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## Partisan of the Absolute State: Arnold Ruge, Liberalism, and the *Hallische Jahrbücher*

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### Abstract

This article considers the political theory and political theology of Arnold Ruge during the years he edited the *Hallische* and *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, paying special attention to his relationship with a variety of “liberalisms” circulating at the time. It argues that Ruge’s central and consistent commitment was to the “absolute state,” which he described as “an end in itself.” Such a state, Ruge believed, would constitute a space in which citizens could realize their public freedom. I show how Ruge constructed this approach through critical engagements with three forms of liberalism: the Romantic nationalist liberalism of Ernst Moritz Arndt; the ethical pluralist liberalism of Franz von Flourencourt; and the pragmatic economic liberalism of Karl Biedermann. I conclude with reflections on Ruge’s 1843 “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus.”

**Keywords:** Arnold Ruge; Young Hegelianism; liberalism; state theory; Moritz Arndt; Franz von Flourencourt; Karl Biedermann

### Introduction

It would be hard to disagree with the proposition that the meaning of political concepts is never fixed, but changes—often dramatically—across time and place. And it would be hard to think of a concept that exemplifies this familiar principle better than that of “liberalism.” Thus, and for example, in a recent conceptual history of the term through the course of what Reinhart Koselleck calls the “Sattelzeit,” or the century spanning 1750 and 1850, Jörn Leonhard has shown how “liberal” went from signifying a refined moral character and unprejudiced state of mind (a *liberale Gesinnung*), to a term identified with Napoleon’s brief but influential effort to construct an imperial ideology (*idées libérales*), to a shorthand used by English conservatives to associate their enemies with the excesses of the Jacobin terror, to a statement of commitment to the revolutionary nationalist movements of southern Europe (notably Greece), to, finally, a discrete political identity and party formation.<sup>1</sup> But while this kind of expansive, diachronic treatment of semantic shifts has a unique capacity to reveal the, as it were, tectonics of political language, it is also true that, at any given moment, individual terms will carry multiple potential meanings, as various actors struggle for the right to define them. Thus, we might suggest that closer contextual methods and studies can disclose aspects of the problem that more protracted conceptual histories cannot. I will make my case by examining the details of one author’s relationship with

<sup>1</sup> Jörn Leonhard, “Formulating and Reformulating ‘Liberalism,’” in *In Search of European Liberalisms*, ed. Fernández-Sebastián Freeden and Jörn Leonhard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72–101.

liberalism, or rather liberalisms, over a short period: the work of the political theorist Arnold Ruge from 1838 to 1843, or the years when, along with Theodore Echtermeyer, he edited the frequently cited but infrequently studied *Hallische* and *Deutsche Jahrbücher*.

There is, of course, a vast literature on those who have variously been dubbed the Young, Left, and New Hegelians, with older studies focusing on how this group contributed to Marx's early development and more recent ones examining them on their own terms.<sup>2</sup> But while commentators always mention Ruge, only rarely do they provide more than a cursory analysis of his work. He is typically characterized as an impresario—a master of promotion and organization, but an average intellect surrounded by giants.<sup>3</sup> Like so many others, he also suffered the fate of having been criticized by Marx, whose prowess with the art of the pithy dismissal was arguably unmatched in nineteenth-century German letters. In *The Great Men of the Exile*, for example (a mean-spirited diatribe Marx wrote in London following the defeat of the 1848 revolutions), Ruge is pilloried as a conceited, insecure, opportunistic, derivative, dim-witted blowhard who, on top of those failings, was ugly to boot.<sup>4</sup> But, though his followers rarely admit it, we must allow that Marx himself often wrote out of resentment, and his frequent attacks on erstwhile friends have cast more than one dark shadow across figures who rightly deserve to be remembered. Ruge, I would suggest, is a case in point. As Marx is sure to note, he did tend to reissue the same work in multiple formats—first as articles, then as a book, then as a volume in his collected works. And he knew how to take advantage of what was a rapidly expanding book trade.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, like all the Young Hegelians, he was undeniably prolific. And from 1838 to 1843, the chief platform for his work was the *Hallische Jahrbücher* (which, in defiance of the Prussian censors, he moved from Leipzig to Dresden in July 1841 and renamed the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*).

The received interpretation of Ruge's trajectory between 1838 and 1843 suggests that ever greater repression on the part of the state resulted in ever greater radicalism in the pages of his journal. On this account, the *Jahrbücher* began as a champion of Protestantism and Prussia. But in 1840, both Friedrich Wilhelm III and his Minister of Culture and patron of Hegelianism Karl Altenstein died. As the Young Hegelians fell out of favor and came into conflict with the regime of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, their politics became more revolutionary, and more inclined toward the French theory of popular sovereignty. For Ruge, this reading concludes, this process reached its apex in "Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus," which appeared in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* from January 2 to 4, 1843, and which is said to represent Ruge's renunciation of his own earlier liberalism and decisive turn toward radicalism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941); Sydney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950); Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (London: Constable, 1965); Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Alan Lane, 1969); David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1969); Ingrid Pepperle, *Junghegelianische, Geschichtsphilosophie und Kunsttheorie* (Berlin: Akademie, 1978); Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Douglas Moggach, ed., *The New Hegelians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Douglas Moggach, ed., *Politics, Religion, and Art* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Lars Lambrecht, ed., *Umstürzende Gedanken* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2013); Michael Quante and Amir Mohseni, eds., *Die linken Hegelianer* (Paderborn: Brill Publishers, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, 12; Lawrence S. Stepelevich, *The Young Hegelians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 209.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, "The Great Men of the Exile," *Marx & Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 11 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 227–325, esp. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Literary Criticism in the Epoch of Liberalism, 1820–1870," in *A History of German Literary Criticism*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 179–276, esp. 183–85.

<sup>6</sup> This is an approach developed most recently by Warren Breckman, who presents "Eine Selbstkritik" as the "moment" when Ruge rejects "Hegelian philosophy" in favor of "radical democracy" (Warren Breckman, "Arnold Ruge and the Machiavellian Moment," in *Die linken Hegelianer*, ed. Michael Quante and Amir Mohseni [Paderborn: Brill, 2015] 127–40, 128). Breckman contends that, from 1838 to 1841, Ruge sought "to liberate the state from theology" (133–34). "Eine Selbstkritik," on the other hand, represented a "break with liberalism" (135) and a "reduction of the political state" to the "demos" (136). As will become clear in what follows, I disagree. Ruge's early work did

No doubt there is some truth to this narrative, and versions of it circulated in Ruge's own time, particularly among his enemies.<sup>7</sup> But the difficulty here is the extent to which it erases the revolutionary and democratic commitments of Ruge's earlier work and the complexity of its relationship with liberalism. Indeed, a close examination of Ruge's contributions to the *Jahrbücher* reveals that, far from identifying with liberalism, he repeatedly sought to define his position off against it. More accurately, from 1838 onward, Ruge defined his position against a variety of liberalisms, or different discourses that were competing for the mantle of liberalism. And the specific aspect of Ruge's approach that distinguished it from these was his conception of the state as, in his words, "absolute" or "an end in itself." Although liberals invariably constructed freedom as something that the state was designed to secure or protect, Ruge saw it as something that the state embodied. For him, the only real freedom was public freedom, or the freedom to participate in the life of the state. And that was the genuine inheritance of the revolutionary tradition and the true meaning of democracy.

What follows is broken down into three sections. First, I provide a synopsis of the literary, political, and philosophical character of the *Jahrbücher*, especially in its first two years, or the period when it was most associated with Protestantism and Prussia. I argue that, from early on, the journal sought to distinguish itself from other literary and political movements by advancing a Hegelian conception of rational freedom—one that emphasized participation in public life, patriotism, and civic virtue. I show how Ruge developed this conception of freedom through a series of polemics with the historian Heinrich Leo in which he mobilized a unique political theology that associated Protestantism less with personal faith than with political activism. Next, I turn to Ruge's engagements with three different forms of liberalism, or nominally liberal discourses, each represented by a figure whose work Ruge either critically reviewed or implicitly countered in the pages of the *Jahrbücher*: the romantic nationalist liberalism of Ernst Moritz Arndt; the ethical pluralist liberalism of Franz von Florencourt; and the pragmatic economic liberalism of Karl Biedermann. By reconstructing Ruge's arguments and (often extremely cunning) strategies, I reveal the manner in which he formulated his own political agenda through his disagreements with others. Finally, in the last section, I propose that Ruge's understanding of the "absolute state" was integral to his politics and to the mission of his journal right up until its final numbers in January 1843. Rather than seeing Ruge as someone who altered his position in response to external pressures, I maintain, it would be more accurate to say that he pursued a single, unified vision, albeit more aggressively as the hope of achieving it faded into obscurity.

### Political Theology and the *Hallische Jahrbücher*

It is surprising how often scholars discuss the Young Hegelians without any systematic engagement with the *Jahrbücher*.<sup>8</sup> For, to the extent that the group existed at all, it was

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not seek to liberate the state from theology; it developed a political theology. Ruge did not break with liberalism in 1843; he challenged versions of it from 1838 onward. And "Eine Selbstkritik" was not a reduction of the state to the demos but a description of what Ruge called a "free state." As Ruge himself explained in an essay that appeared shortly after "Eine Selbstkritik," the goal of that piece was not statelessness but "the republic, that is, the state as common essence (*res publica*) as common property" (Arnold Ruge, "Rechtfertigung der Deutschen Jahrbücher," in *Revue des Auslandes*, ed. L. Meyer and Otto Wigand [Leipzig: Wigand, 1843], 19–20).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Hermann Scheidler [anonymous], "Die Preußische Regierung und die Hallischen Jahrbücher," in *Minerva*, vol. 1 (Jena: Bran, 1841): 504–40; Ernst Hengstenberg, "Die Vollbrachte Revolution," *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* 57 (1842): 449–51; Karl Biedermann, *Die deutsche Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Mayer und Wigand, 1842), 506–16.

