



## **A POLITICS WITHOUT COMPROMISE: THE YOUNG HEGELIANS AND POLITICS**

### **UMA POLÍTICA SEM COMPROMISSO: OS JOVENS HEGELIANOS E A POLÍTICA**

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**Abstract.** *This article aims at exploring how most of the Young Hegelians came to reject all forms of compromise. It will first show how Young Hegelianism itself was born from a process of radicalisation. Then, it will expound some of the theoretical developments that this process produced and explain why and how all forms of compromise came to be rejected. For Young Hegelians, a compromise is an anti-dialectical position. It consists in the adoption of a median posture, which does not correspond with a real mediation. It is a way of deflating conflicts and, more precisely, to avoid the oppositions at work in history being unveiled in their purity.*

**Keywords:** *Young Hegelianism, compromise, dialectics, “juste milieu”.*

**Resumo.** *Este artigo tem como objectivo explorar o modo como a maior parte dos Jovens Hegelianos vieram a rejeitar todas as formas de compromisso. Começarei por mostrar como o próprio movimento dos Jovens Hegelianos nasceu de um processo de radicalização. Em seguida, irei expor alguns dos desenvolvimentos teóricos que este processo produziu e explicar porquê e como todas as formas de compromisso acabaram por ser rejeitadas. Para os Jovens Hegelianos, um compromisso é uma posição anti-dialéctica. Consiste na adopção de uma postura intermédia que não corresponde a uma mediação real. É uma forma de esvaziar conflitos e, mais exactamente, de evitar que as oposições que operam na História sejam desveladas em toda a sua integridade.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Jovens Hegelianos, compromisso, dialéctica, “juste milieu”.*

## **0. Introduction**

For a long time, the Young Hegelian movement has been considered as an epiphenomenon — or a transitional form — in the history of the Hegelian school

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and in the history of ideas in general. Fortunately, an increasing number of recent studies have revealed the great interest of Young Hegelian reflections and demonstrated they can greatly deepen our understanding of political modernity and, consequently, our present political condition. Jürgen Habermas even wrote in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*: "Today the situation of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians when they distanced themselves from Hegel" (Habermas, 1987, p. 53). Nonetheless, one of the key elements of Young Hegelian views seems somehow marginal in the history of modern political philosophy: the absolute rejection of all forms of compromise.

This article aims at exploring this aspect. It will first show how Young Hegelianism itself was born from a process of radicalisation, as a result of several breaks. Then, it will expound some of the theoretical developments that this process produced and explain why and how all forms of compromise came to be rejected.

## **1. Young Hegelianism as radicalisation process**

### **1.1. Ruptures in the Hegelian School**

As suggested by its name, the Young Hegelian movement was closely related to the Hegelian philosophy. It was actually born inside the Hegelian school as a consequence of its several splits. Its emergence can be described as the result of a theoretical and political radicalisation process.

The first decisive break was the division between a left-wing and a right-wing in the Hegelian school. It was first formulated in 1837, in David Strauss defence of his scandalous book *Life of Jesus* (Strauss, 1837). As put forward in its title, this writing was a historical study (in a Hegelian sense, of course) of the life of Jesus. The approach he adopted was radically different to that of dogma and theology. Strauss intended to read the Gospels in the light of the cultural context of their time and to replace this context in the framework of a universal and philosophical history. He aimed at hunting down the mythical additions of these texts. Even if the inspiration of such a perspective was obviously Hegelian, it became matter of debate inside the Hegelian school. Strauss completely accepted it, he even justified the controversy. He thought that some passages in the

Hegelian corpus were not totally clear, and that they permitted a variety of interpretations. At the heart of the matter lied the fact that Hegel explained that religion and philosophy had the same content but that they differed in their form (see e.g., Hegel, 1830, § 573, p. 582). Religion offered a representation of the truth, whereas philosophy developed a conceptual knowledge of it. Here was, to Strauss's mind, the ambiguity: to what extent is the content independent of the form? Strauss considered that the religious form implied a conservation, a crystallisation of the past, and that it could not follow the historical becoming. Hence the mythifications. As Douglas Moggach puts it, "Strauss depicts the Hegelian distinction between philosophy and religion, concept and representation, as an antinomy. The contents of religion are not identical to those of philosophy but reflect a lower, pre-rational awareness. Religion is thus displaced within the system of absolute spirit" (Moggach, 2007, p. 63).

