

Ph.D. Project Presentation

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My Ph.D. project lies within the history of philosophy, specifically the history of 19th century German philosophy, but is also relevant to the history of political theory. I am generally interested in Hegelianism in the period after Hegel's death and the contemporaneous philosophical and socio-political reception of Hegel's philosophy. The project centres on the group of thinkers commonly referred to as the 'Young Hegelians' and the relationship between their philosophy and the mature works of Karl Marx, specifically *Capital*, vol. 1. My two main arguments are (1) that distinctively Young Hegelian themes and concepts are present in the works of the mature Marx, *Capital* being the case in point; and (2) that Marx's shift away from more traditional (Young) Hegelian philosophy and his move towards a critique political economy was not a move away from Young Hegelianism, but was rather the most Young Hegelian thing about him. However, in order to investigate the claim that Marx remains, in some essential sense, a Young Hegelian, I need to define what that means.

In the literature, there is a dual and conflicting tendency in the descriptions of Young Hegelianism. On the one hand, the Young Hegelians are called by that very name, and the term is used to refer to a relatively well-delimited though large group of people, at least in its core. On the other hand, the same literature argues that the Young Hegelians did not agree on anything and that they were engaged in perpetual trench warfare between their respective and conflicting positions. But both of these cannot be true; if there truly were no common ground for the Young Hegelians, then the term itself becomes empty and devoid of meaning. It would have no signifying or explanatory power. Furthermore, we would have no way of determining who should and should not be included in the group of people we refer to by that term. The term 'Young Hegelian' itself is caught between two tendencies: Either it has a viable philosophical content, in which case it becomes too narrow to contain all the historical actors who self-identified as Young Hegelians and has been treated as such in the literature; or it has a viable historical definition, in which case it becomes a

completely historicist designation with no explanatory power or philosophical content. In the first part of my project, therefore, I investigate the relatively simple (though of course incredibly complex) question: *What does it mean to be a Young Hegelian?* I do this by identifying three key problems derived mainly from Hegel's philosophy that the Young Hegelians agreed needed solving (if not explicitly then at least implicitly so), and three key concepts that they all to some extent applied in their individual attempts to solve those problems. Rather than identifying the Young Hegelians by their solutions, I thus identify them by the problems they are trying to solve, and rather than focusing on the concepts that emerge as a result of their individual or collective analyses (e.g. 'alienation'), I focus on the concepts that form the methodological basis for their analysis in the first place. Thus, the three problems are the unification of the particular with the universal, the realisation and possible end of philosophy, and the realisation of human freedom in history. The three concepts are sublation, critique, and *praxis*.

In the second part of my project, I attempt to apply this newfound definition on Marx in his mature work. Though the details vary, there is common agreement that Marx was a Young Hegelian in his youth. I want to investigate to what extent this remained the case in the later part of his life. Taking volume one of *Capital* as the mature Marxian work *par excellence*, I will investigate whether the problems and conceptual methodologies identified as inherently Young Hegelian in the dissertation's first part are present in the mature works of Marx (the assumption being that if they are present in *Capital* then this will be representative for the mature Marx as such) and if so, in what way that is the case.

This leaves open an obvious question: Did Marx not break with the Young Hegelians? This idea has, in my opinion, become such a platitude in writings on Marx, scholarly and otherwise, that it has become devoid of all meaning and sense. None the less, it is the dominant view across the all the literature that at some point in the 1840's Marx 'broke' with the Young Hegelians and that consequently there also appears some kind of 'break' in his thinking, however defined.¹ This notion of a *break* I plan to take up in a short *excursus* between the first and second parts. Here, I will give a general characteristic of the notion and argue for why I believe it has become a platitude. I also want to identify and critique three prototypical motivations for such theories of a break: (1) An epistemological or scientific motivation as seen in Althusserian Marxism (Marx must break with

¹ It is an open question answered in different ways whether or not this break was also a break with Hegel himself. This aside, however, the *break with Young Hegelianism* seems to be a constant.

Hegel if Marxism is to be Science); (2) a political motivation, as seen in the so-called ‘Traditional’ Marxism of the Second International and Marxism-Leninism (the bourgeois liberal tendencies of the young Marx are an embarrassment and must be isolated from ‘real’ Marx so he can remain ideologically *unbefleckt*); and (3) a philosophical motivation, as seen in Hegelian Marxism, especially György Lukács, but also other later Hegelian or Hegel-inspired Marxists such as Slavoj Žižek and Istvan Mészáros (the ‘detour’ into Young Hegelian is a conceptual necessity, but so is the break with them and the ‘return’ to Hegel which thus forms an instance of sublation).

Finally, I hope to conclude by assessing whether or not it is true that Marx remained, in some essential sense, a Young Hegelian throughout his life. I might find that it is not true; in that case, the dominant narrative of a break will have been strengthened and put on a more secure footing. At the same time, I believe that I will have made a valuable contribution in to the history of philosophy in my investigation in part one of what it means to be a Young Hegelian. In the reverse case, if it indeed turns out that the ‘mature’ Marx can plausibly be called a Young Hegelian, I will conversely have made a valuable contribution to challenging an established idea of Marx’s intellectual development, which can hopefully compel others to think through the idea of a break in Marx’s thought and especially the relationship between his (supposedly) youthful Young Hegelianism and his mature economic criticism. Furthermore—and, to a certain degree, more importantly—I will also in this case have made an important contribution to the literature on Young Hegelianism while simultaneously demonstrating my definition’s applicability.