Heinrich Heine and The Young Hegelians on Popular Agency, Social Transformation, and “The Beautiful Error of an Ideal Future”¹
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Note to Participants: Thank you for reading! This is an early draft of the second chapter of my dissertation, which looks at how a largely forgotten set of radical Kantians took up Kant to think about the role of ideals, which we can broadly understand as normative and/or utopian conceptions of politics, in a democratic politics. (The term ideal has a specific life in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, but I’ve attempted to bracket it for this paper). This chapter, however, is less concerned with analyzing the uptake of specific ideas in Kant than it is with analyzing an analogy that a number of thinkers draw between the impact of the French Revolution on France and the impact of Kant’s philosophy on Germany. Specifically, my interest is in looking at how the claim of the so-called ‘Young Hegelians’ that Kant’s revolution in thought must go into practice illuminates their accounts of the connection between political ideals and political practices. I focus especially on how the poet, journalist, and critic Heinrich Heine takes up this idea in his criticism and then the relationship of Heine’s work with that of the early Marx. I should note, too, that a lot of the work that this particular chapter does has ended up being historical, although I’ve tried to foreground the stakes for democratic theory more generally.

¹ This quote is from Heine’s article on the July Revolution. He writes, “Verily, he who fights unto death for the holy delusion of his heart and for the beautiful error of an ideal future, will never ally himself to that cowardly filth which the past has left us under the name of ‘Carlists.’” Cf. Heinrich Heine trans. Charles Godfrey Leland, French Affairs: Letters from Paris in Two Volumes, Vol. 1: Letters from Paris, (London, England: William Heinemann, 1893), pp. 309
“The proposition that has become proverbial, *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*, or in German, ‘let justice reign even if all the rogues in the world perish because of it,’ sounds rather boastful but it is true…”

- Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*

“I behold all the devils of truth dancing round me in triumph, until at last a great and proud despair masters my heart and I cry aloud: ‘It has long been judged and condemned, this ancient society! Let it suffer what it does! Let it be crushed, this old world, where innocence perished, where selfishness flourished so mightily, where man was as a prey and plunder to man! Let them be radically destroyed, these whitened sepulchers, where falsehood and raging wrong were enthroned!’ And blessed be the grocer who will make cornets of my poems for snuff or coffee for the poor honest old women who perhaps in our present unjust world must do altogether without such comforts. *Fiat Iustitia, pereat mundus.*”

- Heine, *Lutezia*

**Introduction**

In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin wrote of Heinrich Heine that he “warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor’s study could destroy a civilization.” For Berlin, Heine was prophetic in anticipating that the transformative political theories of his day would soon be unleashed and, indeed, destroy civilizations. From the perspective of Berlin’s post-war liberal skepticism about efforts at radical social transformation, Heine appeared to be a fellow-traveler, albeit one ahead of his time. Of course, Heine wrote soon after that “the future belongs to the communists” and that “a terrible syllogism holds me in a mesh, and if I cannot controvert the proposition that ‘all men have the right to eat,’ I am compelled to accept all its consequences.” Being of a generation of intellectuals

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who grew up alongside the legacy of the French Revolution, Heine was always as much a partisan of transformative political ideas as he was their critic.

In recent years, a variety of political theorists have come to echo Berlin’s skepticism, though not always for the same set of reasons, expressing a suspicion of political theories that take it as their task to imagine ends for political life. For such theorists, many of whom share a commitment to what has been described as ‘realism,’ political theories that advance normative or utopian conceptions of politics tend to ignore the conflict, contestation, and disagreement over ends that characterizes political life. As a result, they are left either distracting theorists from “real politics” with unfeasible and apolitical castles-in-the-sky, or subordinating the entirety of political life to one overarching conception of the good life. In the latter instance, they are thought to take on an explicitly antidemocratic aspect in attempting to overwhelm disagreement and contestation with their vision of the good. For such thinkers, realism opposes itself to the utopian and ideal theories that they take to be inherently hostile to politics as such.

This chapter looks at the efforts of a prior generation of theorists to understand the role of ideals in motivating popular agency within the context of ‘real’ politics. The thinkers I engage in this chapter sought to understand how ideal and utopian conceptions of politics could be enabling, rather than stifling, of popular agency. Indeed, rather than supporting an apolitical utopianism or an instrumentalist vanguardism, these theorists sought to expose how utopian dreams expressed a much more proximate desire for popular social transformation. I examine a moment in the history of political thought in Germany when a number of theorists, following Hegel, were looking over

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at the revolution that had occurred across the Rhine and trying to understand its significance for their own political life. For Hegel, whose interpretation would become central for the thinkers I engage, the revolution in France was the expression of a historical moment in which humanity realized not only that it was free, but that, as I will explain later in this paper, freedom serves as its own basis. On Hegel’s account, the French revolution in politics found its culmination in Kant’s revolution in thought, which discerned a means of conceiving of humans as free in their obedience to a universal moral law.

