

**Transformations of choice and diversity in education: *Bildung* from Wilhelm von Humboldt through John Stuart Mill to Milton Friedman**

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**Abstract**

To discuss the relationship between philosophy and educational policy, one could begin by asking what ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’ in education means. The conversation would then lead to questions such as: what is education actually for? Who is responsible: the state, the nation, or the parents? What about the student? Provided we find answers we might then ask: how might systems of education be structured, curriculum be imagined, and lessons developed?

When we re-visit the scholarly works of Wilhelm v. Humboldt and *Bildung*, translated by John Stuart Mill, answers appear—not with reference to ‘particular interests’ or ‘transient desires’—but through “‘ewig-unveränderliche Vernunft” (eternal and immutable dictates of reason).

Our initial findings are revealing of the tensions between the particular and the universal and between freedom and security. We explain in the article that follows how ‘choice’ in education has shifted into ‘parents’ rights’ in contemporary times, retaining in one sense, and discarding in another, the connections to *Bildung* from Continental Philosophy past.

**Introduction**

The German concept of *Bildung*, so the story goes, does not translate well into other languages (cf. Mattig/Mathias/Zehbe 2018). According to context, English translators use words like education, formation, development, or cultivation, which hints at the wide semantic range of *Bildung*. Moreover, it is often claimed that German idealist philosophy, in which the concept of *Bildung* is embedded, is to the utilitarianism and pragmatism of Anglo-Saxon thought as water is to oil (e.g., Blomberg 2022, 213-219). The border, it seems, is clear and stable.

In this paper, we challenge this view by relating the Prussian Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), one of the most prominent authors of the classical conception of *Bildung*, to the English John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), a classical proponent of utilitarianism and liberalism, and Milton Friedman (1912-2006), known as an economist who gave rise to today’s neoliberalism. What we want to show is that there is no such clear border between Occidental and Anglophone thought as it is often stated. Rather, ideas—even the idea of *Bildung*—flow across the thresholds of different languages, places, and times, mixing with other ideas and thus being transformed in the processes of translation, translocation, and transcontextualization (cf. Mattig 2017).

It might not be self-evident to draw a line from Humboldt through Mill to Friedman. Yet, they connect in quite explicit ways, as has sometimes already been noted. In 1792, Humboldt wrote an essay in German, entitled *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen*. This essay, which is considered the groundwork for his Idea of *Bildung*, was never published in full in his lifetime and only came out in 1852. In 1854, it was published in English as *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Mill, who scarcely credits other scholars in his work, mentions Humboldt's essay as the main inspiration for his famous 1859 *On Liberty* (Mill 1859 103f; 131; cf. Valls 1999). In a sense, then, Humboldt's ideas from around the French Revolution were translated, translocated, and transcontextualized into mid-19th century England. As to Friedman, he frequently refers to classical liberals, most of all to Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, so he has been depicted as "a classic twentieth-century follow-on to Mill's nineteenth century *On Liberty*" (Rosenbaum 2018, 42). In sum, since the lines from Humboldt to Mill and from Mill to Friedman have already been drawn, we connect them and suggest seeing a line of inspiration from Humboldt through Mill to Friedman, although, of course, the respective inspirations were not the sole ones, as the hint to Adam Smith already shows.

In our reading of these three authors, several common topics emerged, such as freedom, diversity and conformity, choice, the role of the state, and the role of parents in education. Yet, the authors also differed in their views on these topics in some regards. Moreover, we found that these topics still dominate today's discussions on education—discussions that sometimes even culminate in 'culture wars' (Price 2007, 15f). We found a remarkable link between our three authors and today's educational issues in an ongoing heated debate around 'school choice' in education, fought out along partisan lines in the United States (e.g., *ibid.*). Advocates for school choice argue that every parent has a fundamental right to exercise their choice for their own child's education. Most recently, the school choice movement has evolved into a 'parents' rights' movement, where self-proclaimed 'parents' rights' groups disparage public schools for teaching or expressing viewpoints that contradict or conflict with the values of their own family, religious or otherwise. Remarkably, Friedman is considered the father of the school choice movement (e.g., EdChoice 2023).

Against this background the aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, we follow an academic interest in tracing the lineage of *Bildung* through Humboldt, Mill, and Friedman, and in identifying the changes, as well as constants, in this thought. We argue that the core concept that connects the three authors is freedom. Indeed, they all have been described as outstanding liberals. However, the way they spell out freedom differs, which leads us to trace a transformation of liberty from Humboldt to Friedman. The different concepts of freedom lead to different implications regarding the question of who is responsible for the upbringing of children, rather the state, the nation, or the parents. On the other hand, we suggest that today's debates on education would profit profoundly from looking back at their origins. Indeed, we argue that as

we have moved from Humboldt to the present day, certain issues have been lost from the view that should be considered in today's discussions. In this way, contemporary debates on parental choice can be enriched with arguments and conceptual differentiations. Our examination follows the chronological line from Humboldt through Mill to Friedman.