<sup>8</sup> Two crucial exceptions are Wolfgang Ißbach, *Die Junghegelianer* (Munich: Fink, 1988), and Stephan Walter, *Demokratisches Denken zwischen Hegel und Marx* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1995). Ißbach's research on the Young Hegelians remains unmatched. In concert with the argument that I develop here, he reads Ruge's "Eine Selbstkritik" not as a sudden turn from liberalism to radicalism, but as "the completion of a phase in which the Young Hegelians drew logical conclusions from the contradictions of constitutionalism and defined themselves as a radical party of democracy" (191). However, while Ißbach places the emphasis on the emergence of political parties, I focus on struggles over the meaning of political concepts. Walter provides the most systematic study of Ruge

primarily in the pages of this journal. Indeed, the phrase “Young Hegelian” was coined in 1838 by Leo as a nasty epithet for the thinkers that Ruge and Echtermeyer had gathered around them.<sup>9</sup> Always sensitive to the power of what we call branding, Ruge refashioned the insult as a collective identity. The initial numbers of the *Jahrbücher*, which began appearing daily on January 1, 1838, suggested that it might be concerned primarily with literary and aesthetic questions, and historical surveys of the great German universities. Its choice of contributors was also notably ecumenical, and even included Leo. That said, in its second week, on January 7 and 8, 1838, the journal published a piece by Feuerbach that in some sense framed its purpose or that we can use to do so here.

Like most of the articles in the *Jahrbücher*, the piece took the form of an extended book review. Or rather, it employed the genre of the review as a platform for developing an original argument. The book in question was the theologian Karl Bayer’s *Der Idee der Freiheit und der Begriff des Gedankens*, which advanced the thesis that the essence of freedom is found in the act of thinking or that thinking consists of “a free relation of the spirit to itself.”<sup>10</sup> As Feuerbach saw it, this argument “restored the shamefully profaned word freedom to its original and holy meaning.” For it meant that freedom was recognized, not as a function of the will, but as the capacity of reason. Those who assumed the former, Feuerbach maintained, conceived of freedom as nothing more than “the blue Monday of the tradesman” (that is, skipping work). Theirs was a freedom “not of order but of licentiousness, not of sanity but of madness, not of health but of personal arbitrariness, not of plenitude but of deprivation.” In contrast, Feuerbach held that “the word freedom, this word of God, is the expression of the highest reason, the expression of wisdom.” At its core was not the puerile satisfaction of desires, but rigorous “freedom of thought” or “intellectual freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

Feuerbach’s valorization of rational freedom was explicitly derived from Hegel. And more than anything else, this became the *Jahrbücher*’s dominant theme. It also pointedly set those who came to be called the Young Hegelians apart from the two most historically proximate literary movements: Romanticism, on the one side, and Young Germany, on the other. As Ruge noted, the former had turned inward, toward mystery, irony, and the individual genius, and the latter had come to focus on life, the body, sensuousness, and the transgression of bourgeois morality.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, under Ruge’s guidance, the Young Hegelians would be known for their seriousness of purpose, their indefatigable pursuit of pure principles, and their commitment to the elevation and transformation of the state. For them, freedom could only mean rational self-determination, which, in turn, could only be achieved through self-conscious participation in public life or in the ongoing struggles and deliberations that generated the laws and norms of one’s community. This was both the demand and the purpose of the *Jahrbücher*, which Ruge conceived of as an enactment of the principles it espoused.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, when the Young Hegelians promoted the state, they did not mean a collection of positive institutions, much less a Weberian monopoly on violence. Rather, they meant what Ruge often called “the public essence” or the realm of public freedom

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to date, including an account of his larger body of work and the history of its reception. But what Walter gains in comprehensiveness he loses in contextual detail. For instance, he makes no references to Florencourt or Biedermann, and only passing ones to Arndt. And he is primarily interested in what he sees as Ruge’s overlooked contribution to modern “democratic thought” (11–12), not his relationship with *Vormärz* liberalism.

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Leo, *Die Hegeligen* (Halle: Anton, 1838), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Bayer, *Der Idee der Freiheit und der Begriff des Gedankens* (Nürnberg: Bauer und Raspe, 1837), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, “Der Idee der Freiheit und der Begriff des Gedankens,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 6–7 (1838): 45–56, esp. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Echtermeyer and Arnold Ruge, “Die Protestantismus und die Romantik,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 245–51, 265–71, 53–64 (1838, 1839): 2113–64, 2401–80, 417–512; Arnold Ruge, “Basedow und seine Söhne,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 131–34 (1839): 1047–70; Hohendahl, “Literary Criticism in the Epoch of Liberalism, 1820–1870,” 239–48.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Ruge, *Aus früherer Zeit*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Duncker, 1867), 446.

as such—that space where one could exercise one’s reason by turning away from private, egoistic interests and orienting oneself to the universal.

Within this broad theoretical framework, the political issue that came to preoccupy the *Jahrbücher* in its first years concerned the fallout of the so-called Cologne Turmoil.<sup>14</sup> This referred to a power struggle between the Prussian government and the Catholic Church that began when, in 1837, Archbishop Droste of Cologne sought to uphold Catholic doctrine by: (1) refusing to ordain priests who attended the lectures of the rationalist Hermesians at the University of Bonn (named after their founder George Hermes, whose writings had been indexed in 1835), and (2) indicating that he would enforce a papal order that required couples in mixed marriages to raise their children Catholic. When Altenstein attempted to force the archbishop to recant, this sparked a series of events that led to the archbishop’s arrest. In response, the Romantic author Joseph Görres composed his popular and controversial *Athanasius*—a work that defended the archbishop, attacked Protestantism and Prussia, and roused German Catholics to action. In early 1838, the *Jahrbücher* published an article in support of the Hermesians and two critical reviews of Görres’s book.<sup>15</sup> But the real trouble began when Leo published his *Sendschreiben an F. Görres*. Although this work was also critical of Görres, it conceded some of his challenges to the administrative state, which it associated with Hegelianism and the French Revolution. Ruge felt targeted and compelled to respond.<sup>16</sup> When his scathing “Sendschreiben an F. Görres von Heinrich Leo” appeared between June 20 and 25, 1838, it set off an exchange of polemics that lasted into 1839 and drew into the fray, among others, the powerful pietist theologian Ernst Hengstenberg. It was through this conflict that the political position of the *Jahrbücher* first came into focus.<sup>17</sup>

The aspect of Leo’s *Sendschreiben* that irked Ruge most was its attack on rationalism, the revolutionary tradition, and the administrative state. To the extent that Görres challenged these things, Leo was in complete agreement. The difference was, whereas Görres presented them as pernicious effects of the Reformation, Leo characterized them as products of Catholicism, specifically Jesuitism. In good Romantic fashion, Görres held that, in its governance of Catholic territories, Prussia had mechanically intervened into a traditional, organic

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 369–71; Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 419–21.

<sup>15</sup> J. Görres, *Athanasius* (Regensburg: Manz, 1838); J. W. Carové, “Hermesiana,” *HJ* 21–23 (1838): 167–80; W. E. Wilda, “Anathasius von J. Görres,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 61–62 (1838): 481–94; P. F. Stuhr, “Anathasius von J. Görres, zweite und dritte Auflage,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 92–95 (1838): 729–57.

<sup>16</sup> Leo’s explicit agenda was to have Hegelians excluded from positions of authority in state and church institutions, including the universities. See Martin Hundt, ed., “Ruge an Rosenkranz, 19 Juni. 1838,” in *Der Redaktionsbriefwechsel der Hallischen, Deutschen und Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbücher*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademie, 2010), 152–53.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Sendschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 147–51 (1838): 1169–1204. These polemics are complex and merit a separate article. After Ruge’s review, Leo retaliated in the forward to the second edition of *Sendschreiben* and published an anonymous attack on the *Jahrbücher* in the conservative *Berliner politische Wochenblatt*, accusing it of fomenting revolution. Ruge replied in Arnold Ruge, “Die Denunziationen der *Hallischen Jahrbücher*,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 179–80 (1838): 1425–40. “The revolution you do not want, that of the Landrecht, the bureaucratic state, centralisation, scientific work and its free discussion,” he wrote, “has already happened. But it was not against Prussia; it was for Prussia” (1432). When Leo’s assault on the *Jahrbücher* was joined by Hengstenberg’s *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung*, Ruge responded in Arnold Ruge, “Leo und die Evangelische Kirchenzeitung gegen die Philosophie,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 236–37 (1838): 1881–96. “Philosophy,” he declared, “denies neither Biblical nor dogmatic truth but rehabilitates those things in present consciousness” (1887). The philosopher Karl Bayerhoffer reviewed Leo’s *Hegelingen*. Ruge reviewed Görres’s reply to Leo and other critics in *Die Triarier*. Feuerbach got involved to defend philosophy against the dilettantism of historians. And Ruge further composed: (1) an important article comparing Pietism to Jesuitism, arguing that the Pietist emphasis on “sacred inwardness” was a “negation of worldliness” that ultimately affirmed rigid hierarchy in public life (Arnold Ruge, “Der Pietismus und die Jesuiten,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 31–36 [1839]: 241–88); and (2) a comprehensive study of Romanticism that became the journal’s defining statement of principles (Echtermeyer and Ruge, “Die Protestantismus und die Romantik”).

culture, on which it sought to impose an abstract rationalist theology and bureaucratic administration. The arrest of the archbishop was but the most egregious example of this state overreach. Leo responded with a complex historical narrative that attributed both biblical rationalism and the concept of popular sovereignty to the Jesuits.<sup>18</sup> In fact, he argued, Prussia itself was an organic state—but one that, like any state, had to resort to mechanical means in exceptional circumstances. To advance this claim, Leo had to sweep aside any Prussian Protestants who defended the administrative state. Thus, he dismissed the Hegelians as a minor academic clique that vanished in significance next to the vast majority of pious, contented Prussian citizens.

