



# Think Piece on Green Guerrilla: Creating Sustainable Development through Sustainability *Bildung*

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## *Abstract*

*By drawing on a 12-week anthropological fieldwork study, I explore how education for sustainable development is perceived and practised in the Danish folk high school course Green Guerrilla. Through the emic approach of sustainability Bildung I argue that the Green Guerrilla course constitutes a radical political imaginary; a space where the students learn to train their sociological imagination and reflect upon themselves and their own culture and society from an outside perspective in order to imagine how it can be structured differently. I argue that during a five-day study trip to a Swedish forest, the students learn to be in and actively engage with nature through the senses, and experience how they are inextricably connected with their environment. They learn that creating a sustainable world means ‘dealing with your own shit’, in more ways than one. Through this sustainability Bildung the students learn that it is up to them to ‘find their own forest’ – that is, to figure out how they can create the lives that they want to live in the future.*

**Keywords:** Education for sustainable development, sustainability *Bildung*, human/nature relations, folk high schools, Anthropology.

## *Folk High Schools and ‘Sustainability Bildung’*

Before starting the analysis, let me briefly introduce the concept of Danish folk high schools. The tradition of the schools is deeply rooted within Danish history and started in the 1800s, at a time when Denmark was suffering great financial decline, emigration and agricultural crisis (Borish, 1991; Hall & Korsgaard, 2015). Denmark was in a state of transition from being an absolutist society to a democracy, and in this transition the folk high school movement played a major part in the formation of the Danish democracy, the national identity as well as the formation of the Danish cooperative movement (Hjermitslev, 2015). The folk high schools were an alternative to the elitist universities and were places where people from different social classes lived together side by side and learned about society and human relations. Today there are approximately 67 folk high schools across Denmark, all having the primary aim of advancing life enlightenment, public enlightenment and democratic *Bildung* (The Act on Folk High Schools, 2015). These concepts were important building blocks in what the founder of the Danish folk high schools, N.F.S. Grundtvig, wanted the folk high schools to provide. Very briefly, ‘enlightenment for life’ is the idea that books or texts are not enough to understand the whole of existence. ‘People’s enlightenment’ is an understanding of the social and historical context that constitutes the framework of each individual for unfolding their personal enlightenment (Borish, 1991). ‘Democratic *Bildung*’ is a relatively new concept in the history of the folk high

schools. It refers to the common discussions and debates about societal challenges as well as the space to provide solutions; a space where the students learn to unfold their personal freedom as well as engage in an obliging community (Rahbek, 2016). It is thus a type of general cultivating education that teaches the students to engage in all kinds of communities as mature individuals, in other words, to engage in society (Rahbek, 2016). The German concept *Bildung* (in Danish: *dannelse*) is one of the most central and complicated terms in Danish pedagogy, in that it deals with the formation of the whole human (cf. Korsgaard, 2012). Briefly, *Bildung* stands for an educational ideal that centres around the question of what constitutes an educated or cultivated human being. *Bildung* is thus an acknowledgement that education means more than acquiring a specific set of knowledge or skills. *Bildung* has to do with cultivating the inner life, the human mind, soul and person (Biesta, 2002a, 2002b). It is about ‘becoming and being somebody’ (Biesta, 2002a:343).

In light of the environmental, social and economic challenges we face, the transition to a sustainable society has become one of the most crucial tasks of our time (WCED, 1987). Thus, in recent years the folk high schools have increased their focus on what they call *sustainability Bildung* – or *bæredygtig dannelse* in Danish. An increasing number of folk high schools have incorporated sustainability as part of their values or have established subjects working specifically with sustainable transition (Lysgaard, 2015). The assumption is that the folk high schools once again can be the driving force in a sustainable transition, just as they played a crucial part in the Danish transition from an absolutist society to a democratic welfare state (Nielsen, 2015). Rane Lange, a teacher at Vestjyllands Folk High School, states that a sustainability *Bildung* is about how we can increase an open-mindedness towards other people as well as towards nature (Lange, 2016). But what exactly does this mean? During my fieldwork in the Green Guerrilla course at Jyderup Folk High School, I found that sustainability *Bildung* is about constantly relating oneself to the rest of the world and one’s environment. As I will argue, the Green Guerrilla course can be seen as a radical political imaginary, where the students are trained to think critically and reflect upon themselves, their culture and their environment from a new perspective and learn how to imagine new ways of structuring the world. During a five-day study trip to a Swedish forest, the Green Guerrillas learned how they are inextricably connected with their natural environment and that it is an illusion that we can escape our own ‘shit’ – both in the literal sense, as the massive amount of trash humans produce, and the mental ‘shit’ we carry with us. When educating for sustainable development, sustainability *Bildung* thus reminds us that learning to create a new world requires an ability to reflect upon our own society, as well as the relations we have with ourselves and our environment, in a whole new way. Now, let us turn to the autumn of 2016 in the small town of Jyderup in northwestern Denmark.