### **Wilhelm von Humboldt's liberal anthropology and his plans for education reform**

Wilhelm von Humboldt has often been championed as one of the most eminent liberal thinkers of the German Enlightenment (e.g., Beiser 1992). He is known for various achievements, most notably his studies of Antiquity, his liberal political theory, his plans for reforming the Prussian education system, and his groundbreaking research in linguistics (cf. Maurer 2016; Sweet 1978/1980). In German educational studies, Humboldt is referred to as one of the most prominent promoters of the humanistic idea of *Bildung* (e.g., Dörpinghaus/Poenitsch/Wigger 2009, 67–80). *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, inspired by the French Revolution, was an early writing of Humboldt in which he laid the groundwork for his concept of *Bildung*. More than fifteen years later he was assigned to reform education in Prussia. In this section, we will first outline his basic notion of *Bildung* and then depict his later reform plans.

#### *Bildung in Humboldt's liberal anthropology and political philosophy*

Humboldt's philosophy is characterized by a certain notion of the human being. Refuting the contemporary views of 'race' that in his eyes lacked complexity, he conceptualized human beings in terms of powers, stating that everyone has the potential to develop intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and sensual powers. Individuality, here, is based on a specific proportion of these powers: some individuals tend to be more intellectual, others more aesthetic, and so on (cf. Mattig 2019, 91-132). In Humboldt's view such potentiality of powers was not at any rate inherited by categories like class, race, or gender. Therefore, everyone should be able to find and develop his or her potential. In *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, he said:

"The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole" (Humboldt 1854, 11).

This sentence is one of the essential quotes that Mill refers to in *On Liberty*. Note that the word used in the German original for 'development' is *Bildung*, which hints that this development of powers should be an intrinsic process of the individual. For Humboldt, therefore, such development of the individuals' powers was only possible in a state that ensures "freedom" and a "variety of situations". A limitation of freedom would hinder the possible development of the individual's powers, and a limitation of "situations" would certainly lead to "uniformity" (ibid.).

*Bildung* was, of course, a utopian vision. Humboldt wrote *The Sphere and Duties of Government* at a time when in Prussia the absolutist state wanted people to become good subjects, and the church wanted them to become good Christians. The emerging economy needed useful workers. Therefore, there was no interest in letting children least adults develop in the way Humboldt proposed.

In Humboldt's view, the right of the individual to freely develop their powers limited the actions of several actors. Above all, the state should refrain from any positive action and limit itself to guaranteeing inner and outer security so that adults can interact freely with one another. But what about children, who are still in need of particular care? Children should, of course, also get the opportunity to unfold themselves in terms of *Bildung*. However, as children, they would also need an education (in German: *Erziehung*). How are *Erziehung* and *Bildung* related to each other?

Let us first consider Humboldt's reflections on the "duty of parents": Parents must "train up their offspring to perfect maturity"; however, parents should not compel their children in any direction, for example about marriage or "any particular career" (Humboldt 1854, 177). Humboldt thus states: "The duty of the parents, then, may be thus generally defined, —to put their children in a condition [...] to choose a plan of life for themselves" (ibid.). Hence, it is not the parents who exercise choice about their children's life. Such a 'choice' would certainly be an imposition on the child and thus intrude on its freedom. Rather, parents must refrain from choosing instead of their children to make it possible for the children to choose themselves.

Here, Humboldt touches on a tremendous pedagogical problem that was first introduced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) in terms of *perfectibilité* (cf. Benner 1999; Benner 2010, 70-78). Rousseau rejected the contemporary and traditional notion that children should be raised and educated according to their social status. This idea was justified by the assumption that children also inherit the special abilities of their parents. In contrast, Rousseau put forward the argument that every child is born with the general ability to develop abilities, which are not determined in terms of content. It is not clear from the outset what specific skills and interests an individual will develop over the course of his or her life. The concept of *perfectibilité* marked this rather revolutionary idea. In Germany, where Rousseau was broadly discussed, *perfectibilité* was reflected by the concept of *Bildsamkeit*, coined by Johann-Friedrich Herbart (cf. Tenorth 2013, see also the article of Kraus & Ylimaki in this volume). *Bildsamkeit*, with its connection to *Bildung*, refers to the inner powers of individuals and the individuals' inner aspirations to develop these powers. However, the specific abilities of everyone are not known when the individual is born but need to unfold during life. Of course, this insight implies the question of how children shall be educated if no one knows their future in terms of their concrete individual interests and abilities. How shall we treat someone in pedagogical terms who does not yet know about his or her own choice for a "plan of life"?

What, then, about schools? In *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, Humboldt rejected the idea of national education provided by the state. In his view, the state intended to form the children in certain ways and therefore deny them the freedom to develop according to their innate capabilities: “Now all systems of national education, inasmuch as they afford room for the manifestation of a governmental spirit, tend to impose a definite form on civic development, and therefore to repress those vital energies of the nation” (Humboldt 1854, 67). Education should only aim at developing the children’s faculties, for which a state-provided education would not be suited. Instead, Humboldt vaguely proposes that in a free society “communities” will take care of education because individuals would be committed to the community and the education located there (ibid., 69). In 1792 he hoped, probably too idealistically, that the prospect of a free society would inspire individuals to do so (for community and education, see also the article of Kraus & Ylimaki in this volume).

In sum, Humboldt argued against a state-provided education because it lacked diversity, and for the same reason formulated reservations against parental education. These ideas resonate with what Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had so brilliantly said about parents’ and state’s education in his 1803 *Lectures on Pedagogy*: “Parents usually educate their children merely so that they fit in with the present world, however corrupt it may be”; and “princes regard their subjects merely as instruments for their own designs” (Kant 2007, 442).

