



Giving Language to Taboos: Nation and Religion in Modern Educational Reasoning

Daniel Tröhler

Abstract • Like all taboos, nation and religion are so powerful precisely because they are often not brought to language. Educators around the world see themselves as secular, not religious, and rational, not national, and they develop their elegant, moral, and bland arguments precisely on this premise. This is, of course, capable of gaining majority support because it keeps the sociological machinery of educational thinking stably alive, but epistemologically it is unsatisfactory. Educational reasoning is sometimes as elegant as the freestyle of a virtuoso ice skater, sometimes as captivating as a rhetorically gifted village preacher, sometimes as clumsy as a plow horse that thinks it is a dressage horse. Some are the stars in the arena of academic education, others the moralizers, and others the bland extras. This rather simple sociology of educational reasoning emphasizes the different roles that Academics occupy in what Fleck called a “thought collective,” but it obscures that “thought collectives” share common “thought styles” in which, often carefully administered by national professional associations, truth is produced. In education, these “thought collectives” have historically been shaped by two fundamental elements. They are veritable taboo subjects, which are presupposed but hardly ever reflected upon, namely religion and nation.

Keywords • nation, taboos, history of collective education, educational thinking.

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Introduction

Nation and religion are two of the great taboos in modern educational thinking, acting, organising.¹ They determine the way we perceive education as education, and they have all the more influence the more we keep silent about them. In this sense, it is particularly interesting to deal with them, to give them language. By “giving them language,” I do not mean things that are kept quiet even though they are known, such as private wealth, incest, or a criminal past. It is not about the eloquent silence, but about a silence of something of which one is not really aware.

My overall topic concerns our performances of thoughts, discussions, practices, and institutions in education.² The overarching thesis is that because we – researchers

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- 1 It may seem superfluous to emphasize that I am not concerned here with the hidden nationalism in history or geography textbooks, nor with religious education in any form. However, for the sake of certainty, I like to underline that it is about the epistemology of educational research as such.
- 2 For the particular educational historiographic aspect of religion and nation, taking the case of Johann Ignaz von Felbiger and “his” normal method, see Jil Winandy, *National and Religious Ideologies in the Construction of Educational Historiography: The Case of Felbiger and the Normal Method in Nineteenth Century Teacher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

in education, but also politicians, school teachers, administrators and even most parts of the populations in Western countries – think of ourselves as children of the Enlightenment, we believe our educational performances in particular in research to be largely factual and value-neutral. In doing so, however, we are mistaken, and our false assumptions about ourselves multiply the unspoken religious and national presuppositions that govern our thinking, our discussions, our practices, our educational institutions. My more concrete thesis, therefore, is that, in education, we start from unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions, which are usually both religious (or denominational) and national. Our educational performances are thus framed by both, a denominational and a national, that is denomi-national discourse, that enables us to talk, think, and act, but that also makes it difficult for us to address it because, after all, it is precisely this discourse that enables us to act as experts in this constructed field. We perform the denomi-national discourse³, but we rarely think about the stage that makes our performance possible in the first place.

The discussion of the thesis has to do with historical consciousness. Historical consciousness is not the same as historical knowledge, such as that Denmark enacted school laws in 1814 but Sweden not until 1842, that the first non-German professors of education were Finnish nationalist Hegelians, and that one of the last Western countries to establish a chair of education was Norway, which filled the position with one of the first female professors ever, the psychologist Helga Eng, in 1938. Taken in isolation, the Finnish Hegelians of the 19th century are as insignificant as the first German professor of education, Ernst Christian Trapp; the Norwegian Helga Eng; or, similarly, the introduction of test psychology at Teachers College around 1900, the emergence of the comprehensive school in the Nordic countries after World War II, or the advent of PISA after 2000. They only become interesting when we understand them as events in the stream of history that were shaped by underlying discourses contending for dominance and that could have gone differently.

I am not suggesting that most publications on the history of education are conceived and written in a way that reflects the conditions under which the issues under study were able to become events in the first place (and silencing other options) that can be studied today. I suspect that it is the failure to consider, or the silencing of, these discursive contextual conditions of the objects of study that result in the limited interest that these studies in the history of education tend to generate. My point is that this kind of historical awareness is crucial to writing not only something interesting but something relevant. Personally, I have found it both interesting and relevant to understand how test psychologists working for PISA can be seen as Cold War-motivated, nationalist-imperial, U.S.-American activists whose socio-epistemology is ultimately grounded in Scottish Presbyterianism.⁴ It has helped me explain the general number crunching, the belief in evidence, and the tendency to delegate decisions to so-called experts who did

3 For the present context, I regard “discourse” as largely identical with “*langue*” (Pocock, 1987), “thought style” (Fleck, 1935/1979) or “style of reasoning” (Hacking, 1992).

