Introduction to the English Translation of Forgotten Connections
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Klaus Mollenhauer’s Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing (1983) is internationally regarded as one of the most important German contributions to educational and curriculum theory in the 20th century. It has been translated into Japanese, Norwegian, Swedish, Spanish and Dutch, but is only now appearing for the first time in English. It is one of only two or three works on the history and philosophy of education from post-war Germany to be made available in English.¹ What is the context of this book, and what makes it so important?

In introducing Mollenhauer’s Forgotten Connections as a textbook in my classes, I begin by asking my students to share an example of someone who changed or shaped their lives, who contributed substantially to their personal growth, or who could simply be said to have “made you who you are today.” The answers I generally receive are gratifying and diverse, and sometimes impassioned, with students frequently recalling parent, a teacher, a counsellor or (surprisingly often) a grandparent as playing an indispensable, formative role. The diversity of these figures—spanning home, school and beyond— together with students’ accounts of their meaning to them readily illustrate one of most important and challenging terms and concepts in Forgotten Connections. This is Bildung, a notion which Mollenhauer once characterized as the “way of the self,” and a term that has no direct equivalent in the English language. It describes how we form ourselves and are formed by others, eventually to become mature individuals (whose maturation, however, always continues). Like most of the key German terms used by Mollenhauer to discuss education, maturation, and pedagogy, Bildung spans both formal and informal contexts and roles—whether they are familiar, scholastic or extra curricular. This inclusivity is central to Mollenhauer’s thought and to Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing: Education and upbringing in this context are not so much a set of institutions, instruments and techniques for developing competitive skills and competencies; they are much more than this. They are so general as to be inseparable from basic human realities like language, work and—in the broadest sense—human culture. As Michael Winkler puts it, for Mollenhauer, pedagogy is an “irreducible” or “inseparable”² part of modern life.

Asking someone “who helped to make you who you are today?” puts questions of biography front and centre. Indeed, the word Bildung appears in the English language today almost exclusively to designate a type of biographical novel, the Bildungsroman, which describes the Bildung or formation of its protagonist, usually as he or she moves

¹ The only exceptions I am aware of are Adorno’s works on education (e.g., Education after Auschwitz), and Luhmann and Schorr’s Problems of Reflection in the System of Education (in a poor translation).
² The word Winkler uses in this connection is Unhintergehbarkeit, and it is another term that poses challenges for translation. Literally rendered in English, it means that there is no way of “getting behind” the phenomenon in question.
from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. Biography—whether it is the life narrative of Caspar Hauser, Franz Kafka, or Vincent Van Gogh—is central to Forgotten Connections, and it is not surprising that Mollenhauer’s biography itself is both eventful and closely connected with his own educational thinking. In this context, Mollenhauer once described his central interest as “helping people, and above all youth, find the path of their Bildung.”

This introduction thus begins with a short account of Mollenhauer’s life and the development of his thought. From there, it defines and discusses notions of “pedagogy,” “culture” and “upbringing” as they are understood in Forgotten Connections. Having sketched out the general historical and philosophical background for the book, this introduction then offers a detailed guide to reading it, and offers some specific reading strategies for students and teachers. The introduction concludes, finally, by outlining the overall organization of Forgotten Connections, and of the glossary and other scholarly apparatus provided in this translation.

Who is Klaus Mollenhauer?

Klaus Mollenhauer (1928 - 1998) was born the son of a prison teacher in Berlin. Like other Germans born at the end of the 1920’s (for example, the social theorist Jürgen Habermas), Mollenhauer was in early in his teens near the end of World War II, and was consequently forced to join in the German army at the age of 15. After being captured and imprisoned for almost four weeks by the British Army, Mollenhauer returned to school in 1946, and then attended the College of Education in Göttingen.

While studying in Göttingen, Mollenhauer came under the influence of Helmuth Plessner, who he describes as “the most important university teacher I ever had.” Plessner was one of the founding figures in “philosophical anthropology,” the philosophical study of the “universal constants of being-human” (de Lara & Taylor 1998, 110). One of Plessner’s best known works is an investigation of the meaning of the universal human phenomenon of “The Smile.” Plessner was to become one of the most important influences on Mollenhauer’s thinking (and his work is referenced explicitly in the second chapter of Forgotten Connections). The tradition of philosophical anthropology lives on today, for example, in the works of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and of the late Richard Rorty.