Heine, Marx, and the other thinkers I engage in this paper tended to agree with Hegel’s insight that the French Revolution occurred at a moment when people were beginning to realize their own freedom, but they could not reconcile this realization with the hierarchical and oppressive institutions that persisted in their world. As a result, they expressed a demand to realize materially the freedom that they had just come to recognize intellectually. And this meant transforming the world so that it reflected human freedom and the equality it supported. While Hegel and his students are sometime read as archetypes of utopian and teleological thinking, this paper aims to draw out a much more grounded strain in their thought, one which attempts to navigate the pursuit of emancipation against tangible limits on the possibilities of collective human agency. As I argue, their attempts to transform the multitude into a single collective agent in pursuit of emancipation embedded certain democratic commitments. For especially Heine and Marx, the task of the critic was to awaken the people to their own agency. The ideologies they sought to combat with their writings were, for both thinkers, the ideologies that estranged peoples from their own capacity to be self-determining. The task of the critic—and the political poet—was to connect the people, or in Marx’s case, the proletariat, with an agency they already possessed.

*The Revolution in Thought*
In 1835, in *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, Heine wrote to his French audience:

Lessing died in Braunschweig in the year 1781, misunderstood, hated, and in ill repute. In the same year, *The Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant appeared, in Königsberg. With this book, which, curiously, was not generally known until the end of the eighties, a spiritual revolution begins in Germany which has the oddest analogies with the material revolution in France, and to which the serious thinker must assign equal importance.6

Heine’s claim that there was a German revolution in ideas that paralleled the French revolution in the material world was a common one among German intellectuals after the revolution, as was his periodization. Since Kant’s first *Critique* first began to gain real traction in German intellectual life, German intellectuals had understood its claims to point towards a new phase of genuine liberation in both the intellectual and material spheres.7 As Hegel wrote in 1795, “from the Kantian system and its ultimate perfection, I expect a revolution in Germany that will proceed from principles that are already present.”8

As John Toews argues, Kant’s thought appeared to the generation from Fichte to Hegel and, I argue, beyond to the Young Hegelians, as an event on par with the French Revolution. These theorists saw it as such both in the break it made with prior modes of thought and in the way it appeared to argue for the emancipation of the self from religious and political subordination and even from the causal natural world.9 Likewise, as Harold Mah argues, the German effort to analogize Kant’s thought with the French revolution reflected their efforts to determine whether

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8 Hegel, cited in Toews
9 Ibid.
they had entered modernity alongside their friends across the Rhine. And as this paper argues, this analogy also became part of the efforts of German radicals to argue that their country was ripe for its revolution, that the revolution in thought demanded a revolution in practice.

Indeed, the analogy between Kant’s thought and the French revolution was surprisingly widespread in the 1830’s and ‘40’s. Moses Hess, for example, in his 1843 *Socialism and Communism* writes of a “division of labor” between the French and the Germans, where each devoted themselves to part of the task of emancipation, though “here [in Germany] it was Kant,” while in France, “it was the Revolution that became the aim and end of the previous century.”10 Bruno Bauer writes somewhat derisively that Kant’s philosophy amounted to “the perpetual reiteration and restatement of the revolution of [17]89”11 and Marx wrote in 1838 that “Kant’s philosophy is rightly regarded as the German theory of the French Revolution.”12 Ruge likewise wrote in 1854 of “the revolution in theory that Germany has experienced since Kant, in laying the principles of socialism, democracy, and Humanism at the heart of the German people.”13 And, as I have already noted, Heine made it the central theme of his *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, which I explore in the next section. Of course, Hess, Bauer, Ruge, Marx, Heine, and others may have been following Hegel’s own periodization in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which drew an even tighter analogy

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between the *Critical* philosophy and the terror. For Hegel as for his radical students, there was a German revolution in thought that paralleled the French Revolution in practice.

But what might it mean to have a revolution in thought? For the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, the revolution in thought occurred when the demand for freedom expressed in French revolutionary destruction culminated in the more practical conception of freedom expressed in Kant’s moral philosophy. For Hegel, the French Revolution was the moment in history when *Geist* realized that the foundation of its own freedom was self-determination itself, but that its destructive expression in the revolution needed to seek alternate form in Kant’s moral philosophy. Hegel argues that the French revolution rebelled against an older set of hierarchical institutions, like the church and the aristocracy, that promised to reveal and secure the subject’s place in the world. But these institutions were exposed as superfluous once the Enlightenment’s skeptical attitude debunked the forms of faith and superstition that sustained them. In so doing, this skeptical attitude revealed both the superfluity of older modes of hierarchy, which were supported by such irrational beliefs, and the capacity of the skeptical, rational agent to do such debunking.\(^\text{14}\) As the realization of this capacity spread among the people, it came to realize that it was free and that the basis of its freedom is nothing more, and nothing less, than its capacity to determine itself.\(^\text{15}\) And once this realization that freedom is its own basis occurred, Hegel writes, “the undivided Substance of absolute freedom ascended the throne without any power being able to resist it.”\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{15}\) This is a very rough summary of a very long argument in the *Phenomenology*.

For Hegel, the realization of what he calls “absolute freedom” occurred in two chief phases before it turned into the “moral worldview” expressed in Kant’s ethics. The first moment occurred in the revolution itself, where freedom expressed itself through the destruction of all of the institutions of the old world upon realizing that its modes of hierarchy were illegitimately grounded in spurious modes of superstition. For Hegel, this moment of freedom through negation needed to be, as he writes, “a work which is a work of the whole” because what characterized it was the realization that the capacity for self-determination is universal. In this moment in the history of Geist, it realizes that freedom is equally available to all because all are able to express their freedom. Hegel writes of the revolution that “its purpose is the general purpose, its language universal law, its work the universal work.”\(^{17}\) Thus, freedom expressed itself in negating, destroying, and washing away all of the institutions of an old world.