#### *Humboldt’s plans for education reform in Prussia*

Against this backdrop, it is astonishing that in 1809 Humboldt took the lead in planning a new educational system for the Prussian state. There has been much debate among scholars as to whether Humboldt thus made a break with his doctrine of 1792, or whether he remained true to his ideas (cf. Pachner 2020). In our view, Humboldt kept in line with his general ideas. In this context, it must be noted that the notion of the (absolutist) “state” in his 1792 essay differed significantly from the notion of the “state” which was to be reformed according to liberal principles starting in 1806. Indeed, Humboldt’s reform was part of an encompassing restructuring of the Prussian state according to liberal ideas, today referred to as the Prussian reforms (cf. Maurer 2016: 167-91).

Humboldt tried to establish an educational system based on his liberal ideas. He envisaged an encompassing system from Elementary school to university and vocational schools. His plans are still considered the first systematic outline of a modern education system (cf. Benner, 2003; Tenorth, 2018). However, despite some singular success like the founding of the Berlin University—today called Humboldt University—his plans failed in sum. He resigned from his post already in 1810. In Anglo-Saxon countries, Humboldt’s educational ideas have had some influence on the level of universities. His ideas of unity of academic teaching and research, free thought, and education through science have given shape to American research universities like

Harvard (Röhrs, 1985; Trabant, 2021, pp. 47-52). However, the comprehensive system Humboldt envisaged for reforming education from elementary to vocational schools is less known in Anglo-Saxon countries. This is what we shall address here because it looks at education from the early years of a child, as has been referred to above.

Humboldt's conception of the education system is based on the fundamental distinction between general education (*Allgemeine Bildung*) and vocational education (*specielle Bildung*). The idea of general education was new in his time; at that time, from the very beginning, children went through an education appropriate to their social status. Humboldt now wanted to place general education before vocational education to precisely overcome this education according to estate. Once students have acquired a general education, they would have the prerequisites to pursue any possible profession (???). General education was meant to prepare students to choose whatever profession they liked. More than that, having undergone a general education, students were enabled to change their profession during their course of life (???). Therefore, *general* education seemingly paradoxically aims at the individual's empowerment and diverse interests.

When Humboldt worked as a reformer, he collaborated with many respected persons, including Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher, in his 1826 *lectures on pedagogy*, asks the famous pedagogical question, "What does the older generation actually want with the younger?" (Schleiermacher, 1983, p. 9) Schleiermacher argues that an answer to this question must consider the "indeterminacy of anthropological presuppositions," which is his formulation of Rousseau's notion of *perfectibilité*. Based on this assumption, Schleiermacher argues that the course of education must generally take two steps: First, every possible capability of each child must be stimulated; second, the emerging concrete abilities of each must be encouraged and further guided (ibid., 19). Therefore, this model starts very broad and then narrows in the second step, depending on the unfolding capabilities of the individual. Remarkably, Humboldt's essential distinction between general education and vocational education can be seen as a concrete implementation of Schleiermacher's rather abstract idea.

Humboldt envisioned general education differentiated into three successive stages. First came four years of "Elementary Instruction," followed by eight years of "School Instruction," and then "University Instruction" (cf. XII: 260ff.). However, it was not intended to be obligatory for all students to go through all three stages; it was possible to change to vocational training after each stage (cf. Benner 2003, 167ff.).

Looking closely at Humboldt's notion of general education, we recognize his theory of human powers. General education should stimulate and exercise all students' philosophical, linguistic, mathematical, historical-empirical, aesthetic, and physical-gymnastic powers (cf. XIII: 277). Since neither the child nor the adults know what unique individual talents the child has, it is necessary—in line with Schleiermacher—that all the child's powers be stimulated and exercised

first. This is precisely what general education is intended to achieve. Only in time will the individual characters of the growing pupils emerge. They will favor certain subjects among the various subjects of instruction and will tend to dismiss others. This was precisely Humboldt's idea. With growing age, pupils should be able to set their priorities more and more in the successive stages of general education. However, no area should be neglected entirely.

This notion of general education seems inherently paradoxical: On the one hand, all students should follow the same path of general education. Here, no differentiations between students are planned except for the length of school attendance. Especially at the beginning, the students have no choice; they all must learn the same. This seems to contradict Humboldt's emphasis on freedom. However, on the other hand, this conformity in schooling is intended to enable the development of individual talents. Only with time and increasing maturity can the students themselves choose a focus. This means that freedom needs to be cultivated first. The seeming paradox is solved by considering that it needs time to enable children to exercise their freedom.

Kant posed the fundamental question for any modern education: "How do I cultivate freedom under constraint?" (Kant, 2007, p. 447). Modern education aims to free children; however, education always constrains children. Therefore, freedom must be "cultivated" by education. Humboldt's reform model proposes how to implement such cultivation in a sequential system of educational institutions.

Humboldt's conception of general education can be seen as a blueprint for a modern education system that allows all adolescents to participate without distinction of social origin. It is an inclusive and egalitarian concept, but at the same time, it is designed to allow adolescents to develop their personalities. In this respect, it is oriented toward diversity and individual choice. In these respects, Humboldt's plans differed significantly from other reform plans of the time that emphasized elite education (cf. Tenorth 2009).

