

Fowl Play: Owls, Eagles, and the Future in Marx and the Young Hegelians

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The owl of Minerva takes flight only with the onset
of dusk.

G.W.F. Hegel

The owls of Minerva may hide in their dark corners,
- our coming Athena needs only eagles with strong
wings and eyes that endure sunlight [...] Away with
the owls!

A. Cieszkowski

I.

In 1831, G.W.F. Hegel died. During his twenty-odd year reign as the more or less undisputed prince of German academia, Hegel had extended his influence well beyond the boundaries of traditional philosophy. His influence was present just as much in theology, aesthetics, and jurisprudence as it was in metaphysics or natural philosophy. In jurisprudence, Hegel's influence had primarily been waged in two ways. First, through the lectures on the philosophy of right that he delivered for the first time in the winter semester of 1819, but which he would repeat throughout his career, and which form the basis of his 1820 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Second, through intermediaries. Hegel was an eminent power player in university politics, and throughout his career he managed to place his acolytes in important positions in both the German university system and in government. The most important of these, dubbed 'the supreme Hegelian' (*Oberhegelianer*) by Heinrich Heine, was Eduard Gans who became a full professor of law at the University of Berlin in 1828 after beginning as what we would now

call an assistant professor in 1825.¹ Gans also took over Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of right, and while he remained faithful to the core tenets of the Hegelian doctrine, he also made important changes, not least caused by his travels in Paris and Manchester, his favourable impression of the 1830 July revolution, and the influence of Saint-Simonism on his thinking about the social question.²

However, Hegel's lectures (and, following him, Gans's) on the philosophy of right were, as is well-known, less about the intricacies and minutiae of law than about the social and the political as such – what Hegel dubbed *the ethical* (*Sittlichkeit*). His system of political philosophy was, as he makes clear in a famous passage in the preface, not the prescription of an *ought*, but rather an examination of the essence of the modern state “in its ideal average, so to speak”, to borrow an expression from Marx.³ It was not that Hegel was describing how a state ought to be organised, but that any state, in so far as it was a *modern* state, already had as its essence what Hegel was describing. It is in this sense that we should understand his famous double dictum that “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational”.⁴ Since it is the essence of any modern state to be the actualisation of the rational, any actual (in the Hegelian technical sense of *Wirklichkeit* as ‘active reality’) modern state will, by definition, also be rational.

But as Friedrich Engels argued some 60 years after its publication, a difference in interpretation of this sentence was also what lay at heart of the division of the Hegelian school that followed Hegel's death. While the conservative Hegelians put the emphasis on the first part (‘what is rational is real’) and thus on the system, the progressive Young Hegelians put the emphasis on the second part (‘what is real is rational’) and thus on the method.⁵ In a sense, this is a difference of temporalities. While the conservative Hegelians believed the actualisation of the rational state to have already been achieved in the present, the Young Hegelians saw it as something yet to be achieved in the future; a core aspect of the Young Hegelian imaginary is thus the belief in an eschatological moment beyond which lie the

¹ Norbert Waszek, “Eduard Gans on Poverty and on the Constitutional Debate”, in Douglas Moggach, ed., *The New Hegelians. Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 25.

² Waszek, “Eduard Gans on Poverty and on the Constitutional Debate”, 35 ff.

³ Karl Marx, *Marx's Economic Manuscripts of 1864-65*, ed. Fred Moseley, trans. Ben Fowkes (Leiden: Brill, 2016),

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

⁵ Friedrich Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy”, in MECW 26 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 363.

realisation of freedom – an image that we obviously recognise in Marx’s conception of revolution and communism as well. In that sense, the more interesting sentence from the 1821 preface is perhaps the likewise famous metaphor of the Owl of Minerva:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.⁶

II.