But a problem began once absolute freedom destroyed all of the institutions of this prior world. How does absolute freedom express itself when there is nothing left to negate? As Hegel writes, “there is left for [absolute freedom] only negative action; it is merely the fury of destruction.”\(^{18}\) Once absolute freedom had no more objects to negate, the people, acting in a universal mode, turned against its conceptual opposite, “the individuality of actual self-consciousness itself.”\(^{19}\) I understand Hegel to mean here the self-determining individual, whose efforts at individual self-determination must, in this instance, require opposing the general. And this is where the terror occurs. For Hegel, absolute freedom first expressed itself in “the destruction of the actual organization of the world” in the moment of revolution, but “exists now just for itself” and its “sole object” is individual self-consciousness.”\(^{20}\) Hegel writes that “its sole work and deed

\(^{17}\) Ibid.  
\(^{18}\) op cit., 359  
\(^{19}\) op. cit., 360  
\(^{20}\) op. cit., 359
is therefore \textit{death}, a death too which has no inner significance or filling…it is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.”\textsuperscript{21}

But absolute freedom eventually came to see its effects on the world. It became “objective to itself,” and saw itself reflected in its concrete effect on the world, death, and experienced “the \textit{terror} of death,” which “is the vision of this negative nature of itself.”\textsuperscript{22} Absolute freedom realized that it passed on from destroying the old world into just destroying for its own sake. It realized that there is a split between the idea it had of itself, the ideal of freedom, and its actual manifestation in the world, revolution and terror. In realizing this split, absolute freedom realized that it has an ideal essence that is different from its practical manifestation. As a result, absolute freedom transformed into the moral worldview. The moral worldview was able to integrate both the idea of universality and self-determination in the idea that we become self-determining in obeying a universal moral law and so avoided the trap of having to kill everything around it.

Hegel’s account of the revolution is necessarily retrospective; it sees its essence in its manifestation of freedom primarily through destruction on the way towards its higher realization ultimately in ethical community. Kant’s philosophy, then, is not to be taken on its own terms as the expression of an as-yet unfulfilled ideal of freedom, but as a phase in the history of \textit{Geist}'s realization, which will find its ultimate expression elsewhere. For Hegel, then, the revolution is a finished project. \textit{Geist} realized that the basis of its self-determination was in freedom itself, but, seeing that unbridled freedom resulted in destruction, it resolved itself into the moral worldview, itself a step on the way to ethical community. The revolutionary project, then, is merely in the demonstration of freedom for its own sake. To the extent that the revolution had an end, for Hegel,

\textsuperscript{21} op. cit., 360
\textsuperscript{22} op. cit., 361
it was in the dual recognition that the power of self-determination is such that it can serve as its own basis, but that it needed to find its expression in something other than its own negative power.

Hegel’s backwards looking perspective is necessary to a broader project that aims to show how his view can reveal the rational in the actual, the ideal in the real, thus overcoming, among other things, conceptual problems in Kant’s Critical philosophy. For Kant, part of the reason that our political ends appear to us as ideals, both in the sense that they are notional and in that they are normative, is because of the way our intellects are structured. Humans have finite, rational intellects that think through concepts that refer to objects of possible experience, which we know to be real, or actual, when we encounter them sensibly. For Hegel and the idealists that came before him, the problematic consequence of Kant’s idea here is that we can only know the world as it appears to us and not as a mind-independent reality. Thus, for Kant, our ideas about what our political world ought to look like, our political ideals, refer to a possible future, but this also entails that such a future is merely possible and we can only conjecture the processes through which the world of experience might come to match our ideas, whether through some natural process or through human agency. But Hegel understands himself to be writing in a moment where we can look back at our efforts to understand ourselves as rational agents thoughtfully interacting with the world to discover how Kant’s division between thought and being is spurious and how the two are actually one. That is, once we arrive at the moment when we feel it necessary to do such looking back, we can complete the circle, so to speak, and understand how our rational intellects partake in a broader whole that consists of the unity of thought and being.

While Hegel’s radical students tended to accept his arguments about the identity between the rational and the actual, they did not accept that this left them with a retrospective project, but rather interpreted it to mean that what begins as thought must become action. As Heine, who knew
Hegel personally and had taken attended his 1822-1823 lectures on the Philosophy of History and, according to Terry Pinkard, likely his lectures on political philosophy, writes in *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, “do not take my advice lightly, the advice of a dreamer who warns you about Kantians, Fichteans, and Naturphilosophen. Do not take lightly the fantastic poet, who expects in the realm of appearance the same revolution which has happened in the province of spirit. Thought goes before deed as lightning before thunder.”

Writing a number of years later, Ruge would write that the Hegelian philosophy showed how, “all philosophy is nothing other than the thought of its time” and while prior philosophies both “were and remained only thought,” the Hegelian philosophy “represents itself as the thought, which cannot remain so, but out of its consciousness of itself…must become deed.”

Again, Ruge’s claim here is remarkably reminiscent of Heine. “The thought,” Heine writes, “wants to be deed; the word wants to be flesh.”

