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# A forgotten chapter in the history of Nordic educational theory: J. V. Snellman's theory of *Bildung*

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## ABSTRACT

J.V. Snellman (1806–1881) developed an original theory of *Bildung* inspired by Hegelian philosophy and social theory. His conception of *Bildung* is timely for several reasons. It anticipated both the cultural-historical understanding of the human mind and today's European *Bildung*-based curriculum theory. According to Snellman, the primary duty of a civilized person is to understand the demands of their era and to work towards solving its problems. The construction of national *Bildung* must contribute to the development of universal culture and foster peaceful relations between nations. Knowledge and learning are grounded in the critical interpretation and further development of the finest achievements of cultural tradition, making them responsive to the challenges of the present and the future. In Snellman's view, education leads to the formation of moral agency and personal conviction. This conviction also entails a political commitment to reform and improve the norms and institutions of society.

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## Introduction

In debates on educational theory the concept of *Bildung* re-emerged in the 2000s as an alternative to the concept of competence and the idea of developing school systems based on the measurement of learning results (Horlacher, 2016; Willbergh, 2015). In general didactics and curriculum theory, the Northern-European *Bildung*-based approach is opposed to the Anglo-American approach based on the standards and accountability of educational systems (Westbury et al., 1999). The history of the concept has been reinterpreted in these debates. It is customary to state that the German idealist philosophers, among them Kant, Herder, Fichte and Humboldt formulated versions of the classical concept of *Bildung* in the late 18th century and at the beginnings of the 19th century (e.g. Klafki, 2000). It is well recognized that the German term *Bildung* has a wider meaning than education and it is difficult to translate it into English: terms such as self-formation (Koselleck, 2002), ethical formation (Herdt, 2019), 'rising up to humanity through culture' (Gadamer, 2000, p. 10) as well as 'individual and social transformation' (Jessop, 2012, p. 292) have been suggested.

The Northern countries first adopted the concept *Bildung* into an ideology of popular education. *Bildung* was translated as 'bildning' in Swedish, 'dannelse' in Danish and Norwegian and 'sivistys' in Finnish. In most accounts of the development of popular education in the Nordic countries, L.A. Grundwig (1783–1872) adopted the ideas of Herder while creating his idea of folk high schools which was then adopted in Norway and to a lesser extent in Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013; Korsgaard, 2000). In Sweden, popular education found its foundation in the beginnings of the 20th century in the study-

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circle movement (Gustavsson, 1996). Finland is mostly ignored in these accounts. Although the country was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire from 1809 until its independence in 1917, an original theory of *Bildung* inspired by Hegel's philosophy of spirit emerged in it.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to other Nordic countries, the Hegelian philosophy dominated academic philosophy in Finland from the 1830s to the 1880s. At the end of the century, Herbartism and its empirical psychology gradually started to replace the concept of *Bildung* in Finnish educational science and teacher education. However, in popular education (*folkbildning, kansansivistys*) the concept of *Bildung* developed by Johan Wilhelm Snellman (1806–1881) remained a recognized theoretical foundation of the activities of various popular movements until the 1950s (Kantantasalmi & Hake, 1997). It was not until the 1950s that the university subject 'popular education' (*kansansivistys*) was replaced by the term 'adult education' adopted from the Anglo-American tradition. However, in spite of the dominance of the psychology of learning after the Second World War, the concept of *Bildung* even today constitutes a foundation for educational science in Finland in a form that has its roots in German classical philosophy and in Snellman's work. A widely used Finnish university textbook on the science of education introduces the concept of *Bildung* as a foundational concept of the discipline, defining it as follows (Siljander, 2002, pp. 31–32): '*Bildung* is a creative process in which a human being through her own activity moulds and develops herself and her cultural environment. The concept of *Bildung* includes the ideas of transcending the existent and of becoming perfect, in other words, in *Bildung* a more advanced form of life is pursued, which, however, cannot be defined beforehand. (...) *Bildung* is a general obligation connected to humanity'.

In this paper I will argue that Snellman's theory of *Bildung* is more than merely neglected chapter in the Nordic history of education. In addition to being an innovative development of the Hegelian theory of spirit, it adopted ideas from Herder, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, from French enlightenment philosophy as well as from the political economy of the 19th century. It was connected to an attempt to create cultural foundations for Finnish nationality. Following the Hegelian legacy, it established—contrary to naturalistic and empiricist conceptions of learning—the critical adoption and further development of the cultural tradition by subjects as a foundation for *Bildung* and the self-consciousness of an individual. For Snellman, *Bildung* refers both to individual and social development and constitutes a mechanism of cultural development. In addition, the recent interpretations (Lahtinen, 2006; Ojanen, 2016) underline the fact that Snellman's philosophy was a philosophy of practice. He ended up thinking that philosophy should serve the advancement of national *Bildung* by participating in public reasoning and that the conviction of civilized persons concerning the right and true should orient their practical actions in solving the problems of their time.

In his essays and lectures on academic studies and school learning, Snellman outlined a theory of knowing and learning that provides an alternative both to the concepts of competence and metacognition and to the cognitive constructivist conceptions of learning. On the other hand, it anticipates the cultural-historical concepts of learning exemplified by cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1986) and pragmatism (Dewey, 1920/1988).

