i.e. class consciousness), the latter being marked as “distorted thought” (read as: distorted from reality). In this paper, the concept of ideology is exclusively understood as what Purvis & Hunt would call “negative ideology”.