In 1838, the Polish nobleman August Cieszkowski published his seminal text, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*. In it, he criticised Hegel for not being true to himself. In his philosophy of history, Hegel had divided world-history into four parts, corresponding to specific geographical regions (Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Germanic). However, according to Hegel’s own system, only the movements of *nature* are expressed in fourfold divisions, while history, as a sphere of Spirit’s activity, must be expressed triadically.⁷ Whether or not this is a plausible argument or not is irrelevant, since it is the argument that Cieszkowski makes. Inspired by medieval Millenarians, Cieszkowski instead divides history in three: First, *the past*, which runs from the beginning of history and until the birth of Christ, and which is dominated by pure practice (i.e., art). Second, *the present*, which runs from the birth of Christ and until Cieszkowski’s own day and which is dominated by pure theory, beginning with Christianity and culminating in the speculative thought of Hegel. And finally, *the future*, which is characterised by a ‘post-theoretical practice’ or philosophy of action (“the real synthesis of both these one-sided directions of the past”), which is what Cieszkowski denotes by the Greek term *praxis*, which he thus introduces into the German theoretical vocabulary.⁸ This insistence on the relevance of the future to (political) philosophy is emphasised by Cieszkowski a few years later with clear reference to Hegel’s image of the owl:

⁶ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 23.

⁷ Lawrence S. Stepelevich, “Making Hegel into a Better Hegelian: August von Cieszkowski”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (April 1987), 269. See also, August Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1981 [1838]), 3 ff.

⁸ Kant for example had also distinguished between a *theoretisches* and *praktisches* use of reason, but Cieszkowski is the first to use it in the nominal and with the Greek spelling, which is now standard in German. See, Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), ch. 13.

The owls of Minerva may hide in their dark corners, - our coming Athena needs only eagles with strong wings and eyes that endure sunlight. But as not everyone is disposed to be an eagle, they should at least resemble the simple birds who at sunrise cheers us up and stimulates us with song [...] Away with the owls!⁹

Cieszkowski thus introduces two major innovations into the Hegelian framework, which are adopted by the Young Hegelians. First, that Hegel's philosophy is only a culmination of the *present* while the true actualisation of man (i.e., the unification of theory and practice), and hence the realisation of freedom, belongs to the *future*; and second, that this future realisation of freedom takes the form of *praxis*.

While Cieszkowski is the first to make the innovative connection with *praxis*, he is not the first to pick up where Hegel's avian metaphor leaves off. As early as 1831, K. L. Michelet had written that, "The owl of Minerva then gives way to the cockcrow of a new day", and again some years later that, "philosophy is not only the owl of Minerva [...] but also the cockcrow, which announces the dawn of a new day".¹⁰ To owl and eagle we can thus add the rooster to the roster of philosophy's feathery forms, and from F. W. Hinrichs we also get the lark: "Philosophy is the lark of the sky, which in the twilight rises from the ground and sings toward the rising sun".¹¹ But, as Louis Althusser has noted, metaphors are never simply metaphors; they serve to open as well as close our understanding of a certain issue.¹² In this case, the issue that takes flight in the metaphors of Hegel and the Hegelians is that of the relationship between philosophy and reality, the rational and the actual, as I sketched out in the beginning.

On this issue, Cieszkowski is relatively clear. The past, as mentioned is characterised by practice, i.e. art, while the present is characterised by theory, i.e. (speculative) philosophy. These correspond to two different aspects of man, and so any activity based solely on one or the other is not actual in the Hegelian sense. Only in *praxis* is man realised as a post-theoretical subject-object that is both universal and particular because it is the result of the development "of truth in concrete activity" through the synthesis of theory and practice.¹³

⁹ August Cieszkowski, *Gott und Palingenesie. Erster, kritischer Theil* (Berlin: E. H. Schröder, 1842), 21.

¹⁰ Both cited from Horst Stuke, *Philosophie der Tat. Studien zur Verwirklichung der Philosophie bei den Junghegelianern und den Wahren Sozialisten* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1963), 64.

¹¹ Ibid. In the same place, Hinrichs also, like Cieszkowski, compares philosophy to an eagle.

¹² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward and Investigation)", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 135.

¹³ August Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena to Historiosophie*, in *The Young Hegelians. An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Stepelevich (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 77.

Philosophy, thus, cannot be realised as the highest form of man's theoretical activity until it is joined with practical activity – theory and practice, philosophy and reality, it is the enjoining of these two that demarcate the future from the present.

III.

While Cieszkowski himself cannot accurately be described as a Young Hegelian, his notion of *praxis* and his insistence on the future as a relevant category for (political) philosophy are broadly taken up by the Young Hegelians. Some aspects were taken up more clearly by some than others though, and I will restrict myself to two examples before finally moving on to Marx and the innovation I argue that he introduces.