**Heine and the Sources of the German Revolution**

Indeed, for Heine as for Hegel’s other radical students, Hegel’s arguments about the culmination of German philosophy appeared laughable against the persistence of oppressive and undemocratic institutions in Germany. Although Heine takes up Hegel’s analogy between Kant’s thought and the terror, he is more intent on using it to reveal how the ideal of freedom may have been realized in thought, but has not been realized in German practice. And where Hegel couches his argument in the transition of absolute freedom to the moral worldview, Heine positions Kant as the killer himself. For Heine, Kant was the German Robespierre, but he “far surpassed Maximilien Robespierre in terrorism,” because where Robespierre merely killed the King, Kant

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23 *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, 116. Heine was also a student of Eduard Gans (as was Marx) and a member of the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden. Cf. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography*, pp.89-90


25 *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, 76-81
killed God. And, like Hegel, Heine believes that the consequence of this deicide is the nullification of a worldview that legitimates inequality and domination. As Heine puts it pointedly in his *Travel Pictures*:

What do the aristocrats have left once they’ve been robbed of the crowned means of their subsistence, when the kings become the property of the people and lead an honest and secure regiment by the will of the people, the one true source of all power? What will the priests do when the kings realize that a dribble of consecrated oil makes no human head immune to the guillotine, and when more and more realize that you can’t still your hunger with holy wafers? Then, of course, the aristocracy and the clergy will have no other recourse but to unite so as to plot and intrigue against the new world order.27

This passage of Heine’s foregrounds a number of the peculiarities of his political thought. It is important to note that, although Heine was neither much concerned with nor a particularly astute theorist of institutional politics, he imagines here that the aristocracy will be rendered superfluous when the kings obey the will of the people, and so remains committed to monarchy. Heine’s dual commitment to popular sovereignty and monarchy inflects much of his writing on politics, although his commitment to the latter is more aesthetic than anything else.28 This tension between a moral commitment to popular sovereignty and an aesthetic commitment to monarchy is one of the constitutive tensions of his political writings and drives his ambivalence in assessing the mass democratic and republican movements that sought popular sovereignty, social egalitarianism, and an end to monarchy and aristocracy in Europe. But the intensity of his critique of aristocracy and religion here, the ways in which these institutions rely on spurious ideologies to legitimate their exploitation of the people, also reveals his deep antipathy to all forms of material inequality.

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26 op. cit., 79
28 This tension is on its highest display in the introductions he writes to *On the History of Religion & Philosophy in Germany* and *Lutezia*
Indeed, this tension in Heine’s thought exposes one of the sources of what we might call Heine’s realism, which Isaiah Berlin found worthy of paraphrase in “Two Concepts of Liberty.” As the above passage indicates, for Heine, these new egalitarian social movements both threatened and promised to become the drivers of modernity, which he saw as a vast and destructive force that sought to make the world anew through the destruction of the old. Writing in his Travel Pictures of the antediluvian tendency in the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, Heine explains how it sounds a note “in the hearts of our highborn who see their castles and coats of arms in decay; it sounds again in the hearts of the solid burgher who sees the snug and narrow ways of his forbears supplanted by a vast and joyless modernity.”29 Like in Hegel’s absolute freedom, Heine sees the revolutionary tendency of the modern as a force that overturns a prior framework in which tradition and hierarchy organized and secured the social framework. But, for Heine, there is something worth mourning in the destruction of these old institutions and a whole world that will never reappear, as modernity sets the world on a course that is far from certain. Still, this sense of uncertainty also helps to explain his sympathy toward the mass egalitarian movements of his day; whatever else modernity might bring, for Heine, it ought to bring material equality.

For Heine, the political and social significance of Kant’s thought and Hegel’s interpretation of it is in its claim that the eradication of prior theological worldviews has cleared the way for the realization of human freedom and equality. This process, he argues according to his quasi-Hegelian view of the world, has already occurred in France and has, for a long time, been poised to occur in Britain. For Heine, the French revolution occurred as a result of the rise their materialist worldview. Thought preceded action, he argues, and as soon as they overturned the idea that aristocracy and hierarchy had a theological foundation, they overturned aristocracy and hierarchy

29 Travel Pictures, 89
themselves. As Heine writes of the French revolution, they “needed a guillotine—and a materialistic philosophy with the same cold sharpness.”\footnote{Op. Cit., 55} And he anticipates that the revolution will soon come to Germany, as German idealism has also advanced what he regards as an essentially atheistic worldview, which will wash away the alliance he describes between Christianity and the state in their oppression of the people.\footnote{For Heine’s views on the alliance between the Christian worldview and politics, cf. \textit{On the History of Religion and Philosophy}, 12-13. My emphasis.}

