

# Hegelianism and the social question

Magnus Møller Ziegler

*University of Copenhagen*

*Class and Its Discontents: 9th annual conference of the Danish Society for Marxist Studies*

University of Copenhagen, 4-5 October 2024

In *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, the 1829 sequel to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96), Goethe gives voice to the experience of the changing economic conditions in Germany, when he lets one of the characters report that, “the increasing dominance of machine production torments and frightens me: it is rolling like the storm, slowly, slowly; but it is headed this way, and it will arrive and strike”.<sup>1</sup> In Walt Rostow's classic model of economic development, early nineteenth-century Germany can be placed in the first of five stages of growth, which is the stage of establishing ‘the pre-conditions for take-off’. Rostow defines this as a society poised between on the one hand a traditional social order with a pre-Newtonian relationship with nature and production, and on the other the take-off proper of modern economic development.<sup>2</sup> As the economic historians Toni Pierenkemper and Richard Tilly argue, the take-off itself did not happen in Germany until the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> While there are plenty of reasons to be critical of Rostow – not least the shockingly

---

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, in *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. 8, *Romane und Novellen III*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: Beck, 1981), 429; translation from Robert Tobin, *Warm Brothers. Queer Theory and the Age of Goethe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Rostow, *The Conditions of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17-35.

<sup>3</sup> Toni Pierenkemper and Richard Tilly, *The German Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2005), 20-21.

terrible reading of Marx that lies behind his book's not so subtle subtitle, 'A Non-Communist Manifesto' – these categories are useful for characterising the economic conditions of early nineteenth-century Germany in relation to the Young Hegelians, which is what I want to do here, so allow me to develop them a little further.<sup>4</sup>

While the commencement of such a period of 'establishing the pre-conditions for economic take-off' can happen endogenously (i.e., as in Britain), it is historically more likely to have happened through exogenous shock, Rostow argues.<sup>5</sup> This is certainly the case for the German states, especially Prussia. The agrarian reforms – the key element that made the economic lift-off in the second half of the nineteenth century possible – were only initiated after the political shock of Napoleon's total domination on the continent around the turn of the century, not least the complete military defeat of Prussia in 1806 (Rostow also speaks of 'invasions', whether "literal or figurative"<sup>6</sup>). The same applies to some of the other important conditions such as the *Zollverein* and the monetary and banking reforms.<sup>7</sup> However, at this stage of economic development, it is entirely possible for old, traditional modes of production to persist next to the emerging modern conditions, or, in Marxist terms, the *formal subsumption* of society under a new regime of social production does not entail the automatic and instant *real subsumption* of the whole of society under that regime. The Germany of the first half of the nineteenth century was precisely such a society, which had begun to be formally subsumed under the logic of capitalist production, but in which large swaths of social production was still operating under traditional modes of value extraction. In other

---

<sup>4</sup> For a solid if somewhat dated contemporary criticism of Rostow, see, Bo G. Gustafsson, "Rostow, Marx and the Theory of Economic Growth", *Science and Society* 25, No. 3 (Summer 1961).

<sup>5</sup> Rostow, *The Conditions of Economic Growth*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom. The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 320-344.

words, it is a kind of *Sattelzeit*: an in-between time where ‘the old is dying but the new has yet to be born’ etc.

This in-between-ness of the material conditions of society is reflected in Hegelian thinking about those same social conditions. In Hegel’s own political thought, the so-called ‘social question’ is deemed unresolvable, even if it is one which “agitates and torments modern societies”.<sup>8</sup> The constant drive of civil society toward new needs and more consumption is likewise constantly pushing it to expand production. This, in return, creates poverty, which is thus not to be seen as some accidental by-product of production in civil society, but rather as an inherent aspect of it.<sup>9</sup> Hegel defines poverty as the loss of all the advantages brought by civil society, including the guarantee of one’s subsistence, without any of one’s needs disappearing for that reason. (This can be caused both by bad circumstances or by the the conscious actions of the individual, i.e., irresponsible behaviour, or what Hegel calls *Schuld*.)<sup>10</sup> This is an aspect of civil society that cannot be resolved from within, Hegel argues, though poverty can be somewhat alleviated in two different ways, viz. with or without the mediation of work. Unmediated alleviation of poverty consists in support from charitable institutions such as monasteries, hospitals, foundations, etc. While such institutions can help the impoverished sustain a certain standard of living, this unmediated form of support goes against the nature of civil society, specifically the “feeling of self-sufficiency and honour among its individual members”.<sup>11</sup> Mediated assistance consist in an increase of the volume of production thus securing work for the impoverished. This would be in accord with the principles of civil society, but would not help the problem: it would result in overproduction,

---

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 267 (§244).

