

KLAUS MOLLENHAUER

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Klaus Mollenhauer as a young lecturer in Berlin.

Abstract

Klaus Mollenhauer (1928-1998) is one of the most important German theorists of education of the postwar era. Mollenhauer is renowned for his contributions to critical pedagogy and educational social work (*Sozialpädagogik*) in Germany. His late philosophical work, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing* (2014) has been translated into multiple languages including English, and deals in a highly original and accessible way with education in its most basic human and cultural constituents. This chapter or entry begins with an overview of Mollenhauer's eventful life, and then discusses in greater depth the main phases of his thought: 1) an early phase of engagement with critical theory and praxis; and 2), a highly productive cultural and socio-historical phase, in which Mollenhauer developed the "anthropological ingredients for responsible education" using an innovative method or "science" of cultural examples. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Mollenhauer's national and international influence, and by addressing his life-long

commitment to the fundamental themes of "human science pedagogy."

1. Introduction

Klaus Mollenhauer (1928-1998) is one of the most important German theorists of education of the postwar era. Mollenhauer is renowned for his contributions to critical pedagogy and educational social work (*Sozialpädagogik*) in Germany. His late philosophical work, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing* (2014) has been translated into multiple languages including English, and deals in a highly original and accessible way with education in its most basic elements.

2. Biography

Klaus Mollenhauer (1928 - 1998) was born the son of a prison teacher and a social worker in Berlin. Like others born at the end of the 1920s (e.g. Jürgen Habermas or Niklas Luhmann), Mollenhauer was forced to join the German army in his early teens at the end of the Second World War. 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.

Mollenhauer studied under Herman Nohl and Erich Weniger, representatives of human science pedagogy (*geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*; sometimes simply referred to as *Pädagogik*, pedagogy or even "pedagogics"). This tradition can be traced back to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the historical hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Mollenhauer was also greatly influenced by Helmut Plessner, whose "philosophical anthropology" –the study of the "meaning of being human"– synthesized critical, historical and hermeneutic impulses together with the more particularistic possibilities of phenomenology.

In the tumult of the late 1960's, Mollenhauer, working at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, stood out as a rare older ally or "big brother" of dissatisfied youth, providing refuge and assistance for the likes of Gudrun Enslin and Andreas Baader, later key members in the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. His 1968 book *Education and Emancipation: Pedagogical Sketches* was eagerly taken up

by students and activists, and is the text for which he is still best known in Germany today.

In 1972, Mollenhauer returned to Göttingen to accept a position at his *alma mater*. Influenced by Habermas and other social and psychological theorists, he published his second monograph in the same year: *Theories of Educational Processes: Towards an Introduction to Educational Problems*. His 36 years in Göttingen were marked by great academic productivity (e.g., the appearance of over 100 articles and anthologies, as well as his third and final monograph, *Forgotten Connections*), as well as by a concern with questions of aesthetics and culture, and by an explicit return to philosophical anthropology and human science pedagogy of his student days. When asked about the underlying theme in his life's work, Mollenhauer responded by reiterating what one very early human science scholar had identified as the central question of education: "I can only say with Schleiermacher: 'What does the older generation want of the younger?'" (1991 p. 85).

3. Frankfurt am Main: Critical Pedagogy, *Sozialpädagogik*

Mollenhauer began his career with a nuanced critical analysis of the tradition of human science pedagogy in the light of the events during and after the Second World War –and also in the context of the subsequent emergence of an Americanized consumer welfare state. He famously writes in *Education and Emancipation* that "the years since the Second World War have shown [the tradition of] human science pedagogy to have limited capabilities to shed light on the situation that is now constitutive of educational reality" (1968, p. 9). Education, in short, could no longer be adequately conceptualized and practiced in terms of traditional, elevated notions such as *Bildung* (formation, cultivation; e.g., see Wilhelm von Humboldt 1998) or the "pedagogical relation" (e.g., see Spiecker 1984).

