

The Nordic Secret: What can we Learn?

Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Björkman (2017) *The Nordic Secret: A European story of beauty and freedom*. Stockholm: Frit Tanke Förlag <https://www.nordicsecret.org/>

Over/reviewed by Jonathan Reams¹

I have lived in Norway for over ten years now. My early experiences here triggered me as I encountered a variety of cultural norms that stood out and made me aware of my own North American background in new ways. This contributed to amplifying many protective and critical tendencies I had internalized. Despite my initial (and sometimes continued) aversion to various facets of society here, I have also come to an appreciation for many aspects of this society. There is a kind of spaciousness and freedom here. While these are also well espoused and take a specific form in North American society, they have found expression in the Nordic countries in a manner that avoids some of the extremes found in North America.

My curiosity about how this came to be has deepened over time and in this context I had made acquaintance with the authors of *The Nordic Secret*, first Tomas Björkman in early 2014, the Lene Andersen later that year at a retreat Tomas hosted. Tomas' passion for the field of ego development was clear, as well as his passion for fostering healthy societal transformation. Lene's intensity and depth of knowledge was immediately apparent. Together, their collaboration on this project has led to what is, in my view, a significant contribution to 'integral' thought by showing with depth, breadth and clarity how ideas central to it have played out over time in a particular context and contributed to what are considered model societies.²

When I first encountered integral thought over 20 years ago, it appeared to me as a new and enlightening way of understanding the world. The ego development aspect of integral thought was especially engaging for me, as one focus of my studies was the area of consciousness, and ego development theories brought a degree of clarity to my understanding of how consciousness evolved. Over time, I came to see that integral thought, specifically in education, had been talked

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² There are many sources for this claim, but one I found interesting was a speech given in 2016 by then President Obama, where he explicitly mentioned Grundtvig and the folk high school movement and how it contributed to a similar school in the US, which in turn contributed to the education of many prominent civil rights leaders.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2016/05/13/full-transcript-of-president-obamas-toast-at-the-nordic-state-dinner/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0edca6988cdf

You can also watch the speech here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=287&v=UEJLtlAUGGE



about and tried since the mid 1800s.³ In *The Nordic Secret*, Andersen and Björkman have gone even further back in history and traced the threads of what they show to be ideas very similar to the current theory of ego development we study today.

Not only this, but they tell a compelling story with details that make for great reading. The relevance of this story – basically how ideas of ego development, along with *bildung*, have been applied on a significant scale in the Nordic countries and contributed to their current success – is that it offers ideas worth considering as we aim to contribute to the variety of situations being faced in the world today. It is with all this in mind that I have chosen to write an overview more than review – I wish to entice readers to pick up the book and dig into the depth and granularity that it offers and become inspired by the journey key figures in it took. I have little to be critical of here. Of course, it would be possible to unpack and argue with certain points made, perspectives taken and maybe some idealism near the end of the book. However, I believe this would detract from the broader goal of enabling a wider audience to get a taste for what this book offers. The knowledge that integral or ego development has been applied successfully to a large-scale social transformation effort can serve as both inspiration and ideas for our own efforts today. On that basis, I will offer a chapter-by-chapter overview of highlights and elements I find relevant in the narrative woven through examining the journey these ideas have taken through history.

Preface and Introduction

Andersen and Björkman preface their book by articulating the contextual background that motivated this book. The Nordic countries are clearly successful by many measures, and while various attempts to understand this phenomenon are shown to have fallen short, they feel they have found the secret of this success. From this, they wrote the book because:

1. That this recipe for success could be repeated elsewhere.
2. This process is grounded in creating healthy institutions for and in helping people in a society make meaning during large scale societal transformations.
3. The current Nordic situation is seen as an undoing of this success, and being able to contribute to discourse enabling a course correction would be an ideal outcome.

The current regression is characterized as a move away from personal responsibility and accountability of those in power. The move towards utilizing consultant expertise to guide political policymaking and privatization of key societal institutions is eroding the very foundations of their success.

In the introduction, Andersen and Björkman lay out their hypotheses and core message loud and clear right from the beginning.

We are going to make the case that the success of the Nordic countries – not least the successful transition from poor agricultural to rich industrialized countries – was due to a

³ See Molz and Hampson. (2010). *Elements of the unacknowledged history of integral education*, in *Integral education. New directions for higher learning*. Eds. Esbjörn-Hargens, S., Reams, J., & Gunnlaugson, O. Albany. New York: State University of New York Press.

very specific and targeted political project: key cultural and political figures in the 1800s saw the need for enculturation and personal emancipation of the rural population. ... In order for all these people to develop that kind of identification and national loyalty and cohesion, they needed a richer and more complex inner world. They needed to develop a sense of responsibility towards self and society; they needed moral, emotional and cognitive development. They needed what is called ego-development in modern psychological terms. (pp. 7 – 8)

To provide evidence for this hypothesis, they foreshadow the main part of the book; a journey back in time to trace the unfolding and evolving of a set of ideas that enabled this to happen. They lay out how Enlightenment ideas fueled both popular imagination through literature and philosophy through a key set of ongoing conversational relationships and led to the German notion of *Bildung*, and then was pragmatically applied in Denmark as *folk-Bildung*. This spread through the Nordic countries and as they aim to show, was significant in enabling the rapid transformation of Nordic societies.

They round off the introduction by laying out five hypotheses:

1. That the modern concept of ego-development is much the same as the Enlightenment concept of *Bildung*.
2. *Folk-Bildung* is different than what we current call adult education.
3. That in the mid 1800's *folk-Bildung* played a significant role in the development of the Nordic societies.
4. That this success was due to the intentional cultivation of moral, emotional and cognitive development among the least educated in those societies.
5. That there is a universal lesson that can be learned from this in relation to how to create stable and healthy democracies.

They close the introduction by outlining the five parts of the book and then by summing up their findings. The Nordic secret is folk-bildung. The long journey this book takes us on provides ample evidence for this claim, leading to the conclusion that “The Nordic and Swiss histories have shown that good economies develop from responsible self-governing and self-authoring people who can self-motivate” (p. 445).