4 Daniel Tröhler and Veronika Maricic, “Data, Trust and Faith: The Unheeded Religious Roots of Modern Education Policy,” in “Re-reading the OECD and Education: The Emergence of a Global Governing Complex,” edited by Tore Bernt Sorensen, Christian Ydesen and Susan L. Robertson, *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19, special issue no. 2 (2021).

not emerge in the field of education until the 1960s.⁵ This particular case of changing governance systems in education brings me to the core of my topic: nationalism and religion are often overlooked, ignored, unreflective preconditions for events, institutions, practices, and research that shape our educational performances.

The method for identifying such unspoken ideological-discursive contexts that frame us and our educational field differs from methods that are case-based, such as the reconstruction of the ideological and methodological roots of PISA. One has to be provocative, to lure these framing presuppositions out of their speechless hideaway in order to put them into words. Since this affects all of us in our self-understanding as educational researchers and teachers, we will have to reckon with resistance, with counterevidence, and also with the fact that the research findings will be met with ironic scepticism or quiet ignorance, with a pained smile or a shrug of the shoulders.

I would like to make my thesis plausible in four steps before I end my considerations with a short outlook. First, I aim to make clear how nationalised we are when we work academically in education (1). Second, out of courtesy or foolhardiness, I will refer to the Nordic states and ask if the same applies here (2). In a subsequent step, I will show how one of our objects of research, school systems, reflects the social philosophy inherent in religion (3). This will allow me, in the last substantive step, to address the denomi-national nature of our educational culture (4). At the very end, I will briefly discuss those who do research and their task of talking about what makes their performance possible (5).

The national(ised) academic author

I begin with the aspect for which, admittedly, it is relatively easy to list counterexamples. Yet, I call these counterexamples exceptions to an effective epistemological phenomenon that I associate with the keyword “nation”. This includes observations that may seem like truisms and therefore not even worth mentioning, but we must be careful because truisms hold many secrets about our more-or-less secular belief systems. I will focus on four aspects: the *careers* of a typical academic author, on his or her research *topics*, on his or her *associations*, and on publication *organs*, through which research is made accessible. I assume that these aspects point relatively clearly to the national framing of a typical academic existence that is actually reproduced in university educational institutions.

Authors' careers: If we look back over the last 50 years, we can see that renowned professors have been appointed by universities in countries where they grew up. Diane Ravitch is American and worked in the US, Tomas Englund is Swedish and worked in Sweden, Heinz-Elmar Tenorth is German and worked in Germany, Antoine Prost is French and works in France, Marc Depaepe is Belgian and works in Belgium, and so on. Yes, there is counterevidence, and we can name perhaps 20, 30, or 40 – within some 2000 or 3000 less famous examples than the ones mentioned above and that support the observation. It may well be that, recently, things have changed at the postdoc level, but as a rule, these postdocs return to their home-countries after a couple of years being abroad.

Authors' topics: Usually, research focusses on domestic individuals, events, or institutions, and this is the case with Ravitch, Englund, Tenorth, Prost, and Depaepe,

5 Daniel Tröhler, “Change Management in the Governance of Schooling: The Rise of Experts, Planners, and Statistics in the Early OECD,” *Teachers College Record* 116, no. 9 (2014a).

as well as with the vast majority of other authors who work their fingers to the bone in order to avoid getting drowned in the publication-driven business of academia. Again, there is counterevidence, but not too much. Here, in this context, it will be objected that in the north of Europe articles and chapters often cover more than one country. Often these cross-national essays or chapters are written by multiple authors, each describing their own country, such as – I only mention this example because it is a very good chapter – a recent paper covering the three nation-states of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, written by three authors who – you guessed it – work in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, respectively, and hold the respective citizenship: Magnus Hultén, Harald Jarning, and Jens Erik Kristensen’s “From Knowledge to Skills and Competence: Epistemic Reconfiguration in Nordic Basic Education, 1980–2020”.⁶

Authors’ associations: My talk is in the context of a conference organised by an association, and most researchers first make their research visible in conference posters or papers. These conferences are usually organised at the national level, such as AERA (American Educational Research Association), CIES (Comparative and International Education Society), DGfE (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft*), or BERA (British Educational Research Association). Again, there are actual or at least apparent exceptions, like our Nordic Education History Conference, or like ECER, which is organised by the European Educational Research Association and creates a transnational European forum for research. But it is such a thing with internationality, which always presupposes nationality, that membership in ECER presupposes membership in (and thus the existence of) a national association.

