

ON NARRATIVES OF SELF-FORMATION AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I begin with Schleiermacher review and analyze the origins of the Humboldtian model of the modern German university as an influential kind of institution that was adopted in many parts of Europe, the US and beyond. The novel of education and of ethical self-formation came to provide a novelistic depicted of the essential human becoming of the hero protagonist and engendered a new genre that spread throughout the world. The paper asks the question where and what might be the novel of the neoliberal university in an age when the humanistic requirement has fallen away and students have become “customers” purchasing an educational service. Is there a novel of the neoliberal university that does not endlessly replicate the logic of the marketplace but actually intervenes in material reality to “save” the institution?

JEL codes: H52; H75; I21; I23

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In Chapter 5 of *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense* (1808) Friedrich Schleiermacher registers the common complaint against the “crudeness” of university customs especially the disorderly mode of life of students – an indictment that critics countered through the use of the term “academic freedom.” Schleiermacher was writing before the founding of the University of Berlin in 1809 by the Prussian liberal politician Wilhelm von Humboldt. Schleiermacher’s *Occasional Thoughts* carries with it an appendix “On a University Soon to Be Established,” meaning the University of Berlin. It becomes the basis of the Humboldt model that is exported around the world, first to the rest of Europe and then USA and beyond.

Theologian Schleiermacher and philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte provided the impetus for Humboldt's reform ideas based on the close relation of research and teaching, knowledge for its own sake and the notion of *bildung*. He envisioned a "Universitas litterarum" as the basis for a humanistic education and four pillars of Law, Medicine, Philosophy and Theology. Fichte, first a professor, was unanimously elected Rector in 1811 only to resign the following year. His reforming zeal centered on human freedom and provided a nationalistic interpretation in "Addresses to the German Nation" presented in Berlin on 1807. The address was a patriotic German nationalism, tinged with antisemitism, presented as the characteristic of the "present age."

Schleiermacher's German idealism, developed as the philosophical system called the *Wissenschaftslehre* or "science of knowledge" sought new foundations for Kant's Critical philosophy in the self-reproducing nature of the "I." The self-positing "I" for Fichte was the ground of all experience. Progress in the present age was based on the rule of reason rather than instinct, best represented by the German people. It was to be facilitated by a new form of national education that would enable the German nation, not yet in existence, to reach the final age. The vocation of humankind was thus built into the concept of the modern university, the learned scholar and the student who is responsible for developing herself for her own sake as the highest goal of society that leads to complete unity, unanimity and equality of all its members. For Schleiermacher, Kant's abstract moral universalism goes against the ethics of individuality and the free development of a unique personality. Both Schleiermacher and Humboldt reflect a preference for individuality and originality that characterized early German Romanticism. This preference can be seen in accounts of academic freedom – both freedom from the external world and freedom granted within the institution. All three agreed that while the institution was to be supported by the State it must remain free of any government interference. Academics also were allowed to choose topics for their teaching according to their research interests. Students were typically seen as "getting to know themselves" before embarking on a professional career. Freedom – of the institution, of the professors, of the students – became the governing principle for the greater evolution of society.

The Idea of the modern university and its governance – *its leadership and governance* – was essentially an expression of liberal political ideas and moral theory about the greater need for an institution that has its *raison d'être* developing the individual's innermost potential as a form of subjectivity leading to the formation of the student. The humanist concept of the university was well represented in a generation of scholars including Schelling, Steffens, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and von Humboldt. The Humboldtian university concept profoundly influenced higher education throughout Europe although it was in conflict with the French system of the *grandes écoles* that

imposed strict control over the curriculum. The Humboldtian model also profoundly influenced the development of the US university and the modern university. It is in this tradition that one strong notion of university autonomy and academic freedom stands.

It is interesting to note that a modern literary form called the *bildungsroman* grew up around this notion of the liberal university, often referred to as the novel of self formation that focuses on the psychological transition and coming-of-age of youth to adulthood. It is normally dated from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* published around 1795–6. The form spread throughout Europe and the rest of the world and today has its 21st century media counterpart in coming-of-age movies. Goethe's novel focuses on Wilhelm as the hero who undergoes a journey of self-realization.¹ The philosophical novel was judged as very significant by Friedrich Schlegel and Arthur Schopenhauer and some argued that it epitomized the work of Fichte. While there were precursors for this form of the novel it really came to fruition with Rousseau's *Emile* (1763), Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). There are many contemporary novels that can be classified as part of the genre such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Jeanette Winterton's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). Within the genre an *Erziehungsroman* ("education novel") focuses on training and formal schooling. Now the terms have transcended their original German context as spiritual or psychological coming-of-age is depicted as a universal experience of modernity common to all youthful transition of human emergence based on narrative identity.