Of course Strauss's views were not shared by the whole Hegelian school. In his defence of his *Life of Jesus*, Strauss provided an overview of these divergences of opinion. He distinguished three branches in the school, based on the different reactions his work received. The first one, the right wing, tried to prove that the Hegelian corpus did not contain one shred of irreligion. The second one, the left wing, accepted and used the possibility of a rationalistic, historical, and critical reading of the religious writings. The third one, the centre, was undecided on the issue (see Angaut, Buée, Clohec, & Renault, 2015, pp. 15–24).

Rather than being strictly descriptive, this categorisation deepened some tensions inside the Hegelian School. The *Annals of Halle*, the review edited by Arnold Ruge and Ernst Theodor Echtermeyer, offers an interesting example of this evolution. When created in 1838, its initial objective was to compete with the *Annals for Scientific Criticism*, the official review of the School — which had been founded by Hegel himself and Eduard Gans. The editors of the *Annals of Halle* considered the official review "too centred on the defence of the Hegelian system and on academic questions" (Angaut et al., 2015, p. 19). Without any reference to the straussian typology, they just aimed at creating a more spirited publication addressing the problem of its time. But the *Annals of Halle* gradually became one of the main voices of the left wing of the school. The convergence between their initial aspirations and the debate on the place of religion in the system led them

to a broader scope of concerns and questions. One of them was directly political: does Hegelian philosophy support conservative or progressive views? Inspired by the French Revolution, the left Hegelians went for the progressive answer. Nonetheless, their positions covered a spectrum of views ranging from constitutional monarchy to radical republicanism — at least initially (see, e.g., Clochec, 2014).

If the first split in the Hegelian School occurred from the inside, the second one came from the outside. It was provoked by the attacks on Hegelianism (in general) by some conservative and neo-pietist intellectuals. In the autumn of 1838, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg published an article called “The Decline of the Hegelian School” — published in Friedrich Tholuck’s *Literarische Anzeiger* [Literary Gazette] in August, September, and October, 1838 —, where he argued that the Hegelians who opted for a rationalistic perspective on religion and a political defence of the French Revolution only revealed the true nature of the Hegelian system. From his Christian and monarchist point of view, the whole Hegelian school was a danger, therefore it had to be fought. During the same year, Heinrich Leo, another neo-pietist, published a book called *Die Hegelingen* (Leo, 1838) — which could be translated as “The Hegeliards” or “The Hegelsters”. Leo had until recently been influenced by Hegel, so if he was as vehement as Hengstenberg, it was also more precise. He thought that some ambiguities of the Hegelian corpus could be exploited in an atheistic and revolutionary way, as left Hegelians did. Furthermore, his words were more catching than Hengstenberg's ones and some of them acquired an unexpected impact. As a synonym for *Hegeligen*, Leo used “Young Hegelian”. The reference to the Young Germany, this “group” (see Taillandier, 1848) of German writers who advocated (beyond new literary forms) a set of liberal political positions inspired by the French Revolution, was obvious. The purpose of such an identification was clearly disparaging.