In response, Ruge accused Leo of “hypochondria” and argued that the entire Görres-Leo debate was cast in moribund terms. For Ruge, concepts like “the mechanical and organic state,” “the paganism of our times,” “the bureaucratic inessence,” and “the abstract official state” belonged to the Romantic reaction and amounted to “a veritable collection of fossils.”<sup>19</sup> Despite their ostensible differences, Görres and Leo both rebelled “against the authority of reason,” “against the German Reformation,” and “against the legitimacy of recent history” or “the French Revolution and the state formations that have arisen from it, namely the centralised official and administrative system.”<sup>20</sup> But in doing so, Ruge maintained, they invited the very revolution they claimed to despise. For revolutions were not caused, as Görres and Leo seemed to believe, by false ideas but by real conditions. And, since the Reform era, when the Prussian state was redesigned in response to the innovations of the French Revolution, the only thing preventing the decay of Germany into revolution had been the modernization of the Prussian state. In other words, on Ruge’s account, the political reforms that the French revolutionaries sought through violent confrontation with the state had been provided in Prussia by the state. In Prussia, then, “all free institutions capable of producing public spirit and unity of state consciousness, in which each individual can devote himself to the universal” had “voluntarily arisen through the government.”<sup>21</sup> Consequently, “the foolish categories of the mechanical and organic state, the bureaucracy and official state, find no place here.” Rather, “The state is the objective spirit laid out in reality. It is neither a machine nor an organism. It is a conscious moral thing.”<sup>22</sup>

While this Hegelian vocabulary of “objective spirit” provides an initial sense of Ruge’s understanding of the state, it remains difficult to locate his politics unless we engage seriously with his political theology. Because they did not pay much attention to this issue, many twentieth-century commentators assumed that, prior to the 1840s, the Young Hegelians were either exclusively interested in theology or used theology as an arcane political code. But in the *Vormärz*, theology was less a political code than it was an integral component of political discourse, just as the church was an integral component of public life. Here the salient point is that, while Ruge expressed the same, often bigoted hatred for Catholicism as Leo, the Protestantism he defended was distinct. Whereas Leo was an evangelical pietist, interested in calling believers away from overly philosophical theology and back to the intuitive truth of the scriptures and personal faith, Ruge was a representative of what Leo derisively called “green-Protestantism,” by which he meant a Protestantism that sought to be new, fresh, and ever-changing.<sup>23</sup> The essential political theological difference was best described by Ruge. “The core of the Reformation,” he wrote, “is not the faith established by the church, not the surrender of man to the grace of God, not the Augustinian version of Christianity.” It was:

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Leo, *Sensschreiben an J. Görres* (Halle: Anton, 1838). Leo attributed biblical rationalism and popular sovereignty to the Jesuits Richard Simon and Diego Laynez, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Ruge, “Sensschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” 1178, 1181.

<sup>20</sup> Ruge, “Sensschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” 1183.

<sup>21</sup> Ruge, “Sensschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” 1199.

<sup>22</sup> Ruge, “Sensschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” 1201.

<sup>23</sup> Leo, *Sensschreiben an J. Görres*, 8.

The power of the spirit to stand on its own, and to give itself its relationship to God, the right and the power of one's own conscience and knowledge—that lies clearly enough in the longstanding dismantling of all hierarchy and the self-empowered establishment of the laws by which the truth is to be found. If the deed of liberation is the core, the positive teaching, then, is only a determination that tries to grasp the truth by means of the times and in recognition of a living faith that achieves the spirit, but in a form which is itself an infinite development.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, “the core of the Reformation” was “the deed of liberation” or freedom as rational self-determination expressed in public action. And its “positive teaching” did not involve an adherence to tradition, but “grasping the truth” of one's time. To be a Protestant was to be a progressive political activist.

But what was the “spirit” of the years between 1838 and 1843? What was the “truth” of the “times” when Ruge and Echtermeyer were producing their *Jahrbücher*? For Ruge, no teleological map of history could provide the answer. One could only encounter (and in doing so, help construct) the truth of one's times through direct involvement in its unfolding. And that meant, above all else, direct involvement in the polemical struggles of the age. A daily philosophical journal populated by reviews of the most recent political, theological, literary, and scientific research was the vehicle for doing so. Thus, when writing for the *Jahrbücher*, Ruge was not merely expressing his position. He was inventing it—constructing himself through his public engagements with others. What follows will explore Ruge doing so in relation to three forms of liberalism, or three discourses that Ruge and his contemporaries associated with the word *liberalism*: romantic nationalist liberalism, which Ruge addressed in a review of Ernst Moritz Arndt's *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben* (October 7 to 9, 1840); ethical pluralist liberalism, which he took up in two articles on Franz von Florencourt, the first of which reviewed Florencourt's *Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland* (November 24 and 25, 1840), and the second of which responded to Florencourt's response (December 5, 1840); and pragmatic economic liberalism, which Ruge approached through a complicated set of engagements with the work of Karl Biedermann, including an article called “Karl Streckfuß und das Preußenthum.” Although it might seem marginal, this last piece, which appeared under the byline “von einem Württenberger” on November 1, 1839, is crucial to understanding Ruge's larger project. For, as I will show, it established the parameters of the political agenda he went on to pursue for the following three years.

## Ruge Among the Liberals

This section addresses Ruge's engagements with three very different thinkers, all of whom were associated with liberalism. For this reason, it is important to begin by reiterating that the issue here was less who belonged to an identifiably liberal party or who professed an identifiably liberal ideology, and more a struggle over what the word *liberalism* was going to signify and how it would operate in political discourse. As we will see, as much as anything else, Ruge's aim was to prevent the term from being swallowed up by tendencies that he took to be insufficient to his larger republican agenda.

### Romantic Nationalist Liberalism

Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860) was a powerful voice of German nationalism during the Napoleonic occupation and an advocate of the peasantry who championed the abolition of serfdom from the early part of the nineteenth century. A hero of the Wars of Liberation and an enemy of all things French, he was appointed to a professorship at

<sup>24</sup> Ruge, “Sendschreiben an J. Görres von Heinrich Leo,” 1194.

the University of Bonn in 1818. To borrow Christopher Clark's terms, however, he was among those who understood the "Wars of Liberation" as "Wars of Liberty"—not merely dynastic battles between established European powers, but the patriotic action of a free German people, and the first step toward their political unification.<sup>25</sup> For the same reason, under the reactionary Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, he was accused of corrupting the youth and belonging to a secret republican conspiracy. Although no definitive proof of these crimes ever emerged, he was preemptively labeled a "demagogue" and forbidden to teach. As part of a general amnesty that accompanied Friedrich Wilhelm IV's ascension, he was pardoned in 1840 and returned to his academic post. Although his influence was never as great as it had been following the Wars of Liberation, initially at least, his rehabilitation was understood to be a promising sign of the new king's more liberal attitude toward public discourse, or his willingness to accommodate political views that his father had suppressed.<sup>26</sup>

Part personal memoir, part political treatise, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben* was published in tandem with Arndt's return to the University of Bonn. For the most part, it rehearsed the romantic nationalism for which its author had once been famous. Thus, and following Fichte, Arndt insisted that "there is no so-called natural law" and "no law before the state."<sup>27</sup> Natural freedom could only entail a war of all against all. What was required instead was "political freedom in the higher sense," or the freedom afforded by "the supreme and exceptionless rule of law."<sup>28</sup> "The man who is subjected to the law wants all to obey the law," Arndt wrote, "that both the king and the beggar recognise its majesty and follow it." It was here, in the "majesty of law," that we would find "actual freedom."<sup>29</sup> A free community, then, would be one in which "everyone knows and recognises the law through participation in public life."<sup>30</sup> The same community would also require a measure of equality—something that Arndt claimed to discover in the customary laws of the ancient Germanic tribes, which dictated equal division of land among those who laboured and of bounty among those who fought. Arndt admitted some nostalgia for feudalism, and he thoroughly despised what he called "French freedom," or the atomism, rootlessness, and poverty that seemed to accompany modern industry and individual rights. But even in 1840, his ideal society was a version of Fichte's closed commercial state, or a federation of small property owners bound together by "the pious and quiet spirit of the German peasant."<sup>31</sup>

Ruge's approach to Arndt was respectful but profoundly critical. "His name," Ruge began, "carries with it the world-liberating patriotism of 1813" or the Wars of Liberation "and the political maxims of his time and tendency." But while the "heroic deeds" of Arndt and his generation remained "valuable and dear to us," their "spirit of French-hatred" and "all that old-German rubbish" now ran counter to the cause of freedom.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, for Ruge, "the romanticism of 1813," though understood to be liberal at the time, was now fundamentally reactionary and threatened "the liberalism of 1840."<sup>33</sup> In particular, Ruge took aim at Arndt's effort to ground political order in the Bauernstand or peasant-owned estates. For this model only served to propagate "the confused concept of the estate in general, which is currently plaguing our politics and threatening our future." The state should be based, not on "work"

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 378–87.