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 228-231 (§§191-195); Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 265 (§241); Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble. An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum, 2011), 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 265 (§242), 267 (§245).

i.e., “a lack of a proportionate number of consumers”, and the problem would persist.<sup>12</sup> The only real solution is to export the poor, i.e., colonization, but even that simply transposes the problem geographically, Hegel argues. The world is only so big, and at some point in the future the problem will necessarily resurface.<sup>13</sup> This is the extent of Hegel’s thinking about poverty and the impoverished as the preconditions for a modern, capitalist economy are beginning to be established in Germany. He sees the poor as simply a natural element of modern society; poverty and wealth are the two natural aspects of a zero-sum equation, as Shlomo Avineri writes.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1820s and then again immediately following Hegel’s death in the early 1830s, his lectures on the philosophy of law were taken over by his most trusted student and close friend, the jurist Eduard Gans (*der Oberhegelianer*, as Heinrich Heine calls him), who was by then professor of law at the university in Berlin. At first, Gans merely followed the view put forward by Hegel, and according to Norbert Waszek his 1828-29 lectures on the topic “offer little more on the subject of poverty than an accurate exposition of Hegel’s own views.”<sup>15</sup> However, as the economic development in Germany quickened – as more and more of German society was subsumed under the logic of capital – Gans’s analysis of the social question also changed.

In the late summer of 1830, Gans visited Paris as the city was once again erupting in violent revolution against the Bourbon monarchy, by now restored following the fall of Napoleon. Unlike Hegel, Gans was appreciative of the revolution, as his autobiographical essay “Paris in the Year 1830” attests.<sup>16</sup> In the essay, Gans describes how he became

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 269 (§248).

<sup>14</sup> Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, 148.

<sup>15</sup> Norbert Waszek, “Eduard Gans on Poverty and the Constitutional Debate”, in Douglas Moggach (ed.), *The New Hegelians. Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Waszek, “Eduard Gans on Poverty and the Constitutional Debate”, 36.

acquainted with Saint-Simonism, and he became a critical adherent of its main tenets. This led Gans to claim in his 1832-33 lectures on the philosophy of right, with explicit reference to Saint-Simon, that the rabble, i.e., radicalised poor people, was “a fact but no right. It has to be possible to get to the causes of the fact and remove them.”<sup>17</sup> As Waszek argues, this appreciation for Saint-Simonism by Gans was founded in an analysis of English rather than French society, and he thus differentiated the *social* from the *political* question (as he and other Hegelians principally equated the French with the political principle of modern society). The true nature of the social question in the modern state was to be found in England, not France, and thus English society was the proper mirror of what Germany was by now hastily becoming. Gans writes:

One ought to visit the factories of England, where one will find hundreds of men and women who, emaciated and wretched, sacrifice their health and enjoyment of their lives to the service of a single [person] and for no other reward than scanty self-preservation.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Gans had done so himself: during the same trip as the 1830 visit to Paris, Gans crossed the Channel and visited England in order to personally study the English conditions, which horrified him. It was thus evident for Gans in a way it had not been for Hegel that this was increasingly becoming Germany’s fate – Goethe’s rolling thunderstorm was coming.