Part 1: Setting the Scene

Chapter 1: Are the Nordic countries really that remarkable?

This chapter opens by introducing a vignette from Lene's life, a seemingly ordinary trip by train that illustrated key principles evident in Nordic society; humanism, trust and responsibility. First, a winter train ride from Copenhagen into Sweden has a new twist, a requirement to stop at the Swedish border and to show identification. This change in practice has emerged in response to the refugee crisis. On this journey, the inspection officials are extremely polite about their duties to the Danish and Swedish nationals. However, they also encounter two Syrian women attempting to cross into Sweden without proper documentation. Here the guards also display their humanistic

values, being extremely kind and respectful to the women as they made them get off the train, and telling them of their rights to seek asylum in the friendliest way possible.

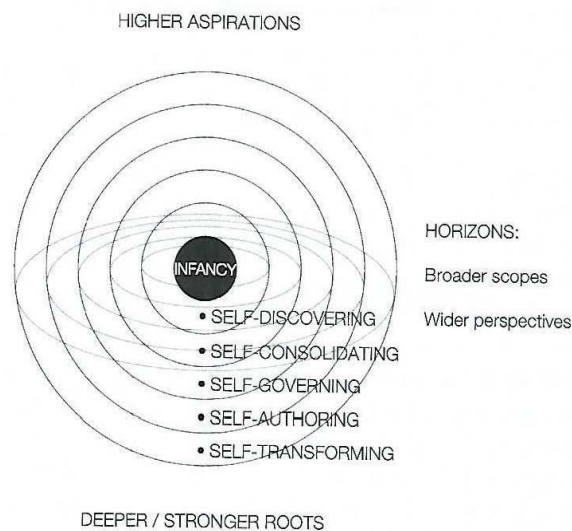
The other incident that illustrates Nordic values comes about when a businessman ends up forgetting his phone on the train. It rings after he has gotten out, and another passenger picks it up and answers; they quickly sort out to meet at the next stop and the man shows up and gets his phone back. This is a high trust society, where people take responsibility to ensure the well-being of others.

As well, the introduction shows us an array of statistics that point to the Nordic countries, along with Switzerland (which becomes relevant later) consistently in the top rankings of things like; happiness, human capital, global competitiveness, GDP, as well as interpersonal trust.⁴ This is also shown to be linked to scoring high on secular and self-expression values. They go through a series of possible explanations, such as political, economic, technological and even religious (Protestant countries tend to have a different work ethic). All of these explanations are shown to fall short of explaining the secret of Nordic success. Which then leads us on to chapter two.

Chapter 2: Personal freedom and responsibility. Psychology.

This chapter forms a foundation for what comes after, in that the authors lay out a description and framing of ego development theory. They address Piaget, Kohlberg and Kegan, and do a good

Figure 7 – Three-dimensional layers of ego-development



The layers represent moral aspirations and depth as well as horizons of knowledge.

Figure 1(7): Reframing of ego development. From p. 56.

job of then doing their own reframing of the language of ego development stages to be less technical and more reader friendly.

They begin by laying out subject object theory to introduce the basic move of development. Their reframing of Kegan's stages (see figure 1(7)) orients around the self at each stage. This alignment helps to shift the notion of a socialized mind to the notion of being self-governing. This enables an intuitive bridge to be made later when discussing the moves made in relation to the implementation of folk-bildung. They do a good job of

⁴ In other background research I have done, Norway also scores high on; corruption perception (lack of) index (2014, #5), UN human development index (2015, #1), legal system and property rights (2015, #3), credit market regulations (2015, #1) and political participation, electoral process, functioning of government and democratic political indexes (2015, #1).

describing the stages and core issues of moving between them. Their reason for this reframing was that they received pushback from the overly academic sound of both the notions of stages or orders and their descriptions.⁵ "... [W]e prefer to use the metaphor of a personal core that builds and expands in new layers" (p. 54). This metaphor also enables them to add in another key component, the social or moral aspect.

For this, Kohlberg's stages of moral development are described to ground this, as well as to link to Piaget as a key source of inspiration for all of this. In order to apply this, they introduce the notion of "circles of solidarity" (p. 38) taken from Christian Welzel,⁶ a researcher behind the World Values Survey. They extend his concept and reframe it to talk about "circles of belonging" (p. 39). They introduce 10 of these:

1. Ego/self
2. Family 1 (parent and siblings – the family we are born into)
3. Peer group
4. Family 2 (spouse, children, in-laws – the family we create ourselves)
5. Community (neighborhood, church, political party, sports team, colleagues at workplace etc.)
6. Imagined community (society / country / nation / people // religious denomination)
7. Culture zone
8. Universal principles / international conventions / multi-lateral alliances
9. Humanity today
10. Planet and future generations beyond great-grandchildren. (p. 39)

This allows them to make a three dimensional model of how our personal core grows. Figure 1(7) illustrates this, with the ego-development layers one axis, and the horizontal axis is about the broadness of scope we consider as well as how wide the perspectives are that we take into consideration. This "allows us to talk about a deep personality, depth of character and inner roominess, as our mental complexity grows and we mature. Only if we mature and add layers in all directions can we become deep, wise and rounded persons" (p. 57). This model of personal growth becomes the reference point for discussions later on in the book. What comes next is a journey back in time to trace the journey of ideas and people who contributed to how all of this came to be implemented in Nordic society.

Part II Personal Freedom and Responsibility – Bildung Philosophy

Chapter 3. A Very different kind of Europe

Andersen and Björkman start out their tour of history with a good framing – that we tend to read historical events from a frame of reference of our current world – we simply do not have the experience to have the same tacit view of what things meant, why they were important and so on. To get us ready for how the ideas they trace developed, they take us back to 1650 and describe life

⁵ I have certainly encountered similar pushback even and maybe especially in academic circles here.