These attacks, of course, elicited responses from the left side of the Hegelian School. Bruno Bauer (who recently converted to left Hegelianism after having defended a right Hegelian position for a while) became particularly involved in this controversy (on the evolution of Bruno Bauer's thinking see Moggach, 2007). His entanglement started with a theological and philosophical debate with

Hengstenberg, his future colleague at the University of Bonn. At first, he mainly tried to prove that the pietists's assertions were slanderous because they were based on fallacies; he still regarded Hengtenberg as a worthy adversary, and his remarks were quite tempered. But Bauer gradually radicalised his comments. This process followed a double movement. The first one lied in the development of some criticisms against Strauss's ideas. As an example, he believed that Strauss's views on history and religion fell back in some form of substantialism that made no room for subjectivity (see Moggach, 2007, pp. 45–46). In doing so, he took some distance from a point of reference of the controversy but he did not come to agree with neo-pietists. The second movement that characterises Bauer's radicalisation is not a purely intellectual one; but the neo-pietists' attacks were not purely intellectual either. They fitted into the political context of the investiture of Frederick William IV of Prussia. If, when he came to power, the new sovereign rose hopes of a new political sequence breaking with the repressive politics of his father, he soon followed a very conservative and reactionary (as Young Hegelians came to qualify it) policy. One of its specific features was the struggle against the Hegelian ideas. Not surprisingly, both Hengstenberg and Leo exerted a powerful influence on the Prussian Camarilla, a circle of court advisers counselling the King behind the scenes. As a consequence, the main left Hegelian organs were censored and banned. As repression progressed, Bauer assaulted more directly the religious and political base of the regime. In doing so, he opened the way for the second movement of his radicalisation process: he came to claim that, in reality, the neo-pietists' statements were fully accurate and that “true” Hegelianism, as Hengstenberg presented it, was atheistic and revolutionary. The rationalist Straussian views on the Gospels were transformed into atheism, and the progressive views on politics became fully revolutionary. The title of the most famous satirical book written anonymously by Bruno Bauer (and in part by Karl Marx), *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement Against Hegel the Atheist and Antichrist*, speaks for itself (Bauer, 1841/1989).

The growing repression further strengthened Bauer's position. In 1842, his dismissal from the University of Bonn — upon a request authorised by the (anti-Hegelian) Secretary of State for Education Johann Albrecht Friedrich Eichhorn — carried a great symbolic weight. Philosophy had become a political affair!

## 1.2. Swerving from Hegel

Paradoxically the Young Hegelians had to face an obvious problem: the political substance of Hegel's writings was different from their own, and assuredly less radical. But to radicalise, in that sense, does not mean to change course; the radical is not the pure other, even if he is no more the same. But how can they justify that kind of swerving, and especially in a systematic theoretical framework? Views differed in that respect. Had Hegel *accommodated* his political considerations with the existing order? And in this case, did the theoretical *principles* of the system remain intact? Or were these principles unsatisfactory and should be criticised? Then what would remain of the system? Two main views opposed (for an in-depth presentation, see Clochec, 2018).

The first one was the “accommodation” hypothesis. Its origins can be traced back to a distinction made by some Hegelians, and Heinrich Heine notably, made (even before the first break in the Hegelian School) between Hegel's esoteric doctrine and its exoteric coating (on the Meinersian origins of this distinction, see, Clochec, 2018, p. 303). Heine claimed that if the regime could approve of the second one, the first one was intrinsically dissenting and liberal. The complexity of Hegel's language and style masked his true views on politics and religion (see, e.g., Heine, 1856, p. 292). Some Left Hegelians, and some Young Hegelians then (Arnold Ruge in particular), took up that pattern. But according to Ruge, the matter was not simply about reading Hegel's writings adequately; it was also about correcting some specific sections of the system: those that justified the existing state of affairs. By an obvious analogy with the German campaign of 1813, he came to portray his own philosophical outlook as a “liberation war” against three “foreign powers”: the closed philosophical system, the presupposed dogmatics, and the empirical reality (Ruge, 1841, p. 2). Hegel let these powers invade his thinking because in the indolent times when he lived, he could enjoy a privileged position (thanks to such a compromise). So he never suffered repression, and he never had to make a real political stand (see, e.g., Ruge, 1842, p. 761). Then his idea that philosophy must “look behind”. But in the opinion of Ruge, the owl of Minerva did not have to wait for the falling of the dusk to spread its wings. Philosophy, to Ruge's mind, had to be the constructive force of the future; its sclerotic and compromised elements had to be hunted and eradicated,



so that it would no more reject the “ought to be”. The philosophical criticism was to produce the historical movement, and the theoretical activity was to become practical. The philosopher, Ruge wrote, must be “sat at the loom of its time” (Ruge, 1841, p. 3). Hegelian philosophy had to be realised, namely redefined (distinguishing the principles of the implications) and completed.