For Heine, in casting off the idea that some divine being created the world in either the mode of the heavenly father or the watchmaker, Hegel’s teaching awakens Germany to the fact that is capable of making its own world. Heine does not state this point with any directness in \textit{On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany}, although he implies it in the connection he draws between the waning of religion and the waxing of revolution. He also states it more directly twice in his later works, \textit{Briefe über Deutschland} [Letters about Germany] and his \textit{Geständnisse} [Confessions], both unpublished works in which he revisits this earlier text. \textit{Briefe über Deutschland} comes at the height of Heine’s radicalism, while the \textit{Geständnisse} come later as he recants many of his earlier beliefs. He writes in the \textit{Geständisse} that he “heard from Hegel that not, as my grandmother thought, God Almighty, who lives in heaven was God Almighty, but rather I myself living here on earth.”\footnote{\textit{On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany}, 207.} He renders this sense more politically and with less solipsism in \textit{Briefe über Deutschland}, where he writes that the masses’ unbelief has lead them to “long for bliss on earth” and in \textit{Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen}, where he writes of “constructing the kingdom of heaven here on earth.”\footnote{Heine, \textit{Düsseldorfer Ausgabe}, 170; Heinrich Heine trans. T.J. Reed, \textit{Deutschland: A Winter’s Tale}, (London, England: Angel Books, 1986), pp. 30. My translation.} In realizing both that there is no heaven to be found beyond this world and that they can construct it here, the people will start to seek their revolution.
This why Kant plays such an outsized role in Heine’s story, why he describes him as the
German Robespierre, and why he describes the first Critique as “the sword with which deism was
executed in Germany.” Like Hegel’s French revolutionaries whose expression of absolute
freedom took the form of the destruction that would pave the way for the moment in the history of
Geist that culminated in Hegel’s looking back, Heine’s Kant destroyed the prior religious
paradigms standing in the way of the reunification of the ideal and the real that would culminate
first in Hegel’s project and then Heine’s recognition of its true value. As Heine writes, “Kant…had
only a critique, that is, something negative.” Kant began the revolution in philosophy that Hegel
would finish.

Now, what Heine occludes in his interpretation of Hegel is, I argue, as important as what
he chooses to praise as Hegel’s true accomplishment. He emphasizes the unity of thought and
being in Hegel, while downplaying the ways in which the dialectic can be construed as legitimating
present institutions. He hints that Naturphilosophie, the project of Schelling’s that Hegel perfected,
also has a conservative function that he does not want to elucidate for fear of adding “even more
to the confusion in French heads.” He claims that, had the French been more familiar with
Naturphilosophie, they “would have never been able to produce the July Revolution” and that
“philosophical follies which can be pressed into the service of the powers that be and the Catholic
doctrine of incarnation would have dampened your enthusiasm and paralyzed your courage.”
He complains that while Lorenz Oken was “educating the German youth about the original rights of
humanity, about freedom and equality,” Adam Müller “lectured on the stable of humanity
according to the principles of Naturphilosophie.” Heine elaborates on a further conservative

34 op. cit., 78
35 op. cit., 113
36 op. cit., 114
tendency taking hold of German philosophy and German ideas, which was leading to a state of affairs in which the “German youth, sunk in metaphysical abstractions, was forgetting its nearest temporal interests and becoming unfit for practical life…patriots and friends of liberty must have felt a justified annoyance with philosophy.”

The tradition that had revealed the necessity of revolution was being twisted to argue that what was truly revolutionary was the status quo.

What Heine takes from Hegel, then, is neither his philosophy of history nor his dialectics, and this is clear in the way he thinks about revolution. Recall that Hegel’s project, and so his understanding of the revolution, is primarily retrospective; Hegel understands himself to be at a point where it is possible to understand how prior moments in history lead to his moment. Heine does not share this understanding. For Heine, the recuperation of Spinoza’s philosophy in Naturphilosophie has pointed the way towards a potential revaluation of values, which, he thinks, should in turn point the way towards a transformation of the material world so they match those values. But this brings Heine face to face with an uncertain future, which he alternatively figures as utopian or violent. Thus Heine writes of founding a “democracy of gods, equally glorious, equally holy, equally joyous” through revolutionary overcoming, just as he writes that “revolutionary forces have developed which are simply biding their time to break out and be able to fill the world with horror and admiration.”

Heine’s warning here, which closes On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, is ambivalent, both celebratory and fearful.

Thus, while Heine’s depiction of the revolution as a moment of radical negation maintains something of Hegel’s absolute freedom in its promise to wash away the institutions of the old world in preparation for the new, its anticipation of an uncertain future in which either the old stubbornly endures, a new project of emancipation takes flight, or yet new terrors conspire against

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37 ibid.
38 op. cit., 115
us, it refuses to look beyond the moment of negation to its culmination in a subsequent phase of
history. As Rudolf Malter argues, picking up on Heine’s claim about thought driving history,
thought does not remain ‘mere thought’ for him, but must become deed, a sense that Ruge will
reiterate in 1840. But whether the pure manifestation of freedom in the world will lead to utopia
or “the coldest and meanest of all deaths,” like “swallowing a mouthful of water” remained an
open question.39

Heine, Marx, and Ruge on Popular Agency and Social Transformation

How, then, does Heine reconcile his uncertainty about the future with his claim “the world
is the word’s signature?”40 Heine’s uncertainty about whether we could obviate the need for
Christianity reveals something about how he imagines the connection between thought and deed.
Although much of On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany is about academic
philosophy, his concern is less with building what contemporary theorists might call an ideal
theory and more about how the prevailing social and theoretical imaginary expresses a desire for
emancipation from material inequality. The image of a heavenly realm in which hunger and want
would be eradicated is, to paraphrase Heine, the lightning before the thunder; it is the thought
before the deed. This idea that the dreams of Christianity express an anticipatory social demand is
no better illustrated than in the opening of Heine’s 1844 poem Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen,
as he returns to Germany from his chosen land of exile, France, and describes how:

a little harp girl sang./she sang with true feeling/and a bad voice, though I was still
stirred/by her playing/she sang of love and its sorrows/sacrifice and recovery/from up there
in that better world,/where all pain disappears/She sang of the veil of tears/of pain, that
soon melts away/of a beyond, where the soul indulges/reposing in true delight/she sang the
old song of abdication [Entsagungslied]/the lullaby of heaven,/with which to sooth/the
people when it whines./I know this wisdom/I know the text/And I also know the author/I
know they secretly drink wine/while publicly preaching water/A new song! A better
song!/My friends, I write to you!/We will soon construct/the kingdom of heaven on