⁶ Welzel, C. (2014). *Freedom rising. Human empowerment and the quest for emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

conditions for the masses of peasants, burghers, merchants and aristocrats. Small things like that beer was safer to drink than water.⁷

They describe a number factors; the introduction of organized education, how literacy was growing, yet still relatively low and the introduction of salons and encyclopedias that made a base of knowledge wider and more discussed. The religious influence on the concept of *bildung* was also important. They show how the concept of metanoia as beyond the mind linked with Pietism to create a call to be Christian in what we would call a more self-authored sense. So rather than simply conforming to a given set of social norms that one was born into and would die within, there was a notion that people could improve. Becoming a ‘true’ Christian now meant having an emotional sincerity and a passion for self-improvement. Protestantism had until then only dealt with salvation and predestination. Now, with Pietism, personal improvement was combined with salvation. “With Pietism, people’s soul, faith, mind, heart, and emotions became their own in a new way” (p. 76). These and other influences were part of the background context in which key figures began to articulate and disseminate ideas that came to inform the notion of *bildung*.

Chapter 4. The *Bildung* prelude

This chapter begins with Shaftesbury, and we see that with John Locke as his tutor, he developed an understanding of human nature that very much mirrors how ego-development is described today. The authors use quotes and then interpret them to make this link more explicit. This reminds me of the perennial philosophy, where these ideas recur in various shapes and forms over the course of human thought. They not only make this link explicit, they also do a comparative analysis to show what was similar and how it was also different, or lacking aspects of how we understand ego-development today.

The tour of intellectual thought continues with a brief visit with David Hume, who they show to be “the first European philosopher to explore how we construct reality” (p. 85). His move was to step outside and observe his own thinking,⁸ which led to him being interpreted as seeing different stages of mental complexity. After a couple minor figures are briefly treated (Klopstock and Wieland) they move on to Rousseau, and in a similar manner show how his writings reveal a similar pattern of describing stages of thinking. They approach all of these figures with a combination of historical context, biographical description and key thoughts related to ego development.

Chapter 5. The German Spring

This long chapter now gets into the meat of how many of the central ideas that contributed to the core proposition of *The Nordic Secret* were developed. It reads like a detective novel, with the careful attention to detail of what kind of personal histories and meetings that helped fuel the spread of key ideas.

⁷ I saw a recent TEDx talk by Steven Johnson (*Where Good Ideas Come From*) that showed the influence of coffee houses on the English enlightenment – before then, everyone was a bit too drunk to think new ideas. After they drank coffee and tea instead of alcohol, ideas started to be discussed in these places without the limitations of constant drink. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0af00UcTO-c>

⁸ It seems to me that this is not new with Hume, as Descartes seems to have done this in some manner.

The first major character is Johann Gottfried Herder. As a student, he caught the attention of Immanuel Kant, who gave him special study privileges and enabled him to gain a degree in theology at 20. He writes some early texts based on Kant's influence combined with his own inquiries that get some traction around Europe. As an example of the kinds of interesting details of personal meetings, Herder works as a theologian for a while, writes some books, gets restless, travels for a while, and ends up in Strasbourg to get eye surgery for a condition he has. A young student at the university observing the operation knows who Herder is from his publications and volunteers to do the post-operative care that is required from this operation, and the two spend two weeks sharing their ideas and inspirations about the new ideas in the air from the likes of Shaftesbury, Rousseau etc. The young student is Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

Herder goes on to write influential texts that for the first time articulate the nature of a national culture, a *Geist* that binds people together. The authors show how this contrasts to the scope of awareness of most people at that time of only their local family and village, maybe to a local aristocrat. In Andersen's and Björkman's circles of belonging, this means levels 1-5 only. Herder is shown to introduce the concept of a people, or nation. Herder also writes about *bildung* as a natural evolution. Being 'bilded' is being shaped, by the cultural conditions of the time.

As mentioned, Goethe met Herder in 1770 in Strasbourg, and they share their passion for this newly emerging Enlightenment thinking from Shaftesbury and others. Goethe goes on to become a writer of popular novels that capture the imagination of the times and are essentially based on the idea of growing beyond the social norms or constraints of the current society.

Friedrich Schiller is another writer of the times and it is shown how his psychological understanding also illustrates this parallel with ego development. The narrative in the book lays out the personal journey and challenges he faced, leading to his 1785 authoring of the Ode to Joy and its inclusion in Beethoven's 9th symphony. The links in the Ode to Joy with this Enlightenment thinking are described.

Then back to Kant, and the articulation of an a priori structure to our minds that enables the perception of the external world and events, or a phenomenological turn. They describe this as a Copernican turn in European philosophy, from an outside perspective on thinking to an inside-out perspective on the mind itself.

Then there is the larger context of the American and French revolutions, and how the generation of Enlightenment thinkers were both inspired and repulsed by some of the political events of those times.

There is then a description of how Goethe became a high ranking public official in Weimar, and the foundation of a free and open (i.e. faculty given freedoms) university in Jena that attracted the best and brightest of the period. This concentration of German Enlightenment thinkers and thought is all clearly shown in detail to repeatedly articulate the same view of human nature and its development as we see in ego-development today.

Meanwhile, in Switzerland, Johan Pestalozzi overcomes a life of poverty and repeated failure to find that Rousseau's ideas of education don't actually work. He finds, through arduous trial and

error, methods that do work, and eventually becomes successful and influential in how modern ideas of pedagogy can be linked to the notion of *bildung*.

Which brings us to the person most associated with the concept of *bildung*, Wilhelm von Humboldt. The reason for this association is that Humboldt not only wrote about it, but was in a position to do something about it. In 1809, he was in charge of the Prussian education system, and he did a complete reform of it. This was based on two key principals: freedom of teaching and learning at the universities (like was piloted in Jena), and that “education must be *Bildung*, it must be personal development, moral development and a deep engagement with the academic endeavors. It must be a path to finding one’s true personality, self-authoring” (p. 155).

