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10-1-2014

# Mollenhauer & Forgotten Connections: An Intellectual/Biographical Sketch

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## *Mollenhauer & Forgotten Connections: An Intellectual /Biographical Sketch*

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Klaus Mollenhauer was born in 1928 in Berlin. Like other Germans born at the end of the 1920s (e.g., Jürgen Habermas), Mollenhauer was forced to join the German army as a teenager at the end of the Second World War. After he was captured by the Soviets and imprisoned for almost seven weeks by British forces, Mollenhauer returned to school in 1946. Then he attended the College of Education in Göttingen in what was then West Germany. When asked about an underlying theme in his life's work, Mollenhauer responded by re-stating a question originally formulated by hermeneutician Friedrich Schleiermacher: "I can only say [or ask], with Schleiermacher: 'What does the older generation want with the younger?'" (as quoted in Friesen, 2014, p. xvii). The passing on of language and culture, of course, is common to all human societies, making this question one relevant to any reflection on "being human." At the same time, this process is highly political – questions about exactly *what* is passed on and *why* it is being passed on are paramount. Such questions are especially important in the intergenerational strains characteristic of rapidly changing modern societies. This question of the relationship between older and younger generations, and by implication, between the needs of the present and the claims of the past, is also central to Mollenhauer's thought and life. The purpose of this short paper, then, is to provide a brief sketch of Mollenhauer's thought and life, highlighting the political and historical dimensions of his book, *Forgotten Connections*.

In introducing Mollenhauer's *Forgotten Connections* as a textbook in my classes, I begin by asking my students to share an example of someone who changed or shaped their lives, who contributed substantially to their personal growth, or who could simply be said to have "made you who you are today." The answers I generally receive are gratifying and diverse (and sometimes impassioned) with students frequently recalling a parent, a teacher, a counselor or a grandparent as playing an indispensable, formative role. The diversity of these figures – extending from home to school and beyond – together with students' accounts of their meaning to them readily illustrate one of most important and challenging concepts in *Forgotten Connections*. This is "*Bildung*," an essentially untranslatable term. *Bildung* refers to the mutual engagement of self and world, and self and others, and also of the self with *itself* and its growth. Mollenhauer himself once powerfully characterized *Bildung* as simply "the way of the self" (as quoted in Winkler, 2002, p. 7), saying that his calling was to "help young people find the path of their *Bildung*" (Mollenhauer, 1999, p. 158)

The second theme is captured in the term *Erziehung*, which is frequently translated into English as "education." *Erziehung* however refers to *both* the general social and cultural practices *and* the professionalized knowledge contributing to raising a child or children. Mollenhauer's emphasis in *Forgotten Connections* is clearly on general social and cultural practices, rather than on institutions and specializations. Consequently *Erziehung* has been translated in *Forgotten Connections* as "upbringing," which highlights this generalist and also literal meaning of the word – to pull or draw up or out.

Practical and political questions about social norms and the relationship between generations were dominant early in Mollenhauer's youth and in German society in general in the 1950s and

1960s. By virtue of having been around during the Nazi regime, parents, teachers and other figures of authority at this time had by definition played some part in the unimaginable crimes and atrocities of the Nazis. Particularly in the 1960s, these older generations were increasingly being held to account by the younger.

At the same time, these older generations had left in place many of their oppressive ways of controlling the young. For example, up to the 1970s, children and youth identified as “delinquent” were imprisoned in special “homes” where they were subject to corporeal and other forms of abuse. While in his first academic position in Frankfurt, Mollenhauer joined in a campaign to free these youth, literally breaking them out of these institutions, and working to establish places for them to live and ways to re-enter society. Mollenhauer describes how, in the early 1970’s, he opened his house to some of these troubled youth – a few of whom were to later distinguish themselves through much more radical politics:

We had a grand eight-room apartment ... [and this] family household was at times overrun by escaped youth from these “homes.” [While] my wife addressed some of their deeper insecurities... I would speak with student leaders about pedagogy and politics. [At other times, a young] Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin would carelessly burn holes in our upholstery with their cigarettes ... [or] other young guests on LSD or just hashish, lying around and listening to my music, would catch sight of me and ask: “What’s *he* doing here?” (Mollenhauer, 1999, p. 16)

Through this openness and commitment, Mollenhauer developed a favorable reputation among 1960s activists as an engaged supporter of their sometimes-radical attempts to throw off the shackles of previous generations. Indeed, Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, as mentioned by Mollenhauer, were subsequently to form the militant Baader-Meinhof Gang or the Red Army Faction (RAF). This group was later responsible for killings, bombings and a prominent political assassination in West Germany.