Mollenhauer completed his PhD under the supervision of education professor Erich Weniger, who represented philosophical tradition of “human science pedagogy” (geisteswissenschaftliche Paedagogik). Like philosophical anthropology, the focus of “human science” is that which is human; however the human science tradition lays claim to wide-ranging developments in German idealism and romanticism, going as far back to the middle of the seventeenth century. (Philosophical anthropology, for its part, originated in the 1920’s.) Figures and ideas prominent in the human science tradition,
such as Fichte and his notion of the self, and Schleiermacher and his approach to
interpretation (known as hermeneutics) either receive explicit mention in Forgotten
Connections or loom large in its themes and questions. Indeed, Mollenhauer once
answered the question about an underlying theme in his life’s work by invoking
Schleiermacher: “I can only say [or ask], with Schleiermacher: ‘What does the older
generation want with the younger?’”

This question of the relationship between older and younger generations, and between
the needs of the present and the claims of the past, is central not only to Mollenhauer’s
thought and life, it dominated German society in the 1950’s and 1960’s. By virtue of
having been around during the Nazi regime, German parents, teachers and other
figures of authority in these decades had by definition contributed to a social order
guilty of unimaginable crimes and atrocities. Even earlier generations were also seen by
the young as implicated in this collective guilt. Particularly in the 1960’s, these older
generations were increasingly being held accountable the younger. At the same time,
older generations left in place many of their oppressive ways of controlling the young.
For example, children and youth who may have been born of a single mother, or whose
parents were poor or in trouble with the law, were imprisoned in special institutions or
“homes,” where they were subject to corporeal and other forms of abuse. Mollenhauer
distinguished himself early in his career by joining in a campaign to free these youth,
literally breaking them out of these homes, and working to establish places for them to
live and ways to re-enter society. Mollenhauer describes how, after taking his first
academic post at the University of Frankfurt, he opened his house to some of these
troubled youth—a few of whom were to later distinguish themselves through much
more radical politics:

    We had a grand 8-room apartment... [and this] family household was at times
overrun by escaped youth from these “homes.” [While] my wife addressed some
of their deeper insecurities, and answered their ongoing calls for breakfast, I
would speak with student leaders about pedagogy and politics. [At other times,
a young] Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin would carelessly burn holes in
our upholstery with their cigarettes...[or] other young guests on LSD or just
hashish, lying around and listening to my music, would catch sight of me and
ask: “What’s he doing here?”

Through this openness and activism, Mollenhauer developed a favourable reputation
among 1960’s activists as an engaged supporter of their sometimes radical attempts to
throw off the shackles of previous generations. Indeed, the two troubled houseguests
mentioned by Mollenhauer by name—Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin—were later
to join Ulrike Meinhof (who Mollenhauer also knew) to form the militant Baader-
Meinhof group or the Red Army Faction (RAF). This group was later responsible for
killings, bombings and a prominent political assassination in West Germany, and was
the subject of an intensive manhunt that practically shut down the country in the Fall of 1977.

Mollenhauer’s career is marked by a deep concern for social justice, and as indicated above, also by a profound awareness of the tension between the inheritance from the past and the needs of the present. These issues converge in his first book, published in 1968 and titled *Education and Emancipation*. This pathbreaking book sees the needs of the present—the social and “educational realities” of postwar Germany—as being clearly more important than any intellectual, humanist tradition harking far back into Germany’s past. At one point in the book, Mollenhauer writes: “the years since the second world war have shown that [the tradition of] geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik has limited capabilities to shed light on the situation that is now constitutive of educational reality.” At the same time, though, Mollenhauer still uses parts of this intellectual tradition as a critical tool to analyze the present. In its turn away from the authority of the intellectual tradition and towards current social realities, *Education and Emancipation* betrays the significant influence of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, a group which consists of Mollenhauer’s contemporary Jürgen Habermas, as well as philosopher Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Their critical sociological studies focused on (among other things) critiques on the idealist philosopher Hegel, all the while critically exploring cultural significance of jazz, cinema and of the contemporary “culture industry.” Following the lead of the Frankfurt School, Mollenhauer was led to define Bildung in a way that clearly differs with the later understandings quoted above. In *Education and Emancipation*, Bildung has a clear political urgency and specificity: “Bildung—as opposed to education—is enlightenment regarding the conditions of one’s own existence and the concretization of singular individuality to the degree that it is possible under such conditions.” The insights of Marx into the systematic nature of inequalities under capitalism were central for Mollenhauer in this text, as was an appeal to a kind of critical rationality which could work to disentangle children and youth from these conditions and their inherent inequality. Significantly, one of these inequitable constraints being the alleged social construction of the powerlessness of childhood itself.

