

The International Dissemination of Grundtvig's Educational Ideas

I: Motivation and Interpretation

By K. E. Bugge

Grundtvig's renown in the area of education is based on the fact that he was the originator of the so-called *folk high schools*, a type of adult education institutions that since his time has taken root in several countries beyond the borders of Denmark. In our days approximately 430 such institutions are in operation in the Scandinavian countries, and of these about 90 are situated in Denmark. During the 20th century, moreover, such schools have been established in other European countries, in North and South America, in Africa and Asia. In this dissemination process the interrelation between motivation and interpretation is a fascinating field of study.

But before we go into these specific questions it may be useful to insert a brief presentation of Grundtvig's educational ideas.

What is a "folk high school"? The new schools envisaged by N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) were to be established for the benefit of young men from all sections of society. He was, however, especially aware of the needs of peasants and artisans, who at that time represented the great majority of the population. From 1866 and onwards also young women have been accepted.

In Grundtvig's days, "Højskole" meant university, corresponding to the German "Hochschule". The Danish word "Folk" means people. Accordingly, the term "folk high schools" is, strictly speaking, to be translated as "*Universities for the People*". The *folk high schools*, which Grundtvig had in mind, however, should not be understood as an early type of university extension. They should provide an education of a quality equivalent to that of a university; but they should also differ decidedly from the universities in respect to aim, content and method.

The aim of the folk high school, according to Grundtvig, is not to offer the highly specialized teaching of the traditional university. It has much a broader aim: to provide an insight into what it means to be citizen of a particular country and additionally, in a wider perspective, insight into what it means to be a human being. All citizens are also human beings in a general and a universal sense.

On this background, the content of the education offered by the folk high school, which Grundtvig calls the "School for Life", should not be the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform some specific function in society. The main subject matter should be life itself. Therefore history and mythology become important. History is essentially "life-experience". It reveals the identity of the people and contributes to the gradual clarification of the purpose of human life. Mythology is important because it expresses in a symbolic way our forefathers' struggle with the basic issues of human existence. Finally, education at the folk high school should also deal with the present life-conditions of the people. From this point of view, education in geography and social issues play an important role.

As concerns method, Grundtvig's folk high school differed radically from the dominating university practice of teaching by means of lectures. A key-concept in Grundtvig's educational thinking is interaction. Teaching should not be a one-way communication but—as he says—a free, living and natural interaction between teachers and students and between the students themselves. Finally it must be mentioned that Grundtvig also considers cheerfulness and communal singing as characteristics of a teaching-learning situation that differs favourably from the sullen drudgery of the traditional education of his time.

Motivation and interpretation

Let this brief summary be sufficient for the time being. More extensive expositions of Grundtvig's educational ideas are easily available (e.g. Bugge 1983). Let us now revert to the two questions previously raised:

- (1) What has *motivated* educationists at different times and in different parts of the world to establish folk high schools?
- (2) How has this transfer affected the *interpretation* of Grundtvig's educational ideas?

Strictly speaking, these are not two separate issues but two closely related aspects of one and the same process of interpretation. Why? Because, fundamentally, *it is the motivation that decides the interpretation*. In the following, this close inter-dependence between motivation and interpretation will be illustrated through selected examples.

Three phases

Let us revert once again to the process, whereby Grundtvig's educational ideas have been disseminated to countries outside Scandinavia. Furthermore, let us focus our attention on the process unfolding during the 20th century. The interpretation of Grundtvig's educational ideas in this process may for the sake of convenience be divided into three main phases:

- (1) The *agricultural* phase, which covers the Grundtvig-interpretation from the beginning of the century up until and including World War II, i.e. from 1900 until approximately 1950. During this phase the decisive primary motivation is the concern for "Rural Uplift", i.e. the improvement of life-situations and working-conditions for men and women residing in rural areas and engaged in food-production.
- (2) The *human potential* phase, which is dominant from the 1950's and onwards. The central focus of interpretation now is the development of *cultural identity* and *self-reliance* as a basis for economic, social and political uplift. This type of interpretation was especially pertinent during the fifties, sixties and most of the seventies. For the new nations, which in those years were emerging in the Third World, the problems of independence and identity were particularly relevant.
- (3) The *social and political* phase, which is dominant from the mid-seventies and onwards. This type of interpretation is a world-wide phenomenon. In our Western society it is strongly inspired by the current neo-marxist movement. In the Third World it emerges on the basis of impatience in relation to the former emphasis on the development of a human potential as a *precondition* for a more tangible social and political "empowerment".¹

The distinction between these phases must not be exaggerated. In the documents of the periods the three points of view are in many cases overlapping and intertwined. However, in order to grasp the predominant trends of the development, it is necessary to focus on the *main emphases*, on the primary motivating ideas.

¹ Cf. the title of Bhattacharya (1994).

Examples

In the presentation of the following examples, which should serve to illustrate the three phases, we will work our way backwards, from the present time to the beginning of the 20th century. Such a procedure may seem just as awkward as the backward movement of the cray-fish, which Grundtvig calls “Krebs-Gang”. Nevertheless, such a backward procedure is well motivated from an educational point of view, according to which it is always advantageous to proceed from the well-known to the unknown. And in relation to our own days the years immediately preceding World War I are indeed remote.