However, this did not lead Mollenhauer to an uncritical embrace of the psychologies of learning or sociologies of management and efficiency coming from Anglo-America. In a 1961 essay simply titled "Adaptation" (*Anpassung*), Mollenhauer teases out the various meanings of "adaptation" and its derivatives (e.g., adjustment, assimilation, accommodation) in biology, cognitive psychology and sociology: It is the response of an organism

to its environment, the adjustment of an environment to one's needs, and a change purposefully brought about by oneself, upon oneself (as in today's self-regulation and metacognition). Mollenhauer insists that education must go well beyond these conceptions, saying that as it is conventionally defined, "adaptation is entirely one-sided; its pedagogical obverse is *autonomous subjectivity*" (1961 p. 359, emphasis added). Apparently harking back to both Kant's notion of enlightenment (as emergence from self-imposed dependency) and Romantic understandings of reflection (as a progressive transcendence of perceptual immediacy), Mollenhauer emphasizes that the educated person is by necessity *not* adapted, or that, "paradoxically" in our modern "cultural context, only a reflective [i.e. maladapted] person can really be said to be 'adapted'" (p. 357).

Education and Emancipation clearly betrays the influence of the Frankfurt School or Institute for Social Research, while still referencing more conservative notions of human science pedagogy. This is evident in Mollenhauer's definition of *Bildung* specifically as "political *Bildung*," as "political enlightenment," with a clear 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" (1968, p. 65). A second central concern in *Education and Emancipation* is the "problem of authority" in both educational theory and practice: "Pedagogical authority," Mollenhauer emphasizes, "is in reality the authority of domination" (p. 62). Citing the canonical figures of "pedagogical thinking" in Germany –Rousseau, Pestalozzi, von Humboldt— Mollenhauer invokes critical rationality and empirical verification as *the* criteria for a pedagogy that would be emancipatory not only for those thus educated, but for society in general:

If it is true that our society is not simply the product of its own reproduction, this means that [existing] social determinations are not simply to be reproduced through education. [It further follows that] ... as both theory and practice, pedagogy has the task of *producing in the new generation the potential for social change or transformation (Veränderung)*. (1968 pp. 66-67)

Harking back to his paper on adaptation, Mollenhauer underscores priorities and examples that could readily be regarded as “maladaptive” –all the while drawing from canonical figures of pedagogy and pedagogical thinking.

4. Göttingen: Culture and Upbringing and the Science of Examples

Mollenhauer’s second monograph, published shortly after his arrival in Göttingen, offers a curious mixture the psychoanalytic educational theory of Siegfried Bernfeld (1973), the theory of communicative action of Jürgen Habermas (1984), human science pedagogy (again), as well as critical theories of social reproduction and hegemony. This book has been characterized as a “theoretical explication along the lines only coarsely sketched in *Education and Emancipation*” (Aßmann 2015, p. 174), and also as an investigation –using a new sociological “terminology” and complex “social models”– of “the pedagogical relation” beloved of human science pedagogy (Hopmann, 2014, p. 58). The conceptual vocabularies of sociology, psychology and the human sciences are combined to form models of social reproduction through intergenerational educative processes.

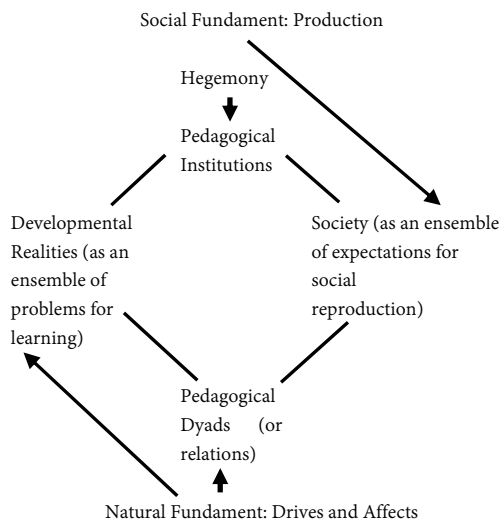


Figure 1: The “pedagogical field” *pace* Bernfeld (Mollenhauer 1972, p. 26)

The pedagogical relation is recast in this model as the “pedagogical dyad,” which –in opposition to traditional

insistence on its social “autonomy”– is very explicitly interrelated with social and institutional factors. The intergenerational dynamics central to Schleiermacher’s question about “what the older generation wants of the younger” are expressed here in the form of “an ensemble of expectations for social reproduction.”