However, the idea of general education went further. Humboldt believed that if all students received a general education at schools that did not differentiate socially, a sense of community would develop in the nation, which was the basis for individuality in the first place. Individual choice of focus should not occur because one feels drawn or pushed in a specific direction by one's social background. Instead, this choice should be completely independent of social origin. The loyalty of the adolescent should not be to a particular social milieu of society but to society, to which one feels obligated by developing one's abilities and then placing them in the service of society. In this sense, Humboldt not only wanted the young to gain the necessary abilities for their "individual profession," but at the same time, he wanted to lay the foundations for each student to become "a moral human and a good citizen" (X: 205; cf. Mattig 2019, 298-318).

Humboldt rejected any social gap, and any social conceit and tried to lay the foundation for comprehensive social solidarity with his educational concept. In this sense, Humboldt's notion of general education can be simultaneously described as individualistic *and* communitarian (cf. Mattig 2020). Although in his reform plans Humboldt for good reasons emphasized the solidarity of the nation, he ultimately promoted a rather cosmopolitan solidarity with the whole of humanity (cf. Forster 2013).

In sum, regarding the question of who shall be responsible for the education of children when viewed from the perspective of freedom and *Bildung*, Humboldt first finds himself in a somewhat aporetic situation, because neither the parents nor the absolutist state would be ideal. Given his arguments for the national community, it is understandable that he would later carry an education through the forming nation-state in a governing role.

### **John Stuart Mill: From Utilitarian to Social Meliorist**

Born in 1806 and home-schooled by his father, John Stuart Mill embraced wholeheartedly the principles of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. Mill's utilitarian perspectives would provide great intellectual support for fundamental American values, such as the government's limited but essential role in assuring public education for its citizenry. He championed a provision of diverse experiences to be made, and concurrently that through the freedom of choice, the individual's growth would be secured.

In time, however, he would modify his devotion to this philosophy of happiness, the edict of increasing pleasure for the most while allowing pain for the least. While he profited off his station with the East Indian Company (the 1830s-40s), he also was made aware of societal injustices. Subsequently, by the mid-19th century, Mill had developed a progressive outlook beyond the individual and toward social change, *social meliorism*. As he was afforded the time and resources, he began to attack imperialism and the monarchy, through his investigative reporting and prescient writings, championing the rights of Irish and Indian alike, and later, pontificating on the rights of women.

Significantly, it was when Mill read the then newly translated *Sphere and Duties of Government* (1854) that Humboldt would become his main inspiration, leading to *On Liberty* (1859). While Mill is not always recognized as a theorist of education, because of Humboldt he provided substantial foundational ideas for education. Given his other influences, it appears that Humboldtian ideas seem to circulate throughout Mill's writings (cf. Cynamon 2023). Quite like Humboldt, Mill can be credited for contributions to a philosophy of education for one thing and proposals for educational reform for another (ibid.). In the following, we will reflect upon those contributions. With the previously mentioned considerations of Humboldt in mind, we continue

by examining Mill's notion of diversity, and entertain the question; who should be responsible for the child's education?

Although he employed the concept of *Bildung* in the German original of *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, the English translation did not include this word. Here, different words are translated, such as *development* or *culture*. Mill, then, referring to the English translation, did not hook into the discourse around the word *Bildung*, yet still connected to and developed further the ideas that in Humboldt's work center around the notion of *Bildung*.

Valls (1999) suggests that central to both Humboldt and Mill is the concept of "self-development," thereby translating Humboldt's *Bildung* into English and establishing a conceptual link between both thinkers. However, Valls introduces a theoretical problem here, since Humboldt's notion of *Bildung* starts with the self indeed but is much broader, including the cultivation of society and even humanity. The centrality of the value of *Bildung* or self-development in the philosophies of Humboldt and Mill can hardly be overstated. For both, this feature shapes many aspects of their political views to such an extent that the latter cannot be adequately understood without first considering the former. Mill goes so far as to defend freedom of thought and action as among the most critical aspects of his philosophical idea of development "its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual" (p. 4). Similarly, Humboldt believed that "that on which the consummate grandeur of our nature ultimately depends, that towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially thereunto design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is, the individuality of Power and Development" (Humboldt, 1854, p. 13). Correspondingly, the epigraph to Mills *On Liberty* quote borrowed from Humboldt is unambiguous: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument hitherto unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity" (Humboldt, 1854, p. 65).

In his later years, Humboldt himself developed further the ideas first laid out in *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. However, many of his writings were published later and came only out in the collected works at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, Mill could not refer to the 'whole' of Humboldt's work but only to a specific part of it. Therefore, especially Humboldt's reform plans for the Prussian educational system had no impact on Mill, who solely referred to the work of young Humboldt.

### *Diversity of opinions*

From the very beginning of *On Liberty*, Mill explains that in his discussions of "liberty," he is focusing not on the individual *per se* but on the social and civil rights afforded to the individual as part of a social group. Man [sic] is not an island but lives as part of a collective of individuals

who in turn have the right to live as they choose under a civilized society, governed by the consent of the governed.