### *Learning to Imagine a New World*

The Green Guerrilla classes take place about a five-minute walk away from the folk high school, in a big old villa house that goes by the name ‘the green house’. The house also has a large garden that the primary teacher of the course, Nana, named their ‘green experimentarium’ – here students experiment with growing their own food while trying to maintain the

biodiversity of the Earth as much as possible. On the first day of class, Nana told the students that she was neither a farmer nor an expert in gardening, but rather a sociologist. She founded the course in cooperation with an environmental organisation called NOAH Friends of the Earth Denmark in a shared conviction that in order to create a sustainable transition, the youth of today needs to learn about sustainability on many levels. 'It is not enough to learn about the political and economic state of the world if we don't know how to change it,' she says. 'That is why it is necessary to teach action competence' (extract from field notes, 29.09.2016). With help from NOAH, students are taught how to keep a garden according to the principles of permaculture. This way of gardening differs from what they would learn at a conventional gardening or agricultural school, as permaculture seeks a more ecological approach to food production where humans, their creations and activities are seen as interconnected with the natural world (Veteto & Lockyer, 2008). This interconnectedness is considered the best way to create systems that function in a sustainable manner (Veteto & Lockyer, 2008). For example, they learn that soil naturally produces its own fertiliser, and thus never actually needs any external fertiliser. They also learn not to plow the soil, but to protect it by covering it, for example with forest cover, hay or seaweed. Furthermore, they experiment with different ways of constructing beds. To our surprise, we discovered that using cardboard, horse manure and hay works very well to kill weeds!

The Green Guerrilla course can in many ways be viewed as a so-called radical political imaginary. An increasing number of political movements in the 20th century have sought solutions to issues like the environmental crisis, poverty, inequality, exploitation, colonialism and racism by developing a political structure other than the already established one (Hage, 2012). In Anthropology, Maeckelbergh (2009) describes these movements as part of a worldwide *alter-globalisation movement* and Hage (2012) further describes how they can be seen as a *radical political imaginary*. This kind of imaginary is generally characterised by a certain balance between 'anti' politics and 'alter' politics, the 'anti' referring to the oppositional politics aimed at resisting the political order, while the 'alter' refers to the aim of providing an alternative to the political order (Hage, 2012). Seeing the Green Guerrilla course as a radical political imaginary highlights the way that the students learn to imagine their world being structured in a different way. Keeping a garden in accordance with the principles of permaculture exemplifies a kind of 'alter' politics, in that students not only oppose conventional and industrial agriculture, but also learn about alternative ways to grow food that protect both crops and biodiversity. Hage (2012) further explains how academic disciplines like Sociology and Anthropology engage in what he calls *critical thinking* in that they take us outside of ourselves and thereby enable us to see ourselves, our culture or our society in a new way. Where Anthropology reminds us that the manner in which we live and the values we have are not the only possible ones, Sociology helps us to reflect upon the social structures and relations of power in our own culture and society as being social constructs. This ability might be compared to what sociologist C. Wright Mills named the 'sociological imagination', which he defines as the ability to 'understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (2000:5). In that sense, the sociological imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, for example from a political to a psychological perspective, and then to look at the

relations between the two (Mills, 2000). This ability to reflect upon the relations in our society as relations of power and thus social constructs, reminds us of the possibility that our society can be structured differently (Hage, 2012).