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous, "Preußen seit der Einfeßung Arndt's bis zur Abfeßung Bauers," in *Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz*, ed. Georg Herwegh (Zürich und Winterthur: Literarischen Comptoirs, 1843), 1–31, esp. 6; Johann Georg August Wirth, *Die Geschichte der deutsche Staaten*, vol. 3 (Karlsruhe: Kunstverlag, 1850), 634–40.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Moriß Arndt, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1840), 258.

<sup>28</sup> Arndt, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben*, 256, 259.

<sup>29</sup> Arndt, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben*, 258.

<sup>30</sup> Arndt, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben*, 260.

<sup>31</sup> Arndt, *Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben*, 287.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Ruge, "Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben," *Hallische Jahrbücher* 241–43 (1840): 1921–39, esp. 1921.

<sup>33</sup> Ruge, "Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben," 1930.



or “property,” but only on what Ruge called “spirit” or “the intelligence of the individual.” For only “spirit” and “intelligence,” and “not status or wealth,” could ensure a citizen’s “ability to relate directly to the universal.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, any reference to the estates would have to be replaced with “the principle of universal representation” and “the power of assemblies.” “The principle of right in the state,” Ruge continued, “is the universal spirit, the dignity of man, not commerce, not the work of civil society. It is intelligence and moral worth, not status, external honour, or external interest. The principle of status and standing [*Standes und der Standschaft*] therefore is and remains absolutely unspiritual, unchristian, and inhuman.” Ruge had no doubt that his position would be met with “the hysterical cry of democracy.” But he brushed off the attack by proposing that, since the time of the Reform era, all Prussian institutions *except* for the state assemblies had been consistently democratic:

What is more democratic than our military, municipal, judicial, and administrative constitutions? Everywhere the same duties and rights of all citizens are recognised. Now, suddenly, when organising the representatives of the people and the state in the governing body, we are to have estates as the principle, the majorat as the basis, privilege and the barbarism of rigid difference as the norm? Strange self-deception.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, since the Reform era, military and bureaucratic offices were filled according to education and talent rather than privilege. All who participated had equal opportunity. The only place where such “democracy” did not prevail was in the elected assemblies, where representatives continued to be chosen from the estates. Prussia, then, was a system of democratic institutions without a democratic government. And contemporary patriotism required a serious effort to build the latter, not misty romantic fantasies about a community of happy peasants.

### *Ethical Pluralist Liberalism*

Franz von Florencourt (1803–1886) was a political essayist who styled himself as a “man of action” rather than “science.”<sup>36</sup> His aim, he claimed, was less to compose abstract theories than to respond to the contingency of events. In the late 1840s, he became increasingly disturbed by what he saw as the triumph of a doctrinaire liberalism and a liberal movement that abandoned its liberal principles, especially the principles of tolerance and understanding in matters of religion. Indeed, during the 1848 revolutions he attacked the Frankfurt Parliament and defended Friedrich Wilhelm IV. And in 1851 he announced his conversion to Catholicism.<sup>37</sup> But as a young man he had been imprisoned for his participation in proscribed student fraternities. And during the 1830s and early 1840s, he was understood to be a powerful ally of liberalism.<sup>38</sup> He was thus deeply critical of censorship, called for free and open debate as a manner of formulating public opinion, defended the tradition of the American Revolution, and argued in favor of representative government and a formal Prussian constitution.

The work Ruge reviewed—*Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland*—was a collection of articles originally published in 1838 and 1839 in the influential *Blätter der Börsenhalle*, which Florencourt edited. They addressed the two most pressing political controversies of the day: the Cologne Turmoil, including the polemics that erupted in its wake, and

<sup>34</sup> Ruge, “Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben,” 1937.

<sup>35</sup> Ruge, “Erinnerungen aus dem äußeren Leben,” 1938.

<sup>36</sup> Franz von Florencourt, *Zur preußischen Verfassungsfrage* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1847), v.

<sup>37</sup> Franz von Florencourt, *Frankfurt und Preußen* (Grimma: Druck, 1849); Franz von Florencourt, *Meine Bekehrung zur christlichen Lehre und christlichen Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1852).

<sup>38</sup> See the contemporary synopsis of Florencourt’s career in Wolfred, “Die sächsische Presse,” in *Der Leuchtturm*, ed. Ernst Keil (Braunschweig: Meyer, 1847), 34–39.

the case of the Gottingen Seven, in which seven University of Gottingen professors (including the legal theorist Friedrich Christof Dahlmann and both Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm) were relieved of their academic posts and forced into exile after they protested King Ernst Augustus's efforts to alter Hanover's liberal constitution.<sup>39</sup> With respect to the former, which was the part of the book that captured Ruge's attention, Florencourt provided a detailed analysis of the Görres-Leo debate. But although, as noted, Ruge took Leo's *Sendschreiben an Görres* to be excessively conciliatory, and even to conceal a shadowy alliance with its ostensible target, Florencourt characterized the two works as bitterly opposed—a literary revival of the religious wars of the sixteenth century. And he called, in essence, for greater understanding.

As Florencourt saw it, Görres's *Athanasius* had two elements: a legal analysis of the jurisdictional conflict between the Catholic Church and the Prussian state and a broader, more aggressive attack on the foundations of Protestantism. The former, Florencourt proposed, was undeniably correct. Prussian law guaranteed religious freedom. And religious freedom meant that the Catholic Church had every right to dictate the marital conduct of its congregation and to discipline its priests, so long as those actions did not constitute an existential threat to the state. The latter, however, was excessive and responsible for sparking an excessive reaction from Protestants. At the same time, the Protestant press also bore some responsibility. For, given that Protestantism was founded on religious freedom, it should have been "more circumspect and educated than its opponent." "They should have shown tolerance," Florencourt declared:

Tolerance—not that indifferentism in which everything is equally true and equally false, but that tolerance which is precisely the yield and the result of our newer education [*Bildung*], the one that clearly recognises that every intellectual direction must have its own historical-organic course and cannot skip over the necessary phases in God's revelation.<sup>40</sup>

Tolerance, in other words, involved recognizing that the truth could not be artificially imposed, but was something that each individual and community would have to arrive at in its own way and according to its own history and customs. Protestantism represented progress over Catholicism precisely because it comprehended this principle. Or, as Florencourt put it, here speaking as a Protestant:

How far we have come in our knowledge of divine things we can leave as an open question. But we have established that we no longer stand on the ground of a dogmatic exclusivity that wants externally to force results and confessions. We have come to the conclusion that every truth must also have its subjective justification, and that the organic transformation of the subject must keep pace with every objective truth. Through this insight into the nature of truth it is possible for us to understand with love those who think differently, to walk in their shoes [*uns in sie hineinzuleben*], and to behold in their spirit the restively active workshop of God. This is what the word tolerance has come to mean. And anyone who is not tolerant in this sense today is unworthy of the nineteenth century as a Protestant and a German.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, even the most incontrovertible truth required "subjective justification." The Catholics of the Rhineland might have been historically backward. But they could not simply be administered the truth like a medicine; it would have to emerge out of their own experiences.

<sup>39</sup> Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck*, 332–33; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 419–21.

<sup>40</sup> Franz von Florencourt, *Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland* (Leipzig: Tauchniß, 1840), 31.

<sup>41</sup> Florencourt, *Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland*, 32.

Published on November 24 and 25, 1840, Ruge's review of *Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland* seems to have been designed to draw Florencourt toward the Young Hegelian cause. Ruge therefore began by commending "the liberal and practical pathos" of the work, which he situated "in the spirit of the new Enlightenment."<sup>42</sup> On Ruge's account, this "new Enlightenment" involved a repudiation of the "indifference, frivolity, and honoured servility" that had characterized the time of the Romantics, Young Germany, and the older Hegelians. In his willingness to engage directly with the political questions of the day, Ruge held, "Florencourt is part and parcel of this turning point."<sup>43</sup> And yet, while Florencourt displayed "admirable impartiality" and "individual conviction," his work remained "ignorant of philosophy." It therefore "lags behind" and has "lopsided effects."<sup>44</sup> In particular, Ruge thought that Florencourt's call for tolerance misunderstood the relationship between Görres and Leo and the reality of the current crisis. "O how naïve," he lamented, to imagine a world with "no enemies" and "no quarrels."<sup>45</sup> For Ruge, of course, the truth was that Görres and Leo were two sides of the same reactionary coin. To propose "tolerance" here was to fall prey to the forces of regression. But only someone not "ignorant of philosophy" would discern the connection. "Without the critical philosophy of our time," Ruge wrote, "there is no free attitude and no free act." Thus, and with no small measure of condescension, Ruge concluded: "If Florencourt had the patience and talent to orient himself philosophically (which I would like to believe he does), he would promise himself a literary future that he will never attain with his face veiled against the pure sun of the spirit."<sup>46</sup>