Like Humboldt, he envisions a diversity of experiences for the individual to grow, be educated, and be free. However, his reflections on government differ from Humboldt's as he is differently situated in a different society. His thoughts on the state are therefore contextualized by democracy. Since the French Revolution, Mill says, "a democratic republic came to occupy a large portion of the earth's surface". Yet democracy, with all its advances in liberty for the collective, nonetheless posed a threat by the majority to the liberty of the individual:

Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, *by other means than civil penalties*, its ideas and practices as rules of conduct and those who descent from them (p. 8, author's italics).

What Mill is getting at and embellishing upon is the essential need for "diversity of opinion", a range of discussions and debates reflecting truth and falsehood. It is quite common, he says, that

conflicting doctrines, instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them; and the nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth, of which the received doctrine embodies only a part (p. 47).

Mill's support for partial truth is so strong that he encourages active solicitation of the other for a different sentiment:

[E]very opinion which embodies somewhat of the portion of the truth which the common opinion omits, ought to be considered precious, with whatever amount of error or confusion that truth may be blended (p. 47).

These considerations extend the ideas of Humboldt, who did not live in a democracy but in an absolutist state and who adored the democratic institutions he witnessed in the Basque Country (cf. Mattig 2019, 226ff.). Mill argues for rational discourse wherein reigns not "opinion" but deliberate and partial arguments, bringing about a greater "truth".

By diversity of education, Mill imagines the give and take of a debating society like Athens past, composed of scholars who are unencumbered by the inertia of *custom*, to Mill, the enemy of progress. Mill was an early progressive, fiercely opposed to traditional education, and an otherwise oppressive state.

*Education, the state, and parents*

But how then does Mill envisage the role of the state and the parents in the education of children? Especially in a democracy? It turns out that he has a more optimistic view of parents than Humboldt, and shares Humboldt's skepticism against the state.

If the government would make up its mind to require every child a good education, it might save for itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they please, and the content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poor classes of children, and defraying the entire school expenses of those who have no one else to pay for them (p. 106).

While the government was to “save itself the trouble of providing one,” that same government, according to the early and passionate social meliorist Mill, should support the needy or the indigent poor. Furthermore, the state could levy a fine on a parent who did not provide the means for their child to receive a “good education”. Thus, the government has a limited but exceedingly critical role in educating its future citizenry, especially that of the most vulnerable.

Mill suggests the responsibility of education by the state, but not the direction of education by the state. Instead, in general, it should be left to parents to choose the education of their children. Mill, therefore, displays a much more optimistic view of parental choice than Humboldt (and Kant). Humboldt had suspected parents impose their “way of life” on their children, and Kant, formulating more drastically, said that parents tended to adapt their children to function in a corrupt society. In Mill, there is no such supposition. In general, he assumes that parents can choose a “good education” for their children; only in exemption cases, this would not be the case.

Given Mill's concerns with the “tyranny of opinion” astonishingly, he wants to leave the decision about a “good education” to parents. How we might ask, shall parents who have been socialized under such tyranny and who therefore are not able to develop differentiated opinions, be able to judge what is “good” or “bad” education for their children? Mill does not provide us with an answer.

This passage exemplifies Mill's admonition to the government to mandate indeed that their responsibility be that every child *must* have an education of worth. Only then does the state, Mill believes, find itself in a better position to be able to step back and allow for education to become available. Mill did not appear to go much further in *On Liberty* except in the powerful sentiment that it was important for teachers to teach students how to think, not what to think. So, the government was to be constrained, prevented from instilling indoctrination, and, as we decry now, resort to political pabulum.

In retrospect, Mill spoke of a rather quaint, limited role for the family in ‘choosing’ their offspring’s schooling. Given his belief, that the father is ultimately responsible for the child’s access and opportunity, Mill draws on the negative example. He imagines a father disallowing their child from receiving an education, and thus failing to foster the child’s self-development. In such an instance, Mill holds out that while the government is not the parent, that limited role does indeed include the power to compel the father (family) to provide an education for their children. Additionally, Mill understands that the impoverished, lower classes would benefit from a stipend to be able to pay for the education afforded. This is an interesting premonition because in the American context choice in education would many decades later be presented as a support for families with limited resources, falling below the poverty line. In other words, the idea of choice in education was always premised on the idea that the wealthy were already well disposed to exercise their choice to enroll their children in private schools. In the early 1800s, private schools could offer a better education for the individual and wealthy families needed no government assistance. On the other hand, charity schools were the only hope for poor families, supported by philanthropy. In Mill’s time in Victorian England, funds allocated to indigent poor families could make a difference so that they might be able to attend a quality school and receive a quality education.

In the US context, pedagogical progressives followed what J.S. Mill had in mind; *Common Schools* supported by public taxpayers, so that rich and poor could sit in a *common class* together with no difference in education *based on wealth* experienced. Public education in the US grew exponentially as a result, was highly successful in advancing economic mobility, and *began to diversify* but only because of civil rights struggles for greater equality and access for all students. More than a century later in the 1980s, the public schools were very comprehensive indeed, mirroring the influence of the Humboldt comprehensive school system and the idea of both Mill and Humboldt in students *sharing a common, foundational education, with an ever-greater range of diverse experiences afforded*. Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons, some parents still opted to exercise their choice, to choose less diversity for their children through private education.