As an insightful version of the Hegelian tradition Snellman's philosophy also resonates with the recent interpretations of Hegel's concept of *Bildung* (Jessop, 2012; Miettinen, 2020; Stojanov, 2018) as well as with many of the ideas raised by the non-metaphysical Neo-Hegelian social philosophy of the last few decades (Good, 2006; Pinkard, 1994; Pippin, 2008). Simon Lumsden characterizes it as follows: 'The question for Hegel that constitutes the modern problem of philosophy is not an epistemological question concerned with how consciousness could know anything about external realities but the question of how a finite being can find a meaningful place in a world set in constant motion? (...) On this view, Hegel articulates the political, social and historical conditions that would allow modern consciousness to be at home in such a collective self-transforming enterprise' (2008, p. 58). These are the very questions Snellman deals with in his theory of *Bildung*.

I will proceed in this paper as follows. First I will provide a brief biography of Snellman and of his role in the history of Finland. I then introduce the basic concepts his philosophy and its roots in the Hegelian and the European intellectual tradition. I suggest five themes in Snellman's theory of

*Bildung* that to my mind are still topical and worth developing further in educational theory. Finally, conclusions are drawn underlining the practical and political dimensions of Snellman's theory. Snellman wrote in Latin, German and Swedish. The critical edition of his collected works *Samlade arbeten* in 12 volumes was published in the 1992–1998 (Snellman, 1992–1998). Their translation into the Finnish in 24 volumes (Kootut teokset) was published in 2000–2005 (Snellman, 2000–2005). They gave birth to a new generation of Snellman studies in Finland (Immonen, 2021; Lahtinen, 2006; Manninen et al., 2021; Miettinen, 2023; Ojanen, 2016; Rantala, 2006; Uljens, 2006). To make access to Snellman's original writings available for Scandinavian readers I refer in this paper to *Samlade arbeten* of Snellman.<sup>2</sup>

## Snellman's life and activity

Snellman was born in Stockholm in 1806. The family moved to Finland to the coastal town of Kokkola in 1813. Snellman enrolled at Turku University, where he studied philosophy under Johan Jacob Tengström (1787–1858), who was the only Professor of Philosophy in Finland between 1827–1848. Tengström institutionalized the dominance of Hegelian philosophy in the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki. Snellman's first dissertation (1835) was about the Hegelian system and the second (1836) dealt with the relationships between Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. He gained an appointment as Docent in Philosophy in 1835 and gave lectures on logic, psychology and philosophy of right. In 1837 he asked permission to give three lectures on academic freedom. The Rector and the Chancellor of the University regarded the topic as too controversial and the permission was refused as well as the publication of the lecture manuscripts. Snellman wrote a complaint to the Consortium about the Rector's decision, but in vain. After he refused to act as curator of the Ostrobothnian Nation he was accused of misconduct in office and suspended from his docent position for six months (Manninen et al., 2021, pp. 68–69).

After several failed applications, Snellman in 1839 was granted permission to be absent and to travel abroad for two years. He moved to Stockholm and in summer 1840 began a journey to Copenhagen and to Germany, where he met members of the Hegelian School. In fall 1840 Snellman published in Stockholm an essay, *Om det akademiska studium* (On Academic Studies) (SA II, pp. 152–171). It was a revised version of his lectures that had been forbidden in 1839. By the Czar's decision importing the book into Finland was forbidden. In spring 1841 Snellman published in Tübingen his major philosophical work, *Versuch einer spekulativen entwicklung der Idee der Pörsönlichkeit* (A study on the speculative development of the idea of personality, SA II, pp. 197–244) and in the following year *Läran on staten* (Theory of the state, SA III, pp. 298–498) in Stockholm, which provides his theory of nationhood, state, and civil society.

Snellman returned to Finland in 1842. Since he had no prospect of an academic career in Finland, he considered the possibility of moving abroad. In 1843, however, he accepted the position of headmaster at a higher elementary school in Kuopio in Eastern Finland. There he started a campaign for national awakening by establishing two journals, the Finnish-language *Maamiehen ystävä* (Farmer's companion) and the Swedish-language journal *Saima*. When the censor banned the publication of *Saima* in 1846, Snellman continued the public debate in the journal *Litteraturblad*, which was established with the help of his friend Elias Lönnroth, the collector and author of the Finnish national epos *Kalevala*. Snellman published more than a thousand articles in these journals. Their themes ranged from reviews of European philosophy and literature, critics of the emerging domestic literature, development of the transportation and industry of the Grand Duchy, the advancement of the status of the Finnish language and the school system to methods of agriculture. It has been suggested that these writings constitute Snellman's main work and are an expression of his practical philosophy (Ojanen, 2016).

The rein of a more liberal Czar, Alexander II, in 1855 opened new possibilities. Snellman was nominated Professor of Ethics and the System of Sciences at the Imperial Alexander University in 1856 at the age of 50. During almost seven years of professorship, Snellman gave 19 lecture courses

in many fields of theoretical and practical philosophy, among them academic studies, theory of justice, practical ethics, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy of law, and political science (Manninen et al., 2021, p. 74). In March 1863 he was asked to serve as the chief of the national finance bureau. This position in the Finnish Senate corresponds the Ministry of Finance. As a Senator he was able to work in cooperation with Alexander II's administration on many important national reforms, among them the language decree of 1863 that made Finnish an official language as well as the establishment of the country's own currency, the markka. Snellman consolidated his status as leader in the Fennoman movement which aimed to construct of a nation based on the Finnish language. He soon enjoyed fame as Finland's 'national philosopher' and his death in 1881 was a day of national mourning. The first biography on Snellman's life and philosophy was written by Thiodolf Rein (1838–1919), his successor as Professor of Philosophy. Snellman's first collected works in Swedish were published in the 1890s.