Mollenhauer’s politics were, of course, not nearly this radical – more social democratic than extra-parliamentarian and revolutionary. Nonetheless, he was uncompromising and, at times, antiauthoritarian in his stance. For example, he publically justified the theft of food by those unable to afford it, like the young escapees of German youth homes. When pedagogical and legal norms are in contradiction,” he declared, “pedagogical norms have priority” (Aßmann, 2012a, n.p.). This declaration led to a formal reprimand from Mollenhauer’s governmental employers (in Germany, university faculty are employees of the state). Mollenhauer was also formally asked to publically correct his position – a request with which he did not comply.

Mollenhauer’s career is thus marked by a deep concern for social justice, and also by a profound awareness of the tension between the inheritance from the past and the needs of the present. These political and generational issues converge in his first book, published in 1968 and titled *Education and Emancipation*. The insights of Marx into the systematic nature of inequalities under the conditions of capitalism are central to this book. Mollenhauer appealed in this text to a kind of critical rationality that he believed could disentangle children and youth from these inequalities. This path breaking text sees the needs of the present – the social and “educational realities” of postwar Germany – as being clearly more important than any intellectual, humanist pedagogical tradition harking far back into Germany’s past. At the very beginning of this book, Mollenhauer writes: “the years since the Second World War have shown that [the tradition of] *geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* [human science pedagogic] as limited

capabilities to shed light on the situation that is now constitutive of educational reality” (1968, p. 9). This was a clear devaluation of the intellectual tradition of human science pedagogy, as well as of the work of his doctoral supervisor, Erich Weniger.

But by the time of *Forgotten Connections*, Mollenhauer’s position had changed. It was clear to him that children and childhood—a period of dependency on adults and their efforts towards upbringing—was not an entirely arbitrary social construct, and that theoretical and critical analyses had their limitations. Mollenhauer came to see that any one person’s experience of their own upbringing and *Bildung* is not just a process and a set of structures, a number of abstract probabilities that is to be statistically derived, say, from their parents’ IQs and incomes, or the rankings of relevant schools and colleges. This experience is instead particular and embedded in biography, culture and history, often being decisively shaped (for example) through a relationship with an especially engaged teacher, parent, counselor or grandparent.

Mollenhauer’s *Forgotten Connections* thus marks a clear return to the tradition of human science pedagogy, while at the same time retaining his concern for human emancipation and the political, as Mollenhauer himself explains:

I don’t think that this book [*Forgotten Connections*] is a denial of the concept of emancipation; for me it is rather a different path that I first had to take one more time in order to arrive at a more substantial concept of emancipation. In addition, the problem of language played a big role for me. ... So I thought, in order to find another language [other than a social scientific vocabulary], I would have 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)

Indeed, Mollenhauer’s book begins with a brief but particularly powerful passage from Kafka’s *Letter to his Father*. This passage highlights the harm that can be done to the child through upbringing, and especially the impossibility of fully coming to grips each with our own upbringing, and thus with upbringing in general. However, Mollenhauer reminds us that, even with the harm or limitations that are a part of each and every individual’s upbringing (whether through sins of commission or of omission), we cannot *not* engage this task of bringing up others. It is similar, but in some ways more morally troublesome than the idea that “we cannot *not* communicate.” Mollenhauer insists that even “the most radical anti-educationist [or de-schooling advocate] cannot avoid embodying an adult way of life in front of children; like any adult,” Mollenhauer continues, “he or she powerfully exemplifies one way of life or another for a child” (2014, p. 8). This existential condition, of being “forced” to be a part of the life of younger generations, can be said to form the first theme of *Forgotten Connections*. It is suggested in the key terms of upbringing and *Bildung*, and can be encapsulated in the question “Why do we want children?” or “Why do we want to be with children?” This first of six questions and themes in Mollenhauer’s book is developed in a powerful interpretation by Stein Wivestad and Tone Sævi (See: Friesen & Sævi, 2010).

There is also a *politico-historical* coherence that interconnects the chapters in Mollenhauer’s book. Although the early-modern period – inaugurated by the Renaissance and leading up to the nineteenth-century industrial revolution – is Mollenhauer’s principal historical interest, *Forgotten Connections* is organized around a sequence of historical periods. Each of the

chapters in the book (with the exception of the introductory chapter) has one or more historical periods as its principal focus. Chapter 2, for example, looks to Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This period extends from Ancient Greece (about 700 bce) to the Renaissance (about 1400 ce), and focuses on religious belief and the cultural achievements of ancient Greece. In these pre-modern conditions, people generally remained illiterate and lived off the land. Under these circumstances, children are brought up by simply having adult ways of life, skills and knowledge shown to them directly through *presentation*. This is this chapter's principal theme in terms of pedagogy. (Figures and examples from Antiquity and the Middle Ages include Augustine and the peasant Menocchio.)