We do not of course suggest that Mill’s thoughts on liberalism were influenced solely by Humboldt’s. Before he became acquainted with Humboldt’s work, he had studied many other thinkers and had also published extensively himself. However, it seems that in Mill’s *On Liberty*, we can trace Humboldt’s influence. Yet there are similarities and differences between both, of course. In being translated from German into English long after his death and being taken up by the Utilitarian Mill, Humboldt’s thoughts from *Sphere and Duties of Government* became also translocated and transcontextualized and took on a different shape. Yet, in a sense, in taking up so much from Humboldt, Mill can be said to be a thinker of *Bildung*.

## **Diversity and Choice in Education in Milton Friedman**

If Mill is indeed a thinker of *Bildung*, in the following passage Mill imagines a diversity of educational ‘options’, leading to what we other educators might see as a clarion call for ‘choice in education’.

[given] the importance of individuality of character, and diversity in opinions and modes of conduct, [this] involves diversity in education (p. 106).

We want to trace liberal thought on diversity and choice in education from Humboldt through to Friedman, “a classic twentieth-century follow-on to Mill’s nineteenth century *On Liberty*” (Rosenbaum 2018, 42). Friedman, the proclaimed father of the “school choice” policy, informs our current moment of neoliberal capitalism, radically different from the Common School era that Mill lived in. Neoliberalism not only decreases the role of government by *withdrawing* support for the common good (cutting social services by reducing taxes) but in a complex manner increases the role of government in *creating* markets. In his 1962 *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman develops his arguments for a free market and the role of the state. He includes a chapter on education, which we shall examine in this section.

What Humboldt had proposed in his reform plans, namely that education should consist of a first stage of general education and a second stage of vocational training, is now a matter of course in Friedman’s publication (85). Friedman elaborates on these different stages in terms of diversity and choice, mainly. In the following, we concentrate on the first stage, general education, because this can best be related to Humboldt’s initial idea of *Bildung*.

### *State and parents*

According to Friedman, the state should be responsible for general education. This is because general education provides not only “literacy and knowledge”, but also “some common set of values” necessary in democratic societies (86). Hence, a necessary “conformity” in schools. The state should be responsible for guaranteeing that schools provide an “approved” curriculum. Friedman’s main suggestion concerned the funding of schools.

However, parents should be allowed to choose a school for their children. Although the state should still be financially responsible for the system of general education, he proposed that the state give vouchers to parents that they could use in turn ‘pay’ the schools of their choice for their children. This system would stimulate competition among schools for attracting students or, more correctly, parents: “Denationalizing schooling would widen the range of choice available to parents” (???). Parents, he argues, should have the right to choose between schools, public or private, much as they already were able to exercise the selection of a product for purchase at a grocery store. In Friedman’s view, this proposed system of parental choice would lead to more diversity: “The injection of competition would do much to promote a healthy variety of schools”

(81). Moreover, competition would imply more diversity in teachers' salaries, because "good teachers" and "bad teachers" would be paid by merit, not by a fixed salary (82).

Friedman counters the argument that the system he proposes might "exacerbate class distinctions" (79) by arguing that school vouchers would allow parents from a "low-income neighborhood" with a gifted child to choose a school in another neighborhood, because "The 'good' public schools are in the high-income neighborhoods" (80). Transportation systems would ensure that children can reach schools apart from their own community.

### *Analysis*

We would like to point to three issues in Friedman's approach. First, the relation between "conformity" and "diversity" in schools remains unclear. For one thing, Friedman holds "common values" to be necessary, so that there is a necessary "conformity" of schools in general education. For another, he proposes more "diversity" of schools through competition and parental choice. However, he does not say in which way there might be differences between schools if they are all bound to the "common values". The only difference he hints at is that attractive schools would have "good teachers", while others have "poor teachers". This, however, would imply that the imagined "diversity" of schools simply consists of quality differences in how teachers provide the "common values" – which are, as it were, the same in every school. Such a result, we think, would not be desirable.

Second, we need to take a closer look at what Friedman defines as "core values". He does not get very extensive on this question. For one thing, he mentions a "common language" (96) in this context; more than that, he mentions the three R's and admits that the core values are more and more difficult to define with higher stages of general education:

"For the lowest levels of schooling, there is considerable agreement, approximating unanimity, on the appropriate content of an educational program for citizens of a democracy—the three R's cover most of the ground. At successively higher levels, there is less and less agreement" (98).

If we look back at Humboldt and Mill, we may recognize how much is lost in Friedman's view. A common language and the three R's will hardly do either to develop a student's personality to the fullest possible degree or to develop a sense of community and democracy. In a word, Friedman's considerations certainly have departed a long way from the basic theory of *Bildung*.

Third, Friedman, like Mill, posits not the individual but the family as the core social unit. It is not the individual student who shall be enabled to make choices, but it is the parents who choose for their child. Humboldt had already understood that parents tend to make choices for their children based on their way of life which is, after all, dependent on social class: aristocrats would prefer other schools for their children than farmers. These considerations have been furthered in the

20th century most prominently by Pierre Bourdieu. The family in this neoliberal, market-is-sanctified-universe, is exonerated—and at the same time tragically reduced—to being a consumer.