What we see in this section of the book is that the concept of *bildung*, soon to be traced into Scandinavian society, has deep roots in the Enlightenment thinking in Germany and that it in essence embodies modern conceptions of ego-development.

Chapter 6. Bildung and ego-development

In this very brief chapter, the authors circle back to one of the core questions that united their interests. Having made a thorough investigation into the currents of thought that contributed to the conception of *bildung*, they conclude that while not identical, there is a significant and strong overlap with ego-development. The people listed above, as well as others, all tended to describe the ideas of human growth in terms that clearly match or parallel modern ego development descriptions. Where *bildung* appears to differ is primarily in content related areas, which they list as education, folklore, poetry and aesthetics, a sense of belonging etc. This is where the notion of circles of belonging appear to help flesh out how the structural approach of ego-development can show up in the layers of contexts we inhabit and can expand our consciousness into.

Part III The Scandinavian Spring – Implementing Bildung

Chapter 7. The Danish Spring

Here our story moves slightly north. The southern parts of Denmark, Schleswig and Holstein, had always been Germanic in culture, and eventually, after a couple wars, politically as well. The narrative follows a mentally ill king and his successors who held on to absolute monarchy until about 1849, when reforms finally arrived. In the period leading up to this, various philosophical developments went on that are again traced with meticulous detail. Beginning with the Norwegian Henrik Steffens studying in Jena and then giving the first lectures in Denmark on German Romanticism in Copenhagen in 1802. Two sets of rival cultural and philosophical salons are traced, with various visiting luminaries seeding new ideas, such as Fichte, who is fleeing Napoleon.

Then Grundtvig, the “Moses of the Danes,” (actually Steffens’ cousin), comes into the picture as a man of God who is also inspired by the ideas of romanticism. He also brings Norse mythology into his writings, evoking a sense of people, or the Geist of the Nordic nations. Grundtvig is quite contentious and outspoken and is actually banned from speaking and writing for a period, during which he goes to England and is (perplexed and) inspired by his encounters with liberties of

religion, the press and trade, pragmatism, collegialism between professors and students and even falls in love with a married woman.

All this contributes to his ideas of combining English pragmatism with German Idealism and Romanticism to envision a school where the peasants of Danish society can be ‘bilded’ or shaped into responsible citizens who can participate in and contribute to the betterment of their society. In 1836, he writes a pamphlet about ‘education for life’ that attempts to bring all this into practice and challenges contemporary ‘dead’ classical education. He goes on to write popular songs with lyrics inspiring a generation. For Grundtvig, freedom, both individual and political comes through bildung.

The political upheavals of 1848 strike Denmark as well, in addition to war with Prussia, which goes on again in 1864, and shrinks the Danish borders. In this context, the desire to begin to strengthen the national identity through this idea of small folk high schools⁹ grows and the first experiments take hold.

Into this mix comes Christen Kold, who, having wandered about thus far in life (literally walking from Trieste to Denmark) and read all the same figures noted thus far, takes Pestalozzi’s admonition to ‘just do it’ to heart and finds a way to begin his own school. Kold seemed to hit just the right combination of elements and ‘marketing.’ The folk high schools began to flourish, both in numbers and gender as they opened for young women as well. The authors describe that an average of 6000 Danes attended these schools each year. They then estimate that it is possible that by 1940 200,000 out of the population of 2.5 million could have attended these schools. We also hear that concurrently the cooperative movement began and took off with great success.

Chapter 8. The Norwegian Spring

As the story moves north to Norway, the narrative moves back to 1800 to set the stage. Norway has been under Danish rule for about 400 years. However, a combination of politics around who is given the governorship of Norway, a financial crisis in Denmark in 1813 and being on the losing end of war in 1814, led to Norway ending up in the hands of Sweden. During this time of flux, the Norwegians draft a very progressive constitution, drawing inspiration from the Americana and French constitutions. However, it does not give them the same progressive school legislation as the Danes, nor does it give them religious freedom.

The idea of a folk-bildung is a harder sell in Norway than Denmark, but eventually the ideas take root in government legislation that enables rural education to have the same standards as schools in the city. Ole Vig and Hartvig Nissen contribute to bringing some of Grundtvig’s ideas into Norwegian schools. The first folk high schools are established in Norway in 1864, and we see that in Norway this set of ideas is re-arranged a bit to show that “the goal is personal fulfillment, political freedom is the tool” (p. 240) and that stages of ego development are clearly laid out in texts from that time. The authors propose that the uptake is more powerful in Denmark because of

⁹ I have learned that the term high school is here more in reference to what in North America would be considered community college. The age group targeted is around 18 or 19, which fits between secondary and tertiary education.

losing the war and part of their country to Bismark, where in Norway it was not so strong a need for nationalistic sentiment.

Chapter 9. The Swedish Spring

The Swedish case is different yet again. An extremely high rate of literacy is one foundation for this difference. This came from a strong religious formalism, with parents required to teach reading to their children, and everyone tested on their ability to read and show their knowledge of the bible. Swedish peasants were never serfs and had some form of representation in the Swedish parliament. There was of course a strong German influence in Sweden, coming from the Reformation and the importation of Kantian philosophy and relationships between influential Swedish philosophers and German figures like Fichte and Klopstock. A kind of nationalism arose in Sweden as a response to the loss of Finland in 1809. The rise of Göticism inspires a host of romantic and nationalistic literature to spark the public imagination. In addition, things like gymnastics took root as a form of youth development.

It is noted that the Swedish term in use for *bildung* has more of a connotation of upbringing than of education. Thus the idea of parents (like the teaching of reading) bringing up or *bilding* their children is closely linked. This is seen in layers, starting with the family and local community, expanding to the country, then specific civic professional positions and finally an office in the state requiring in depth knowledge in a subject area.