Tobias Boes provides a brief account of *Bildungsroman* as an introduction to his translation of Karl Morgenstern's classic essay "On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*" delivered as a public lecture in 1819:

The word was introduced to popular usage by Wilhelm Dilthey in *Poetry and Experience* (1906), though he had already used the term in the earlier *life of Schleiermacher* (1870), a book that fittingly appeared on the eve of German unification under Bismarck. In *Poetry and Experience*, Dilthey argued that the *Bildungsroman* was a distinctively German achievement, a product of unique political circumstances and an antithesis of the French and English novels of social realism. This claim was repeated with increasing nationalistic fervor by Thomas Mann and others during the time of the First World War and became, in due course, an ideological commonplace of the Third Reich. After 1945, a younger generation of scholars eager to break with the sins of the past drew conclusions that were the inverse of Dilthey's but retained his basic premise: suddenly, the *Bildungsroman* was regarded as a literary

symptom of the German *sonderweg*, the separate path into modernity that had paved the way for fascism (p. 647).

Famously, Morgenstern defines the *Bildungsroman* in the following terms:

We may call a novel a *Bildungsroman* first and foremost on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel. The objective and work-encompassing goal of any poet who produces such a novel will be the pleasurable, beautiful, and entertaining depiction of the formative history of a protagonist who is especially suited to such a development; this goal will be original and, as with every truly beautiful artwork, free of any didacticism (pp. 654–655).

The *Bildungsroman* depicts an individual who develops according to his true nature. Morgenstern illustrates this philosophical process by reference to Goethe's *Meister* as the model of its time. As Boes claims: "Morgenstern's insistence on the pedagogical values of the developmental novel and his trust in the ability of literary works to shape and cultivate the *whole* individual are frequently interpreted as relics of an eighteenth-century mind-set" (p. 648). (See also Boes, 2008).

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian critic and philosopher of culture, was working on *The Novel of Education and Its Significance in the History of Realism* before it was destroyed in the German invasion during WWII. Only a fragment remains² but it attests to just how wedded he was to Kant's question "What is man?" – a question that Kant reputedly always open his course on anthropology. He proposes a typology that incorporates the travel novel, the novel of ordeal, the (auto)biographical novel, and the *Bildungsroman*. His main theme as he says is "the image of man in the novel" and especially "*man in the process of becoming*" (p. 19). He goes on to write:

There exists a special subcategory of the novel called the 'novel of education' (*Erziehungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*). Usually included (in chronological order) are the following major examples of this generic subcategory: Xenophon's *Cyropotdia* (classical), Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Middle Ages), Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (the Renaissance), Fenelon's *Telemaque* (neoclassicism), Rousseau's *Emile* (since there is a considerable novelistic element in this pedagogical treatise), Wieland's *Agathon*, Wetzels' *Tobias Knout*, Hippel's *Lebenslaufe nach aufsteigender Linie*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (both novels), Jean Paul's *Titan* (and several of his other novels), Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Raabe's *Der Hungerpastor*, Gottfried Keller's *Der grune Heinrich*, Pontoppidan's *Lucky Peter*, Tolstoy's *Childhood, Adolescence, and Youth*, Goncharov's *An Ordinary Story*

and *Obломov*, Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and *Magic Mountain*, and others (pp. 19–20).

The *Bildungsroman* concerns “man’s essential *becoming*” (p. 20) as “a novel of human *emergence*” and he goes on to make the distinction among cycles of emergence, including the classical novel of education in the second half of the eighteenth century:

This kind of novel of emergence typically depicts the world and life as experience, as a school, through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result: one becomes more sober, experiencing some degree of resignation.

And another form he calls “the didactic-pedagogical novel:” “It is based on a specific pedagogical ideal, understood more or less broadly, and depicts the pedagogical process of education in the strict sense of the word” represented in Rousseau’s *Emile*. In the fifth and final form “Man’s emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature” (p. 23) as depicted in Goethe’s novels.

How far we are from this humanistic concept of the free university today and how far have we drifted away from the notion of autonomy and the moral substance of leadership that was exercised in the name of the Idea of the university? Educational leadership, now a formal sub-discipline or field of knowledge on its own that has grown very quickly in the last couple of decades, is built on the hypothesis that leadership is different from management and administration even although the management has taken precedence over the leadership in the neoliberal environment that favors a strict line management hierarchy. It is comforting to see that some scholars in the field are approaching the question of educational leadership as a moral and humanistic inquiry rather than a scientific one. I have written about the kind of changes in a variety of contexts beginning in the early 1990s and returning to the theme over the years. In “Managerialism and the Neoliberal University” (Peters, 2013) I addressed the issues in the following way:

Neoliberal universities, with little philosophical self-reflection, have been put in the service of the “new global economy” under conditions of knowledge capitalism that has had several effects. First, it has diminished the public status of the university. In the era of sovereign debt crisis the search for alternative funding patterns have led to national strategies for encouraging fee-paying students on the basis of human capital theory, leading to excessive student debt and a consequent privatization of higher education. Second, it has buttressed domestic fee-paying students with an internationalization of higher education and the global competition for international students with the growth of multiple campuses and off-shore profit centers. Both these features led directly to the encouragement of all forms of capitalization of the self and a kind of new

educational prudentialism (Peters, 2005). Third, it has focused on issues of intellectual capital and the ownership of the means of knowledge production with the development and expansion of research parks, private-public partnerships in science production, and an emphasis on the commercialization of research and online teaching initiatives. Fourth, it has led to the huge growth of administration vis-à-vis the teaching and research faculty, to an increasing bureaucratization of the university and to the emergence of a new class of ‘knowledge managers,’ – an administrative cadre – whose job is monitor and measure academic performance and to maximize returns from research. Most of these developments leading to the neoliberal university and its recent variants – the ‘entrepreneurial university,’ the ‘enterprise university,’ the ‘innovation university’ – spring from the application of neoliberal economics to higher education based on a series of reforms carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, the reforms often collectively referred to as ‘new managerialism’ or ‘new public management,’ often applied to the reform of the public sector as a whole, have sprung from public choice theory and new institutional economics leading to a fundamental reframing of the university what Bill Readings has called “the university of excellence” (p. 11).

To these thoughts and reflections I have nothing further to add by way of analysis except some dubious personal reflection about the nature of leadership that I have experienced in different institutions around the world, probably best left unsaid. In a sense the neoliberal university chronicles the decline in professional autonomy, a move away from the values associated with collegiality and the significance of peer review and peer governance towards the development and management of knowledge capitalism (Peters & Besley, 2006; Besley & Peters, 2006).

Nowhere is the absurdity of the new management ethos captured so brilliantly than in the campus trilogy of David Lodge’s comic novels: *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). His novels span from the “generous” sixties to the beginnings of neoliberal business model forced on UK universities with the onset of Thatcherism. A former professor of English literature at the University of Birmingham, Lodge’s novels depict some of the changes from the golden age to a time when the market decides what is viable. In an interview with the *Times Higher Education* Lodge (2015) says: “I felt I’d had the golden years of British higher education from the 1960s to 1987 – I have the impression that life in British universities has not been as much fun since then.”³ When *Nice Work* was published at the beginning of the Thatcher onslaught many on the Left criticized it as giving ammunition to discredit university life as both self-indulgent and hedonistic.

One can imagine how easily the performance culture of the British university might be the subject of satire and perhaps less likely top provide an

avenue for *bildungsroman* – there is no time to discover one’s self. University life is about qualifying as quickly as possible without running up too much debt. The British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) morphed into the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that now dominates university life and determines all advancement and funded research in terms of a kind of ranking. Increasing the audit culture of the university is run by line managers who buy in various big data systems to give institutional comparative analysis in terms of simple citation counts.

Yet there has to be some relief from the endless torrents of critique on neoliberalism poured out by chaparoned students who only know the consumer-driven university and mark their levels of satisfaction by how many videos the professor shows. The professoriat have largely been complicit in their own downfall refusing solidarity and the seemingly endless differentiation of the professoriat so that adjunct faculty take on more teaching with less and less security.

I use the term “Left managerialism” to describe those academics who in one breath critique neoliberal managerialism but in another quickly embrace management culture when they are coopted as “Dean” or “Head of School” unable to detect contradictions in their own authoritarian personality.

Perhaps the outstanding example of the *Bildungsroman* in English is the film *Educating Rita*, directed by Lewis Gilbert and starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, originally a stage comedy by British playwright Willie Russell which was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and premiered at The Warehouse in London in 1980. As Virginia Steinhagen (1996) writes in her dissertation *Educating Rita and Her “Sisters:” The Female “Bildungsroman” in the German Democratic Republic*:

The 1983 movie *Educating Rita* shows Rita White’s struggle to realize her personal goals when these goals go beyond her society’s expectations for a woman of her age and class. The film highlights her academic development from her traumatic first attempts at university life through her successful completion of a rigorous academic program. But this film is about more than an academic education. It also shows Rita’s development in the broader sense conveyed by the word *Bilduna*. That is in the sense of shaping her individual personality through acculturation and experience within her society. Rita’s journey and her search for herself are reminiscent of the personal cultivation and development at the heart of a particular literary genre, the *Bildungsroman* (p. 1).

Steinhagen begins with Rita’s comment:

I’ve been realizing for ages that I was, you know, slightly out of step. I’m twenty-six. I should have had a baby by now. Everyone expects it. But I mean, I don’t want a baby yet. No. I want to discover meself [sic] first.

