ABSTRACT. The paper examines the “prehistory” in the 18th century of the theory of Bildung. Pedagogical historiography commonly traces the theory back to the influence of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, who is held to be the founder of the concept of “innere Bildung” on the grounds that Shaftesbury’s concept of “inward form” was translated into German as Bildung. The study focuses on the reception of Shaftesbury’s writings in the German-speaking realm in the 17th century in order to discover the contexts of discourse in which this reception took place and to find out what significance the various discourses had for the formulation of a German “theory of Bildung.” What is revealed are varied influences of a religious, literary theory, and aesthetics nature that give indications as to why the construct of Bildung has remained diffuse and excessive in the German tradition up to the very present. It is also shown that the concept, in comparison to other discourses, found its way into the pedagogical discourse relatively late, which may be another reason for the difficulties that the German theory of Bildung continues to present to the science of pedagogy.

KEY WORDS: Bildung, Bildungstheorie, discourse analysis, eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, reception

INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th century, there have been ever-new versions of the discourse on Bildung. Most recently, the debate variously regrets the loss of Bildung (Fuhrmann, 2002), attempts to capture the essence of Bildung in encyclopedic fashion (Schwanitz, 1999), or radically rejects (Oelkers, 2002) or affirms its connection to the school (von Hentig, 1996). In a comprehensive study of Bildung und Schule, Dohmen concludes in 1964 that the concept of “Bildung” is one of the most ambiguous and vague fundamental concepts of German pedagogy (Dohmen, 1964, p. 15). Indeed, it is typical of the lack of clarity of the concept that in the discussion on school reform, it is used by conservatives and reformers alike. Alternatives, like Erziehung (education) or Unterricht (instruction, teaching), do not really catch on, as they cannot rival the grandness and splendor that lies in concept of
Bildung. When related to the concept of Bildung, says Dohmen, the school becomes elevated into the high winds of the spiritual, so to speak (ibid., p. 16), whereby this ideal concept generally refers to perfecting the person’s “true nature,” or “higher self.”

All research notwithstanding, the remarkable ambivalence of ambiguity versus splendor continues to persist stubbornly, and the concept of Bildung enjoys great popularity, not least of all with educational policy makers and school theorists. They view Bildung as something important and significant; it is on everyone’s lips, but no one knows what it really means. “But if in our language we say Bildung, we mean something both higher and more inward, namely, the attitude of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavor, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 11). There is agreement that Bildung is more than knowledge and that it has something to do with holistic development; it is used in connection with the name of Humboldt just as it is linked with very broad expectations of a better society (economically, morally, politically) (see Løvlie et al., 2002).

It would be almost impossible to try to gain an overview of the vast literature on the concept of Bildung and, in the face of the lack of clarity, perhaps not very useful. However, even cursory and selected readings from the German-language media shows that despite the variety of topics, aspects, and dimensions treated, the following historical construction is always repeated and affirmed: that in Germany, Bildung was given a special shape and form as well as significance in the 18th century. Bildung is a German “invention” that must be cultivated and preserved, and Bildung provides justification for the special significance of German intellectual history. Bildung has high demands and expectations; Bildung contains a promise of salvation, and Bildung cannot be reduced to mechanics, and certainly not to economics. Bildung is the haven for “Good” and “Whole.”

In the German-language pedagogical historiography of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one of the roots of Bildung is traced to the English moral philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). Shaftesbury’s authorship of the concept is attributed to the fact that his concept of “inner” or “inward form” was translated into German as “Bildung.” For this reason, this paper focuses on an examination of the reception of Shaftesbury’s works in Germany and Switzerland. The specific form of that reception will be illustrated using the case of Herder (1744–1803).