Even Luxembourg, which has only had its own university since 2003, has formed a national society for the sole purpose of becoming a member of EERA and thus enabling reduced ECER conference fees for people doing research in Luxembourg. And we also see that Northern Europe, with its NERA, is indeed an exception, although not an entirely flawless one: Finland has a Finnish Educational Research Association (FERA) in addition to NERA, and Sweden has a Swedish Educational Research Association (SWERA). In the UK, of course, there are also two associations: the British BERA and the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA). The same seems to be true for Cyprus with its CESA and CERA. National organisations are prevalent and sometimes hidden, but effective. Internationality is often a stirrup holder for nationality.

Authors’ publications: National associations aim to bring together researchers, mainly those who work in the country, and these are usually researchers with the same nationality as the association. They provide the space for the cultivation of what, following Ludwik Fleck,⁷ is called a “thought collective,” which in turn cultivates a particular “thought style.” This starts with the calls for papers, the peer review processes, and the selections of experts, and this goes on to posters, individual presentations, whole panels, and, perhaps to a lesser degree, keynotes. But this is only the first step, for it then goes into the publication phase 2.0.: the printing phase. Who are the editors; what is the publication organ, the journal, or the book series; and by which publisher? Take the example of the most highly endowed journal, the *Review of Educational*

6 Magnus Hultén, Harald Jarning and Jens Erik Kristensen, “From Knowledge to Skills and Competence: Epistemic Reconfiguration in Nordic Basic Education, 1980–2020,” in *The Nordic Education Model in Context: Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations*, ed. Daniel Tröhler et al. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 236–54.

7 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, original 1935).

Research. This journal is an organ of an association that organises meetings, but these are not meetings for an international organisation but a national, perhaps imperial one: AERA, and this journal is managed exclusively by US-Americans in terms of content and editing.

The same observation can be made using almost any other example, such as the Comparative International Education Society (CIES) and its *Comparative Education Review*. Sometimes there are no national associations behind a nationally characterised journal, such as the English *Journal of Research in International Education* (JRIE); the Spanish *Revista de Investigación Educativa* (Journal of Educational Research); or the Swedish *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige* (Educational Research in Sweden), a journal focusing on Swedish topics with an editorial board that is made up of people from Linnaeus University and supported by a national council, the *Medlemmar i tidskriftens nationella råd* (Members of the Journal's National Council). There are exceptions, like the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) and its affiliated journal, *Paedagogica Historica*, but these are exceptions. The publication of research is, not only in journals, very often and as a rule, nationally connoted.

Evidently, the institutionalised author in education research is a largely nationalised one.

The Nordic context: the exception?

Two objections may now be raised, namely that here in the North this situation is largely different and that it seems only natural that researchers – especially those in historical educational research – should concern themselves with national topics. This makes sense given that archives are nearby and that students, who will not infrequently go into the teaching profession, are interested in national school history rather than international history.

The second objection, the naturalness of working with local, regional, or national archives rather than those abroad, is tricky because the “natural” is one of those things where we tend to get trapped. Beyond the fact that libraries and archives are never organised on universal rational principles,⁸ on closer observation, the “natural” often turns out not to be natural at all but “cultural,” and by that an expression of power relations. It is no coincidence that when someone wants to become a citizen somewhere else the procedure for doing so is called “naturalisation”; although this process is just a matter of going to a state, becoming familiar with its basic cultural principles – the nation, and making them one’s own. And that is, at least in part, an educational process with moral components, which again is quite different in many places.

I limit myself to the Nordic countries. Norway, for example, requires that someone has lived in Norway for at least seven years without a criminal record, has learned the Norwegian language, and has familiarised themselves with Norwegian culture and values; this is then assessed in a test in which he or she is asked about citizenship issues and social studies. Sweden, on the other hand, does not require proof of language skills, knowledge of the country, financial independence, or a written or oral “declaration of loyalty”: One has only to prove a minimum stay of five years and the residence

8 Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

permit must be permanent, their identity must be clearly proven, and they must have no outstanding debts to the state or criminal misconduct in Sweden. The situation in Denmark is quite different again. There, a permanent residence of nine years is required; no tax debt; no entry can exist in the criminal record; and a language, history, and tradition test must be passed; in addition, the existence of a legal source of income must be proven, and an oath of allegiance to the Danish Constitution must be taken. Finland is somewhere in between, with quite some importance laid on language skills that have to be proven in a test. So much for naturalness, which so often contains whole systems of cultural values.