### Snellman's philosophy of *Bildung*

Snellman adopted philosophical and methodological ideas from Hegel: among them the reconciliation between the subjective (self-consciousness) and the objective (given cultural tradition), between the universal and the particular, and between freedom and necessity. He shared with Hegel the idea of a constitutional state as a historical achievement and foundation for moral order (*Sittlichkeit*) that allowed the realization of *Bildung* and the freedom of individuals in society (Miettinen, 2020). He also shared Hegel's non-essentialist understanding of *Bildung*. Self-development is not the realization of a pre-given nature or potentiality of a human being. It is a contradictory process in which individuals detach or alienate themselves from their natural existence into a 'second nature' that is based on the adaptation of culture and the use of critical reason. In *Bildung*, in rising up to universality, an individual encounters what is common to all humanity, the best achievements of one's cultural heritage.

Snellman, however, also dissociated himself from Hegel. He did not find Hegel's way of constructing a philosophical system sensible and wanted philosophy to be used in public reasoning in the political arena. He expressed his appreciation of the French enlightenment philosophers, who instead of system building, extended criticism to all aspects of human activity and knowledge. According to Snellman, the only starting point was 'the eternal right of each generation to ponder, accept or dismiss the existing traditional knowledge' (SA VI, p. 220). While Snellman's *Läran om Staten* (1842) follows the structure of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, it most frequently refers to Montesquieu, Rousseau, Sismondi, and de Tocqueville.

Finnish Snellman researchers of the second millennium regard the renovation of culture as a kernel of Snellman's concept of *Bildung*. According to Rantala (2013, p. 92), the *Bildung* process 'is adoption, interpretation and renovation of the tradition, that is, the knowledge and cultural heritage of the past'. Uljens (2006) finds the non-teleological nature of cultural change important. The *Bildung* process does not have an endpoint or any predefined course. It is realized through a reasonable human activity in which alternatives are freely pondered. Väyrynen (2007, p. 152) also finds the change and development of culture to be a foundation of *Bildung*: 'In the spirit of neo-Hegelianism Snellman emphasized social dynamics and critique: education is not adaptation to something given beforehand. It is a part of the construction of the future and the future is an open project, whose only measure is critical and ethical reason'. According to Pulkkinen (2011) Snellman understood that the development of an individual into a moral subject took place within the normative structure of the society. An individual, on the other hand, is the only possible transformer of this structure.

Snellman's concept of *Bildung* must be understood in relation to his other basic concepts. Among them are humanity, *Sittlichkeit* or ethical order, freedom, the state, and spirit. According to Snellman, *Bildung* has another, more descriptive term, humanity. A human being has moved from a state of nature into a more refined state 'when each generation accumulates by their own activity the

cultural heritage received from another generation' (SA V, p. 455). In this way humanity progresses towards a more perfect humanity: 'the contents of real humanity must be sought from the perfection which humanity pursues' (SA V, p. 445). This perfection is always expressed in history through novel forms.

For Snellman, *Sittlichkeit* meant the normative order of society. It refers to the habits, rules and laws, on which individuals need to take a stand when they ponder the morality of their actions. According to Pulkkinen (2006, p. 175), 'using contemporary language we can say that for Snellman a "sittlich person" is the one who actively and consciously takes part in the change of the set of values of her own culture by participating in political life'. *Sittlichkeit* is realized in the family, civil society, and the state. Individuals find their place in the system of society and form a personal relationship to the norms of its institutions. Universality is a characteristic to *Sittlichkeit*. It is oriented towards advancing the common good.

The primary historical institution that enables the achievement of individual freedom and *Sittlichkeit* is the constitutional state. It defines the equal rights and duties of citizens and through governance and the legislative system a way in which common norms and rules are drawn up. In civil society, individuals and social groups pursue their own interests. As a member of a state a citizen acts for the advancement of justice and the common good. The state is an arena of activity where the attitude is that of changing the norms (Pulkkinen, 1999, p. 20). In a modern state, the community consciously reforms its legislation for the realization of right in its laws and institutions: 'No law will be admitted if it does not have support in the *Bildung* of the nation; Otherwise it remains an empty letter.' (SA III, p. 338). Law has a meaning only if citizens recognize its justice and obey it. The state was for Snellman an ethical institution, 'the existence of the *Sittlichkeit* as a national spirit' (SA III, p. 460).<sup>3</sup> A national spirit is the awareness of the nation of right and wrong. It is expressed in mutual trust and in activities taking place in the institutions of the nation (SA III, p. 460). Individuals are 'sittlich personalities' and are free when they surpass their subjectivity and commit themselves to the purposes of the national spirit, serve their native land, and through that humanity.