The second perspective did not dismiss the need for rectifying the system, on the contrary! It claimed that the division between principles and implications was misleading. Bruno Bauer was the first to develop such a position but his friend, in those days, the (young) Karl Marx explained it more clearly and defended it more firmly (on Bauer's hesitations, see Clohec, 2018, pp. 305–306). As he put it in his doctoral dissertation: when Hegel's pupils “explain one or the other determination of his system by his desire for accommodation and the like, hence, in one word, explain it in terms of *morality*” (Marx, 1841/2010, p. 84). Marx used two arguments against the accommodation hypothesis. The first one consisted of recalling that, a short time ago, some of these pupils still shared the same views; as a consequence they “rendered themselves suspect of not having been serious before” (Marx, 1841/2010, p. 84). The second (and more interesting) argument lied in a criticism of the psychologising aspects of the accommodation hypothesis. It assumed that some content of Hegel's philosophy depended on personal and arbitrary decisions — and this is how we must, here, understand Marx's usage of the term “morality” — in a particular context. So those who defended that kind of interpretation deviated from a real philosophical understanding of the problem: “It is quite thinkable for a philosopher to fall into one or another apparent inconsistency through some sort of accommodation; he himself may be conscious of it. But what he is not conscious of, is the possibility that this apparent accommodation has its deepest roots in an inadequacy or in an inadequate formulation of his principle itself” (Marx, 1841/2010, p. 84). The principles were as problematic as the implications: the conservative positions of Hegel were rooted in the internal logic of his thinking, and the Hegelian system required an inner revision. So the goal was no longer to be consistent with Hegel's words or to reveal a hidden doctrine. Unfortunately, in his dissertation, Marx did not precisely designate the fallacious aspects of the system. The Bauerian influences of his text — the emphasis on self-consciousness in history as opposed

to an abstract and transcendent “absolute spirit” — help us to better understand his outline.

Thus, one of the key aspects of the Bauerian reconfiguration of the Hegelian framework was a renewed dialectic deprived of sublation and affirming the supremacy of the negative against the positive. For Bauer and for most of Young Hegelians, the term “positive” came to designate the fixed and sclerotic elements of the existing state and theories, the persistence of dead and rotted materials in history that get in the way of the development of self-consciousness and that must be purged by criticism — as it discovered the contradictions and the mythical aspects of the gospels (On Bauer's studies of the gospels and the difference between his approach and Strauss's one, see Moggach, 2007). At that time, and as mentioned by Marx in his doctoral dissertation, some philosophers (such as Schelling, whom the Young Hegelians perceived as the main theoretical enemy of Hegelianism) and jurists (such as those of the very conservative German Historical School) highlight the value of the “positive” could only strengthen such a claim. Nevertheless, the struggle against the positive could not affect the mere enemy. Hence the idea that the principles of the Hegelian system could not remain undamaged: “Criticism must therefore direct itself against itself, and dissolve the mysterious substantiality in which up till now it and its object have been contained. The development of substance itself drives it on to the universality and determinateness of the idea and to its real existence, to infinite self-consciousness” (As translated by Moggach, 2007, p. 75).