Max Stirner published almost nothing in his lifetime (famously, Marx expended more pages on a critique of Stirner in the manuscripts known as the 'German ideology' than Stirner himself ever published), and usually the infamous *The Ego and Its Own* (1844) tend to overshadow everything else. However, in 1842 he published the short article "Art and Religion", in which he clearly if not explicitly takes up the thread from Cieszkowski. In this short article, Stirner argues that man is divided into his present, unfulfilled self and his own beyond (*Jenseits*), a perfection of himself, a "future man who must be expected on the other side of this present reality".¹⁴ This other side of man is then given shape and form (*Gestalt*) through the creative genius and practical activity of the artist – he fashions it from an inkling of 'another side' into the ideal on an Other (*Gegenüber*). This is, of course, a clear-cut application of the motif of alienation that was dominant in the Young Hegelians: something created by man which comes to stand outside him and dominate him. In this way, Stirner claims, *art is the source of religion*. For this reason, Hegel is wrong in placing it after religion in his system, because art (i.e., practice) is what gives religion its content.¹⁵ Similarly, what will make religion disappear (and to Stirner this is an ideal) is that 'the artist takes back his art unto himself', and so:

¹⁴ Max Stirner, "Art and Religion", *The Young Hegelians. An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Stepelevich (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 327.

¹⁵ Stirner, "Art and Religion", 331.

Serene and confident, art will claim its own once again, and by so doing will rob the Object of its objectivity, its ‘other-sidedness’, and free it from its long religious imprisonment. Here, art no longer will enrich its Object, but totally destroy it.¹⁶

However, art itself (i.e., practice) will always just create new ideals, new religions. In order to arrive at the future of the perfected man, something else is needed, and to the Stirner of 1842 this is still *philosophy*. Philosophy “breathes the air of *freedom*”, because it removes itself from the dependency on objects (whether creating them like art or worshipping them like religion).¹⁷ *Philosophy* (which always to a Young Hegelian means *Hegelian* philosophy) thus represents the fulfilment of the practical that will truly allow man to move beyond. While Stirner does not go into detail with how philosophy is to do this, Ludwig Feuerbach does.

In 1842—the same year that Stirner published his text—Feuerbach began his critical project of establishing a ‘New Philosophy’. Already in the opening lines of the first salvo, the 1842 essay “The Necessity of a New Philosophy”, Feuerbach is echoing Cieszkowski’s insistence on the relevance of the future:

There is a qualitative difference between a new philosophy that falls into a common epoch with earlier philosophies and one that belongs entirely to an entirely new phase in the history of mankind.¹⁸

Though he does not call them by that name, Feuerbach also identifies this as the relevant difference between the Old and Young Hegelians: while the some want to reject the new to preserve the old, others want to “translate the new into practice”.¹⁹ Like Stirner, Feuerbach ties this development to *religion*, and the present epoch is that of the downfall of Christianity, which no longer corresponds to either the practical or theoretical needs of man.²⁰ Here, then, a direct link between the question of the future and that of theory and practice. Hegelian philosophy is not the answer, however; in its speculative form, it is only the ‘perfection of theology’ and therefor belongs to those ‘earlier philosophies’ that do not belong to the new phase of history, i.e. the future. This new philosophy, says Feuerbach, must instead be of a kind that unites theory and practice, which means that it must be of ‘German-Franco parentage’:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stirner, “Art and Religion”, 334.

¹⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, “The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy”, in *The Fiery Brook*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso Books, 2012), 145.

¹⁹ Feuerbach, “The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy”, 146.

²⁰ Feuerbach, “The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy”, 147.

Life and truth are, therefore, only to be where essence is united with existence, thought with sense-perception, activity with passivity, and the *scholastic ponderousness of German metaphysics* with the *anti-scholastic, sanguine principle of French sensualism and materialism*.²¹

The reason that such a new philosophy of the future must be a unification of theory and practice is that man is both *brain* and *heart* as Feuerbach puts it; if he is to be a whole man then, his being must be both equally. Feuerbach thereby claims to have revealed anthropology as the secret of religion, and as such his new philosophy is the complete sublation of theology into an anthropology in which all contradictions have been overcome, because it is not only the sublation in the brain (theory, Germany), but also in the heart (practice, France) – the new philosophy is, in other words, a *post-theoretical practice*, or *praxis* for short.²²

IV.