The critics of Snellman's social thought suggest that his conception of a unified national spirit is monologic and tends to exclude minorities that think in different ways (Ahonen, 2018; Rantala, 2013). They find the threat of totalitarianism in Snellman's thought. Such an interpretation, however, is in contradiction with Snellman's concept of *Bildung*, which underlines critical thought and the renewal of tradition. Snellman also gave his reason for the possibility of civil disobedience (Ojanen, 2002, p. 79): individuals should strive to change the laws and norms if they are in contradiction with what they find right, reasonable, and corresponding to the common good.

## Philosophy of spirit, providence and the responsibility of an individual

Behind Snellman's concept of *Bildung* was Hegel's philosophy of spirit, according to which world history is a process in which the spirit becomes aware of its freedom. In Snellman's thought this is realized in the development of nations and their national spirit guided by providence, 'an awareness of the eternal reason that guides the fates of individuals' (SA III, p. 498). For Snellman, the concepts of Providence, God, world spirit, and eternal reason mean approximately the same thing. The concept of personality developed by Snellman emerged as a reaction to the religious-philosophical debate of the Hegelian school on the relationship between a finite spirit (a human being) and infinite spirit (God). Snellman adopted a so-called identity position on the issue. The absolute and the subjective spirit, God and human beings are one and the same spirit: divinity is realized in a human being at every moment. 'Personality is namely an awareness of God, an expression of world spirit in the human spirit, the contents and duty of which are to perform the works of the world spirit in the history of humanity' (SA VII, p. 648). Snellman did not believe in a life after death.

On the other hand, Snellman underlines the fact that history is realized through the actions of thinking and willing subjects: 'the world spirit performs its work in world history in our decisions, in our free actions' (SA III, p. 312). He did not accept Hegel's thought that history has a goal nor the idea

that the world spirit uses human beings as a means to pursue its ends. Snellman underlined the genuine possibility of an individual influencing the course of history. 'It holds true only for human beings, that they have will, free choice and responsibility for their actions' (SA XI1, p. 535). In his writing on the history of human development he states: 'we must regard the human spirit as endlessly creative: it is not possible to define its future development' (SA VII, p. 263).

Can ideas on the guidance of providence, on the other hand, ideas of the freedom and responsibility of an individual be reconciled? Mikko Lahtinen (2006, p. 253) concludes that Snellman's commitment to Hegel's philosophy of history and his ideal of providence is in contradiction with Snellman's theory of action. If providence, world spirit or eternal reason define the course of history, no room is left for human freedom and responsibility. In recent decades, many Hegel researchers have begun to interpret the development of the spirit in history as the activity of humanity, the results of which are objectified into forms of culture and the structures of society (e.g. Gleeson & Ikäheimo, 2020; Good, 2013). Snellman also refers to the possibility that the world spirit refers to humanity (SA II, p. 337). The understanding that the world spirit is humanity and the becoming of the spirit is creative human activity, frees *Bildung* from guidance of providence and teleology. It underlines the radical openness of history as well as the responsibility of individuals, communities, and nations as makers of history.

This interpretation would also free *Bildung* from the quality of innateness, which pietism, romanticism, and organicism have given it. The foundation of self-consciousness is not the discovery of God, eternity or the real self from the innermost depths of a human being. Rather it can be found from an orientation outwards, from the critical interpretation of the cultural tradition as well as from the understanding of the place of an individual as part of cultural and social change: 'The more human beings come out of themselves ja commit themselves to the historically given, the better they became aware of their own existence' (SA IV, p. 140).

## The messages of Snellman's concept of *Bildung* for our time

The relevance of Snellman's concept of *Bildung* is based on his cultural, historical and institutional concept of a human being. In his essay 'On Academic Studies' he characterized the process of *Bildung* and a human being as its subject as follows (SA II, p. 158):

The *Bildung* of each time exists only in its own time in the individuals that live and act at that time. If *Bildung* is made into an end that can never be achieved, something that is outside the *Bildung* of each period, humanity is negated. What follows from this is that a human being can be understood as a thinking and wanting subject, as a self-consciousness only in connection to a given tradition and to an existing rule of law, a society.

This conception of a human subject is an alternative to the individualistic concepts of psychology, economic theory, and of liberal political theory in which the psychological processes, features and choices of individuals are taken as starting points. Snellman's concept anticipates the modern socio-cultural and communal conception of human beings. A community, its language, norms and cultural achievements are the foundation and the starting point for the development of an individual. A corresponding idea has been developed in the 20th century by cultural-historical psychology, pragmatism, and communitarianism in social philosophy. In Lev Vygotsky's theory (1986) the origins of individual thinking lies in the internalization of the language of the community into a means of controlling one's behaviour. In interaction with other people an individual adopts the norms, ways of thinking and acting of a community. In John Dewey's philosophy (1920/1988) the shared habits of thinking and acting are also a starting point. The moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) looks to virtues from the purposes and internal goods of different societal practices.

Snellman's theory provides a dynamic and contextual approach to the *Bildung* process, in which individuals adopt and further develop the cultural tradition as well as the norms, laws, and institutions of society. It includes an educational theory, a theory of society and politics, as well as an ethical theory of *Sittlichkeit* and moral order. In this sense it is a more holistic framework for the theory of

education than cognitive psychology of learning, which focuses on information processing and intellectual activity. It is also an advanced alternative to the concept of competence suggested by the OECD and other transnational organizations, which regard human capabilities first of all as human capital and evaluate their relevance in relation to the labour market.