## **2. Theorising the refusal of compromise**

### **2.1. Moderates and “juste milieu”**

The relationships with the moderates had been a determining element throughout the evolution of the Young Hegelian movement. One of their first attitudes lay in a defence of the whole school and an attempt to radicalise it. The article of the (young) Friedrich Engels untitled “Diary of a Guest student” offers an example of this kind of position (Engels, 1842/2010). In this report of some lectures given by the “Old” Hegelians Philip Konrad Marheineke and Leopold von Heinning, Engels highlighted their criticism of Schelling in order to give an impression of unity in the face of the enemy. At the same time, he transposed the words of these professors in a Young Hegelian vocabulary in order to make their



remarks sound more radical. It should be noted that, in May 1842, when this article was published, Marheineke, who had been the master and the collaborator of Bruno Bauer, defended his former student and tried to prevent his dismissal. But soon, this support transformed into criticism. “Old” Hegelian did not agree, either with the Young Hegelian views or the idea of a common front, and they made this clear. The Young Hegelians rupture with the Hegelian School hastened as a consequence. During the summer of 1842, the radicalisation process becomes clearer and more conceptualised. It also exceeded the framework of the Hegelian School.

Edgar Bauer (Bruno Bauer's brother) introduced an important concept in that sense. He considered that all politics of conciliation stumbled into the pitfall of the *juste milieu* [middle way politics]. Gradually, this term became widely used in Young Hegelian literature. It was generally quoted in French; it had indeed first been employed in France to characterise the July Monarchy. It had been popularised by French Press caricaturists; they had made the expression a kind of motto of Louis-Philippe's regime, which both rejected absolute monarchy and revolutionary republics. In such a position, Edgar Bauer and Young Hegelians denounced a *lack of principle*, which undermined the antagonism necessary for any historical development. Bruno Bauer's negative dialectics was the evident background of such a claim. Obviously Edgar Bauer did not just target the French regime. For example, he attacked the German liberals (such as Karl von Rotteck) who mainly defended, in the French Revolution, the achievements of the National Constituent Assembly. To Bauer's mind, those who rejected the Revolution as a whole were more consistent; at least, they perceived the real principle of the revolution and they spurned it. Edgar Bauer also wrote an entire book entitled *Bruno Bauer and his enemies* to advocate for his brother's against both the Old Hegelians and the anti-Hegelian establishment, following the same argumentative pattern (Bauer, 1842). Two kinds of enemies were identified: the real and consistent enemies and the moderate false friends. He assumed that the best way to refute both of them was quite simple: revealing the antagonism in its purity and leading to its summit the principle of the negative.

But how can one know whether this principle is the good one? How to know if it really tends to the universal? Isn't, by definition, the negative a particular

opposed to another particular (the positive)? Here again, Edgar Bauer answered such questions in the light of his brother reading of Hegel's philosophy of history. For Bruno Bauer, as a matter of fact, "the universal must not be treated as a transcendent or hypostatised entity or force [...] because this would be to impose a new form of heteronomy on subjective action. A universal perspective is opened rather when we reflect on the entire course of history as a process of alienation and struggles for freedom. [...] The essence of liberation is the extrication of oneself from existing relations of domination, and the unrelenting struggle against their objective forms." (Moggach, 2006, p. 120) In this process, self-consciousness has no fixed end, it is rather autotelic. To Bauer's mind, infinite self-consciousness was defined by an opposition to any particular interests and especially, of course, all particular interest that pretends to be universal (as political or religious forms of tutelage), namely the positive. In dialectical terms, "the perspective of infinite self-consciousness is that of a determinate negation, grasping the implicit possibilities and contradictions at the heart of the present and undermining all efforts to sustain the existent against the progress of reason and freedom. It thus fulfils the millennial struggle for emancipation that is the essence of history." (Moggach, 2006, p. 123) And that is why it corresponds to the realisation of freedom, and to concrete universality.

In *The Reaction in Germany*, Mikhail Bakunin as a young Hegelian, defended brilliantly that kind of position in the light of Hegel's logic. He tried to show that all compromise positions and all "juste milieu" postures were nothing more than tepidity and mediocrity, and that they were anti-dialectical insofar as they implicated the adoption of a *median* position, which might never be confused with an authentic dialectical *mediation*. As the compromise tries to deflate conflicts, it avoids the "oppositions" at work in history being unveiled in their purity and transformed into "contradictions" (see Angaut, 2007; García, 2018). In other words, compromise is inconsistent and inconsequential; it is just a manner of preserving the status quo. From this point of view, the problem with such a gesture is that it presupposes that the opposites are equal in right. It is true that both are unilateral — and that none of them, as such, can claim to be fully universal — but one of them is preponderant because, as the moving principle, it can bring to universality: the negative.