Gans’s solution to the social question was the concept of *Vergesellschaftung*, a translation of ‘association’, a key term in Saint-Simonian social thought. It is difficult to say exactly what Gans takes this ‘association’ to consist in though, as he does not seem to take it over wholesale from Saint-Simon. Rather, his own interpretation can most clearly be gauged

---

<sup>17</sup> Edouard [sic] Gans, *Naturrecht und Universalgeschichte*, ed. Manfred Riegel (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 93, quoted from Waszek, “Eduard Gans on Poverty and the Constitutional Debate”, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Eduard Gans, *Rückblicke auf Personen und Zustände* (Berlin: Veit und Comp. 1836), 100.

from his criticism of precisely the Saint-Simonian theory. He does not mean a Saint-Simonian collectivism; in Gans's Hegelian framework the doing away with property would be a doing away with the ethical (*Sittliches*) side of the person. Instead, Gans has something like modern trade unions and the system of collective bargaining known today especially from Scandinavia in mind. By improving the material conditions of the poor, they could be raised into an organic part of the state's ethical life similar to the other classes of civil society rather than have them descend into rabble, defined by Hegel as "inward rebellion against the rich, against society, the government, etc." on the side of the poor.<sup>19</sup> It was the changing social conditions of Germany in light of the conditions of England and France as mirror images of Germany's future that made Gans change his mind on poverty and the social question.

Finally, at the end of this preparatory period in the development of economic growth in Germany, in the 1830s and 40s, we have the Young Hegelians proper, whose focus on the social question increased tenfold in comparison to either Hegel or even Gans.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, following the decisive defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1806, Prussia began a series of agrarian reforms with social results similar in nature to those of the English enclosure movement, which had been pivotal in establishing the necessary social conditions for the emergence of capitalism in England.<sup>20</sup> Large swaths of common land, especially in the old East Elbian Prussia, were enclosed, cutting off landless peasants from their means of subsistence, forcing them into the emerging proletariat.<sup>21</sup> As Pierenkemper and Tilly notes, wage labour had existed in Germany as elsewhere well before this time, but the number of wage-labourers exploded throughout the nineteenth century: In 1816, 80 per cent of the Prussian population lived in the countryside,

---

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 266 (§244); Waszek, "Eduard Gans on Poverty and the Constitutional Question", 38-40.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism. A Longer View* (London: Verso Books, 2002), 108-9, 125 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Pierenkemper & Tilly, *The German Economy During the Nineteenth Century*, 24, 28.

but by the late 1850s this number had dropped starkly to less than 50 per cent.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the general demographic development was an explosion in population numbers, not only in the city but also nation-wide. However, as Pierenkemper and Tilly again note, at the aggregate level, “one can say that the labor force potential grew faster than the number of jobs”.<sup>23</sup> This, however, did not result in massive unemployment, but rather in the movement of workers into low-paying and part-time jobs, creating an early version of what in today’s Germany is known as *Erwerbsarmen*, or ‘working poor’. Rather than being a new source of livelihood, the emerging industrial sector was thus a source of an expanded social need for a growing number of the German population, not least during the so-called ‘hungry 40s’, which, while the Irish potato famine is perhaps more famous, also led to widespread food shortages all over Europe, including in the German states.

In 1844, Silesian weavers rose in revolt and smashed the machines that had pushed them into poverty, an event famously immortalised in verse by Heinrich Heine who has the weavers cursing God, king, and fatherland.<sup>24</sup> There is a straight-forward interpretation in the mode of Ellen Meiksins-Wood here: By displaying agency in the way that the Silesian weavers did, they put a new question on the agenda for intellectuals like the Hegelians, and with this development, the social question became an unignorable problem for them.<sup>25</sup> Gans’s solution had really been a non-solution. He might have introduced some version of the Saint-Simonian concept of ‘association’ into the Hegelian framework, but that was only to save the Hegelian ethical state from the rabble by subsuming the rabble into it. Gans’s revisionism does not fundamentally change anything about the nature of that state or its relation to it. Even if he, like the Saint-Simonians, sees competition as the root of misery, he nonetheless

---

<sup>22</sup> Pierenkemper & Tilly, *The German Economy During the Nineteenth Century*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Pierenkemper & Tilly, *The German Economy During the Nineteenth Century*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See, Ellen Meiksins-Wood, “Why It Matters”, *London Review of Books* vol. 30, no. 18 (September 2008).  
Online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n18/ellen-meiksins-wood/why-it-matters> (retrieved 26 April 2024).

defends competition against the Saint-Simonians, as Patrick Eiden-Offe points out.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to this, the treatment of the social question by the Young Hegelians focuses on resolving it by *overcoming the state*.