In the following I will discuss five dimensions of Snellman's theory of *Bildung* that are timely and worth developing further. These dimensions also clarify the ways in which Snellman's theory differs from the cognitive concepts of learning and the idea of metacognition embodied in the lists of 21st century competences.

### ***The first obligation of civilized persons is to understand the demands of their time and the readiness to take action in relation to the big questions of humanity***

Snellman states in his essay '*Bildung* and the General Spirit' (1846) that a civilized person is 'one who as a family member, in his profession, as a member of a municipality and a nation understands in the big questions of humanity the requirements of his time and who has knowledge and will to advance these universal ends' (SA V, p. 458). This requirement of *Bildung* concerns all social classes and all professions in which the requirements of the time are expressed in particular ways. Specifically it concerns educators: 'If educators do not have any idea of the general social life of their time, they are not able to educate citizens for it. If they do not know the way in which the profession or activity which they are educating, is connected to the wholeness of society, they cannot provide education for a profession' (SA V, p. 457).

Snellman characterized his time as the pursuit of the universality of *Bildung* and the right of all to have access to education. He considered it to be the only secure foundation of a modern society and was the foundation of the free development of nations and of the international relations. *Bildung* is (SA V, p. 459, Manninen et al., 2021, p. 130) 'the source of the present's various doctrines on universal freedom of conscience, shared political and civic rights, equality before the law, freedom of establishment, free trade, etc. All these were based on universal education and therefore they can only be realized to the degree to which education truly is a matter that belongs to all members of society'.

What then does the understanding of the spirit of the time require? First it requires a realistic understanding of the key problems and challenges of the time. In sociology the analysis of such problems has been called the diagnosis of the time. According to Gert Biesta (2002), the reinterpretation of the concept *Bildung* should start from a diagnosis of the time. A classical example is Karl Mannheim's (1943) sociological analysis of European society after the Second World War. He analysed it in terms of mass society, the crisis of democracy and the emergence of irrational mass movements, which, he feared, would lead Europe to totalitarianism. He outlined the reconstruction of institutions based on democratic planning and popular education (Yamada, 2021). An analysis of the time also implies an understanding of the state of political power relations and of the contingent developments that close or open windows of possibilities for the reform of institutions. J.V. Snellman in his later career as a senator was skilful at utilizing the possibilities that emerged in the Russian Empire such as the establishment of Finnish as an official language in the Grand Duchy in 1863.

The second element that concerns the understanding the spirit of the time is a critical comparison of the competing world views, theories and suggestions for reforms in society. A predecessor of J.V. Snellman, Adolf Ivar Arwidsson (1791–1858), had already suggested that every person should clearly conceive of the ideologies and ways of thinking that are dominant in the time and should forcefully participate in their development (Rantala, 2013, p. 41). In his discussion on academic studies, Snellman required that a university student should be able to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the main theorists in his field of studies as well as evaluate the relevance of different frameworks and methods for solving major societal problems.

Climate change and loss of biodiversity belong to the big problems of our time. Several frameworks and programmes have been suggested to solve them: sustainable development, circulation economy, green growth, ecological reconstruction and degrowth. A central disagreement between

these frameworks is whether the goals of economic growth, preservation of nature and social equality can be reconciled. The United Nations' programme of sustainable development considers that it is possible. The green growth programmes of the OECD and the World Bank believe that by developing alternative forms of energy and recycling it is possible to decouple economic growth from the increasing environmental impact and use of natural resources (OECD, 2011). Many researchers, however, do not regard recoupling to be as a realistic option. Hickel and Kallis (2019), for example, reported in their synthesis of studies on recoupling that the growth in the use of natural resources in the 2000s has been faster than economic growth measured by the GDP. Helmut Rosa (2021), Professor of Sociology at the University of Jena, has argued that 'it is simply impossible to save the climate in a society that needs eternal growth, innovation and acceleration to keep itself in balance'. Postcolonial theories focus on the relationships of dependence and power between the rich north and poor south and to the historical responsibility of the north for causing the climate crisis. They doubt whether it is possible to solve the environmental problems, to achieve social equality or limit the consumption and use of natural resources in an economic system based on profit making and competition.

### **National work towards *Bildung* is justified because of its contribution to the universal culture and to peaceful relationships between nations**

One of the challenges of the concept of *Bildung* that is often mentioned is the need to detach it from national projects. A reorientation towards a global or cosmopolitical concept of *Bildung* is needed. Universal humanism is a foundational attribute of Snellman's thought. When he asks who is a civilized human being, he asks 'who is a civilized member of the great community of humankind?' (SA V, p. 458). He further states: 'It may be said that the task of the nation is to work for the good of humankind. (...) A sensible politics is that the good of the nation would be the good of humanity' (SA XI, I, p. 534 and p. 566, Manninen et al., 2021, p. 150 and p. 153).