We come now finally to Marx. In the published “Introduction” (1843) to his unpublished critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Marx incorporates all of these elements: the relevancy of the future; the unification of theory and practice into *praxis*; the identification of these with the French and German principles respectively; and even Hegel’s feathered imagery. He thus ends the introduction with the following famous lines: “When all the inner conditions are met, the *day of the German resurrection* will be heralded by the *crowing of the Gallic cock*.”²³

However, my central claim here is that Marx also introduces an innovation into this formula: Unlike Cieszkowski, Stirner, and Feuerbach, who all identified *praxis* as the perfected form of flourishing human life that exists beyond the eschatological moment, i.e. in the *future*, Marx takes *praxis* to be the form of activity that brings this kind the eschatological moment about. To put it differently: *Praxis* is not some future form of life, it is the activity which draws the future into the present.

What does Marx’s Gallic cock signify? As others before him—Feuerbach, Arnold Ruge, and most notably Moses Hess—Marx identifies the principle of theory or

²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy”, in *The Fiery Brook*, ed. and trans. Zavar Hanfi (London: Verso Books, 2012), 165. Emphasis in the original.

²² Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 241.

²³ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction”, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 257.

speculation with Germany and the principle of practice or politics with France. That the ‘day of German resurrection’ will be heralded by the Gallic cock is thus another way of saying the same thing that Feuerbach had been saying: in order to realise the potential of German metaphysical speculation (i.e., Hegelian philosophy), it had to be combined with practice. Germany must marry France. This is not least motivated by the *Traumgeschichte* motif that Marx presents in the text: The German conditions are backwards, and to “negate the situation in Germany in 1843” thus leaves us barely in the year 1789 by French standards.²⁴ In other words, the Germans—like so many teenage boys—have done the deed only in thought, and not in action.

The subject that must carry out this deed is, of course, the proletariat. It is the only class that is able to project its own particularity into universality, which is what is needed to carry out the social revolution that Marx envisages. He writes:

When the proletariat proclaims the *dissolution of the existing world order*, it is only declaring the secret of its own existence, for it *is* the *actual* dissolution of that order (...)
Just as philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *intellectual* weapons in philosophy.²⁵

In the proletariat, then, we have the unification of theory and practice. In it, theory “becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses”.²⁶ As such, the ‘dissolution of the existing world order’ by the proletariat *is in itself praxis*, i.e., the post-theoretical practice of the future described by Cieszkowski, and this *praxis is in itself* the heralding in of the future – the French cock crowing in the German dawn. True *praxis* is thus not something that exists in the great beyond; instead, it is what brings about the transgression of the present conditions. Where Cieszkowski, Stirner, and Feuerbach all used the term *praxis* to denote the flourishing state of the realised humans being—“the in- and for and of- itself being of totality” as Cieszkowski calls it²⁷—Marx uses it to denote the way there. There is thus a radical re-temporalisation happening. Marx does not ‘return’ to some kind of Hegelian disregard for the future, he is not an owl. Like the other Young Hegelians, he takes the future to be of supreme interest to philosophy. While he does not engage in speculative utopianism, Marx definitely recognises that, since the future will always be a definite negation of the present, there is absolutely

²⁴ Marx, “Introduction”, 245.

²⁵ Marx, “Introduction”, 256-257.

²⁶ Marx, “Introduction”, 251.

²⁷ Cieszkowski, *Gott und Palingenesie*, 17.

something that a historically informed philosophical analysis can tell us about it. The future will be communist – that we know. This is what philosophy in for form of German speculative thought can tell us. And this is thus what its enjoining with radical political practice will bring about: communism, which is what leads Marx and Engels to famously define it in the so-called ‘German ideology’ manuscripts as “not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things”²⁸ – i.e. *praxis*.

²⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, [Konvolut zu Feuerbach], Ms-S. 1 bis 29, in *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), vol. I.5, *Deutsche Ideologie Manuskripte und Drucke* (Berlin: De Gruyter Akademie Forschung, 2018), 37.