Not long after his discussion of *Politische, kirchliche und literarische Zustände in Deutschland*, on December 5, 1840, Ruge returned to Florencourt in an important article titled "Politik und Philosophie." Here he addressed a review of Karl Ernst Schubarth's anti-Hegelian *Ueber der Unvereinbarkeit der Hegel'schen Staatslehre*, which had appeared anonymously in the *Blätter der Börsenhalle*. The author (who, Ruge noted, was unquestionably Florencourt) defended Hegel against Schubarth. But he also took the opportunity to denounce his Young Hegelian "pupils," or those who, in his estimation, recklessly sought to translate Hegelian philosophy into practice. Florencourt's argument turned on two axes: first, he insisted that the state described by Hegel was to be understood as an ideal that could not be imposed mechanically but had to emerge organically and through stages; second, he reaffirmed his commitment to ethical pluralism, subjective freedom, and the principle of tolerance, all of which he claimed the Young Hegelians flouted. Ruge had no difficulty destroying the first proposition. For Hegel, he explained, there could be no distinction between real and ideal or actuality and concept. There was only "the conceptualised actuality [*die begriffene Wirklichkeit*]" and "the actuality of the concept [*die Wirklichkeit des Begriffs*]." "In Hegel the end goal is always present, the rational always real, the immanent purpose and the absolute always attained," Ruge wrote. Hegel "does not put his philosophy at the end of a racetrack." Rather, "he grasps the actuality that is, not the actuality that is to come."<sup>47</sup> Ruge acknowledged that Hegel himself was profoundly "accommodationist," that he "feared nothing more than to be at odds with the authority of church and state," and that he could correctly be accused of "court philosophy and scholasticism." But he nevertheless introduced to the world a concept of freedom that he could not control. And the Young Hegelians were to be credited with following it through to its practical consequences. Thus, Ruge insisted that Hegel's "absolute state" could not "be constructed on the model of past existences." Rather, "The present is to be

<sup>42</sup> Arnold Ruge, "Friedrich von Florencourt und die Kategorien der politischen Praxis," *Hallsche Jahrbücher* 281–82 (1840): 2241–52, esp. 2241.

<sup>43</sup> Ruge, "Friedrich von Florencourt und die Kategorien der politischen Praxis," 2243.

<sup>44</sup> Ruge, "Friedrich von Florencourt und die Kategorien der politischen Praxis," 2241.

<sup>45</sup> Ruge, "Friedrich von Florencourt und die Kategorien der politischen Praxis," 2247.

<sup>46</sup> Ruge, "Friedrich von Florencourt und die Kategorien der politischen Praxis," 2254.

<sup>47</sup> Arnold Ruge, "Politik und Philosophie," *Hallsche Jahrbücher* 292–93 (1840): 2329–44, esp. 2231.

criticised, and from this criticism, the demand and formation of the next or, if you will, the actually present state should arise.”<sup>48</sup>

Along with this clarification of Hegel’s approach to actuality and concept and the Young Hegelian appropriation of it, Ruge challenged Florencourt’s distinction between the mechanical and the organic, and his assumption that both communities and history develop “naturally.” Although it is true, Ruge claimed, that political actors must engage with the world as it is, and not project utopian fantasies, it is also true that their actions are themselves aspects of an historical process. Those who reprimanded others for attempting to impose an artificial, mechanical order on what was properly a spontaneous and organic process typically did so to conceal their own mechanical activities behind the veneer of an organism. Indeed, for Ruge, it was more dangerous to presuppose what Florencourt called the “natural harmony” of a community than it was to acknowledge its constructed status. Thus, Florencourt said that the Young Hegelians “want, through the weapons of the state if necessary, to force the unity, which is supposed to be a free one, arising from the natural harmony of free individuals.”<sup>49</sup> Ruge insisted, however, that there is no “natural harmony” of individuals, certainly not for Hegel, for whom everything, nature included, was the effect of the historical development of self-consciousness. If organic meant unconscious, then it was un-Hegelian. But more importantly, Florencourt’s suggestion that Hegel presented history as a series of neat, organically evolving stages, and that his philosophy therefore recommended patience, was nonsense. As the continued coexistence of numerous religious denominations attested, historical development was uneven and ridden with conflict. To pretend that conflict was an aberration, or the result of efforts mechanically to hasten a properly organic process, was not to avoid conflict, but to place it beyond the reach of rational intervention.

This brings us to the second related line of argument concerning tolerance. Here Florencourt’s rhetoric bordered on the apoplectic, and Ruge quoted him at length, exposing the intolerance at the heart of his plea for tolerance. “Nothing,” Florencourt fumed:

Is more intolerant than a theorising, doctrinaire Young Hegelian. For him, there should be only one conviction, and that is his. Positive faith, for example, is but a superstition. The various ecclesiastical denominations are the subject of ridicule. Instead of respecting the subjective element of truth (or honest conviction) in them and allowing this to develop freely, they would like to proclaim their narrow-minded dogmatism immediately as the law of the state and cut through every historical stage of development with Alexander’s sword.<sup>50</sup>

Or, as Florencourt went on to claim, in their haste to skip over historical stages and rejection of all convictions save their own, the Young Hegelians portended a “return to Robespierre’s virtue-state or the ancient states of the Middle Ages, where individuality counted for nothing, and only an arbitrarily fixed objective norm counted for life.”<sup>51</sup> Ruge’s initial response to these assertions was to turn them back on the one making them. “The critic,” he wrote, “who immediately lays the trump card of loyalty to convictions and tolerance takes exactly the same direction for which he attacks the Young Hegelians.”<sup>52</sup> For the principle of tolerance was not a universal container for all convictions, but one conviction among many. And, as Florencourt’s own incendiary rhetoric suggested, a regime of tolerance could only be imposed by intolerant means. In this sense, Ruge proposed, Florencourt’s liberal pluralism confused “praxis” with “theory” and ethical interaction with political power. Although, on

<sup>48</sup> Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2232.

<sup>49</sup> Florencourt in Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2340.

<sup>50</sup> Florencourt in Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2340.

<sup>51</sup> Florencourt in Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2343.

<sup>52</sup> Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2341.

the register of the former, one could and should tolerate as many convictions as there were subjects, on that of the latter “only one conviction can rule” or “one sovereign will.”<sup>53</sup> The salient question was how the ruling conviction would be determined. On Florencourt’s model of tolerance, all convictions became siloed off from one another and conflict was abhorred. Ruge preferred the Hegelian dialectic, in which different convictions encountered one another, struggled for recognition, and thereby arrived at a higher, more comprehensive truth.

This is not to suggest that Florencourt’s argument was without merit. In the final analysis, Ruge did promulgate a conception of truth that excluded plurality. Thus, he allowed that “convictions can be held for subjectively sufficient reasons,” and everyone was free to believe what they wanted in private. He continued, however, “that has its sphere, not in the absolute, but in the world of finiteness and contingency.” In public life, science, and “the field of pure theoretical philosophical spirit,” on the other hand, “there is absolutely no reason for tolerance.” Here “extreme harshness is extreme justice, and all indulgence of error a sin.”<sup>54</sup> Ruge’s point, however, was not merely to impose scientific dogma at the exclusion of individual beliefs. Rather, he wanted to emphasize the danger of organizing a political order around inward convictions. Thus, to ensure the integrity of what, with a nod toward Habermas, we might call his “ideal speech situation,” Florencourt was careful to distinguish between real and false convictions, and to exclude the latter from the realm of tolerance. “Only what is subjectively dead,” he wrote, “or the truly subjective lie, can be completely negated by the constituting law.”<sup>55</sup> Ruge was quick to pounce on the qualification. “Strange how tolerance changes,” he retorted. Florencourt’s idea was that we should only tolerate convictions held in good faith and that bad faith convictions should be “completely negated” by the law. But how would we ever determine the good faith of another? How could we know if they were lying? Human history offered only one means: an inquisition. And, Ruge maintained, an inquisition of those who posited no truth was far more frightening than an inquisition of those who posited one. “How much worse is the Inquisition which does not believe in the Confession, as opposed to one which only wants to uphold the Confession,” Ruge wrote. “Lying,” he continued, “cannot be forbidden.” And instead of attempting to use the law to prevent private individuals from lying, we should ensure “that it is not permitted or commended by defamatory and dishonourable institutions, as happens whenever orthodoxy reigns and the spirit of history is pushed into the background.”<sup>56</sup> Private convictions (and whether one held them sincerely) should remain beyond the scope of law. Public institutions, on the other hand, should be governed by a firm commitment to truth.

Heated though it was, this exchange between Florencourt and Ruge did not result in lasting enmity. Indeed, existing correspondence shows that, despite their differences, Florencourt endeavored to have his work appear in the *Hallische Jahrbücher* in the years following. Thus, in a letter from the summer of 1841, Florencourt offered an article on the political situation in Hanover for Ruge’s consideration, explaining that, although he wanted “to commit” himself to Ruge’s journal, he “held back” on the assumption that his approach was insufficiently “philosophical.” “My individuality resists discovering in every particular case the infinite, the abstract, the universal,” Florencourt explained. “I prefer to take such things for granted and jump directly into the middle of the concrete situation.”<sup>57</sup> Further letters shows that Ruge rejected Florencourt’s submission on the grounds that it did not match the editorial direction of his *Jahrbücher*.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, in 1845 and 1846, a handful of pieces by Florencourt did appear alongside work by Ruge in the journal *Die Epigonen*,

<sup>53</sup> Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2340.

<sup>54</sup> Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2342.

<sup>55</sup> Florencourt in Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2343.

<sup>56</sup> Ruge, “Politik und Philosophie,” 2343.

<sup>57</sup> “Florencourt an Ruge, etwa Juli/Anfang August 1841,” in *Redaktionsbriefwechsel, 777–79*, esp. 777.