I argue that when learning to imagine a new, sustainable world, and thus balancing the opposing ‘anti’ with the alternative ‘alter’, this ability to reflect upon your own life and culture in a new way and being able to question the structures in society is crucial. The Green Guerrilla course can in many ways be regarded as a radical political imaginary, with this sociological imagination being developed throughout the course. In addition to learning about permaculture and the practical work in the garden, the students also learn about different aspects of sustainable transition: the difference between industrial and peasant agriculture, resources and trash, consumerism, what causes climate change as well as different ways of taking action, for example activism or community organising. Thus the course presents global issues and problems that we all face in the Anthropocene era (cf. Steffen *et al.*, 2011).

However, it was not until the Green Guerrillas went on a study trip far into the Swedish forest that the students really learned to reflect upon their relation to the environment, society, each other and themselves in a whole new way.

### *Learning to Be in Nature*

The study trip to Sweden was not originally part of the course. But when 21-year-old Sebastian decided to participate in the course, Nana opted to learn from Sebastian’s mother, Andrea Hejlskov.<sup>1</sup> Five years earlier, Sebastian had moved from a small town in Denmark far into the Swedish forest with his family. After living with depression and stress for many years, Andrea and her husband Jeppe decided to quit their jobs, sell their house, take their children out of school and move into the Swedish forest to live ‘off the grid’ – a lifestyle where people do not rely on the electrical power grid and usually live in a self-sufficient manner.

The first day we arrived in the forest, Andrea and Jeppe helped us build a teepee – a cone-shaped tent that we lived in for the next four days. Jeppe helped us put the teepee together, while Andrea showed us how to cut branches of spruce to line the ground in the teepee, with hay on top as bedding. After cutting for about three hours, Andrea accompanied us to fetch water from the lake, which we carried back to the teepee. Afterwards we picked up pieces of wood and Jeppe helped us make a fire. At about 4pm, Andrea started cooking dinner. It was getting dark and we were tired from all the work.

In Anthropology the relationship between humans and the natural environment has long been of great interest, lately with the main interest being criticising the supposed dichotomy between the two (cf. Descola & Pálsson, 1996; Hastrup, 2013). According to Ingold (2011), a pioneer in anthropological studies of humans and the environment, we are bombarded with information about the environment to such a degree that we tend to forget that the environment is first and foremost the world we live in and not something that we stand on

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1 For further information, read more about Andrea and her story in English at [www.andreahejlskov.com](http://www.andreahejlskov.com).

the outside of. 'We *inhabit* our environment: we are a part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too' (Ingold, 2011:95, emphasis in original). To clarify his point, Ingold opts to criticise the entire discourse that characterises the contemporary debate on environmental issues and climate change. He argues that using the term 'global environmental change' indicates an embedded perception of the environment being something separate from the human. The word 'globe' indicates a round, hard and solid entity where human life happens on the surface and not in the centre. So, when discussing the need for decreasing the destructive consequences of human activity, Ingold's point is that in the very idea about construction and destruction lies a perception that the world is already naturally constructed and thus becomes an object for human concern. In this way the globe is perceived as an object that human beings can affect, damage or protect, but never dwell in, that is, never be an embedded part of. Instead, he suggests seeing the world as a *sphere*, which, as opposed to a globe, is not hard and intact, but hollow and transparent, and where life circulates from the centre (Ingold, 2000). Ingold argues that it is very likely that many of the severe climate issues we are facing today stem from this alienation of humanity from the environment.

I find Ingold's points useful in order to understand how being and living in the middle of a Swedish forest, far from the rest of civilisation, affected the Green Guerrilla group. Having this intense meeting with raw nature made a big impression on the students, myself included. Being in nature this way clarified how humans are supposed to be in, and actively engage with, the natural environment – something that the average person living in an urban environment seldom does, at least not this group of Green Guerrilla students. Cecilie, one of the students, commented on the first night:

It's been a crazy day. I'm very physically tired. It feels so good getting away from the city and being out here in the forest. I really feel that we are built for this! I feel like when there is peace in your surroundings there is also more peace in yourself. (Extract from field notes, 09.11.2016)

Cecilie was reflecting on the day she had been through in the forest, including learning to build her own teepee and fetching water. Her comment that humans are 'built for this', that we are supposed to be in, engage with and produce in our environments, indicates that, through her sensory engagement and interaction with nature, she experienced how good it was for both her body and mind, as it gave her a feeling of calmness. Similarly, when Jeppe taught the group how to chop wood, he showed them how to hit the piece of wood hard and fast with the axe, turn it around and hit it hard again until it broke. One of the students, My, could hardly put the axe down and continued chopping for the entire afternoon. 'It's really like I can get out some aggressions,' she said. 'I'm sure this works just as good as the anti-depressive medicine I'm taking' (extract from field notes, 11.11.2016). Having followed My during the entire course, most of the group by this point knew that she suffered from anxiety and depression. She was taking the course because she felt she needed to pull the plug on her normal everyday life as a university student in Copenhagen.