National-cultural peculiarities, which can hide behind arguments of “naturalness,” can evidently be found behind supra-national constructions of different nation-states, too. According to the Norwegian and Finnish historians Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, *Norden* is such a cultural construction,⁹ and according to the Danish historian Mary Hilson, the Nordic model is a model with five exceptions, each of the nation-states in question being an exception.¹⁰ This exceptionalism can be evidenced in two ways: either all members involved want to be different from each other – this is the normal characteristic of all nation-states – or they are exceptional because they work more closely together than others in many ways. According to this second view, the inhabitants of the Nordic countries are often confident of not being as nationally limited as their European brothers and sisters in Italy, Hungary, France, or Germany, as they are part of the “Nordic model,” more social, more democratic, more emancipatory, and less violent¹¹ (though they make up for it with their flourishing business of writing brutal and gruesome crime novels). Yet, an extra-Nordic view of Northern Europe does show national differences – the exceptionalism of the first reading, as one can see ironised in the *Atlas of Prejudices*.¹²

Sport is of course also part of a nation’s cultural self-image. As for national sports, it is ski jumping and pesäpallo in Finland; hockey and football in Sweden; skiing, foremost cross-country skiing, in Norway; and football in Denmark. Yet, the best Nordic football player is probably not the Danish Michael Laudrup, but the Swedish son of Bosnian immigrants, Zlatan Ibrahimović, and his leading position might, one day, be challenged by the Norwegian Erling Haaland. In turn, the Danes beat the Germans in the final of the 1992 European Football Championship, almost making up for the disgrace of 1864, when they lost Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia. I have been told that these two dates, 1864 and 1992, are central landmarks of Danish national consciousness. And both events took place without the help of their Nordic brothers and sisters.

Sport and identity may be a subject with which many intellectuals do not want to deal. Perhaps this is because they themselves are unsporting or else because they distrust the overt nationalism often associated with sport – for instance, at world championships or the Olympics – even though they are not in favour of globalisation, either. Between nationalism and globalism, the construction of the North lends itself

9 Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997).

10 Mary Hilson, *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia Since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

11 Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

12 Yanko Tsvetkov, *Atlas of Prejudice: The Complete Stereotype Map Collection* (S.l.: Alphadesigner, 2017).

precisely to emphasising otherness vis-à-vis the rest of the world while also practising national differences, perhaps without paying too much attention to them, for these can be considerable, especially in the field of education.

These differences become evident in education policy, where Sweden has departed the furthest from the model called the Nordic model of education developed in the post-war period.¹³ Private schooling is flourishing in Sweden, including at the elementary level,¹⁴ and individual achievement and selection have again become basic principles that have eclipsed ideas of cooperation.¹⁵ Perhaps this phenomenon becomes even clearer in our field of research. If we look at the *Nordic Network for Historians of Education*, we see that this network is part of the *Uppsala Studies of History and Education* (SHED), that is in the hand of a national group of researchers. The undeniable Swedish dominance in the field of history of education can also be seen in the editorial staff of the *Nordic Journal of Educational History*, who are, so to say, all located in Sweden, except for Johannes Westberg, who recently left Örebro for Groningen.¹⁶ In contrast, the *Nordisk tidsskrift for pedagogikk og kritikk* (Nordic Journal for Pedagogy and Criticism) is, like the *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, firmly in the hands of the Norwegians. The *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* and *Nordic Studies in Education* are the exceptions as it has members on its editorial boards who come from all the Nordic countries, even from Iceland.

Educational systems and the social philosophy of religion

Next to the national taboo, we now need to speak of the religious, which is closely interconnected with the first, as a short glance at contested parts of the world makes clear. In 2020, the Turkish President Erdogan re-staged the reversion of the world-famous Hagia Sophia into a mosque to please his faithful Muslim voters. In February 2022, President Putin got support for his war in the Ukraine by the Moscow Patriarch Kyrill I. Some 30 years ago in the Yugoslavian countries, you would not only find peoples trying to create autonomous nation-states, but these also according to three religious affiliations: the Catholic, the Orthodox, and the Muslims. For many decades now, we have been seeing a religious conflict in Northern Ireland and British or Irish Republican Nationalism. We are also seeing how the authorities in Burma are chasing Muslims out of the Buddhist country; how India's President Modi has declared Muslims to be second-class Indian

13 Lisbeth Lundahl, "Marketization of the Urban Educational Space," in *Second International Handbook of Urban Education*, ed. William T. Pink and George W. Noblit (Cham: Springer, 2017).