*Bildung* reaches an individual through the *Bildung* of a nation. However, an individual 'ought to strive and needs to comprehend the position of their own nation in relation to other nations and the *Bildung* of their own nation in relation to the universal culture of humankind' (SA V, p. 458). Snellman defined a national spirit as a mode of universal culture that is characteristic to a nation. However, (SA III, p. 304): 'No nation can be formed only by resorting to itself. It joins itself into a part of the whole only by being in interaction with other nations, and its particular *Bildung* gains its particular form in relation to them. (...) One learns what is reasonable by comparing the habits of one's own nation to the habits of others, and when one's vision has been sharpened in the interaction with these nations, one learns to submit the imperfections of the national spirit to what one finds belongs to the universal culture' (SA III, p. 312). On the other hand, the construction of an original national *Bildung* in different nations constitutes the foundation for the development of universal cultural development. In the development of human history, culture moves forward from one nation, age, and geographical location to another.

The good of humankind is best taken care of when each nation strives to cultivate itself. We can, for example, think that the Finnish free public school system with its particularities is a contribution to universal culture. Other nations may learn something from its model and organizing principles. However, it was created and is being further developed to achieve educational equality and to assure democracy exclusively in Finland. When a country participates in negotiations to solve global problems like climate or biodiversity loss, its contribution and credibility is heavily dependent on how it solves these problems in its own territory.

Snellman also regards the principle of *Bildung* to be a key foundation for international relations. He describes how religious proselytization, political necessity based on the will to power, and the demands of business have dictated relationships between nations. Snellman considers that instead of these factors the relationships of nations should be based on the right of *Bildung*. Here Snellman agrees with Immanuel Kant's (2006) concept of the foundations of world peace, namely the

development of a republican form of governance based on the principles of freedom and just legislation in single countries. This kind of republican state—a *Bildung* state in Snellmanian terms—is likely to maintain peace and commit itself to international conventions.

Taking into account recent global developments, does this view represent wishful thinking? it might be asked whether a more realistic foundation for solving global problems could be suggested. Do the experiences of climate change negotiations of nature loss as well as the developments of geopolitics show that authoritarian states are unwilling to commit themselves to international agreements? Kirill Rogov (2022), a political researcher from Moscow, comments on the Russian war against Ukraine: 'This war is again a horrendous demonstration of what kind of force of destruction an authoritarian regime can provide without monitoring, counterforces and freedom of knowledge'.

### ***Knowing and learning as a reinterpretation of tradition leads to the formation of an individual sense of conviction and moral agency***

When writing about learning in schools and in the university, Snellman relentlessly criticizes teaching based on homework, examinations, and rote remembering. He underlines that the learner needs to form a personal understanding of the achievements of past generations: 'the knowledge of an individual is completely empty and does not deserve the name of knowing or *Bildung*, unless they are independently acquired, thought and reworked into an individual wholeness' (SA IV, p. 4). But even an ability to unify and organize knowledge is not sufficient for university studies. Snellman defines three criteria for the maturity that a student should achieve in school in order to move to university studies: 1) a conviction based on personal judgement, 2) a will and an ability to pursue free and independent studies, and 3) an ability to apply independently the knowledge acquired to the issues that come up in public life. Snellman's concept of learning is based on his understanding of the nature of knowledge (SA II, p. 155):

We can draw a distinction between two moments of knowledge, namely the given contents, concepts, determined thoughts, and on the other hand, the thinking subject, the way of knowing of the knowing subject, the way subjects take into their consciousness these contents. More closely understood, these two moments mean, that knowledge is both a tradition that is independent of an individual and at the same time it has existence in the self, generally in self-consciousness.

According to Snellman, knowing is made up of conceiving what is sensible in the tradition, that is, what is enduring, valuable, useful, and worth of developing further. Tradition is always a multifaceted and contradictory wholeness. A subject interprets it and moulds it to get it to respond better to the challenges of the present and the future. According to Snellman, this reinterpretation of tradition by subjects as a part of the *Bildung* process constitutes the mechanism of cultural change and development (SA VII, p. 638).

A conviction means that a subject has an idea of what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is not true. Secondly, conviction calls for agency and activity of individuals for the ideals they regard as important. Snellman underlines that for an individual knowing does not exist above the realm contradictions of the world of activity. Knowledge only has value for humankind 'as a conductor of activity, a thing that is expressed in activity. (. . .) Even understanding and conscience attain their real existence only in activity' (SA III, pp. 375–376). Learning and knowing are connected to the first obligation of *Bildung*, namely a willingness to engage in activity in relation to the big problems of the age.

According to Snellman the task of school is to create the required foundations for further studies, for independent civic activity and for self-education. In Snellman's account, moral and intellectual agency are inseparable. This separates his concept of learning and knowing from constructivist conceptions of learning and problem solving in which a student is seen as a cognitive agent who is capable of successfully controlling her learning processes. Snellman, instead, underlines moral

agency and the willingness to tackle the major problems of the time. Both the OECD (2005) and the EU (2007) have presented a list of competencies that all people need in order to survive in the knowledge society of the 21st century. These competencies are metacognitive, that is, they are independent of any cultural content or tradition. Snellman would have regarded such a conception as an empty abstraction that could not be further from his idea of *Bildung* as reformation of cultural tradition and as a critical comparison of the leading ideologies of the age.

Finally, Snellman's concept of *Bildung* refers to a life-long process in various institutions in the society: 'Education does not end with school or some specific exam, for the whole of life is school, where an individual is transformed into a human being, and this process of *Bildung* itself constitutes what is human in a human being' (SA II, pp. 157–158, Manninen et al., 2021, p. 84). Here Snellman formulated a conception of humanity that in the late 20th century became known as the idea of lifelong learning and more recently continuous learning. However, these notions lack the cultural and moral contents of *Bildung*.

