

Bokrecension

Våga veta! Om bildningens möjligheter i massutbildningens tidevarv. Burman, A. (red.), Södertörns högskola, 2011, ISBN 978-91-86069-33-9

At just under a crown a page this little book is value for money. Burman and his colleagues at Södertorn University have produced a very readable and insightful set of essays that argue the case for the re-emergence of 'bildning' as a meaningful and useful concept in today's world of mass tertiary education. The fact that 'bildning' or, to use the original German word, 'bildung', is so hard to translate into English is worth an essay in itself. From a linguistic and a philosophical point of view the lack of an exact Anglo-Saxon term for the concept is intriguing.

The various essays point out that the ideal encompassed by the term 'bildning' is best exemplified today by the Liberal Arts Colleges in the United States, where students receive a general education that is intended to 'cultivate and broaden the mind' rather than provide specific professional skills and knowledge. The word itself has its origin in the Humboldt tradition and that thinker's vision for a new type of German higher education in the 19th century. In the United Kingdom, especially during the expansion of the British Empire (1700s to early 1900s) the 'university man' (sic) was the English equivalent of a 'bildad' or educated person. The 'university man' - women were generally not admitted to university - was a well rounded individual with a general grasp of the classics, law, science and the humanities, whose subsequent professional education occurred, for the most part, on the job. As with the liberal arts in the United States today, such education was not only on-campus but generally focused in small residential colleges. 'Bildning' was a feature of most western universities and usually associated with an elite. The concept and its application has waned since the second world war as increasing numbers had the chance to undertake university studies and the character of those studies changed. Today up to 40% of the adult population can be expected to undertake a university degree in so called 'developed' countries. The argument running throughout the book is that in the change from an elite to a mass, vocationally oriented, tertiary education 'bildning' has been ignored, overlooked or squeezed out and that this development is a negative one.

Given that *Våga veta* is produced at a University with the most diverse set of students in the whole of Sweden, the aim of the book is to not only argue what the term has meant in the past and why the ideal appears to be absent in universities today, but also to redefine the term and make it more relevant to a university such as Södertorn. The book does this well, although I would like to see more arguments about the economic costs of 'bildning'. It is a no coincidence that the best examples of traditional 'bildning' today, are the small, rather exclusive liberal arts colleges in the United States, that still cater for an elite. The arguments for a new type of 'bildning' are persuasive but there could be more space given to the reasons why we see so little of it in today's universities. To be fair, the chapter by Henrik Bohlin does address this question. He raises the dilemma of whether 'bildning' as practised by an elite can be replicated in a time of mass university education. He also, by an example from his own teaching, argues that, at little cost, one can redesign a course in such a way that it includes a new type of 'bildning'.

The real worth of this collection is that the various chapters work together so that although the concept of 'bildning' is defined a number of times and explored in a variety of different educational settings, the reader does not get a sense of redundancy. In fact the opposite is true. Burman's first chapter, that connects 'bildning' with education for citizenship, establishes how, in Sweden, this concept has been an ideal for adult educators and not just the property of an elite. Ingela Josefson's chapter shows how one can combine continuing professional education with principles and practice that help the learners not only improve their jobs but also their lives. Other chapters by Fredlund, Öberg, Mazzarella, Hjertström and Schwarz take different aspects of higher education – the use of the Socratic method, the seminar, the essay, or Dewey's 'learning by doing' - and weave together a coherent picture, not only of what 'bildning' has been, but what it might become. In a recent SHERN seminar Max Scheja uses Barnett (2009) to argue that 'a primarily vocationally oriented and performative ideal misses the important point of recognising higher education as a milieu for a more profound process of knowing, being and becoming—a process of moral and intellectual growth'. This is the message of *Våga veta*.

I am responsible for two summer courses at Stockholm University: an introductory course to university studies and a parallel course for mentors of such students. After reading *Våga veta* I realized that it is an ideal book to give to young students just starting out at university. The introductory course will emphasize practical ways of doing well in what is a competitive, graded, vocationally oriented higher education system but having *Våga veta* as a textbook will provide a healthy balance. It will show them that there is more to a university education than 'swotting for exams' and provide them with an example of a readable, well argued, academic text that will inspire them to write a final essay of their own on the relevance of 'bildning' today. My hope is that they will conclude, as this little book does, that a university education should not only help one become a more knowledgeable person but also a better person.

REFERENSER

Barnett, R. (2009). Knowing and becoming in the higher education curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 429-440.

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