<sup>58</sup> “Florencourt an Ruge, etwa September 1841,” in *Redaktionsbriefwechsel, 818–19*.

which was edited by the Young Hegelian publisher Otto Wigand. In those articles, Florencourt reflected on his experiences in the student fraternities and argued that, despite the accusations of their enemies, they had always been oriented toward gradual reform and not revolution. He also continued his campaign against the censorship and attempted to convince the regime of Friedrich Wilhelm IV that a representative constitution was inevitable and that delaying its implementation could only lead to disaster.<sup>59</sup> But throughout this period, Florencourt's central commitment remained to the principle of tolerance. And this led him to defend expressions of faith that Ruge and the Young Hegelians deemed retrograde. "It cannot be repeated enough," Florencourt wrote in his 1845 *Fliegende Blätter über Fragen der Gegenwart*: "An enlightened standpoint in matters of faith is displayed through tender consideration of those of other faiths. It shows itself in the fact that one can empathise with the religious feelings of others and, as it were, identify with them."<sup>60</sup> This was a kind of pluralism for which Ruge and his circle had no time. For the watchwords of their project were not *tolerance* and *understanding*, but *science* and *truth*.

### *Pragmatic Economic Liberalism*

The preceding discussion of Ruge's treatment of Arndt and Florencourt offers a sense of the indirect nature of political discourse during the *Vormärz*. Book reviews, reviews of journals, and reviews of reviews allowed authors such as Ruge to stake out unique positions in the guise of objectively evaluating arguments that had already been sanctioned by the censor. Ruge's relationship with Karl Biedermann (1812–1901)—a Leipzig University law professor who later became one of nineteenth-century Germany's most important liberal politicians—was particularly convoluted in this regard. And it is indicative of the kind of political shell games at which Ruge excelled and that often make it difficult to piece together his agenda, especially in historical retrospect.

The issue revolved around two reviews of the senior bureaucrat Karl Streckfuß's *Ueber die Garantien der preußischen Zustände*, a work that argued that Prussia did not require a constitution as its existing institutions already provided sufficient security, freedom, and public trust.<sup>61</sup> The first review, "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum," appeared from November 1 to 4, 1839. Although it was signed "von einem Württemberger," Ruge later confessed to being the author. It developed a strong argument in favor of public freedom and represented the first positive political program to appear in the pages of the journal. The second, by Biedermann, was titled "Das preußische Staatsprincip kritisch beleuchtet," and published between November 14 and 19, 1839. It argued for a constitutional limitation on state power, especially over industry and trade. Importantly, it appeared with an editorial note indicating that, although it invited lively debate, the *Jahrbücher* did not endorse Biedermann's position. "The editors and the whole direction of this journal," the note read, "is so little in agreement with the principle of practical and industrial interests that subsequent issues will provide a detailed criticism of it."<sup>62</sup> Perhaps because Ruge wanted to maintain a relationship with Biedermann, the task of composing that "detailed criticism" was handed to the philosopher Julius Frauenstädt, whose critical consideration of two of Biedermann's books—*Fundamental-Philosophie* and *Wissenschaft und Universität*—appeared in the *Jahrbücher* from November 24 to 28, 1839.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Franz von Florencourt, "Die deutschen Universitäten," in *Die Epigonen*, vol. 1, ed. Otto Wigand (Leipzig: Wigand, 1846), 16–116; Franz von Florencourt, "Rückblick auf preußische Zustände," in *Die Epigonen*, 222–49; Franz von Florencourt, "Allerlei Glossen über unsere Preßzustände," in *Die Epigonen*, 271–88.

<sup>60</sup> Franz von Florencourt, *Fliegenden Blätter über Fragen der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1845), 175.

<sup>61</sup> Karl Streckfuß, *Garantien der preußischen Zustände* (Halle, 1839).

<sup>62</sup> Karl Biedermann, "Das preußische Staatsprinzip kritisch beleuchtet," *Hallische Jahrbücher* 273–77 (1839): 2177–216, 2177 (editor's note).

<sup>63</sup> Julius Frauenstädt, "1. *Fundamental-Philosophie*, 2. *Wissenschaft und Universität*," *Hallische Jahrbücher* 279–85 (1839): 2225–80.

Because our goal is to clarify Ruge's relationship with liberalism, even though it does not follow the order in which they appeared, it is helpful to address Biedermann's review first, so that Ruge's approach appears sharper in contrast. A thinker who prided himself on clarity and practicality, Biedermann's essential claim concerned the natural rights of the individual and the limits of state power. "Why should we hesitate to present the matter as it really is," he asked:

There is only one true guarantee, and it consists in recognising and accepting individual freedom in its full consequences, in all its expressions, under all circumstances, without any restriction or condition. The whole question is extremely simple and clear without having to get involved or confused. Either all rights and all freedoms of the private individual are merely an outflow of the sovereign will of the ruler or each individual finds the power and the basis for action within himself; he has an original, natural right to his deed and does not need to wait for a foreign power to authorise it or vouch for its enjoyment.<sup>64</sup>

On Biedermann's account, what got in the way of this natural individual right was the administrative state, or "the system of the Prussian government," which, through regulation and taxation, "kills the spirit of industry and commerce and nips their free development in the bud."<sup>65</sup> "Industrial development," Biedermann continued, "requires the greatest activity of the individual and the greatest passivity of the government." Echoing the "doux commerce" arguments of the eighteenth century, Biedermann contended that "trade calls into being the spirit of association, which is the natural enemy of administrative interference and tutelage."<sup>66</sup> Thus, and likely anticipating a Young Hegelian interlocutor, Biedermann concluded that "one may call this narrow-minded egoism." But "it is at least the most natural egoism, for it rests on the most natural needs and interests of the human being." And in this sense, economic egoism could be contrasted with "that enthusiasm for an arbitrarily formed ideal of greatness and glory" that "is equally egoistic, but in a far more pernicious way, because it seeks to impose an artificial interest on all."<sup>67</sup>

By "enthusiasm for an arbitrarily formed ideal of greatness and glory," Biedermann almost certainly meant to invoke the patriotism and civic virtue promoted by Ruge. While, as we saw previously, Ruge's political position, or political theology, could be discerned in the background of his polemics with Leo, it was only in "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum" that it got set out in explicit terms. The conceit of the piece was that it was written by a "Württemberg," or a citizen of one of Germany's most liberal constitutional states, who was observing Prussian politics from the outside and becoming increasingly distressed by its apparent reactionary turn (especially in the wake of King Ernst Augustus's proposed constitutional amendments in Hannover and the so-called "Zurich counter-revolution," which saw a liberal Swiss government toppled by a populist religious uprising that began as a protest against the appointment of David Strauss to a chair in theology at the University of Zurich).<sup>68</sup> Following the Wars of Liberation, Ruge's alter ego noted, "Prussia was said to be the new Germany" and to point the way forward for other, smaller German states. Now, though, it seemed that "orthodoxy," "religious obscurantism," and "the political rationale of the Restauration" had "taken up residence" there.<sup>69</sup> In what was both a ploy to deflect any suspicion that he or another Young Hegelian was the author of the piece and a sincere challenge to conservative interpretations of Hegel, Ruge had his

<sup>64</sup> Biedermann, "Das preußische Staatsprincip, kritisch beleuchtet," 2195.

<sup>65</sup> Biedermann, "Das preußische Staatsprincip, kritisch beleuchtet," 2212.

<sup>66</sup> Biedermann, "Das preußische Staatsprincip, kritisch beleuchtet," 2216; A. O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>67</sup> Biedermann, "Das preußische Staatsprincip, kritisch beleuchtet," 2212.

<sup>68</sup> Marc Lerner, *A Laboratory of Liberty* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 221–64.

<sup>69</sup> Arnold Ruge, "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum," *Hallische Jahrbücher* 262–63 (1839): 2089–2107, esp. 2090.

Württembergers associate these developments in part with Hegel's theory of state. For Hegel characterized the bureaucracy as a kind of clergy that transcended the laity of the people and explicitly excluded the people from public life, relegating them to the realm of civil society. This was the division that, in the guise of a "Württemberg," Ruge wanted to combat. And it was one that he thought Streckfuß's placid defense of the status quo could not avoid.

The argument Ruge developed in "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum" turned on the definition of the term *absolute state* and a related political theology. In Streckfuß's model, "the absolute state" meant "the wisdom of the monarch and the highest authorities." Here only a small circle of officials possessed a "living self-consciousness of the state" while all other subjects "must honour the state as something otherworldly."<sup>70</sup> For Ruge, this was effectively a Catholicism of the state, or the Catholic hierarchy translated into political terms. Contrastingly, Ruge declared: "We are Protestants, and we want to be good and whole Protestants, which means Protestants in the state as well." He continued:

That is why we cannot tolerate the absolute state, because we cannot stand that this state withholds from us the absolute that it contains within itself. We must participate in it theoretically with full public self-consciousness and practically with the freest representation ... One could therefore say that this absolute has the sole fault that it is not absolute enough. For how could a state be absolute which is alive in only one part, namely the government [*Regierung*]? Just as God is not absolute unless he permeates the world, the state is not absolute unless it fills and permeates all human life with its self-consciousness.<sup>71</sup>

What would make a state genuinely "absolute," in other words, and genuinely "Protestant," would be for all its "parts" to be "alive," or for the ongoing participation of all citizens in all aspects of public life. Here the state would not be an instrument for securing external, private interests or freedoms. It would be what Ruge called "an end in itself"—that space in which citizens exercise their public freedom. "Just as," in Protestantism, "everyone knows and wants the truth for himself, mediates himself with God and must trust or distrust only his own spirit" so too should "the same mediation with the truth also take place in the state." Here, "the state" was "no longer, in good Catholic terms, a mere safeguard (guarantee) of external life and comfort." It was "the realisation of the idea itself, the existence of God, the shaping, not only of life (which even a bee hive [*Bienenstaat*] achieves), but of the spirit, which is given to the self-conscious people based on their reason and will, and which cannot be denied wherever the image of God is recognized in them."<sup>72</sup> The state should not simply protect the freedom of the people; it should become the stage on which they realize and enact it.