A host of influential figures are described before going into how Swedish feminism is launched by a man. Visits to Danish folk high schools leads to journals publishing influential articles like *About Hans Who Went to the Folk High School*. This small article captures the heart of the folk high school movement and inspires many to attend. Hans is a peasant youth, the proverbial ‘lump of clay’ destined to a life of toil on the farm with little change in his life course. He meets a stranger who tells him of a place (the folk high schools) where you can find real gold. This gold is actually inner growth, maturing into a higher stage of ego-development and expanding one’s circles of belonging into the 6th circle, a sense of nationalistic identity.

Chapter 10. Summing up the Scandinavian Spring – Folk-Bildung 1.0

This chapter brings together and revisits the threads so far. The urge to grow into circle 6 or find a sense of national identity, especially in Denmark, emerges as a result of civil war / war with Germany.¹⁰ Running through all three countries’ implementation of *bildung* is how “to get young people from the traditionally least educated parts of society to become loyal, inspired self-governing citizens with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose” (p. 272). This is seen as taking them from a level two ego to a socialized mind, self-governing level 3.¹¹ The voices around the further

¹⁰ This happens to a lesser degree in Sweden with the loss of Finland. In Norway, my understanding is that the desire for a national identity came more from the 400 years of Danish rule, then another 100 of Swedish rule.

¹¹ The interesting thing for me, living in Norway the past ten years, is that the culture around which people internalize a capacity for self-governance appears to be around a set of relatively higher order values. Thus, they are socialized into a highly progressive and humanistic set of values, yet are often unreflected about them. I have understood these values as emerging from the founders of the constitution taking inspiration

move to self-authorship or the “moral man” (p. 273) was not yet the driving force. However, this turn was about to be voiced in a stronger way as the next generation built on this foundation.

Chapter 11. The Modern Spring – Folk-Bildung 2.0

This move into the modern Scandinavian society that emerged out of the folk high school movement drew on radical progressive and modern values that were arising, the so-called ‘cultural radicalism’. Georg Brandes is shown to have published a six volume series, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, which describes how literary trends have been shaping people’s ways of understanding their worlds. These are translated into ten languages and cause a stir, while essentially saying that people’s opinions are the result of social constructs informed by literary trends. It thus pushes for the move to level 4 of self-authoring.

A key voice in this was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen. Many of us may have read Kegan’s *In Over Our Heads* where he uses an example from a key section of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. In this play, Nora embodies both the feminist move of liberation, but more importantly, the move to self-authoring, happening live in a moment where she breaks free not only of her husband and the current social norms, but more importantly, the hold of those norms on her meaning and decision making process.

All of this and more contributes to the evolution of not only folk high schools, but of things like gymnastics, sports associations, unions and workers movements, scouting, and the development of libraries. The degree to which this movement becomes mainstream is shown in the Swedish context through the political exploits of two men, Staaf and Branting. Both are champions of the bildung agenda and both become prime minister of Sweden, influencing and governing between them from the late 1890s until about 1920. Andersen and Björkman characterize Branting’s description of bildung as paralleling level four, self-authoring.

The move into what is described as ‘cultural radicalism’ and Nordic design, which is fueled by things like WWI, the peaceful division by referendum of the Danish German border in Schleswig region, and a new kind of aesthetics. The different experiences of the three countries during WWII is highlighted as well.

Having a culture that promotes individualism and self-authoring is seen to have contributed to a number of things that were investigated in chapter one. A line has now been drawn, from German Idealism and English pragmatism, along with influences from the French and American revolutions, to the elite of Scandinavian society who realized the need for an educated citizenry in order for democracy to actually work.¹²

from the ideas of the time as described above, as well as their implementation in the American and French constitutions.

¹² I had the impact of this strong democratic tendency on large corporations described to me one evening over dinner by an executive of a Norwegian based multi-national company. He told how it was difficult to get people to align in such organizations, because earlier, there were no large farms or large fishing boats where people went to work for others. Everyone had their own farm or fishing boat and worked independently of any kind of authority. It occurs to me that this might also have contributed to the

But why did these ideas and influences not play out the same elsewhere?

Part IV Exploring what we have found

Chapter 12. What happened elsewhere? – control cases

In this chapter, six other cases are explored to see the effects of these ideas in shaping the experience and current state of other countries and groups. We see that Finland also adopted the folk high school idea, participating in some of the Scandinavian gatherings on this in the 1860s. The Swiss are seen to have forgotten about Pestazolli, and adopted a more conservative set of values in society. Otherwise, the Swiss appear to rank in similar ways around the opening chapter ideas, happiness etc.

The case of most interest is of course Germany. Clearly, a number of differences were in play and contributed to a very different outcome, especially in the first half of the 20th century. The deaths of a number of key figures of the Romantic era, such as Goethe, Herder, Schilling, Fichte and more, was followed by Wagner composing operas based on Norse mythology and German Romantic Nationalism. Then along came Marx. The upheavals of 1848, followed by Bismarck's unification of the German states under Prussia, created a mood in Germany among the conservative elements in power of concern for worker uprisings. Thus, folk education was shaped in a different way. For example, the lectures were never to be interrupted and no questions, discussion or debate of the ideas presented was allowed. As well, subjects such as social, economic or religious topics were not allowed. Then along comes Nietzsche, who Andersen and Björkman see as achieving a self-transforming mind, but feeling very alone and out of step with society.

The authors then describe the tensions between the lower middle class who just want to be better off or upper middle class, thus focused on personal and social and economic concerns and not societal change and emancipation. They just want to become part of the bourgeoisie. And 'bildung' becomes associated with conformity with those norms. Bismarck and his regime take an authoritarian stance towards the lower classes.

Then comes the aftermath of WWI, and any ideas of the type of bildung we have read about in the Nordic countries is far from reality. They quote Thomas Mann, showing that in this period, for Germans, the idea of asking "[the German] to transfer his allegiance from inwardness to the objective, to politics, to what the people of Europe call freedom, would seem to him to amount to a demand that he should do violence to his own nature, and in fact give up his sense of national identity" (p. 320). Thus all of the core ideas of development and growth to a self-governing and self-authoring conscience was never related to contributing to society; even being able to think for one self, was never related to political responsibility in this period in Germany.