And Steinhagen broadens the canvas to argue:

This film came to mind as I began working on this dissertation and mapping out the path of Rita Seidel's development in Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*. Both Rita White and Rita Seidel come from family backgrounds where higher education is not the norm. They are both leading comfortable lives, but are not content; they are questioning whether there is more to life than they are currently experiencing. For each of these young women, the chance to study at a university provides the opportunity to see her world in a new light, and through this process to learn more about herself and her place in her society. Similar comparisons can be made between this film and the other literary works analyzed in this dissertation: Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand*, and Volker Braun's *Unvollendete Geschichte*. The film and the books raise broader issues concerning the cultural constraints influencing a woman's education and development in her respective country (pp. 3–4).

As she also remarks: “the novel of development, a genre associated with Weimar classicism, was seen as a tool to promote the development of the socialist state” (p. 4). Is there an equivalent for the neoliberal era or state? It is hard to imagine a novel of education self-formation in an era of where humanities departments are closed and community and adult education classes are scaled back or made available on a user-pays basis.

Self-formation is not rankable or high on the list of performance indicators. Educational self-transformation in the neoliberal era seems quaint and old-fashioned; rather the game has changed to being an entrepreneur of oneself. As Jeffrey Williams (2013) in “The Plutocratic Imagination” argues:

If we still take the novel as a register of politics and culture, it is not a good time for social democracy. Since around 1990, a new wave of American fiction has emerged that focuses on the dominance of finance, the political power of the super-rich, and the decline of the middle class. This new wave marks a turn in the political novel: the fiction of the 1970s and 1980s tended to expose conspiracies under the surface of formal government, whereas this new wave tends to see government as subsidiary, with the main societal choices occurring within the economic sphere. The novels animate the turn to neoliberalism, and thus we might aptly categorize them as ‘the neoliberal novel.’⁴

Walter Benn Michaels (2005) examines what he calls “The Neoliberal Imagination.”⁵

The scariest thing about the first day of school in two recent novels – Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* and Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* – is finding out what the other girls are wearing (the

answer at both schools is flip-flops and shorts), and the toughest moment is when your family meets your new roommate's family.

Michaels' (2005) continues the analysis:

Schools, in other words, loom larger in the neoliberal imagination than they did in the liberal imagination because schools have become our primary mechanism for convincing ourselves that poor people deserve their poverty. Or, to put the point the other way around, schools have become our primary mechanism for convincing us rich people that we deserve our wealth. Everybody gets that people who go to elite schools have a sizable economic advantage over people who don't; that's one reason why people want to go to them. And as long as the elite schools are open to anybody who's smart enough and/or hardworking enough to get into them, we see no injustice in reaping their benefits. It's OK if schools are technologies for producing inequality as long as they are also technologies for justifying it.

In an age of finance culture when student loans have blown out to over \$1.3 trillion as the second most common form of mortgage in the USA it is hard to imagine a place for the novel of educational subjectivity and transformation except perhaps as non-white communities collectively struggle outside formal state systems to educate themselves against the prevailing ethos of the age. What is the story of the neoliberal university if not the micro-managing vice-president obsessed with manipulating the rankings so that he can obtain the annual bonus, or the head of school – “a nice chap really” – who on his promotion turns from an introverted scholar to an authoritarian line-manager unable to brook anyone challenging his authority, or the conference junkie impressed by his own google citations who trots out the same public lecture on how to change the world, or the business school lecturer who specializes in zero hour contracts and employs his PhD student to do his grading for him or the adjunct professor without tenure who teaches six classes a semester. Is there a novel of the neoliberal university that does not endlessly replicate the logic of the marketplace but actually intervenes in material reality?

Matthew Nilges (2015) writes:

The notion of a 'neoliberal novel' conceives of the relation between its constitutive terms in such a way as to allow us to locate the periodisation of the novel not simply in an external, material determination but in the complex interplay of the formal relations between the market, social, and political structures and culture.

The notion of a critical neoliberal novel of the university, not just a campus novel based on the strange culture and habits of the professor, would

demonstrate how educational transformation can still be won, can actually be achieved, against the era of an institution that is more interested in efficiencies, in scale, in self-promotion, in expansion, in its own dirty little history than in the students and faculty that it is supposed to serve. The university institution as a public knowledge platform (PKP), an open institution promoting collective awareness, intelligence and action may yet have time to recuperate its ideals in the name of educational transformation of its students and dedicated to the harnessing of intellectual potential that serves the aesthetic, ethical, political and environmental goals of a new global civil society.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.bartleby.com/314/> for an online text.
2. "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986).
3. See <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/interview-with-david-lodge/2018135.article>
4. See <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-plutocratic-imagination>
5. See <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-3/essays/the-neoliberal-imagination/>

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