However, as the 1970s progressed, Mollenhauer came to see that he could not integrate the pedagogical relation and other concerns of human science pedagogy to form a grand sociological synthesis. Mollenhauer realized that any one person’s experience of their own upbringing and *Bildung* is not just the result of indifferent socio-political structures and processes, but is particular and embedded in one’s own biography, culture and history, often decisively shaped (for example) through a relationship with an especially engaged teacher, parent, counsellor or grandparent. This understanding of *Bildung* as a biographical and experiential “way of the self” (Mollenhauer, as quoted in Winkler, 2002, p. 7) means that Mollenhauer’s attention in his third monograph, *Forgotten Connections*, is directed to particular instances of these ways of and toward selfhood –and it articulates them using a language clearly different from that of the social sciences:

In order to find another language, I had to realign my object of study. I found I was able to arrive at a better language for studying education and upbringing when I read more, say, of Franz Kafka’s educational text [*Letter to his Father*]. Or the extraordinary care that Augustine takes in his writings. These are exercises in the *Bildung* of the self [*Selbstbildung*]. (Mollenhauer 1991, p. 81)

When considered in this very general way, this type of language allows Mollenhauer to powerfully illustrate some of the most basic commonalities and patterns relevant to education and upbringing (*Erziehung*): That it is, as Schleiermacher suggests, a confrontation between older and younger generations, about which the older should be reflective; that adults “educate” both involuntarily and unsystematically, through their ways of life, and also quite deliberately, through curriculum and instruction; and paradoxically, that adults should passively give space to a child while actively engaging with the emergence of his or her individual character and *identity*. Mollenhauer brought such insights into connection with key notions

from human science pedagogy. The result can be described (Wivestad & Andersen, 1997) in terms of six foundational questions and keywords that also form the overarching structure of *Forgotten Connections* and its six chapters:

1. Why do we want (to be with) children? Theme: *Erziehung* and *Bildung*
2. What way of life do I present to children? Theme: Presentation (everyday “upbringing”)
3. What way of life should we systematically represent to children? Theme: Representation (formal “education”)
4. How can we respect and draw out a child’s inherent character? Theme: *Bildsamkeit*
5. How can we give children space to be active and solve their own problems? Theme: Self-Activity
6. Who am I? Who do I want to be, and how do I help others with their identity problems? Theme: Identity

In these questions, keywords and organizational structure, *Bildsamkeit* refers to the inherent willingness and readiness of the child to learn, and to the process of drawing the child into the world through adult engagement; Self-activity refers to projects and activities taken up by children and youth, from learning to walk to learning to paint or play basketball. These projects, in turn, also manifest the development of children’s *identities* as emerging autonomous adults (see: Friesen 2014, pp. xxvi-xlvii).

Mollenhauer not only uses biography or biographies to explore these questions and concepts, but also develops a kind of hermeneutic and phenomenological “science of examples.”¹ This is an examination that focuses on cultural documents, artifacts and above all, on *works of art*, as Mollenhauer’s biographer, Alex Aßmann (2015), explains:

[It] amounts to the hypothesis that educational thought, through the examination of [literary, visual and other] works of art, can... read and understand how the self-formative and embodied relationship of the individual [engaged in learning] ...is given sensually. After all, art is the representation of aesthetic figurations in which the embodied

relationship of the forming self to itself is symbolically expressed. (p. 268)

