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# Introduction to the thematic issue on *Bildung* and popular education

## Tobias Harding

Tobias Harding is a university lecturer of Cultural Policy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and holds a Ph.D. in Culture Studies from Linköping University, Sweden. He wrote his dissertation in 2009 on the concept of national culture in Swedish cultural policy 1970–2002, and has later written several articles on the roles and organization of the Swedish national study associations. He is currently researching Swedish government policies on cultural heritage and the Church of Sweden 1922–2014.

## Henrik Nordvall

Henrik Nordvall is Associate Prof and Senior Lecturer in adult education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, and Director of Mimer – The Swedish Network for Research on Popular Education. E-mail: Henrik.nordvall@liu.se

Among the many historical similarities between the political approaches to cultural activities and education in the Nordic countries have been tendencies to stress equal access and opportunities to participation, as well as an emphasis on popular education. Much of the background to these tendencies can be summed up by the German term *Bildung* (Dan. *dannelse*, Fin. *sivistys*, Nor. *dannelse*, Swe. *bildning*), which in the Nordic context has often been associated with terms emphasizing the public access to *Bildung* (Dan. *folkeoplysning*, Fin. *kansansivistys*, Nor. *folkeopplysning*, Swe. *folkbildning*). Such ideas have had a strong influence, both as a general public ideological tendency and as the focus of specific organizations. As an ideological tendency, the idea of *Bildung* has influenced the explicit cultural policies of the Nordic countries, as well as their implicit cultural policies, i.e. policies directed at changing the culture of these countries.

Ideas of *Bildung* have been characteristic of how the legacy of the enlightenment and the romantic movements of the 19th century have been received and developed in the Nordic countries, at least since the later part of the 19th century. Ideas of *Bildung* and popular enlightenment have also been strongly associated with various political movements in the Nordic countries, from national movements and independence movements to the labour movement, temperance movement and various Christian movements.

In many of the Nordic countries, ideas traceable to the Danish thinker N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1873) have played significant roles in this context. Among his chief contributions was the idea of the folk high school (Dan. *folkehøjskole*, Fin. *kansanopisto*, Nor. *folkehøgskole*, Swe. *folkhögskola*), including an open learning style focusing on the individual, as well as the concept of the folk high school as a boarding school for adult students. Today, folk high schools and other

organizations focusing on popular education organize significant numbers of local cultural events and activities in the Nordic countries. They also play significant roles in education, often through education based in arts and culture, but also in educating future artists. In some countries they have even had significant influence on political culture, playing a role in the training of future politicians.

This thematic issue of the *Nordic Journal for Cultural Policy* has been organized through a cooperation between this journal and MIMER, the Swedish national research network on *folkbildning* and its annual conference in 2014. We have invited contributions primarily with the following three approaches:

- the political role of culture in popular education.
- popular education from a cultural policy perspective.
- cultural policy from a *Bildung* perspective.

These rather broad topics have been interpreted in various ways by the contributors to this issue. All articles address the political role of popular education and *Bildung* in one way or the other, where ‘the political’ may refer to conceptions of democracy and freedom, to governmental and institutional policy articulations, or to political representatives in parliament. Likewise, ‘the cultural’ is also addressed in various ways by the contributors, where culture may refer to shared values, to culture as aesthetic practices, or to culture as a policy area defined by the political-administrative system.

The first article, written by Tobias Harding, explores *bildning* as a central concept in the historical development of explicit cultural policy in Sweden. The article takes its point of departure in the interpretation of the concept of *bildning* made by Arthur Engberg, the classical, and in various ways controversial, Social Democratic minister of culture, education and church policies 1932–1936 and 1936–1939. Based on the theoretical concept of path dependency, i.e. that previous decisions limit possible decisions later in history, Harding explores how ideals of *Bildung* relate to Swedish cultural policy up to date, comparing Engberg’s ideas and policies, to the government bills on cultural policy of 1974, 1996 and 2009.

The next article, written by Jorun M. Stenøien and Ann-Marie Laginder, starts with a presentation of a somewhat parallel development in Norway, concerning the governmental view of the relation between popular education and cultural policy. This is done to contextualize the authors’ own empirical research on the widespread practical-aesthetic learning activities found in the context of popular education. Focusing on participants’ experiences of such activities Stenøien and Laginder explore why people choose to continue to learn dance and crafts and what the cultural political significance of this interest is.

In the third article, Johan Lövgren explores another aspect of the field of popular education in Norway, namely the folk high schools. Lövgren explores how the Norwegian folk high schools redefine the religious values which are part

of their movement's heritage. Through the lens of Etienne Wenger's concept reification, Lövgren analyses the value document of folk high schools and discusses how they interpret and relate to their Christian heritage.

In Annika Turunen's contribution, based on ethnographic fieldwork at a wood-working course in institutional popular education in Finland (Fin. *kansalaisopisto*, Swe. *medborgarinstitut*), she explores how this social interaction contributes to the participants' conceptualization of their citizenship.

In the final article, Henrik Nordvall and Louise Malmström, return to analyzing the political level in Sweden. However, if the first article of this thematic issue addressed the impact of ideals of *Bildung* on government policies, this article explores the impact of *Bildung* ideals on people in political power. Historically, popular education, has served as an alternative educational portal for politicians in Sweden. In their contribution, Nordvall and Malmström explore what forms of education and knowledge are currently important as portals for entering the political elite in Sweden. Interviews with Social Democratic MPs and data from Statistics Sweden on the educational backgrounds of MP's are interpreted through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital.

Taken together, the various contributions in this thematic issue cover various aspects of the roles of *Bildung* and popular education in Norway, Finland and Sweden. A common theme is the close focus on values and popular education, where the relation to democracy is highlighted from various angles.

Despite the fact that all contributions, in one way or another, address contemporary society, the historical ideals associated with *Bildung* and popular education are reflected. An implicit question seems to reoccur in several contributions: Could popular education – as an ideal for cultural policy, aesthetic activates and handicraft, or as a fosterer of religious and political values – play a key role in contemporary Nordic countries, despite the fact that society has changed since the «golden days» of Grundtvig or the labour movement's early mobilization? As the contributors to this issue demonstrate in different ways, ideas of *Bildung* and popular education appear to have strong impacts on contemporary cultural and political life in these Nordic countries. Although a shadow of the assumed anachronism of the ideals of *Bildung*, *folkbildning* and *folkeopplysning* may be traced in various ways in these articles, they also open up new angles for research on *Bildung* and popular education, where cultural and political aspects are explored in relation to how institutions and individuals use these concepts and activities in contemporary society.

With this thematic issue of the *Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy*, we hope to increase communication between the two research fields of cultural policy research and research on *folkbildning/folkeopplysning*. We hope that it will inspire further and reinforced dialogue between researchers in the Nordic countries on differences and similarities regarding the cultural and political roles of *Bildung*, cultural activities and popular education.