The social and political phase: Examples from Canada and Bangladesh

The first example from the present time is found in a Canadian context. In July 1993 the newly established organization, *Community Folk Schools of Saskatchewan*, published a “Prospectus”, which contains a presentation and a statement of purpose. Let me quote some of the most characteristic paragraphs of this document:

OUR VISION. Participatory community-based learning is viewed as a means to provide a clear voice for the least powerful and undervalued persons in society. Social answers coming directly from people's life-situations, help strengthen grassroots leadership and provide the pre-conditions for a democratic society.

OUR CONCERNS. We uphold a profound respect for a just democracy and the need to name and transform barriers which make life hard for people. Barriers limiting participation in a democratic society include: racism and a disrespect of cultural richness, women's and children's inequalities, joblessness and economic decline, illiteracy, shunning of the physically and mentally disabled, non-inclusiveness due to sexism, limitations in the use and productive management of land, and a concentration of wealth in the hands of the few.

HISTORICAL ROOTS. N. F. S. Grundtvig, the Danish founder of folk schools in the early 1830's, had full confidence in the essential soundness of the mass of the people. He saw the need for “schools for life”, defined as “a free school for adults. It must strive to awaken, nourish and clarify a higher concept of human living in general than is commonly held.” January 1854.²

² Quoted Bugge 1999, 100-101.

The interesting thing here is the use of the word “Folk” in the title of the Prospectus. In this document the word “Folk” clearly denotes the underprivileged, marginalised sections of society such as women and children, the poor, the jobless and the cultural minorities. These constitute “the mass of the people” in need of “schools for life.” These masses are not conceived as a total entity, as the Canadian people as such, but as *sub-sections* of Canadian society.

A similar interpretation of the concept “Education of the people” is found in contemporary sources from Bangladesh in the opposite Eastern corner of the world. In that country five folk high schools were established in the 1980’s. The interpretation of Grundtvig’s educational ideas in this context has been formulated both in official reports and in a publication from 1994/95, written by two Bangladeshi authors, Tanvir Mokammel and Abdul Gofur. In these sources “the people”, who are to benefit from the Schools for Life, are defined as “the common man”, “the common masses”, the “downtrodden. (...) poor, subaltern marginal groups.”³

These quite recent sources, from Canada and Bangladesh respectively, are thus basically in agreement. In both cases they interpret Grundtvig’s concept of “folk” = “people” as referring not to a totality encompassing the people as such—sharing a common history, identity and destiny—but as referring to a *partial entity*: the underprivileged masses.

The human potential phase: Examples from Africa and (again) from Canada

Representatives of this second phase are for example *Peter Manniche*, principal of the International People’s College in Elsinore, and *Dr. Erica Simon*, who established a folk high school in France. Instead of quoting these prominent educationists, two documents may be focused upon which are not very well known, one from Africa and one (again) from Canada. These documents are geographically far removed from each other. They therefore provide convincing examples of the world-wide acceptance of the human potential idea.

The aim of the “Folk Development Colleges” of Tanzania in East Africa was defined as follows in a programme from the 1970’s:

³ Bugge 2001, 63-64. Significant in this context is a book published in Bangladesh in 1998 (in Bengali with a summary in English): Tanvir Mokammel: *Grundtvig o Gonoshiksha*, i.e. *Grundtvig and People’s Education*.

They (i.e. the colleges) aim at the development of the whole personality, the ability to think, participate in the economic, cultural, political and social life of the community. They aim at producing self-actualizing human beings who can be able to identify their problems and act upon them in an intelligent way. (Hansen 1993, 311)

The educational process here described is clearly conceived as a natural growth through personality development into active participation in “economic, cultural, political and social life”.

A similar way of thinking is found already in an article from 1956, written by *Alex Sim*, the former president of the Rural Learning Association of Ontario, Canada. Concerning the inspiration from the Danish folk high schools, Sim writes as follows:

Many of us were inspired by the Danish folk school long before we knew what it was or how it worked. We were impressed by the fact that it had aided a people to defeat limitations placed upon them by poverty, a poor soil,⁴ obstinate neighbours, and a peasant population which had forgotten its art, poetry, legends, indeed the greatness of the Norse culture.

The Danish experiment interested us then because we were told farmers who had learned to think became, almost incidentally, efficient prosperous farmers. They became thinkers by becoming familiar with history, they became observant (a prerequisite of good farming) by learning to paint. (Bugge 1999, 63)

These documents from Africa and Canada respectively, obviously agree on the point that the aim of the folk high school is to offer a type of adult education leading to an individual, personal development, which in turn—almost “incidentally”—inspires an outgoing economic and cultural activity. This way of interpreting the folk high school idea seems to culminate around 1980.