14 Hultén, Jarning and Kristensen (2023); Malin Ideland, "Google and the End of the Teacher? How a Figuration of the Teacher is Produced Through an Ed-tech Discourse," *Learning, Media & Technology* 46, no. 1 (2021); Malin Ideland and Margareta Serder, "Edu-business Within the Triple Helix. Value Production Through Assetization of Educational Research," *Education Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (2022).

15 Åsa Melander, "The Educationalization of the Swedish Welfare State and the Expectations of School Teachers," in *The Nordic Education Model in Context. Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations*, ed. Daniel Tröhler et al. (New York: Routledge, 2023).

16 While this paper is being revised (October 2022), news has spread that a Norwegian Education History Network (*Utdanningshistorie i Norge*) was being planned, for the time being based at the USN (Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge). This may break up the Swedish dominance somewhat, but of course, not the principle of the national in organising and framing research.

citizens;¹⁷ and how the same has been happening in Israel, not only with Arab Israelis but also with African Jews who practise a distinct form of Judaism.¹⁸

Yet, the idea that these religious phenomena connected to national aspirations concern only others and not us is misleading, for what we see in these “other places” are simply aggressive manifestations of what we all nourish across the world with everyday symbols and practices that can be labelled “banal”.¹⁹ A good first clue – for Northern Europe – is apparent on the national flags of the Nordic countries: they all carry the Christian cross.

These flags represent the national identity of the respective nation-state through the symbol of Christianity. In research, national flags are “described as modern objects of worship and as the extension of a secular form of divinity.”²⁰ This is mirrored in the constitutions. In those of Denmark and Norway, it is stated that the king shall be a member of the Lutheran Church and the state church shall be Lutheran. They are in quite good company, by the way; the German Constitution starts with “Aware of his responsibility before God and man,” and the Swiss Constitution starts: “In the name of God Almighty!” Across the Atlantic, “In God We Trust” is the official motto of the United States.²¹ And, let us not forget, many people in the North decorate their Christmas tree with the national flags.

It can be argued that flags date back centuries and that people now live in a secular age governed by educated, rational citizens informed by modern science – like our self-image as researchers. However, we are well advised to be cautious about the secularisation thesis, as we are told by an array of scholars, among them Mette Buchardt’s work.²² We should at least distinguish between institutional secularisation and cultural secularisation, that is, between the decline of the church as an institution in shaping public and private life and people’s religious attitudes or dispositions that in modern times are often related to the nation.²³ To equate these two different kinds of secularisation is more or less wishful thinking on the part of Western intellectuals and actually a poor premise for good historiography.

17 Fazal Rizvi, “Nationalism, Populism and Education in a Globalizing India,” in *World Yearbook of Education 2022: Education, Schooling and the Global Universalization of Nationalism*, ed. Daniel Tröhler, Nelli Piattova and William F. Pinar (New York: Routledge, 2022), 185–200.

18 Marva Marom, “A Second Exodus: Ethiopian Jews in Israel Between Religion, Nation and State,” in “Education, ‘Doing Nation,’ Nation Building and the Development of National Literacies,” ed. Daniel Tröhler, *Croatian Journal of Education* 22, special issue no. 2 (2020).

19 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995)

20 Gabriella Elgenius, *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 28.

21 US Congress, House, Reaffirming “In God We Trust” as the Official Motto of the United States Resolution of 2011, H Res. 13, 112th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House January 26, 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-112hconres13rh/pdf/BILLS-112hconres13rh.pdf>

22 Mette Buchardt, “Lutheranism and the Nordic States,” in *Luther: Zeitgenössisch, Historisch, Kontrovers*, ed. Richard Faber and Uwe Puschner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017); Mette Buchardt, “Between ‘Dannelse’ and ‘Real Life’. National Cultural Christianity in a Nordic Cold War Education Reform Process,” *International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 10, no. 2 (2020a); Mette Buchardt, “The Political Project of Secularization and Modern Education Reform in ‘Provincialized Europe’: Historical Research in Religion and Education beyond Secularization, R.I.P.,” *International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 11, no. 2 (2021).

23 Daniel Tröhler, “Secularization, the Education of the Heart, and the Modern Nation-State: The Case of Swiss Reformed Protestantism and its European Resonance” (forthcoming).