### The Absolute State as an End in Itself

Ruge's affirmation of the "absolute state" helps explain an aspect of Young Hegelian discourse that has occasionally puzzled commentators: their glorification of Friedrich the Great. For the Young Hegelians, the absolutist state of the eighteenth century was a pivotal historical accomplishment. It constituted a centralized administrative authority capable of subordinating the churches to science (and theology to philosophy), eliminating aristocratic privilege, democratizing public office, and reconceiving of political power, not as inherited right, but as service. That it remained organized around an individual monarch meant that it was one-sidedly subjective, an imbalance that history attempted to correct with the French

<sup>70</sup> Ruge, "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum," 2092.

<sup>71</sup> Ruge, "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum," 2100.

<sup>72</sup> Ruge, "Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum," 2106.



Revolution. But the institutional innovations of absolutism were integral to the state the Young Hegelians pursued. This was the position developed most extensively by Friedrich Köppen in his *Friedrich der Große und seine Widersacher* (which Ruge enthusiastically reviewed)<sup>73</sup> and his “Der Freier der Thronbesteigung Friedrich II,” a celebration of the centenary of Friedrich the Great’s ascension published between June 19 and 23, 1840, or just after Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s ascension on June 7. Here the goal was not merely to persuade the new king to adopt Enlightened policies. It was to present a theory of the state as “the absolute monarchy of self-conscious reason,” which Köppen dubbed “the final world-regime [*Weltreich*].” “What is,” Köppen wrote by way of explanation, “should no longer be valid because it is, but because it is reasonable and known as such.”<sup>74</sup> Although his initial decisions were ambiguous, signaling both more and less freedom, Friedrich Wilhelm IV soon moved to stamp out the Young Hegelians. But this did not so much change their concept of the state as convince them to articulate it more brazenly.

A comprehensive study of Ruge’s contributions to the *Jahrbüchern*—which includes discussions of philosophy, theology, politics, diplomacy, poetry, novels, drama, painting, sculpture, humor, and more—would exceed the scope of this article. Here I propose instead to trace two parallel lines through Ruge’s articles, the first designed to emphasize his critical appropriation of Hegel’s philosophy, the second to elaborate on his political theology. My goal is to show how, though there were alterations in his approach, a fundamental set of commitments concerning the absolute state remained consistent. And inasmuch as there is a break, it occurs, not in “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus,” but in a piece called “Der christliche Staat. Gegen den Wirtemberger [sic] über das Preußenthum,” which appeared on November 9 and 10, 1842, and which threw into doubt the political efficacy of Protestantism. But even there, Ruge’s conception of the absolute state and of the political significance of religious sentiment remained untouched. And when, in “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus,” he took his final, defiant stand, it was not so much a new direction as an open admission of what the absolute state might look like in institutional form.

One key to understanding Ruge and the Young Hegelians is to recognize that, from the beginning, their agenda was not to follow Hegel dogmatically, but to draw out the radical implications of his approach and even to challenge Hegel’s formulations from a Hegelian perspective. In this sense, they always operated both inside and outside of the Hegelian system. Ruge in particular held that Hegel’s philosophy of history (which suggested that all established forms would smash against the rock of their own internal contradictions) demanded a reassessment of his *Philosophy of Right*. This was a position to which Ruge often referred, but one that he developed most programmatically in three pieces: (1) his “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts” (June 24 to 30, 1840), which consisted of a review of the statesman Heinrich von Gagern’s *Kritik des Voölkerrechts*; (2) his “Vorwort” to the first issue of the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* (July 2 and 3, 1841); and (3) his “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit” (August 10 to 13, 1842). Although the last of these is sometimes thought to represent Ruge’s repudiation of Hegel, it was more like a continuation of the arguments already established in the earlier work.

The ostensible purpose of “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts” was to supplement Gagern’s knowledge of “praxis” with the “true theory” found in Hegel.<sup>75</sup> But in fact, Ruge developed a powerful critique of Hegel, exposing three limitations to his approach. First, he held that Hegel’s concept of the state was abstract, ahistorical, and incapable of accounting for change. Hegel’s state was presented as “a fixed, universally valid closure

<sup>73</sup> Carl Friedrich Köppen, *Friedrich der Grosse und seine Widersacher* (Leipzig, 1840); Arnold Ruge, “Wastebook. Friedrich der Große und seine Widersacher,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 125 (1840): 999–1000.

<sup>74</sup> Carl Friedrich Köppen, “Der Freier der Thronbesteigung Friedrich II,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 147–50 (1840): 1169–2000, esp. 1181.

<sup>75</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 151–56 (1840): 1201–43, esp. 1209.

[*Abgeschlossenheit*]” and a “conclusion for all times.” But “every form of state, even the most perfect and complete, can only ever be a product of history.” “History,” Ruge claimed, “is the becoming of freedom, its objectification; the law and the state, on the other hand, are its existence, its objectified form, its specificity.” And “since history and the state are related like development and determination, like the course and establishment of spirit, it goes without saying that the state emerges from history and further history emerges from the state.”<sup>76</sup> The state, in other words, was both the product of and the vehicle for history. Second, Ruge challenged Hegel’s reliance on the law of primogeniture and the inherited crown. For Hegel, although the state consisted of mutually mediating institutions, only the will of the sovereign could provide the moment of “final decision.” And the only way to ensure that the sovereign represented universal rather than particular interests was to have it determined by an accident of birth. Ruge viewed this line of thought as a perversion of Hegel’s own philosophy. For Hegel’s great accomplishment had been his elevation of the universal and rational state out of the particularism of civil society. To propose that “the decision-making power” should be determined by an accident of birth was to sink the state back into civil society and the family. Rather, Ruge argued that “the decision-making power” must follow “the historically developed state consciousness as reflected by the national representatives”—not the laws of primogeniture, but the deliberations of an assembly.<sup>77</sup> Finally, and for related reasons, Ruge ridiculed Hegel’s negative assessment of “popular opinion” and his assumption that, without the stabilizing power of the monarchy, political order would succumb to “the arbitrariness of the factions and the electorate.” “The truth of the majority is not the absolute truth,” Ruge conceded, “but it is by and large the determination of the *zeitgeist*, the political and historical truth.”<sup>78</sup>

By the time Ruge moved his *Jahrbücher* from Leipzig to Dresden in July 1841, official disapproval of his project had become much more aggressive. But his Hegelian critique of Hegel remained essentially the same. Thus, Ruge began his “Vorwort” to the first issue of the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* by proposing that the mission of the newly named journal would be to actualize Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute, but in a manner that Hegel himself would have deemed inadmissible. “Hegel emphatically denies that philosophy can have a future-shaping power,” Ruge stated. For him, “philosophy” was “a conclusion without an ought, a mere contemplation of an age.”<sup>79</sup> But the struggles initiated by the Young Hegelians had shown that Hegel’s philosophy of spirit and the absolute was inexorably bound to come into conflict with the established order, especially on matters of religion. More accurately, they had shown that a consistently Hegelian approach pointed in the direction, not of the destruction of religion, but of the emergence of what Ruge called “true religiosity,” which Ruge glossed as a “fidelity to the idea” that “can only be achieved if the world and world-life [*Weltleben*] are directly pervaded and saturated by the practice of the absolute.” Such a “practice of the absolute,” Ruge continued, involved a “permanent breathing of the spirit” or a “tension and productivity” that would appear “not only in times of war and public fervour, but always and just as much in times of external peace, which must no longer be mankind’s time of lethargy and rest, but must become open to public internal struggles, lively freedom, and the vigorous pursuit of vital interests.” In other words, for Ruge, the Hegelian “absolute,” or the “absolute state,” required a permanent manifestation of the kind of collective action typically reserved for times of crisis and emergency.<sup>80</sup>

With this set of claims in the background, the question at the center of Ruge’s “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit” was not whether Hegel’s

<sup>76</sup> Ruge, “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts,” 1210.

<sup>77</sup> Ruge, “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts,” 1229.

<sup>78</sup> Ruge, “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts,” 1236.