Andersen and Björkman then briefly describe the creation of a folk high school in Tennessee, the Highlander school inspired by folk high schools in Denmark. They trace famous alumni of this school among the American Civil Rights movement (see footnote 2).

"Norwegian model" in organizations, which is characterized by very lower power differences and flat, democratic governance structures.

A brief examination of Nordic immigrants in the US shows that they tend to suffer less poverty than the rest of the American population, and the premise here is that this is partly due to the flip side of the high trust culture, that of also having high personal responsibility.

Finally, the cooperative phenomenon is examined, showing again the Nordic countries having a higher than normal per capita relationship to this form of economic activity.

Chapter 13. Does our thinking hold up?

Here the authors look back at the 2-4th hypotheses they began with:

2. Folk-bildung is different from mere adult education.
3. Folk-bildung has played a significant part in the development of the Nordic societies as of the mid-1800s.
4. The Nordic countries became successful due to a deliberate cultural, intellectual, moral, and emotional cultivation of the least educated part of the population.

What they see is that while it is not possible to make clear causal assertions, there is good evidence to say that folk bildung had a positive impact on the development of Nordic society. They also say that the authors of the folk high schools were aware of the ego or personal development aspects, so it was a conscious effort with clear intentions. They also see that bildung is a broader and deeper construct than ego development.

Chapter 14. Scandinavia today – self-destruction in the making

Here Andersen and Björkman get into the forces of empiricism and logical positivism and how they can take away the positive impact of bildung. For example, school reforms in Denmark and Sweden are described as hollowing out the personal development aspect. In Sweden, during the 1990s, commercial and investment companies were allowed to run private schools and they note that while Swedish students had been top performers on the standardized PISA tests, they fell below the average for OECD countries. The government worked to address this and enabled Sweden to climb back to average by 2015.

In Denmark, they show the changes in mission statements for public schools, starting in 1958.

The purpose of the public schools is to promote and develop the traits and talents of the children, to strengthen their character and to provide them with useful knowledge.

In 1960, the goal changed to developing “harmonious, happy and good people.” The Danish 2012, reform focused on values such as “community, well-being, informal approaches, democratic decision-making processes and an emphasis on practical knowledge.” A school reform in 2014 brought back knowledge and personal development to the mission statement but the number of hours and students in the classrooms were increased without extra-funding, considerably messing up the working conditions for the teachers. (p. 349)

They go on to describe how the latest university reforms make it “virtually impossible to study more than one topic, the students are supposed to get a pre-defined degree without the possibility of adding another perspective” (p. 350). This narrowing of education into specialization takes away the breadth necessary to expand the inner world.¹³

The authors also see corruption, lack of vision and lack of competence as key issues. While perceived corruption may be low, they point to recent political scandals in Denmark and attempts to digitize the tax system that never worked and doubled the amount of tax owing to around 100 billion Danish kroner. The authors make a strong set of claims about the impact these and other issues have had.

We fear that the lack of self-governance, self-authoring, systems perspective, and a sense of duty in Nordic politics is a sign of a deeper problem Too many voters and politicians are struggling to self-govern at the level of national belonging and solidarity. People may be able to self-govern in concrete groups such as family and local communities, but in abstract entities such as nation, culture zone or regarding global issues, they flunk. (p. 352)

Andersen and Björkman list five reasons they believe have contributed to this.

1. That in the first half of the 20th century, there was a strong shift in the Nordic countries away from Idealism to empiricism, positivism and nihilism.
2. After the two world wars, everything German had an image problem and bildung wasn't sexy anymore.
3. The Marshall Plan, while enormously helpful in many ways in rebuilding Europe after WWII, pried our attention away from bildung towards the glamor of Mickey Mouse, Coca Cola and Elvis Presley.
4. The youth revolts of 1968 brought valuable self-authoring, but also threw the baby out with the bathwater, leaving bildung as a reactionary concept that was not updated.
5. This all led to bildung being renamed adult education, or life-long learning.¹⁴ Evening classes for adults lost their political edge and became harmless hobby lessons.

All of this has an effect on the population. They show statistics that place Sweden, Denmark and Finland among the top on consumption of anti-depressants (with Norway not so far behind). They propose this reason; “that our expectations of happy and meaningful lives became extremely high in the Nordics over the past generations and that something has fundamentally changed in the way we live, something that caused high number of people to seek medication in order not to feel certain kinds of pain” (p. 356). This pain is linked to;

¹³ While I am not sure of this overall, I do notice that this kind of breadth of study is difficult to obtain here in Norwegian university study as well. One except I am familiar with is a course required of all master students at the university I teach at, (about 2300 students take this course each year), where they have to work in interdisciplinary teams on projects, and 50% of their grade is based on a group dynamic process report. Called Experts in Teams (EiT), the course was developed at the urge from industry to help the university's graduates have some skills beyond their disciplinary expertise, specifically in collaborative teamwork.

¹⁴ My position at NTNU is in a department named Pedagogy and Life-long Learning, and I can vouch for the current focus of this field not really being aligned with the ideas of bildung laid out in this book.

a lack of meaning and purpose in people's lives, a lack of deep, intimate, lasting, and committed relationships. There is a mismatch in the need for belonging and the actual sense of belonging, there is a mismatch between meaning making and purpose. (p. 357)

Chapter 15. What have we discovered writing this book?

Here is where the authors put forward some really interesting propositions. They articulate the importance of nationalism, the 6th circle of belonging, and how it takes people beyond self-interest, and helps them self-govern according to a larger set of symbols and meanings or standards. They see the value and importance of each step and each circle, and examine what happens if we don't get a rounded out personally with experiences in each circle or sphere. This leads into a nice discussion of three types of freedom, American, (freedom from the state), French, (freedom that comes from the state), and then German as *bildung* (freedom that is not political but existential).

The authors are quite clear when they discuss the implications of the education necessary for contributing to democracy.