Most researchers of nationalism point either to the religious roots of nationalism or at least to the fact that under nationalism the nation has become sacralised. For example, in his book *Sacred Sources of National Identity*, Anthony D. Smith defines the nation as “a community of faith and as a sacred communion.”²⁴ This idea is not new and can be traced back to Rousseau’s concept of civil religion in his *Social Contract*²⁵ or to Durkheim’s sociology of religion. Durkheim’s book on the concept addresses the absolute social necessity of modern rituals and ceremonies for the moral conduct of societies’ members.²⁶ This again corresponds to one of the relatively uncontroversial definitions of the “nation,” by the eminent French intellectual Ernest Renan in 1882, which rejected all quasi-ontological definitions of the nation because the “nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.”²⁷

Few state institutions are as clearly defined to give permanence to the sacralised nation as the school, whether in school laws, curricula, textbooks, transitional arrangements, or teacher training. One can limit oneself to the most formal aspect of the school, the structure, where the close relationship between religion and education is perhaps most obvious. Further above, I have touched upon the Nordic comprehensive school model, which has been strongly under pressure in Sweden for some years and which separates students through a selection process as late as possible. A comparison with systems in conservative Catholic and Calvinist countries or regions reveals how strongly this has to do with religiously conditioned sociopolitical ideas.

Consider the Free State of Bavaria in southeastern Germany, which, like all other German states, has sovereignty over the education system. At the bottom, there is the kindergarten, which is not state organised but offered by foremost religious organisations: kindergarten for children between the ages of four and six is seen as an institution of moral, value, and social education. Kindergarten is followed by the elementary school, a comprehensive school that lasts four years, from Year 1 to Year 4. After these four years, at the age of ten, students are then selected for the three tracks of the secondary school, either *Mittelschule*, *Realschule*, or *Gymnasium*. The *Mittelschule* prepares students for lower vocational training, the *Realschule* for more demanding professions, and the *Gymnasium* for university. With some minor differences, the same system is used in Austria.

Hence, while the Lutheran-dominated Nordic countries with the idea of comprehensive schools tend to educate children together for some ten years and select children only at the age of sixteen, children in some conservative Catholic countries are selected at the age of ten, with, as we know, decisive consequences for their future life. Conversely, it is true that Calvinist countries have comprehensive schools as the Lutheran countries do, but in these Calvinist countries, there is often an elaborated elitist private school system, which stratifies the student population socially from birth,

24 Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24.

25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The Social Contract and the First and the Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, original 1762).

26 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915, original 1912), 427.

27 Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation?* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), 27.

so to speak. This reflects the Calvinist conviction in a weak state and high personal responsibility, so that the state is primarily concerned with the unprivileged children. In these countries, the idea of school vouchers has become popular, according to which tax money should not go to schools but given to parents, who then decide to which school their children should go and pay for it with these vouchers. This system, therefore, favours the already privileged families who have the time to take their children to distant schools in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon, once again manifesting the Calvinist ideas of personal responsibility, individual merit, and little state interference.

On a very mundane level, then, it becomes apparent that even the formal structure of national school systems reflects at least a part of the prevailing religious denomination and its inherent ideas of social structure and justice. But it is not only about denomination, as there are also national peculiarities within a denominational realm, for instance in Lutheranism.

Denomi-national configurations of schooling

Not all Calvinist countries have strong private school systems, and not all Catholic countries practise early selection. While the school systems can have visibly basic religious structures, they also have national idiosyncrasies or configurations. This can be shown in the Lutheran realm by looking at differences between the Nordic states – which I will collectively pull together for simplicity’s sake – and the Lutheran parts of Germany.

The differences I am interested in can be imagined, for example, in the concept of “people”. While the Nordic states have a conception of *folket* that is more-or-less comprehensive or encompassing, in Lutheran Germany, the collective term *Volk* meant the great mass of people below the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie who was to remain excluded from political participation. In the Nordic states, in contrast, we find a popular but non-populist tendency directed against the nobility, which exerted the most influence in Sweden and Denmark, or against the civil servant elite, which dominated in Norway.²⁸ In a constellation that must have seemed very strange to Germany, absolutists in Sweden in the 17th century insisted on a coalition of king and peasants against the nobility; in Denmark, and later also in Norway, the insistence was on a coalition of king and citizens.²⁹ Accordingly, Nordic societies have hardly ever experienced anti-parliamentarian mass mobilisation.³⁰ This was quite different in Germany, where higher education led to strong social mobility from the upper middle classes to the aristocracy (*Bildungsbürgertum*), with a strong demarcation “against the bottom”. This largely social and political exclusion of the *Volk* in turn led to massive unrest and protests of the “lower classes,”³¹ which could only be appeased towards the

28 Daniel Tröhler, “The Nordic Education Model: Trajectories, Configurations, Challenges,” in *The Nordic Education Model in Context: Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations*, ed. Daniel Tröhler et al. (New York: Routledge, 2023).

29 Sørensen and Stråth (1997), 7.

30 Henrik Stenius, “The Good Life is a Life of Conformity: The Impact of Lutheran Tradition on Nordic Political Culture,” in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 170; Martin Schröder, *Integrating Varieties of Capitalism and Welfare State Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 144–57.