### ***Bildung, work, and the economy presuppose each other, but the material wealth created has to serve Bildung***

In recent debates on education the requirements of the economy and *Bildung* are often seen as opposites. Partly as a result of the OECD's influence, education has increasingly been seen as a producer of human capital, as a condition of the success of an individual in the labour market and as a major source of the international competitiveness of nations. When this viewpoint dominates the discussion of educational politics, one can speak about instrumental education or an education that has submitted itself to the economy. Although such a conclusion is justified, it easily leads to an irreconcilable opposition between *Bildung* and the economy.

Snellman did not accept such an opposition. For him, material and spiritual *Bildung* were prerequisites for each other: '*Bildung* is a condition of industry and its fruit' (SA V, p. 459). According to him, *Bildung* and welfare reciprocally require each other (SA V, p. 114). With the prosperity of the nation, national defence, popular education, administration, jurisdiction, as well as sciences and arts, can flourish. Snellman was acquainted with German economist Fredrich List's (1789–1846) theory of the forces of production. In List's theory, the spiritual, social, and institutional conditions of economy played a central role. It has similarities with Snellman's theory of *Bildung*. Not only were industriousness, prudence, inventiveness and individuals' entrepreneurship necessary for the flourishing economy, but also civic freedom, public institutions, proper laws and foreign policy and 'first of all, the unity and strength of the nation' (Patoluoto, 1986, p. 306).

Snellman underlined that industry and the economy must in the last instance serve *Bildung* (SA V, p.112): 'The national wealth must be recognized as a means for advancing the spiritual development of the nation only, that is, as a means of the national world-historical existence that serves and benefits humankind'. Snellman reverses the instrumental conception of education so that the economic wealth achieved must serve *Bildung* and the common good.

According to Snellman, work not only satisfies needs, it also develops the understanding and morality of the worker: a farmer, an industrialist and a shopkeeper all benefit their surroundings, the municipality and also the state 'by transmitting truthful knowledge of the situation and the needs of the country and by telling about the best means of satisfying those needs' (SA V, p. 457). The civilizing dimension of vocational education can be found in the ways in which a profession is connected to the totality of society and to the problems of the era.

Like Hegel, Snellman found it problematic that an economy based on the freedom of commerce and industry inevitably divides people into the rich and the poor. He suggested education as a solution to this problem: 'the bigger the difference in wealth and external welfare grows, the more necessary it is to equalize the differences by education. By that means the property of the wealthy can be distributed to the unlucky in a more just way' (SA III, p. 395). Education can mitigate

the gap but not eliminate it. Snellman, however, doubted (SA VII, p. 209) whether school is able to fix or compensate for the shortcomings of family education.

### ***A Bildung university must be open to society***

In Finland, the term *Bildung* is part of the strategies of universities. Snellman's essay on academic freedom and academic studies (1840) has in Finland been connected to the Humboldtian idea of the *Bildung* university (Niiniluoto, 2011). Both Snellman and Humboldt found necessary the union between research and teaching, the autonomy of the university, and the freedom of teaching and studying. However, their concepts also differed from each other. Humboldt had an idea of the internal force of human beings inspired by romanticism and organicism (e.g. Miller, 2020; Reichenbach, 2014). Second, he had a liberalist conception of the state where the state exist to allow the development and flourishing of individuals (Herdt, 2019). For Snellman, the state was a moral community whose obligation was to provide education and *Bildung* for all citizens, not only to educate a civilized elite. Thirdly, Humboldt defended the conception of pure science, which was independent of all interests of the surrounding society. For Snellman, research and education needed to be connected to the problems of the time. Even today, the autonomy of the university is often defended by referring to the idea of basic research which needs to be free from any societal concerns or interests, although this idea has been found problematic. Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright formulated his evaluation as follows (Von Wright, 1992, p. 186):

The ongoing unification of science and the economy has changed the situation. The ideal of the Humboldtian university looks ever more like the pastoral dreams of past times. (...) The traditional division into pure and applied science has become blurred and lost its significance (...) A new situation is emerging and science has a reason to reflect anew on its own justification.

Snellman defined two necessary ingredients of real scientific life: 'the participation of the university in the scientific disputes of the day and participation in the issues that at a certain moment are important for the homeland, with which the university cannot hope for recognition in the world of science or from citizens' (SA V, p. 458). He specified (SA II, 167, Manninen et al., 2021, p. 84):

Scientific interest has ceased to belong to a specific profession and the solution to every question regarding the good of society is early sought in science. Therefore, the scientist has to understand his own era and to become acquainted with those issues of his era that are interesting with regard to knowledge. This kind of outward action strengthens the universities internally, and the student gains confidence in his teachers, who are already well-established in the field of science. This more than anything else will make him love the sciences.

In the last instance, however, the university was for Snellman an institution in which *Bildung* and morality (*sedlighet*, *Sittlichkeit*) was achieved through science. A Finnish commentator interpreted Snellman's version of the German neoclassical conception of university based on *Bildung durch Wissenschaft* by saying that morality (*sedlighet*) means a form of motivation based on knowledge. Education in morality means an increase in knowledge, an increase in knowledge means an education in morality. 'These are not two parallel tasks of the university, they are one and the same thing' (Toikka, 1970, p. 109).