To the Young Hegelians, the question of the poverty doubles as the question of the masses, which in itself is a reformulation of the central problem of modernity par excellence, viz. that of the relationship between the individual and society. In Hegel's philosophy, the unification of particular and universal is made possible by the person of Christ, but the criticism of this idea by first D.F. Strauss and later Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach had made this notion impossible. Strauss's own solution, which Feuerbach took over, was that it was not the person of Christ but the whole human species as such which was to be the vehicle of this unification of particular and universal. However, in the burgeoning capitalist society, the previously fixed pre-modern social relations are torn up root and branch as "All that is solid melts into air".<sup>27</sup> In this context, in which conflict rather than reconciliation comes to the forefront, as the Silesian weaver's revolt shows, the true question for the Young Hegelians becomes: how can a society ridden by division become an organic whole? How can the individual find their place in society? The question of poverty becomes *the social question*.

This question motivated Bauer in his criticism of the masses. He juxtaposed the substantiality of pre-modern society with the 'oppressive indeterminacy' of the mass.<sup>28</sup> The main result of the French revolution, he thought, was the dissolution of the organic substantiality of society into an aggregate of competing individuals. Contrary to the liberal self-perception, this did not represent process but rather, ultimately, inertia and stagnation.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Gans, *Rückblicke*, 98-99; Patrick Eiden Offe, *The Poetry of Class. Romantic Anti-Capitalism and the Invention of the Proletariat*, trans. Jacob Blumenfeld (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 223.

<sup>28</sup> Moggach, *The Politics and Philosophy of Bruno Bauer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Moggach, *The Politics and Philosophy of Bruno Bauer*, 54.



While Bauer does not identify the mass as such, in its indeterminacy, with the proletariat, he does describe the proletariat as *a* determinateness (*Bestimmtheit*) of the mass defined by its relation to general competition. However, against those of his fellow Young Hegelians that would claim that this makes the proletariat into a force able to recognise the universally oppressive nature of competition, Bauer instead claims that they “have only elementary feeling of its [general competition] pressure, without being able to interpret and explain it – what they cannot sense, cannot bring into consciousness, they are also unable to oppose”.<sup>30</sup> Instead, it is the individual development of free self-consciousnesses through philosophical critique which will realise the universal in the particular and do away with the atomisation of modern society, including the ills of competition. This is not a restoration of a pre-modern estate society, but a militant republicanism understood as self-determination as opposed to the principles of a competitive market society.<sup>31</sup> In this way, even if Bauer is sceptical of the mass having any agency, the social question as a problem put front and centre by the new social forms emerging in Germany nonetheless comes to the forefront of Bauer’s thinking.

While Marx had been a follower of Bauer in the late 1830s and possibly into the 40s, by 1844 he had diverged radically from his old mentor. In his published introduction to the unpublished 1843 critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Marx takes the exact opposite stance of Bauer and squarely centres the proletariat as the social class uniquely positioned to realise universality.<sup>32</sup> However, Marx also *agrees* with Bauer that the problem of civil society is the problem of atomised competition. A political revolution, he says, is nothing more than when a “*part of civil society* emancipates itself and attains *general* domination”, but this is a false form of universality, because it delivers freedom only to those who find themselves in

---

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Bauer, “Die Gattung und die Masse”, in *Feldzüge der reinen Kritik*, ed. Hans-Martin Saß (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), 214.

<sup>31</sup> Moggach, *The Politics and Philosophy of Bruno Bauer*, 151. Bauer is basically a Jacobin republican, and it is only by the force of a group of enlightened republicans like the Robespierre that the indeterminate *Masse* can be transformed into an organic *Volk* (op.cit., 153).