Art, illustration and historical accounts provide examples which at once preserve their historical independence and also offer an embodied immediacy and even intimacy. From Renaissance portraits through early modern engravings to medieval diaries and legal records: all of these are used in *Forgotten Connections* to richly illustrate the relation of the expressive and formative self to itself (and to others) in a context that is concrete, not only in social and historical terms, but also aesthetically and phenomenologically. In addition, Mollenhauer explores these examples in such a way as to delimit what might be regarded more generally or even cross-culturally as “pedagogical” –bursting the cultural bounds of the traditional conceptions of human science pedagogy. Aßmann asks:

Had any pedagogical author engaged in this way with the embodied structures of education and upbringing? Through aesthetic perception, embodiment shows itself not only to be something [*pace* Plessner] that we as humans both *have* and *are*, but also shows that in every experience of embodiment... there hides a memory of “the pedagogical” as something common to all peoples. Our entire culture [Mollenhauer showed] is pedagogical. (p. 280)

Mollenhauer develops the considerable possibilities offered by this method further in a late collection of essays titled *Detours: On Bildung, art and interaction*. He also provides a very general outline of this method in a 1997 paper that invokes a particular kind of pedagogical “seeing:”

Pictures that show explicit educational constellations are not the only ones of pedagogical interest. Pedagogy is concerned with the way that [all] adults see those who are being brought up, and also with how adults see themselves. This is the starting point for engagement with children and youth. As “educators,” we cannot erase ourselves, and we necessarily bring our own narrative self-

¹ A phrase from van den Burg 1955, p. 54.

understanding (*Lebensentwurf*) into play. ...consequently, one can say that serious engagement with the widest variety of images and their worlds is a necessary part of educational research. (1997, p. 253)

Although many were inspired by Mollenhauer's work to make use of examples and images (see below), no detailed explication of this method, and exploration of the broader, "anthropological" interpretive possibilities it presents has yet been undertaken.

7. Scholarly Reception

The influence of Mollenhauer's earlier work in critical pedagogy and *Sozialpädagogik* is palpable in a range of important but untranslated publications by critical educationists in Germany. These include Wolfgang Klafki's (1996) *New Studies of Theories of Bildung and Didaktik*, former student Andreas Gruschka's (1988) *Negative pedagogy: Introduction to pedagogy through Critical Theory* and Katarina Rutschky's (1977/2003) *Black Pedagogy: Sources for a natural history of bourgeois upbringing*. However, it should be noted that Mollenhauer's influence on his numerous student followers from his time in Frankfurt was neither unproblematic nor uninterrupted. Many viewed his later turn towards culture and tradition as a "retreat" or worse, as personal abandonment (Aßmann 2015, p. 260-261).

However, this did not prevent some of these same students (and many others) from taking up the "science" of cultural and aesthetic "examples" that Mollenhauer developed later in Göttingen. This is betrayed in many important works in the philosophy of education, ranging from the image on the cover of Max van Manen's *The Tact of Teaching* (1991; taken from the cover of *Forgotten Connections*), through the acknowledgements and examples in Dietrich Benner's book, *General Pedagogics* (2005; *Allgemeine Pädagogik*), and extending to a 2004 book-length study by Andreas Gruschka of 18th century French portraiture: *Determinate indeterminacy: [Jean-Baptiste-Siméon] Chardin's pedagogical readings*.

8. Conclusion

Any discussion of Klaus Mollenhauer must address what in the opinion of many remains the key theme or even mystery of his career: His almost obsessive concern with human science pedagogy and specifically, with the pedagogical relation. As mentioned above, this relation can be interpreted the central theme of *Theories of Educational Processes* – a book which itself is seen as an elaboration of earlier sketches in *Education and Emancipation*. Finally, according to Aßmann (2015) and also Benner (2012), Mollenhauer's *Forgotten Connections* itself presents an attempt to work out the issue of the issue of the pedagogical relation still further.² "In this sense, *Forgotten Connections* recapitulates earlier versions of the pedagogical relation as well as [seeking] its current whereabouts, asking for what seems to be unavoidable, namely [the] anthropological ingredients for responsible education" (Hopmann 2014, p. 48).

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² Bas Levering (1987) goes so far as to render the title of Mollenhauer's text in English as: "The Forgotten Relation."

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