## **2.2. Theory of terrorism and politics of love**

In one aspect, Bakunin and Edgar Bauer's perspectives differed from Bruno Bauer's. They consider that the struggle against the Reaction cannot be merely theoretical and intellectual. They were some of the most prominent supporters of a translation of Young Hegelianism into a real *praxis* — while Bruno Bauer still considered that theory was in itself “the strongest *praxis*” (Tomba, 2006, p. 94). Nonetheless, we can notice an interesting difference between Edgar Bauer's and Bakunin's perspectives. The first one came to promote a theory of terrorism and the second one a politics of love.

The defence of the supremacy of the negative led Edgar Bauer to look upon the French Terror as a practical model. He gave, in that respect, a provocative answer to the moderate liberals that drew on the legacy of the National Constituent Assembly. Nonetheless, he also claimed: “it is certain that every principle that newly steps into world history is vandalistic. And it is vandalistic because it must stride forward to its most extreme form” (As translated by Luft, 2006, pp. 143–144). If Bruno Bauer alleged the destructive powers of criticism, his brother Edgar came to insist on the critical powers of destruction. “The new principle is Sansculottish. Truth is Sansculottish” (as translated by Luft, 2006, p. 144), he affirmed. And this principle could even justify violence. As Eric van der Luft put it, for Edgar Bauer, “any measure of violence or arrogance was permissible toward the goal of overthrowing the monarchy” (Luft, 2006, p. 144). However, Edgar Bauer's views remained marginal in the Young Hegelian movement; he was in all likelihood the only Young Hegelian to go so far. And note that, in fact, that apology of violence remained purely rhetorical. But it produced a real debate in the movement (see, e.g., the closing of Ruge, 1842).

Bakunin too considered, as a partisan of the negative, that destruction was necessary. The ending (and most famous) phrase of *The Reaction in Germany* is undoubtedly: “the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!” (Bakunin, 1842/2015). But contrary to Edgar Bauer, Bakunin tried to think how politics without compromise could avoid being a politics of hate. For Bakunin, true love could only be experienced and practised by the partisans of the negative. Because of their defence of a unilateral position that could not become universal, consistent positivists were only capable of hatred against their opponents. The

only kind of love they could feel was entangled in the false universal provided by Christianity. But Bakunin alleged that it was not real love because it was not rooted in the pursuit of universality. The partisans of the negative, as they belonged to a party — and, as such, took a unilateral position — could feel hate too. But as they were to realise the concrete universal, they could experience a true and regenerated love which could even be a love for their enemies. The partiality to which the negative was forced tended unceasingly to abrogate itself in the universality of love. That's why for the partisans of the negative, love was more than a feeling, it was a duty.

### **3. Conclusion**

More or less consciously, we often represent radicalism in a topological way; on the political spectrum, the radical dwells in the extremes. Even if we use a more complex analytical perspective on political ideologies, we tend to define core and peripheral groups, concepts, etc. And the radical is always situated on the outskirts. In that respect, we can easily attest that Young Hegelianism was born of a radicalisation process. Young Hegelians, nevertheless, provided a completely different representation of radicalism, putting it at the centre of the historical process.

For Young Hegelians, and to quote Marx's "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction": "To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter" (Marx, 1844/2010, p. 182). In that way, radicalism is not just a "topological" situation, it is a matter of truth; and obviously, from a Hegelian point of view truth does only make sense in history. Hence, the historical necessity of rejecting all kinds of compromise. But here appears a major theoretical issue: that of the relations between philosophy (and its truth) and politics. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one of the major theoretical problems faced by Young Hegelians as they get involved in politics was that of the end (or more precisely the exit [*Ausgang*] from) philosophy.

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