Chapter 3 emphasizes the Renaissance and Baroque periods, which brought with them a different approach to upbringing, known as *representation*, in which learning occurs through pictures, text and books, in the specialized pedagogical realm of the school. Representation made use of the new technology of printing, and was made necessary by increasing divisions in labor and knowledge. The Baroque period, coming close on the heels of the Renaissance (and Reformation), was a time of war and political instability. In *Forgotten Connections* it corresponds to related difficulties in the realm of schooling and curriculum. These challenges are familiar to us today, and are associated with the artificiality, even unsuitability, of the world of books and classrooms for children. Chapters 4 and 5 in Mollenhauer's book take the period of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as their historical focus. The themes of these chapters converge on the engagement and relationship of child and world, and between child and adult. Mollenhauer chooses examples largely from the time when childhood has been said to have been "discovered" as a social and cultural reality. Romanticism and the Enlightenment saw children as being both natural and potentially rational beings. This nature and potentiality, moreover, was seen as being accessed by relating to children in special ways. The final chapter in Mollenhauer's text looks to the modern period, the twentieth century (and the decades just before). Characteristics of this century, marked as it was by destructive, ideologically-driven warfare and rapid technological upheaval (to pick just two examples) include fragmentation, instability, uncertainty and loss of identity. Correspondingly, individual identity and the difficulties associated with it is Mollenhauer's central, pedagogical theme in this chapter. The modern artists and writers from which Mollenhauer draws his examples were individuals who struggled with displacement and exile – whether externally- or self-imposed. (Figures featured in this chapter include Vincent van Gogh and Bertold Brecht, both of whom focus on personal and socio-political conflict and crisis with a remarkable directness and energy.)

History for Mollenhauer, of course, is not a linear story of progress and improvement. It is instead a series of disruptions, false starts and detours. (The metaphor of the detour or *Umweg* was a favorite of Mollenhauer's towards the end of his career.) This is not to say that Mollenhauer is just a critic or a pessimist: He is *not* interested in simply focusing on the problems, failures and weaknesses of education in order to critique, reject or upend today's educational order. His approach, in part, can instead be said to be "genealogical" in the sense developed by Michel Foucault, a theorist and historian whose influence is evident throughout *Forgotten Connections*. According to Foucault, genealogy is a kind of non-linear "counter-memory," one that seeks out more obscure, individualized "events." It investigates these as Foucault says,

in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is *without* history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace

the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. (1977, pp. 139–140)

Genealogy does not search out scenes and sentiments for their own sake, but as Foucault explains, it does so as a form of political critique in order to see how these “errors,” “false appraisals” and “faulty calculations ... gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us” (p. 146). Throughout *Forgotten Connections*, Mollenhauer presents readers with collections of scenes in which topics ostensibly “without history” are treated – including changes in the expression of people’s “self-relation,” or the way children are integrated in parental work. Similarly, Mollenhauer focuses on Pestalozzi’s experiment in setting up an orphanage in Switzerland, not because of its success, but precisely in light of its *failure*. Disparate elements like economic history and industrial technologies (e.g., currency-based trade in ancient Greece, or texts from the Catholic Counter-Reformation) are brought together in sometimes startling conjunction.

But Mollenhauer, unlike the early Foucault or some of his followers, is not inclined to reject the history of pedagogy as being only one of tyranny and repression. For Mollenhauer, one of the best ways of understanding what is of future value is to consider what we have received from the past. This certainly does not include all acts – acts sometimes criminal and often cruel – that have been done in the name of pedagogy and upbringing. It instead involves careful evaluation and selection; and this evaluation and selection is one of Mollenhauer’s key tasks in *Forgotten Connections*. Together with other themes and dimensions of the book – and along with the particularities of any one child’s upbringing—this historical focus constitutes the “content” that Mollenhauer insisted was unavoidably a part of education, upbringing and *Bildung*.

Before concluding, it is important to return to Mollenhauer’s biography, and to note that *Forgotten Connections* was not Mollenhauer’s last book. The publications that followed include a collection of essays titled *Detours* (1986/2014) and a book on “aesthetic education” (1995). Both can be said to follow in the same general tone and emphases developed in *Forgotten Connections*. Mollenhauer passed away at in 1998 at the age of 69. His work can be said to be undergoing a rediscovery in Germany at present, as that country deals with the events and intellectual culture of the 1960’s and 1970’s. As a contributor to this special issue on Mollenhauer’s *Forgotten Connections*, it is my hope that Mollenhauer might also be undergoing a similar but initial discovery in the English-speaking world as well.

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