Wherein school choice in the contemporary period became the subject of a ‘parents’ rights’ policy milieu for education has a connection to the past but has, even more, to do with the politics of *austerity*. Leading this movement in the US was what came to be referred to as the *Reagan Revolution* (named of course after the then-president). *Social Liberalism*, the legislation aimed at a rising middle class had assumed hegemony for much of the 20th century; it gave way toward the turn of the 21st century to a seeming return to *Classical Liberalism*. A narrative emerged of public education either failing, being too costly, teaching non-traditional values, or all three. The central idea was to return power to the parents or to for the first time empower parents. In the beginning, the target of choice in education was poor parents (some would argue this was a cynical ploy). By supposedly providing them with a choice, they could transfer their child from a failing public school to an imagined successful private school.

What is gained in public education today because of Mill’s notion of choice, and by way of Humboldtian vision for the comprehensive system, is a magnificent structure of an elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education system. But what is lost in the neoliberal Friedman’s ‘choice in education’ is the very essence of education itself. Education needs to be a pathway to support the full development of the individual (*Bildung*), in all his or her diversity toward a common, universal good or civil society, not merely as checking a ticket into a free market of alienated, individuated consumers competing against one another for diminishing resources.

## Conclusion and outlook

We conclude with four aspects related to diversity and choice in education.

- 1) Our view from Humboldt through Mill to Friedman made clear that a good education system is a necessary basis of liberal societies. As Friedman says, democracies need “common values”, which are to be instilled in the young generation through education. Democracy means that everyone can participate in public affairs and therefore needs to be enabled to do this in terms of attitude and competencies.
- 2) Liberal societies promote the freedom of the individual. In Humboldt’s and Mill’s view, this implies the development of each individual’s capacities; in Friedman’s view, this means the opportunity for each person to act according to self-interest. Either way, liberal societies promote diversity: in Humboldt and Mill this is a diversity of characters, in Friedman, this is the diversity of a free market. Yet and seemingly paradoxical, although individual freedom and, hence, diversity is at the center of liberalism, liberal education requires some kind of “conformity”. Again, the reason for this may differ. For Humboldt, each child’s “powers”

need to be stimulated to develop, and since he assumes that all human beings share the same powers, education needs conformity in offering diverse learning experiences. Although individuals share basic powers, these powers develop in different individual ways in each individual, so we can say that diverse people share the same education to be enabled to develop their characters. At the same time, a common basis will be laid among the various people of a nation. Friedman did not at all mention the argument of *Bildung*, he only promoted the “unifying force” of education. Again, either way, the education system is envisaged as having two basic stages, one general education, and the next vocational education. From the lowest level of education to the highest, therefore, less and less conformity will characterize schools, and more and more individual choice should be possible.

- 3) Although all three authors agree about general education, they differ in designing such education. Humboldt oriented his approach according to his theory of human powers, thus demanding diverse intellectual, physical, and imaginative experiences. Although Mill limited this range and focused on intellectual capacities, he made an important contribution in demanding that students not only learn what to think but also how to think. Such education should counter the “tyranny of opinion” and enable students to take part in deliberative processes on which democracies are based. In Friedman, the notion of general education flattens to a common language and the three R’s. Against this backdrop, we think it would be of the highest importance to remember Occidental Philosophy.
- 4) Although the three authors agree that individual choice is of the highest importance in liberal societies, there is disagreement as to the core social unit. While Humboldt sees each individual as a basic unit, Mill and Friedman see the family. Hence, Mill and Friedman advocate parental choice concerning their offspring’s education. Humboldt, on the contrary, feared that parents might intrude into their children’s individual development. Indeed, when today it is parents that advocate parental choice, we should be cautious and remember Kant’s words.

## **Discussion and outlook**

But there are problems in fully realizing diversity and choice in the current highly polarized political moment; we characterize these problems as two ironies. The first irony is that today in the 21st century, various groups self-proclaim to be for “parents’ rights” and seek to eliminate curricula they disagree with. In other words, these parents are exercising their ‘choice in education’ by demanding to rigidly control their children’s educational experience by making it uniform, not diverse. Indeed, they even go so far as to demand uniformity for what other parents’ children experience. This in effect does not expand ‘choice’ or ‘diversity’ but rather restricts opinions, places limits on what children can learn and does not expand the children’s choice.

Mill found custom to be anathema to progress and surely would reject this movement to make customary the tyranny of the parent.

The second irony is that efforts toward diversification often devolve into political pabulum and indoctrination, not education. Any curriculum that predetermines outcomes and standards, even a curriculum that proclaims beneficent ends, also predetermines what may not be thought, spoken, or considered. Contentious issues often call for debate, and although there are ‘settled’ issues (climate change for example) most issues are further understood by including, even seeking the contrarian opinion; indeed, that is exactly what Mill so stridently called for. This is what Mill feared: the settled problem, the unquestioned question. Custom thwarts progress, and even well-meaning efforts at diversity that do not allow questioning do not secure greater liberty. What again can we learn here from Mill?