31 Richard Tilly, “Unruhen und Proteste in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Kapital, Staat und*

end of the 19th century with Bismarck's top-down social legislation.

This constellation has to do with a national interpretation of Luther's rather implicit two-worlds doctrine, according to which the world on earth may be ruled unjustly, without criticism or even rebellion being allowed, while the world in heaven is just. This, in turn, has resulted in a specific, strong reason of state that has also become visible in the education system, as the example of 18th Prussia shows. But why? In the first half of the 18th century, Prussia had developed from a rather unimpressive electorate into a serious European monarchy within the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, challenging not only Catholic France outside the empire but also Catholic Habsburg, the traditional leader of the Holy Roman Empire. In doing so, one was especially concerned in how the cultural form of barbarism ascribed to the Germans since Tacitus' *Germania* (AD 98/1999) – which was attributed by Western intellectuals to all forms of life in Eastern Europe and Russia³² – was put into perspective: Eastern Europe was to begin east of Prussia, but without ascribing Prussia to the antithesis of barbarism, to Western civilization:³³ As an alternative to barbarism and Western civilization, the Prussians claimed to represent a culture (*Kultur*) whose core was not modern, useful scientific knowledge, but, for the upper ranks, *Bildung*.³⁴ This double anti-Catholic and anti-barbarism front demanded discipline and efficiency and was enabled not only by the development of a disciplined army, but also by an efficient, pietistic model of *Volks*-education³⁵ that provided a loyal mass from which to recruit for both the lower local administration of the state and the army. The elite of the state administration and the army, however, remained reserved for the nobility and the upper middle class, who raised their children at home.

Accordingly, the widely admired education system in Prussia in the 18th and 19th centuries had been established for the *Volk* and not the *folket*. After 1800, when the *baccalaureate* was established as a prerequisite for entrance to university, the state continued to organise the normal free education system for the *Volk*, whereas the *Gymnasien* offered paid preschools, in which the elementary school children of privileged parents were taught, among other subjects, Latin. Latin competence, in turn, was a prerequisite for transfer to the *Gymnasium*, which led to the *baccalaureate*, which in turn was the condition of entry to the university, university degrees being a prerequisite for the higher civil service positions in the state. Their catchword was

Sozialer Protest in der Deutschen Industrialisierung. Gesammelte Aufsätze, ed. Helmut Berding, Jürgen Kocka and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 143–74.

32 Wolff, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

33 The vulnerability of this cultural anti-Western and anti-barbarian self-assertion was demonstrated three days after the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914. The French philosopher Henry Bergson, who had indeed admired German “culture,” wrote as a reaction to the German aggression: “The struggle against Germany is the very struggle of civilisation against barbarism,” to which Germany had “relapsed” (Bergson [1914] 1972, 1102).

34 A text by Moses Mendelssohn in 1784 shows how these terms were perceived as new: “The words enlightenment, culture (*Kultur*), *Bildung* are still new arrivals in our language. They belong before the hand merely to the book language. The common crowd hardly understands them.” Nevertheless, Mendelssohn believed that they represented facts of the sociable culture (*geselliges Leben*) that indeed distinguished the Germans from others (Mendelssohn 1784).

35 Mette Buchardt, “Church, Religion, and Morality,” in *A Cultural History in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Tröhler (London: Bloomsbury, 2020b).

not *Pflicht* (duty), as in the case of *Volks*-education, but *Bildung*, the aesthetic inward perfection of the individual soul, ideally conveyed through Greek and Roman antiquity.

This dual educational policy was legitimised by a particularistic educational philosophy, a *Bildungs-philosophie*, that still receives almost undivided approval in Germany, at least from educational researchers.³⁶ The most frequently cited super-father of the style of thinking that configures around or epitomises this notion of *Bildung* is Wilhelm von Humboldt. As with many other heroes of educational history, Humboldt is quoted more often than he is read. He is reduced to two or three quotes, with one standing out:

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 [*Bildung*] of his powers to a complete and consistent whole.³⁷

This quote is not about knowledge or skills, but about *Bildung* understood as an inward harmonious whole of inherent powers. It reflects Lutheran dualism, according to which the inwardness of man is sharply separated from his physical and material world. That is why, in this text, Humboldt refuses the implementation of a constitution which makes equal citizens out of different people. The decisive issue is never the “outer,” the political, but the “inner,” the aesthetical, which is to be *gebildet*. This is not to be done, however, through knowledge, empiricism, social interaction, or democracy, but through the inward aesthetical experience, which was seen exemplarily realised in Greek antiquity, and this had curricular consequences insofar as the *Gymnasium* focussed strongly on the mastery of Greek and Latin in order to make *Bildung* possible for the elite.³⁸