However, the program outlined in *Education and Emancipation* was gradually to become a victim of its own success. As Michael Winkler explains, one of the results of the great popularity of Mollenhauer’s text was that it was subject to simplification, misinterpretation and exaggeration: The book’s “critical pedagogical position,” Winkler explains, “was perceived and discussed with an almost intentional naïveté.” The embrace of radical violence by the members of the extremest RAF who once lounged on Mollenhauer’s couch can be seen as an example of this. Perhaps a parallel to this political radicalism in the educational realm is provided by “negative pedagogy.” This approach can be seen as a particularly extreme brand of romantic, progressive approaches to education, and is against any activity or program that would deliberately seek to shape children. Indeed, it goes so far as asking adults to explicitly refrain from
any deliberate acts of upbringing with children. Later in his career, Mollenhauer came
to see that we cannot not engage in upbringing (in the same way that “we cannot not
communicate”). In the preface to Forgotten Connections, he is uncompromising in
arguing that even “the most radical anti-educationist cannot avoid embodying an adult
way of life in front of children; like any adult, he or she powerfully exemplifies one way
of life or another for a child.” In keeping with this fundamental insight Through a series
of books leading up to and following on the publication of Forgotten Connections,
Mollenhauer worked out understandings of education that focused less on current
political conditions of education, and more on children’s own experience of education,
including the aesthetic dimensions of this experience. As Winkler explains,
Mollenhauer came to “insist on the real life situations of children, including their
powerlessness as part of the characteristic structure of education... [Children] cannot
simply be explained away as a social function, although they are certainly located
within social conditions.”

These realizations led Mollenhauer to reaffirm the importance of the tradition of human
science education of Weniger, his advisor, and the philosophical anthropology of
Plessner. For example, in a 1986 interview, Mollenhauer was asked: “Are there key
pedagogical texts for you; pedagogical classics, of which you would say: these are texts
that one must repeatedly open oneself to?” Mollenhauer responded by saying: “I am
embarrassed to answer, so maybe just quickly: The Education of the Human Race by
Lessing, the Letter from Stans by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and the lectures from 1826
from Schleiermacher.” It is these deeply humanist texts, rather than, say, Karl Marx’s
class analyses or Kant’s rationalistic critiques, that Mollenhauer sees as being of lasting
importance for education. In the same text, Mollenhauer reflects on how his return the
tradition of human science pedagogy –specifically as manifest in Forgotten Connections--
relates to his earlier interest in emancipation:

I don’t think that this book is a denial of the concept of emancipation; for me it is
rather a path that I have to take once again, in order to arrive at a substantial
concept of emancipation. ...So I thought in order to find another language [other
than the social scientific], I would have to realign my object of study. I arrive at a
better language for studying education and upbringing when I read more, say, of
Franz Kafka, his outstanding pedagogical text (Letter to his Father). Or the
extraordinary care that Augustine takes in his texts. These are exercises towards
the Bildung of the self (Selbstbildung).

In other words: Mollenhauer did not lose interest in the notion of emancipation, but
that he became profoundly dissatisfied with the language of the social sciences that
describes structures, forms and processes –but that does not deal with the content or
substance of that which is organized and processed, with what actually happens in a
moment in an actual classroom, or what the cultural background of a given educational
technique or curriculum might be. In general terms, the tendency that Mollenhauer was
combating the use of a purely formal and abstract “psychological” and “social-scientific jargon” -- is arguably stronger now than it was in Mollenhauer’s time. An emphasis on transferable “competency” and a deliberate de-emphasis on any particular content that might be associated with it has recently been prominent in German school reform, with a similar emphasis on high stakes skill-based testing of reading and math being familiar in North American. Indeed, in the American context, curriculum content has become in some cases too controversial for broad agreement –for example in the areas of evolutionary biology, or sex and religious education.