My's wood-chopping experience had a therapeutic effect on her. But as Cecilie stated, the entire experience of being in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by beautiful snow-covered trees, the sound of water running from the stream, sparks from the fire and having worked all day, gave us all a feeling that we were built for this and were connected with nature.

Following Ingold, I argue that this intense meeting and sensorial engagement with nature as they learned to build their own teepee, chop wood, fetch water and really engage with their environment, showed the students that they are inextricably connected with that environment – a feeling that many of them could not express and use in their everyday lives at home.

### *Learning to 'Deal with Your Own Shit'*

The next day Andrea introduced us to Astrid, a 24-year-old woman who, inspired by Andrea and Jeppe, had moved out to the forest alone. Astrid told us that she dropped out of her studies as they did not have anything to do with reality. She felt that her relations back home were superficial and her life made more sense now that she lived in the forest almost self-sufficiently. She told us how she managed the trash she produced. Andrea added: 'Living in the forest forces you to deal with your own shit' (extract from field notes, 10.11.2016). She was of course referring to 'shit' in the very literal sense, as regular flushable toilets are usually replaced by a *das* in the forest – a small self-built wooden house with either a hole in the ground or a bucket for collecting human faeces, which is often used as natural fertiliser. Andrea was also referring to the amount of trash one produces and is forced to deal with, as well as the mental 'shit' that people carry around. American anthropologist Nicholas Kawa (2016) argues that humans have created a fantasy in which we believe that we can distance ourselves from our waste and separate ourselves from our natural environment. 'The Anthropocene will offer many lessons for humanity, but one of its most jarring is that we simply can't hide from our shit anymore' (Kawa, 2016). Kawa argues that there is a lot of potential in finding new ways in which to relate to our own 'shit'. This includes new ways of thinking ecologically and new ways of engaging politically and ethically with our environment. Ingold's (2001, 2011) point about how humans and their environment are mutually constitutive becomes even clearer bearing Kawa's words in mind. We cannot physically or environmentally escape the waste that we produce, no more than we can escape the mental shit we produce.

### *Finding Your Own Forest*

During the trip to Sweden the students not only learned to relate to their environment in a new way, they also learned how to relate to each other and to themselves in a new way. This became especially apparent when the class returned from Sweden and started discussing what they had experienced and learned, and how they could use this as an inspiration for their own choices in the future:

Nana: I think what we need to do now is to find our own forest, wherever that might be. It might be here in Jyderup or it might be in Copenhagen, just doing it differently.

[...]

Malou: Maybe it's not so much about being in Copenhagen or in Sweden, maybe it's more about being critical about the life we live.

Cecilie: Yes exactly, and having the feeling that we're doing something, we're saying no to the society we don't want and we do something different. That can be by buying organic food or moving into the forest, I don't care, but just that we're actually taking a critical stance and saying no to the things we don't believe in. (Extracts from field notes, 14.11.2016)

The classroom conversations changed tremendously after returning from Sweden. Needless to say, being in the forest for five days, isolated from the rest of society, created a strong bond between the group members, which resulted in more personal and deep discussions afterwards. The extracts above indicate that the group reflected on the changes they wanted to make in their lives. They also realised that what is important is not so much what they do, but rather that they take a critical stance and say no to what they do not want. The trip to Sweden taught them that they are inextricably connected with nature, but also that we cannot escape from our own shit – not physically, mentally or environmentally. They learned that it is up to them to 'find their own forest' – to create the lives that they want to live in the future. Sustainability *Bildung* thus seems to be a holistic approach to education, where students learn to reflect upon themselves in relation to the rest of the world as well as their environment in new ways. Maybe this is exactly what the world needs if we are really to learn how to 'deal with our own shit'.

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