Particularly politicians, bureaucrats and consultant companies must pay attention here: If you *only* studied economics, political science, law, and/or communication, you do not have an education that qualifies you to solve our current problems. Your knowledge is inadequate and you are most likely contributing to ruining our democracies. (p. 370)

Andersen and Björkman say they are not trying to be arrogant in writing this, but believe strongly that the professionalization of political governance is actually wrong.

To close this chapter, they look into the role that the Freemasons have played in all of this. Many of the main characters in the book were masons. The authors describe how it would make sense 2-300 years ago that free thinking men, living under absolute monarchies, would need to find some way to gather in order to discuss ideas freely. They developed an hypotheses that there is some alignment between these ego-development principles, *bildung* and Freemasonry, and this was confirmed by the feedback they received from a high ranking Mason in Denmark who read the first draft of this book.

Part V Looking Forward

Chapter 16. Can the Nordic Experience Benefit the Rest of the World?

Here the authors look at their 5th hypothesis: Is there a universal lesson about creating democracies and stable societies to be learned from the Nordic countries? They propose two parts to this question. One is about the Nordic experience benefitting the rest of the world and the other is to see if there are lessons in how this transition was made that can be applied to the current transition to a digitized and globalized economy and community.

Their argument, harking back to the first chapter, is that the Nordic countries did not have any special natural resources – they were poor agrarian societies (although some would say now that Norway's oil helps). Nor were they set up any differently in terms of governance – they were

feudal monarchies. What they had was a few visionary people who fostered bildung among the masses during the transition into democracy. They list a number of key ingredients in the formula for this, which depend primarily on dedicated teachers being given the freedom to teach bildung.

The authors also recognize that today is a different transition than the one of 150 years ago. The basic response is that increasing complexity in society can best be met with requisite increases in complexity of mind. They see self-authoring also as self-initiating and not being in the grip of others' expectations, which, combined with a basic sense of economic security, contributes to a robust and happier society.

However, all is not a rosy picture. The authors acknowledge that the disappearance of bildung in Nordic society combined with the disappearance of shared national heritage that contributes to fleshing out our connection to the 6th circle of belonging, leaves us with an over-abundance of narcissistic elements of culture. Rather than asking teens to internalize a lasting set of moral values, they are invited to share how they feel, and connect more to peer groups. "[E]verybody is increasingly surrounded by self-consolidators and fewer feel that they are surrounded by committed persons and communities who truly care about them" (p. 390). Thus we can have all the means of support to develop, but if all we develop is our level two ego, then all does not bode well for society.

Chapter 17. Societal Transitions

The second part of the 5th hypothesis is explored more fully in this chapter. The authors examine how a transition today into a BINC (Bio-, Info-, Nano-, and Cognitive technologies) world contributes to shaping a more complex society and culture to navigate. Here they make the case that in order to face this kind of constant change at this level we need a self-transforming mind capable of handling a changing inner landscape.

On the cultural side, they explain the evolution of cultural codes from indigenous, through pre-modern, modern and postmodern, and then go into the notion of meta-modernity. They do an analysis of clashes between these layers of culture and our ego meaning making systems, pointing to the need for both meaning and purpose being developed through layers of bildung in order to adequately navigate current transitions.

Chapter 18. Where are We Now? – Challenges, Obstacles and Choices

Here the authors lay out their analysis of our current situation as a species. They focus on collective challenges in the outer world (society and environment), collective inner challenges to our circles of belonging, individual challenges of making it in the world and inner individual challenges. They list a number of such issues in each area. Their description of these areas show how bildung, or more specifically the lack thereof in today's society, contributes to these challenges. They address the issue of finding appropriate leaders for political governance, redressing imbalances in a market ideology and how to deal with the clashes of cultural codes, including the issue of terrorism. They illustrate this by asking a question that places the core idea of the Nordic secret into a modern context.

How would Hans Who Went to Folk High School have reacted if the person who wanted to find the gold inside him had not been a religious folk high school teacher offering heroic Danishness but a religious madrasa teacher offering ‘heroic’ Islamism? Would Hans have known the difference? (p. 429)

They articulate a need to “develop meta-modern cultures that, each in its way, strengthen their particular heritage without having to impose it on everybody else” (p. 430). They note that transitions like the one they describe in their book, and the one we face today to move into a meta-modern society do not happen without the active participation of visionaries who enable an appropriate kind of bildung for the times.

One illustration in this chapter I found interesting was how economic value is created in today’s economy compared to yesterdays. The Swedish car manufacturer Volvo was sold in 2010 after 83 years of operation, with value created by 23,000 employees amounting to \$1.5 billion USD. On the other hand, the Swedish company Mojang was formed in 2010 and bought by Microsoft in 2014 for \$2.5 billion USD. It had only 40 employees, who created the game Minecraft.

Chapter 19. What Could Bildung 3.0 Look Like?

What would Bildung for meta-modernity look like? “... meta-modern folk-*Bildung* must offer paths towards inclusion in all circles of belonging as the homesickness for them appears or evolves” (p. 437). The authors note that knowing about the various circles of belonging is not the same as having a sense of belonging or being at home in them. “... our task is to awaken 8 billion people to feel homesick regarding the well-being of their peers” (p. 437). Then they lay out what they perceive developmental psychology is offering us, emphasizing that while we should not judge people in general based on their ego development, we should definitely take this into consideration for those who wish to influence society, such as politicians, teachers, or leaders of companies. A list of questions we can ask of ourselves for each level are offered to help us assess our place in this sequence of development.

They then turn to what bildung has to offer, essentially that “*Bildung* allows us to find beauty and meaning at all stages of life, throughout all layers” (p. 442). This includes connecting personal ego development to cultural heritage, expressions of art and beauty and narratives that enculturate us and enable meaningful participation in society.

To create folk-bildung 3.0, the authors explore a number of ideas that emerged for them during their journey of creating this book. This is in the context of how our life spans today have extended well beyond norms from the recent past. We can expect to have 60-70 years of active adult work life, where our careers evolve through various meanderings.¹⁵

In this context, the need for a new kind of life long education becomes clear. Andersen and Björkman lay out key points that focus on enabling people to be supported and challenged to grow into successively later stages of ego development, as well as to expand into circles of belonging.