39 Malter, “Heine und Kant”
40 On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, 77.
earth/We will be happy here/and will no longer starve/lazy stomachs should not gobble up/what diligent hands procured.41

Heine reiterates this theme, as well, in Briefe über Deutschland [Letters about Germany], in which he (positively) reassesses On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany.42 On the subject of religion and political emancipation, he writes:

The annihilation of belief in heaven has not only moral, but also political importance: the masses no longer carry their Christian guilt, their earthly wretchedness, and long for bliss on earth. Communism is a natural consequence of this changed world view, and it propagates itself all over Germany. It is even such a natural appearance that the proletariat in their battle against the status quo hold up the most advanced spirits, the great school philosophers, as leader; these philosophers go from doctrine to deed, the last goal of all thought, and formulate the program.43

Heine’s writings here concretize the more abstract and metaphysical critique that he and the other young Hegelians would level against Hegel, showing how their insistence on the connection between the words and deed of their times is about how collective social wishes connect up with ordinary practices. This is no better illustrated than in the passage from Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen that immediately succeeds the opening, cited above, where Heine explains that, “while the little one sang of a desire for heaven,/the Prussian Customs officer was searching [his] trunk,” for “lace, jewels, and forbidden books.”44 At the outset of the poem, Heine shows how the little girl’s desire for heaven actually stems from the ordinary practices of oppression that characterize his world, the preachers who “drink the wine, while publicly drinking water” and the customs officer digging around in Heine’s trunk for forbidden books. Heine’s imagery shows how the suffering from which the little girl sings of relief is not intrinsic to humanity, but produced by avarice, power, and petty cruelty.

41 Deutschland: A Winter’s Tale, 29-31. My translation. I have striven for semantic accuracy, but made no effort to preserve the meter or rhyme scheme.
42 Galley, “Briefe über Deutschland und die Geständnisse”
43 Heinrich Heine, Sämtliche Werke 15, Düsseldorfer Ausgabe
44 Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen. My translation
The critical force of Heine’s poetry, its increasingly sharp criticism of the discrepancy between the real condition of the people and the false promises of those who try to succor them with pleasing imagery while nonetheless oppressing them, comes to a head in his Silesian Weavers, written in response to a worker’s revolt in the town of Peterswaldau in Upper Silesia. The revolt captivated the Prussian and French media and provided debates about the welfare of workers with increased urgency. The plight of the workers, hungry from being paid literal starvation wages and wearing rags, elicited the sympathy of even the King of Prussia, who issued a cabinet order to mandate that the weaver’s poverty be remedied through charity, as, he thought, would befit a Christian nation. Still, for expat socialist Hegelians for whom ‘all thought is the thought of its time,’ the revolution seemed to hold particular significance. Was this a sign that the revolution in thought would soon go over into practice?

Heine’s response showcased his sense of revolution as the radical negation of the old at the same time it foregrounded the communist themes that had entered his political imagination. “In sad eyes there sheds no tear,” he opened, “they sit at the loom and grind their teeth: Germany, we weave your shroud;/and into it we weave a threefold curse.” The weavers curse “God, king, and fatherland, the motto of the Prussian militia,” through the act of weaving, laying “one curse upon the God to whom we prayed in Winter’s chill and hunger’s despair,” one upon “the rich man’s king . . . who pried the last penny from our hands and had us shot like dogs” and finally one upon “the false fatherland.” Like in Travel Pictures and On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, the moment of revolution represents the negation of ‘old Germany,’ its last death and

46 Sammons, 260
funeral. But Heine’s imagery here is crisper, more direct, and more obviously socialist; it is through the very act of proletarian labor that the weavers produce the funeral shroud of Old Germany. Heine’s weavers are sad, but they are not crying, intent rather on ensuring that the God, king, and country that promised to relieve them of suffering while “shooting them like dogs” will be laid to rest, a curse upon wherever it is they will finally lay buried.

*The Silesian Weavers* was first published in the July 10, 1844 issue of *Vorwärts!* under the title *die Armen Weber* [the Poor Weavers] and unwittingly took a preemptive stance on a debate about theory, practice, and the political currents in Germany that would soon break out in those same pages. Heine’s poem is clear in its sense that the weaver’s revolt was a sign of things to come, but little more than two weeks later, Ruge would try and dampen such expectations, responding to an article in the Parisian republican outfit *Le Réforme* that saw it as a harbinger of the coming German revolt. Ruge’s article, “The King of Prussia and Social Reform: by a Prussian,” argued that the weaver’s revolt was a “social revolution without a political soul.”\(^\text{48}\) Marx responded to Ruge with an amusingly distemperate, line-by-line takedown that he titled “Critical Marginal Notes to the King of Prussia and Social Reform: by a Prussian.” (Ruge’s article took up two columns on the last page of the July 27, 1844 edition of *Vorwärts!* Marx’s response took up the near entirety of the August 7\(^{th}\) edition and about 2/3rds of the August 10\(^{th}\) edition. Editions of *Vorwärts!* consisted of five leaves each, often divided into about 3 columns, although the layout tended to shift from issue to issue.)