This dual structure is still somehow at play today. Most of the Lutheran dominated states (*Bundesländer*) in Germany have, like the Nordic countries, a comprehensive school, but it is one that runs parallel to the *Gymnasium*, aiming at *Bildung*. This reveals a nationally conditioned internal Lutheran difference. Whereas in Germany, with its socially stratified idea of *Volk*, questions of democracy related to education were hardly ever discussed, in the Nordic countries, with their clearly more comprehensive understanding of *folket* (again, I ignore the intra-Nordic differences), there was much more interest in the connection between education and democracy.³⁹

Outlook: Giving language to the denomi-national frame of education performances

When we are to perform education in thought, talk, organisation, or research, we perform nation and religion by implementing their hidden or inscribed values and norms in the institutions and theories. As alleged children of the Enlightenment –

36 Rebekka Horlacher, *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

37 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Spheres and Duties of Government* (London: John Chapman, 1865, original 1792).

38 Daniel Tröhler, “The German Idea of *Bildung* and the Anti-Western Ideology,” in *Theories of Bildung and Growth: Connections and Controversies Between Continental European Educational Thinking and American Pragmatism*, ed. Paul Siljander, Ari Kivelä and Ari Sutinen (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 149–64.

39 Stråth, Bo. *Language and the construction of class identities. The struggle for discursive power in social organisation: Scandinavia and Germany after 1800* (Gothenburg: Department of History, 1990).

I come back to my overarching thesis, we have little sensitivity to either nation or religion, certainly not when it comes to ourselves. Religion and nationalism concern not us, but others: the people in the near and far neighbouring countries, who are labelled as nationalists while we may be patriots, or the migrants who come to us, who are religious or even fundamentalist while we are rational or perhaps compassionate. Our own image, dear to us as heirs of the Enlightenment, constructs the image of the Other,⁴⁰ which is immediately problematised and educationalised insofar as we, as enlightened and solidary people, have developed educational tools in the form of tolerance education or intercultural learning.

We ourselves have been so massively educationalised in recent centuries – and here I am referring to the historical consciousness I mentioned at the beginning – that we no longer even know how strongly we have internalised religion and nation, both of which having high energy potentials to make certain kinds of people, not least the academic researcher.⁴¹ We are no longer aware of them, and we see them only in the realm of the other from ourselves. Obviously, we are, at best, shining examples of a fundamentally false self-image in which arrogance and patronising others go hand in hand, and we will continue to do so unless we begin to strip these taboos of the incredible power over us that they derive precisely from the wordlessness, the silencing, that they enjoy.

If we are so concerned with being rational, we should start thinking about the discourses that would have us believe that we are rational, unbiased, value-neutral. Only that would enable us to stop reproducing dominant educational ideologies and theories that come from either national⁴² or religious epistemologies⁴³ or a denominational mixture of both. We will then research the historical consciousness of our own historicities, exploring and discussing the historical conditions of our own epistemological roles in the field of education and its performances, bringing taboos to the fore, and giving them words to free us from their dictates over us.

About the author

Daniel Tröhler is Professor of Foundation of Education at the Department of Education, University of Vienna, Austria. Email: daniel.troehler@univie.ac.at

40 A prime example is how especially the intellectual French elite of the 18th century – sustainably! – created “Eastern Europe” as the Other (that is as antithesis to their own “civilization,” i.e. as barbarism) (Wolff, 1994).

41 I acknowledge in this context the important publication on methodological nationalism by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003). While they start from the national idea *as such*, which has characterized social science research and shaped its focus on immigration, I am less concerned with a general concept of the nation as an epistemological formative force than with the question of how nationalism has affected the *respective* social ideals differently in the individual nation-states. These international differences can be illustrated very nicely by the example of reactions to the “social question” in the late 19th century, which was addressed and problematized differently in each nation-state and which then gave rise to completely different educational theories (Tröhler, 2014b).

42 Stephanie Fox, “The Entanglement of Nation and Epistemology: Glances into the Backyard of Academic Dignity,” in “Education, ‘Doing Nation,’ Nation Building and the Development of National Literacies,” ed. Daniel Tröhler, *Croatian Journal of Education* 22, special issue no. 2 (2020).

43 Daniel Tröhler, “The Lasting Legacy of the European Reformation of the 16th Century: Protestant Foundations of Modern Educational Reasoning,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values. Studies in Religion & Education* 42, no. 2 (2020), 258–276.

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