¹⁵ I can attest to this not only in my own life, where my transitions have been from farming, through carpentry and truck driving into academia and consulting, but also in that of my father, who in his early 80s is well into his third major career and successfully working as much as he wants.

As well, this education needs to promote meta-modernity as they have described it, introduced at age appropriate times in our lives. Beyond this, they lay out a number of concrete measures to support this, such as focusing on hiring teachers from later ego development stages and keeping technology in context in education. This is to counter what they perceive missing today: “What is missing from today’s goals for education is the meaning-making, the sense of cultural connectedness, moral depth, and allowing the student to develop a rounded character” (p. 455).

All this is illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 19 – Layers and transitions including the escape from freedom

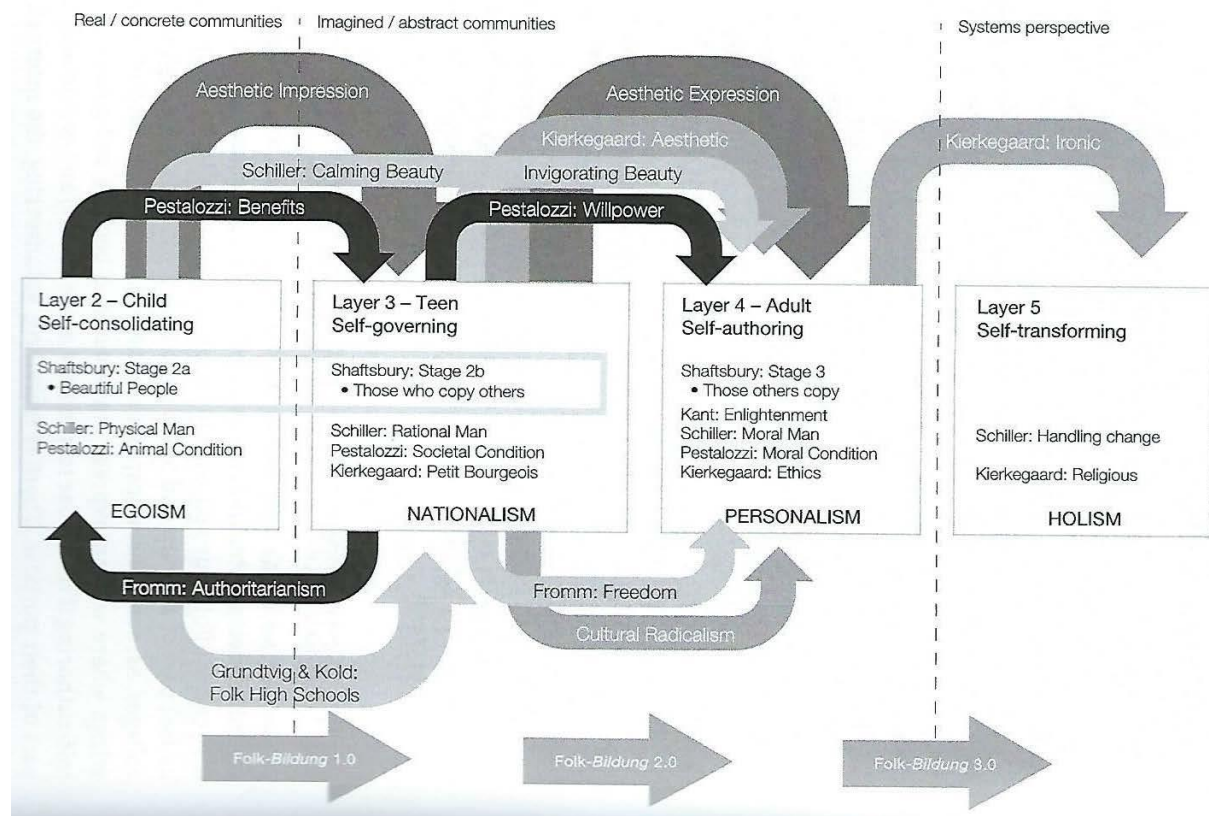


Figure 2(19): A model of Bildung as development.

In addition, they make a number of specific suggestions relating to updating things like the scouts organizations to this 3.0 version, executive education as a type of bildung, implementing Grundtvig’s idea of a folk-bildung university in Gothenburg and a European bildung university in Strasbourg.

Chapter 20. Looking Forward to our Conversations

Here a brief summary shows how they have traced the development of bildung philosophy from Shaftesbury through a number of key German philosophers to the Scandinavian folk-builders who created the high schools that brought personal growth and development to a broader range and number of people in those societies. They characterize this journey as a story of freedom and

beauty (thus the subtitle of the book) and a history of increasing the understanding and sense of responsibility of members of a set of democratic societies.

They note that the lack of such development can lead to falling prey to the emotional need for authoritarianism, or the desire for someone else to take responsibility. In the face of increasing complexity in society, can we fall prey to the same pattern?

Reflections

With all of this, I hope a) that I have done justice to the work put into this book and that b) I have whetted your appetite for reading the book itself. Not simply for the reading and taking in of interesting ideas, but for the sake of motivating you to find new possibilities for participating in society.

For myself, reading this book has helped me recognize some of the qualities in the culture where I live that have in recent years been emerging more into the foreground of my awareness. When I came to Norway, everyone here asked how long I would stay. I responded that I didn't know, maybe 5, 10 or 15 years. Now I find myself comfortably settled, enjoying the foundation living in a high trust society with basic means reasonably attained. What I have learned reading this book helps make explicit for me at least some of the reasons this is the case.

We all face challenges. These offer us the opportunity to grow. Yet we need to do more than grow. Essential to our growth at some point is the need to pass along what we learn to others. There are many ways this can happen and I hope that this small contribution can stimulate next steps for each of us in doing this.