To Ruge’s comment that the social revolution lacks a political soul, Marx replied with a reiteration of one of the main themes of his “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right:”

\(^{48}\) “Der König von Preußen und die Sozialreform,” *Vorwärts!*
It has to be admitted that Germany is just as much *classically* destined for a *social* revolution as it is incapable of a *political* one... The disparity between the philosophical and the political development is not an *anomaly*. It is an inevitable disparity. A philosophical people can find its corresponding practice only in socialism, hence it is only in the *proletariat* that it can find the dynamic element of its emancipation. At the present moment, however, I have neither the time nor the desire to explain to the ‘Prussian’ the relationship of ‘German society’ to social revolution... He will find the first rudiments for an understanding of this phenomenon in my “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.”

For Marx, Ruge had made the exact mistake that Marx warned against in the “Introduction.” Although he agreed with Ruge that Germany was ‘unpolitical’ because it had not yet had its political revolution and so was not yet ripe for it, he was emphatic that this did not entail that Germany was not ripe for revolution *tout court*. Ruge thought that the weaver’s revolt could not be a harbinger of things to come because it was ‘a social revolution without a political soul.’ Marx’s reply was to say, in essence, that a social revolution doesn’t need a political soul because its aim is not political emancipation. If the revolution comes to Germany, its aim will be human emancipation.

Like Heine, Marx also takes up the analogy between the French revolution in practice and the German revolution in thought in his “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” and, like Heine, he understands the revolution in thought to anticipate the revolution in practice. He also echoes Heine in arguing that the German revolution in practice will address the *material* in a way that the French revolution did not and he argues that the German revolution will be even more epochal than the French revolution. And where Heine writes that, “the Gallic rooster has now crowed for the second time, and in Germany, too, day is coming,” Marx writes that, “the day of German resurrection will be proclaimed by the crowing of the Gallic rooster.”

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like Heine, Marx argues that the critique of religion was a necessary step on the way toward the German revolution, although Marx’s views are closer to the Heine of 1844 than the Heine of *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*.

Indeed, the convergence between Heine’s work in the mid-1840’s and Marx’s may be due to the fact that this was the period when they became close friends, if only briefly. The two were in Paris at the same time for a duration of around ten months and their relationship was by all accounts extremely warm, which was somewhat rare for both of them, given their cantankerous and difficult personalities. There is an unverified story that Heine saved Marx’s daughter Jenny when she was convulsing and there exists a verified letter in which Marx expresses his desire to pack Heine in his suitcase when it came time to leave Paris. The resonances between their two bodies of work during this period are also striking, although it is hard to determine the degree and directions of influence, as they were both working through a body of ideas common in left-Hegelian and Parisian expat circles.

And where Heine’s analysis of the harbingers of revolution was, save the *Silesian Weavers*, fixated entirely on the ideas that would lead to the revolution, Marx was far more attuned to seeking out the practices that could germinate into revolution. For Marx, the function of the critique of religion was to “unmask human self-alienation,” or the way that the people, like Heine’s little harp girl, have displaced their desire for a new reality into the realm of ideas and illusions, in order to reunite the people with their actual desire for emancipation. This critique had, for Marx,

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51 Sammons, 262
52 Nigel Reeves argues for Heine’s extensive influence on the young Marx’s writings, though he draws much of his evidence from a comparison of similarities in their texts. György Lukács’ “Heinrich Heine as National Poet” is the classic statement on their intellectual similarities and not inaccurately paints Heine as a kind of missing link between Hegel and Marx, despite the protestations of subsequent generations of cold warrior Heine scholars. Cf. Nigel Reeves, “Heine and the Young Marx,” *Oxford German Studies*; Reeves, *Heinrich Heine: Poetry and Politics*. 53 Marx, “Introduction,” 54.
“essentially been completed.” The next task for the critic, for the Marx of the “Introduction,” is to unmask how law and politics do a similar work of alienation or estrangement, in this instance the way that Germans have merely “thought what other nations have done.”

But the political deficiency of Germany, its utter backwardness, meant for Marx, that among nations, it was actually the readiest for revolution and was poised to be on the vanguard of human emancipation. Marx writes that Germany has “experienced the pains of [development] without sharing in its pleasures and partial satisfactions.” Germany combines all of the deficiencies of capitalism with the “barbarous deficiencies of the ancien régime.” For Marx, this means two things, as becomes especially clear in his reply to Ruge. The first is that, although Germany is behind England and France in the development of its political institutions, it is apace with their inability to solve the social question, and German workers experience the same oppression that French and English workers do. The second is that, given that France and England’s political institutions have not been sufficient to solve the social question, the Germans should not content themselves with merely political emancipation, which “leaves the pillars of the building standing,” but should seek their human emancipation.