The agricultural phase: Examples from North America and England

As early as at the turn of the century quite a few agriculturists in the Western world were aware of the direct and indirect links between the folk high schools and the co-operative movement. An influential spokesman of this view can be found in the American agricultural expert *H. W. Foght* who published a book on *The Danish Folk High Schools* in 1914. Having travelled widely over the North American

⁴ The words “poor soil” refer to “the large reclamation of heath, moor etc.”, which was carried through in Denmark during the latter half of the 19th century, cf. *Begtrup et al.* 1927-29, 21.

continent in his capacity of agricultural consultant, Foght recommended the folk high schools as an effective instrument for improving the situation of the rural population. In this respect Foght was in full agreement with the Canadian author *John MacDougall*, who in 1913 had published a book on *Rural Life in Canada*. In chapter VIII of this book we find a detailed account of “Bishop Grundtvig” and his achievements, definitely linking the folk high schools with the breakthrough of the co-operative movement in Denmark.

Finally, we shall conclude this series of examples by focusing on the connections between Denmark and England. It is well known that already from the 1890’s and onwards sporadic personal contacts were established between the Danish folk high schools and British educational centres, notably the colleges established by the Quaker community in the outskirts of Birmingham.⁵ Furthermore, some of the most prominent Danish folk high school principals were invited to lecture in British agricultural societies.⁶ However, it seems as if earlier accounts have missed to notice one great book, which in England really put the folk high schools on the map wherever adult education and agriculture were discussed, namely the book *Rural Denmark and its Lessons*, published in London 1911. The author of this book, by which the folk high school idea was made known to a wide public, was none other than *Henry Rider Haggard*, the famous author of the popular novel *King Solomon’s Mines* (1886). Less known is it that Rider Haggard had a vivid interest in agriculture. His book *Rural England* (2nd ed. 1903) expresses a pessimistic view of the status of British agriculture. In 1910 he visited Denmark in search of ideas for the improvement of agriculture in Great Britain. The book published in 1911 reports the findings of his journey. As this book is no longer readily available in our days, it will be necessary to bring some broad quotations. First the monumental dedication of the book:

This book is dedicated to THE FARMERS OF DENMARK in token of the admiration of a foreign agriculturist for the wisdom and brotherly understanding that have enabled them to triumph over the difficulties of soil, climate, and low prices, and by the practice of general co-operation, to achieve individual and national success.

The admiration expressed in the dedication runs all through the more than 300 pages of the book. Not only the Danish farmers are admirable, but the Danes as such are wonderful. They are, as he says, “excellently

⁵ Lawson 1996, 9-16.

⁶ Begtrup *et al.* 1927-29, 8-9.

instructed”, and most of them speak English. Even the Danish cows set an inspiring example for their bovine cousins beyond the North Sea:

These [*Danish*] cattle have been accustomed to tethering from generation to generation, and bear its inconveniences with dignified calm, never becoming entangled in the ropes or otherwise misbehaving themselves. What would happen if an attempt were made to peg down an uneducated herd of English cows I am sure I do not know. (Haggard 1911, 3)

Haggard's main purpose obviously has been to draw attention to the Danish co-operative movement. The impressive economic effect, the organization and practical function of the co-operatives are, therefore, the subject matter of most of the chapters. The folk high school, here called “People's High School”, is presented in a chapter reporting on a visit to Askov High School in September 1910 (16-21). Haggard clearly has been much impressed by the rural population's eager interest in this type of voluntary adult education:

It is almost impossible for us to conceive a state of affairs under which 10 per cent of the population of England, male and female, would pay 11 s. a week out of its individual pockets in order to spend six or even three months in studying history, mathematics, physics, drawing, singing, geography, geology, mythology, chemistry, physiology and other subjects. This too, at an age when most young people have shaken the dust of school with joy, and simply in order the better to prepare themselves to face the struggle of life and to become worthy citizens. It must be remembered, moreover, that there are no examinations at these High Schools, and consequently no degrees which open direct doors to a career. Learning and learning alone is the aim and prize (18).

On the following page the author describes a public lecture “upon a subject of historical interest” drawing an audience “of about seven hundred people (...) so crowded indeed that all of them could not get in at the door” (19).

Surprisingly, Haggard does not mention Grundtvig's name in his chapter on Askov High School. Why not? Might the explanation be that in his case the power of the motivating factor, the success story of the co-operative movement, overshadowed the historical and ideological roots of this development?

Through the eloquence of its famous author, Haggard's book seems to have had a profound influence on the promulgation of the folk high school idea in the English-speaking world. Studies on the dissemination of these ideas reveal quite a few direct and indirect quotations from Haggard's book. Indeed, the dedication quoted above

seems in a nutshell to contain the essence of the oral and literary message that was communicated out into the world.

Representatives of the Danish folk high school quickly realized the advantage of combining a presentation of the folk high school idea with the story of the co-operative movement in Denmark. This is the design adopted in the influential book written by Holger Begtrup, Hans Lund and Peter Manniche, published under the title: *The Folk High Schools of Denmark and the Development of a Farming Community* (1927, new ed. 1929). But this book contains more than that. It is also a stepping-stone to the second phase of interpretation already described.

Conclusion

These selected examples demonstrate that up through the 20th century changes of motivating factors powerfully influence the understanding and realization of Grundtvig's ideas of folk high schools or Schools for Life.

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