### **Conclusions**

Daniel Tröhler (2003) has shown that the German *Geisteswissenschaftliche* tradition in education and its concept of *Bildung* developed at the beginning of the 20th century in the direction of an exclusive nationalistic ideology. Snellman emphatically rejected such a position and found the dialectics of the national and the universal essential for cultural development. He found learning from another cultures to be a foundation for the development of a national spirit. On the other hand, a hermeneutic, dialogic approach to *Bildung* as proposed by Gadamer (2000) and Herdt (2019) challenges and complements Snellman's concept of

*Bildung* and its unitary concept of a national spirit. The dialogic approach underlines a dialogue between different and opposing positions as a source of universality (Herdt, 2019, p. 220): 'The We ... is a determinate universal that reflects both the common identity and individual differences'. Snellman took a step in that direction in underlining the necessity of learning across boundaries from other cultures as a source for the construction of a national *Bildung*.

The recent European discussion on general didactics and curriculum theory frequently refers to Wolfgang Klafki's critical-constructivist didactic theory (Klafki, 1996). Snellman's concept of *Bildung* anticipates Klafki's theory in two main issues, namely in taking the key problems of the time as the starting point for the curriculum and education and in focusing on the cultural contents needed in addressing these problems. For Klafki *Bildung* means gaining 'a historically mediated awareness of key problems in current society—as far as it is predictable—in the future, the insight that everyone is co-responsible for such problems, and a readiness to contribute to the mastery of the problems' (Klafki, 1996, translation; p. 154; Kvamme, 2021, p. 5). The basic definition of *Bildung* between the two is astonishingly similar. Snellman found a diagnosis of the requirements of the time concerning the big questions of humanity and the willingness to contribute to their solution to be the starting point for *Bildung*. The critical interpretation and further development of the tradition, the given contents, provide means for starting this undertaking. The two theories suggest that a diagnosis of the time should be an essential part of studies in educational institutions.

In Snellman's concept of *Bildung*, practical and political dimensions are essential, that is, an orientation towards the renewal of norms and social institutions that corresponds to the concept of moral order that a civilized individual or a community finds right. The practical and political are needed in dealing with the key problems of our time, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality. Professor of Environmental Policy at Helsinki University Janne Hukkinen (2019) formulates this need as follows:

If we take the climate reports seriously, the political upheavals needed are unprecedented. However, they cannot emerge in the present liberal democracy that underlines individual freedoms. We need a transformation towards a republicanism that emphasizes the common good. Republicanism requires a strong rule-based economic steering. (...) An unrestricted climate change threatens democracy. Today we need a democracy, that restricts the freedom of individuals to do what they please – a democracy that safeguards the freedom of the people from the distress of the deteriorating living environment.

The development of the practical and political dimensions of *Bildung* in school education requires crossing the boundaries between school, the environment, and society (Miettinen, 1999). While maintaining their autonomy, schools may join in the projects of civil society organizations and even to the projects of citizen science. Schools located on coastlines have made plans with their local communities to meeting the impacts of climate change (González-Gaudio & Maldonado, 2019) and students have participated in the monitoring of the state of the local ecosystems in citizen science projects (Freiwald et al., 2018). Such projects could play an important role, for example, in the prevention of local biodiversity losses.

In the Montreal Agreement of 2022, the international community decided that a third part of the land area of the Earth should be protected by 2030 and the EU is preparing a biodiversity legislation to fulfill this Agreement. In Finland, the national Nature Research Center has defined 288 nature types or ecosystems in the country and has evaluated to what extent they are threatened. Schools could participate in the monitoring of the variety of local nature types in their home municipality or region, forming an opinion which ones of them need to be protected and why. This needs to take place in collaboration with local nature organizations and other associations, with land owners, and with researchers and regional authorities responsible for land use and nature conservation. Such an activity would develop the systemic and ecological thinking of students, their understanding of different the types of ecosystems and as well as increase their political consciousness of the necessary measures to prevent biodiversity loss. It

would also strengthen the role of the school as an autonomous and responsible agent of civil society.

## Notes

1. The laws and administration of the Swedish kingdom were left effective in the Grand Duchy. However, the Russian rulers favoured the development of national exceptionalism and independent institutions in the country in order to prevent its elites from pursuing the reunification with Sweden.
2. In the references the Latin numbers refer to the volume of the *Samlade arbeten* (SA) and Arabic numbers to the page number. The translations into English are by the author. Some of the translations have been adopted from (Manninen et al., 2021), as shown in the reference.
3. This kind of Hegelian concept of the state evidently differs from neoliberal or postmodernist concepts of the state that consider a state to constitute bureaucratic governance machinery that shackles the market mechanism and restricts individual freedom and initiative. Such a view of the state, however, as Vermeulen and de Graef (2012, p. 248) put it, neglects the long and contradictory history of the state as both a 'massive disciplinary power' and the provider of 'domestic welfare': 'instead of being a mere repository of procedurally legitimate violence, the state also encompasses the daily functioning of the institutions that educate the young, protect the old, or step in when the status of the temporarily able-bodied is suddenly withdrawn'.

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