Like in Heine’s Silesian Weavers, Marx imagines that the workers’ labor has a revolutionary potential, but unlike Heine, Marx’s imagination extends beyond the moment of negation and into an emancipatory future, nonetheless grounded in the “first order practice” of laboring itself. In other words, as readers of Marx well know, the nature of the worker’s oppression is, for him, grounded in the way that their laboring activity is turned against them. The

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55 Marx, “Introduction,” 59
56 Marx, “Introduction,” 61
57 I have taken the language of “first order practices” from Linda Zerilli, “Feminist Critique and the Realistic Spirit,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, No.4 (2017), pp. 589-611
system of capitalism and its support in the bourgeois state enchains them to a condition in which their labor produces wealth for others and only poverty and oppression for them; they are, as Marx writes in the “Introduction,” the class that must say “I am nothing and I should be everything.” Marx imagines a future in which human emancipation means the reconciliation of workers’ alienation to their laboring practices.

Still, Heine’s *Silesian Weavers* also appears to track the very progression of critique that Marx describes in the “Introduction.” Although Heine wrote the *Weavers* after Marx wrote the “Introduction” and we have no way of knowing whether Heine read it, the progression of the weaver’s curse is to target first God (theology), then the king (law), and then finally the fatherland (politics). And each of the weaver’s curses is accompanied by the worker’s revelation that the claims of theology, law, and politics to protect them were belied by their actual conditions. They weave a curse to the god that they prayed to “in vain,” one to the “rich man’s king/Who did naught to soften” their “misery,” and one upon the “false fatherland…where every flower buckles before its day.” Again, Heine’s image is one where the workers realize the emancipatory power of their labor at the same time they realize the false claims of those who exploit them.

Indeed, part of the work that alienation does against the laborers is to estrange them from their own knowledge, from what they already know in their own practices, defusing their revolutionary consciousness when it is most poised to ignite. Against Ruge, Marx in fact argues that the workers’ actions in the revolt reveals their awareness of this fact (and the superiority of their political consciousness to that of the French and English). He writes: “the action itself bears the stamp of this *superior* character. Not only machines, these rivals of the workers, are destroyed, but also *ledgers*, the titles to property. And while all other movements were aimed primarily only
against the owner of the industrial enterprise, the visible enemy, this movement is at the same time
direct against the banker, the hidden enemy.”60 The revolution indicates to Marx that the workers’
are awakening to what they have always known. As Marx renders it in the “Introduction,” “just as
philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its intellectual
weapons in philosophy.”61

One way to read Marx here, I suggest, is that the task of the critic and, for Heine, perhaps,
the poet, is to reveal how prevailing ideologies have estranged the masses from their own collective
agency. In this regard, the function of his conception of emancipation is not to overwhelm
democratic politics, but to activate it. Their dreams of a heaven that promises them relief from
suffering is just their estranged demand for relief from their current suffering. For Marx, the task
of the critic is to reveal to them how their practices, in both their productive iteration as labor and
their destructive iteration as the violent rebellion against all of the structures that estrange them
from their agency, actually embed a capacity for agency that could lead them to their emancipation.
Marx, I suggest, points the way towards a realism that finds its substance not in the rejection of
lofty or unfeasible ideals, but in the attempt to connect our ideals to practices in which we’re
already enmeshed that could realize them.

Indeed, Marx’s own vision of emancipation has an unavoidably utopian element to it. He
writes in his reply to Ruge, for example, that “the community from which the worker is isolated
by his own labour is life itself, physical and mental life, human morality, human activity, human
enjoyment, human nature. Human nature is the true community of men.”62 Likewise in the
“Introduction,” Marx writes that the redemption that the proletariat will seeks is the “total

60 “Critical Marginal Notes,” 201
61 “Introduction,” 65
62 “Critical Marginal Notes,” 205
redemption of humanity.” Marx’s vision of a revolution that will reconcile a universal class to its own agency as a means of reconciling itself to its morality, activity, enjoyment, and nature takes on an unavoidably utopian dimension. It is hard not to see something unfeasible and remote in Marx’s vision of a society in which the problem of human alienation has been solved tout court.

**Conclusion**

Again, though, Marx’s insistence on imaging how remote ideals of emancipation connect up with “first order practices,” to again borrow a phrase from Linda Zerilli, does something to bring them down to earth. For Marx as for Heine in his more radical moments, the imagination of a better future, terrestrial or divine, has a critical force; it is the negation in thought of the material practices and institutions that we regard as oppressive or otherwise ripe for change. The task of the theorist or the radical poet, for Marx and Heine, is to make sure that the people do not estrange themselves from their desire for emancipation and believe that it will be achieved through something other than their own collective agency. For the Young Hegelians, Hegel’s insight was in showing that the French Revolution expressed a moment in which people realized their own freedom. Their critique of this insight targeted Hegel’s claim that we could be satisfied with the sublation of that freedom into an ideal realm.

The substance of their critique, then, is not to argue against the ideal as such, but to argue that the demand for social transformation contained within the ideal must be connected up with everyday practices. The task of imaging alternative futures, even if it succumbs to a kind of utopian wishful thinking, can never fully transcend its historical and practical context, but rather expresses the desire to transform—to ‘negate’ in Hegelian parlance—those features of our world from which our utopia promises to relieve us. In other words, what Heine and Marx teach contemporary

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63 “Introduction,” 64
theorists, then, is that, our ideals, no matter how remote they might seem, cannot transcend their own historical context, and that one task of the critic is to determine what they seek to express about our time, what desires they contain, and how those desires connect up with the ordinary practices that either perpetuate or lead us toward an emancipatory future.