When Mill champions diversity and choice, he extolls a difference from today’s concept of diversity. In lauding a diversity of educational options, Mill envisioned a liberal, pluralistic democracy, a society *seeking* diversity of opinion. Today diversity training and parents’ choice in education appear to exclude, not include choices or diversity in opinion. Diversity training seems to have become orthodoxy. While approaches, initiatives, and pedagogical and curricular strategies promoting choice and diversity may be helpful in reconceptualizing education, settled diversity standards that are uniform and choice reforms that undermine the public school system reign. Also, choosing to abandon the Common School on the one hand, as “school choice” advocates do, and diversity advocates seem to characterize as needing to be discarded, only serves to balkanize society (Kozol, 1992). If the Common School is no longer a foundation for a democratic society, it seems difficult not to imagine the dismantling of the public school system and in its place leaves parents and their children congregating in little silos with no common thread to maintain the liberal, pluralistic society the nation was founded upon. Paradoxically so, giving up on a common educational foundation under which the premise of the common school was imagined by Humboldt and Mill and other education advocates alike limits the options for diversity in thinking in the Common Schools that remain. Undermining the idea that public education serves the common good for all runs the risk of imposing yet again another orthodoxy and curriculum by audit, both of which become conformity to an imagined politically correct way of not only teaching and learning but being (ontology) in and of the world.

Mill called custom tyrannous; it would be fascinating to entertain a discussion concerning new customs of today; whose choice? Diversity to what ends? Does diversity and choice in education further diversify thought, opinion, or being? We believe true diversity does, and choice amongst equals might generate the type of rich diversity we see lacking amidst the political pabulum which does not offer ‘choice in education.’ Do these educational reforms allow for greater liberty for which Mill aspired? Burbules (2021) noted that significant discussion needs to take place

concerning the “different antinomies” of diversity. How might we do so amidst speech codes and mandates restricting divisive concepts from being uttered?

What might otherwise be rendered meaningful as rational, intellectual discourse—claims, assumptions, evidence, and warrants . . . all worthy of thoughtful consideration and needing diverse expression of opinion, and responses of support and dissension—is in the current American context, reduced mainly to emotion-ridden ‘buzzwords and catchphrases. Some argue that these so-called debates are only political spectacles (Smith, 2004), surface level, merely ‘proxies’ for deeper fears over sacred values under threat.

The current cultural battles include sayings such as “I don’t co-parent with the government” and “Black Lives Matter.” While statements such as these represent specific values, truths, and belief systems, they do not offer much for generating actual discussion or deliberation. Unfortunately, the platitudes expressed do not afford debate at all; instead, they lend more to closed-ended arguments and virtue signaling—telegraphing one’s concerns as unassailable and morally correct. Additionally, culture battles invariably open the way to pejoratives, the self-defeating characterization of one’s opponent as evil or at least not to be taken seriously, often ‘canceled’ as befits their ‘obviously’ incorrect and/or ‘toxic’ opinions.

Particularly instructive examples of the culture battles occur and are on vivid display in school board meetings where increasingly shrill, agitated, and emotionally spent parents (and their allies) hurl ad hominem at the ‘other’ side, at school board members, or in general simply assail the larger institutions of local and state government, big data, or different religion(s). Additionally, culture battles are finding their expression in rules, regulations, and laws, resulting in narrowly constructed state legislation that leaves a great, and chilling impression on K-12 public schools, higher education colleges, and universities. Mill and Humboldt alike would certainly imagine better, not a restriction on choice or a one-size fits all diversity, but a diversity of opinion expressed through greater choices, again amongst equals and to the benefit of the common good, not a particular shrill group of parents.

### **Conclusion: Informing debates on diversity and choice?**

Who is ‘responsible’ for such a state of affairs? Who or what is responsible for the loss in the meaning of diversity and choice and the meaning of education? Diversity was intended to mean a range of opinions and choices of a range of options. However, in the current climate, diversity has been reduced to a caricature where diversity of opinion is not sought after but shunned. Unfortunately, the wrong choice signals a cancel culture to unfold, taking the place of debate as befits a culture of inquiry.

We as co-authors are struck by the paucity of civil discourse, the benchmark of a fully functioning democracy. This paper aims to go beyond the surface level of the cultural battles, the

political pabulum, proxies, and manufactured playbooks. We are sincerely interested in issues of choice and diversity. The deep tension between groups of individuals in the cultural battles appears to revolve around desired utopian social conditions and problems of liberty. Hence our renewed interest is in revisiting *The Sphere and Duties of Government* by Wilhelm Humboldt and *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill. Freedom of choice, a diversity of experiences . . . figure into the work of Humboldt and Mill respectively, and this is not surprising as Humboldt left an impression, informed key ingredients of Mill's thinking.

Stated another way, we find that the public is increasingly agitated concerning social conditions of 'liberty from' and 'liberty to' and subsequently relate this agitation to issues in education. In several heated altercations, liberty is placed squarely in—characterized as highly relevant to—the context of government. Specifically, parents demand liberty, 'the right to choose' educational offerings for their children. Additionally, some parents sometimes demand their children not only experience diversity but are allowed to *be* diverse . . . but too often only in the uniform manner they the parents elect to choose.

We cite instances that, on close examination, reveal the anxieties of us all, not only just parents, within the cultural battles. Here is a brief sampling of the turmoil: reading curriculum and pedagogy; new history standards (and content); LGBTQ+ rights; diversity, equity, and inclusion in all learning and working places; and heightened contestation, if not attacks on intellectual and academic freedom.

This remarkable connection between Humboldt and Mill, between diversity and choice, inspired Mill's work and reinspired us to consider the substance of this liberty he sought, the comprehensive school system that Humboldt imagined, and how it all relates to contemporary meanings of choice and diversity.

*If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.*

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