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction”, *MECW* 3, 184.

the same situation as this class or part of civil society.<sup>33</sup> Only a class which embodies all the deficiencies of society as a whole can do this, but this class does not exist yet in Germany. This class can only appear by the formation of a *proletariat*, Marx argues, a class which “has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong* but *wrong generally* is perpetrated against it”.<sup>34</sup> The emergence of this class in Germany is then linked directly by Marx to the emerging industrial development and the ensuing *artificial poverty* (possibly as opposed to the kind of ‘natural poverty’ identified by Hegel).<sup>35</sup>

While this is obviously not a comprehensive analysis of either Marx’s or Bauer’s ideas about the social question, I nonetheless hope to have demonstrated that not only was this question at the forefront of the mind of Young Hegelians like Bauer and Marx, they also deemed it *solvable* (as opposed to Hegel), but only through the dissolution of *the modern state* (as opposed to Gans). I have also suggested that this development in the thinking about the social question within the Hegelian school was the result of the maturing of capitalist conditions in Germany during this *Sattelzeit* period: as the in-between-ness of the period waned and capitalist social relations solidified, the social question became a permanent fixture of intellectual debate.

However, there are two important questions I have not attempted to answer. The first is the question of how, in practice, the material development affected the conceptual development. If we want to avoid heading down the path of a crude materialism, we must be able to give an account of the “difficult dialectic between historical specificity and the always

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, “Introduction”, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, “Introduction”, 186-87. Tellingly, like Bauer Marx does *not* equate this proletarian class with ‘the mass’. Instead he suggestively equates the masses with the entirety of society when he says that any class that wants cast itself as the universal class (this presumably includes the proletariat) must awaken “a moment of enthusiasm in itself and in the masses” were it “merges with society in general” (op.cit. 184).

present logic of historical process”, as Meiksins Wood calls it.<sup>36</sup> To do this here would be too big a task. The second question is Quentin Skinner’s question: what is it that the Young Hegelians can *do* with this different conception of the social question? What are they able to do with it that Hegel could not? This answer I will, in fact, attempt: What could be done with the conception of the social question that the Young Hegelians had, which could not be done with Hegel’s concept of poverty, was leverage it towards an idea of *radical revolutionary action and the dissolution of the state*.

## Literature

- Avineri, Shlomo. *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Bauer, Bruno. “Die Gattung und die Masse”. In *Feldzüge der reinen Kritik*, edited by Hans-Martin Saß, 213-223. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968.
- Clark, Christopher. *Iron Kingdom. The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Eiden-Offe, Patrick. *The Poetry of Class. Romantic Anti-Capitalism and the Invention of the Proletariat*. Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld. Leiden: Brill, 2023.
- Gans, Eduard. *Naturrecht und Universalgeschichte*, ed. Manfred Riegel. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981.
- . *Rückblicke auf Personen und Zustände*. Berlin: Veit und Comp., 1836.
- Goethe, J.W. *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. In *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. 8, *Romane und Novellen III*, edited by Erich Trunz. Munich: Beck, 1981.
- Gustafsson, Bo G. “Rostow, Marx and the Theory of Economic Growth”, *Science and Society* 25, No. 3 (Summer 1961).
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translated by H. B. Nisbet, edited by Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Marx, Karl. “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction”. In *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, *Marx and Engels 1843-1844*, 175-187. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975.
- Marx, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Translated by Samuel Moore, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones. London: Penguin Books, 2002.
- Moggach, Douglas, *The Politics and Philosophy of Bruno Bauer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Pierenkemper, Toni and Richard Tilly. *The German Economy in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2005.
- Rostow, W.W. *The Conditions of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Ruda, Frank. *Hegel’s Rabble. An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. London: Continuum, 2011.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism. Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 61.

- Tobin, Robert. *Warm Brothers. Queer Theory and the Age of Goethe*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Waszek, Nibert. "Eduard Gans on Poverty and the Constitutional Debate". In Douglas Moggach (ed.), *The New Hegelians. Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, 24-49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Democracy Against Capitalism. Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- . *The Origin of Capitalism. A Longer View*. London: Verso Books, 2002.
- . "Why It Matters". In *London Review of Books* vol. 30, no. 18 (September 2008). Online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n18/ellen-meiksins-wood/why-it-matters> (retrieved 26 April 2024).