<sup>79</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Vorwort,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 1–2 (1840): 1–6, esp. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ruge, “Vorwort,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 1–2 (1840): 6.

philosophy of the absolute should find concrete political expression, but whether his *Philosophy of Right* could contribute anything to that project. “Our times,” Ruge began, “are political, and our politics wills the freedom of this world.”<sup>81</sup> What was required to face the moment was a combination of “public virtue, historical art, and free philosophy” capable of creating “a new political world, a real public life, and a real freedom in the state.” And in this context, “a work like Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* must be fundamentally shaken.”<sup>82</sup> Ruge devoted the first half of the article to a comparison of Kant’s and Hegel’s political characters. Although the former, in keeping with the subjectivism of his philosophy, was content to know the truth privately without speaking it publicly, the latter, who rejected Kant’s subjectivism and sought to actualize morality in the world, should have shown political courage. Instead, he retreated from the political fray and believed it was possible to pursue “thinking” without “willing.”<sup>83</sup> In the second half, Ruge focused on the *Philosophy of Right* and argued (as he did in “Zur Kritik des gegenwärtigen Staats- und Völkerrechts”) that it presented the state as abstract, ahistorical, and impervious to change. Or, as Ruge put it, “The Hegelian *Philosophy of Right*, in order to operate as speculation and prevent criticism from emerging, elevates existences or historical determinations to logical determinations.”<sup>84</sup> Ruge concluded with reflections on the relationship between “religion and the state,” which he compared to “essence and existence.” “True religion,” he wrote, “concentrates in itself all the content of the zeitgeist, which is essence, and strives to introduce it into the world as subjective power or emotion.” And this “impulse for the idea” and “criticism” would have to “be admitted into the state itself.”<sup>85</sup> For only the state could temper the enthusiasm that, when left external to it, threatened to spill over into “fanaticism.”<sup>86</sup> Only political life in a free state, in other words, could channel religious fervor into rational, self-determining action.

This brings us to the second line of thought mentioned above, or Ruge’s political theology. Here again we can draw attention to three articles: (1) Ruge’s “Die evangelische Landeskirche Preußens und die Wissenschaft” (September 23, 1840), a review of Bruno Bauer’s book of the same name; (2) his “Vorwort” to the 1841 volume of the *Hallische Jahrbücher* (January 1 and 2, 1841); and (3) his longer study of “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung” (first article, November 19 to 23, 1841; second article, November 27 to December 2, 1841). Bauer’s *Die evangelische Landeskirche* was an impassioned defense of Friedrich Wilhelm III’s efforts to unify Prussia’s Lutheran and Calvinist congregations under a single state church. As Ruge explained, Bauer saw this policy as much more than an administrative issue. It was instead “the actual completion of the Reformation through the definitive constitution of the invisible church.”<sup>87</sup> By subsuming the churches within the state, it simultaneously subsumed religious appeals to a transcendent, otherworldly authority within a rational, public one. In doing so, it completed the Reformation’s promise of liberating free scientific inquiry from theological mystification. For Ruge, the next logical step would be to apply this analysis of religious questions to political ones, and especially the question of the “free state.” “What then is the essence and the true form of the free state?” Ruge asked:

To say constitutional monarchy is not to say enough. For who will deny that Prussia already is such a thing?... One should therefore answer that question, which will be

<sup>81</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 189–92 (1842): 755–68, esp. 755.

<sup>82</sup> Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” 757.

<sup>83</sup> Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” 761.

<sup>84</sup> Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” 763.

<sup>85</sup> Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” 766.

<sup>86</sup> Ruge, “Die Hegelsche Rechtsphilosophie und die Politik unserer Zeit,” 768.

<sup>87</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Die evangelische Landeskirche Preußens und die Wissenschaft,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 229 (1840): 1825–32, esp. 1827.

repeated incessantly until it is resolved, with a book that achieves in the political sphere the same thing that the present book does in the religio-political sphere, or the sphere of freedom, science, and absolute spiritual purpose.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, the subsumption of particular religions within the universal reason of the state should be the initial step toward the subsumption of public life in general within the same.

In the “Vorwort” to the 1841 volume of the *Hallische Jahrbücher*, Ruge declared that his journal’s fundamental mission would now be (indeed, had always been) the same political extension of Bauer’s critique of religion and the church that he had called for in his review of *Die evangelische Landeskirche* and that this approach entailed a radical transformation of the state. “Here,” Ruge wrote, “the corresponding theory is that the state is not an impenetrable, veiled, secret and therefore estranged condition, but the processual existence of our self-consciousness or, clearly stated, the ordered, universal, and reasonable form of the people’s self-determination.”<sup>89</sup> The state, in other words, should be nothing other than the realization of the public freedom of its citizens. The specific constitutional form adequate to achieving this goal was a secondary concern. Thus, Ruge began by declaring the classic republican principle that “the state is not a *res privata* but a *res publica*.” However, he continued: “According to our concept, strictly speaking, it is not a *res* at all, not a thing, at most a matter [*Angelegenheit*], but also not just any matter, but the matter, spirit, freedom, which contains everything in itself, in its knowledge and its actions.” “The state,” he said, “is an end in itself.” Indeed, Ruge now proposed that even the word *state* was misleading. For what was at stake was what Ruge called the “public essence,” which, he insisted, goes far beyond the “formal guarantees” offered by liberal or republican principles of individual right and the rule of law (even if it was “the true underlying content” of such things), and referred instead to the “publicly and objectively realised reason of the people.”<sup>90</sup>

If “Die evangelische Landeskirche” and the “Vorwort” established a theoretical framework for Ruge’s political theology, the two articles that made up his “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung” provided it with a historical foundation. In the first, Ruge traced the relationship between the church and political power from the Reformation to the present. And he proposed that this history culminated in “Protestant absolutism,” or “the concept of the state as an end in itself [*Selbstzwecks*], an entelechy.”<sup>91</sup> In the second article, Ruge focused on the epochal changes that resulted from the French Revolution, the Napoleonic occupation, and the Wars of Liberation, especially the Reform era and the Restoration. “In the time of need,” Ruge wrote with respect to the Reform era, “all preparations were made to establish the state as a public essence, as *res publica*, and, as world historical development demanded, the lively participation and cooperation of all citizens in a higher meaning was taken up.”<sup>92</sup> The Restoration consisted of an effort to diffuse this public spirit by turning “citizens” back into “philistines,” or isolated individuals “who know of no right other than that of their lives and their trades, and to whom the state with its gorgon shield appears as a threatening, alien power.”<sup>93</sup> But the state could no longer be reduced to “a power that grants and protects” private rights or “a mere military and financial power.” It was, instead, “the power of Spirit itself.” Thus, Ruge insisted that “the elements of civic and public freedom are present in the state, but they are not yet alive.”<sup>94</sup> To bring them to life, it was necessary to dismantle the false conception of

<sup>88</sup> Ruge, “Die evangelische Landeskirche Preußens und die Wissenschaft,” 1832.

<sup>89</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Vorwort,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 1–2 (1841): 1–6, esp. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Ruge, “Vorwort,” *Hallische Jahrbücher* 1–2 (1841): 3.

<sup>91</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 121–24, 128–32 (1841): 481–95, 509–26, esp. 482.

<sup>92</sup> Ruge, “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung,” 509.

<sup>93</sup> Ruge, “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung,” 521.

<sup>94</sup> Ruge, “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung,” 522.

private freedom as “independence” and to replace it with public freedom or the public use of reason. “Who is merely independent?” Ruge wrote. “Only those who are relation-less [*verhältnißlos*] and abandoned on Robinson’s Island.” Freedom was not “independence” but “the assertion of my reason in the world of other people, in the state.” That was the “form” in which “my reason proves to be universal.”<sup>95</sup>

It was precisely this combination of Protestantism and public freedom that unraveled in “Die christliche Staat. Gegen den Würtemberger [sic] über das Preußenthum.” In essence, the piece retracted the political theology set out in “Karl Streckfuß und die Preußenthum” and still affirmed, as we just saw, in “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung.” Specifically, Ruge now proposed that “the free state is not a form of Protestantism” but “its annulment.” Whereas he had previously characterized Protestantism as the theory of public freedom, he now conceded “that conclusions could be drawn from Protestantism that are completely opposed to freedom” including “the wilful guardianship and surveillance of private individuals by the state.”<sup>96</sup> The Reformation had not so much eliminated priests, Ruge contended. It rendered every individual their own priest, which did not mean they entered public life or exercised their civic virtue, as he had suggested in his earlier writings, but that they governed themselves and their own private affairs. Consequently, “the faithful private individuals” of Protestantism “do not want to be politicians, they do not want to be citizens, they are all alike in that they are nothing but subjects.”<sup>97</sup> At the same time, Ruge still held out hope that this retreat into the private self would somehow be accompanied by a widespread discovery of philosophy and that this would lead to a great, revolutionary transformation. “And what will be the conclusion of this drama in which the old and the new age fight one another to the death?” Ruge wrote. “The new political world,” he continued, “the world of free people, which consumes private individuals and their egoism in the flames of genuine patriotism, will become real; what is already on the inside will appear on the outside.”<sup>98</sup>

### Conclusion: The Self-Critique of Liberalism

Making “what is already on the inside appear on the outside” is not a bad description of Ruge’s “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus.” For, as noted, this final piece for the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, published just a few weeks before its last number, was as much a confession of long-held convictions as it was a radical reorientation. Significantly, the title can be read in two ways—as a liberal criticizing himself, but also as the self-criticism contained within liberalism or its internal contradictions. Ruge’s aim was to show that liberalism was defeated by its own narrow, private understanding of freedom, which could only conceive of the state as an instrument for securing external, nonpolitical rights, or what Ruge called a “police state.” Thus, it came as no surprise that, during the period of liberal struggles, the people had become more atomized and the state more alien and powerful. The same phenomenon explained liberalism’s tendency to remain theoretical, and its failure to form an effective political party or develop collective political consciousness. What was required, Ruge contended, was a rebirth of the public spirit characteristic of the Reform era and the Wars of Liberation. And this could not be accomplished through philosophy or political reform alone. It demanded what Ruge called “a new consciousness”—one that gripped, not only intellectuals, but “the people.” This “new consciousness” would put “the earth in place of the heavens, the kingdom of freedom in place of the kingdom of God, the state and the public spirit in place of the visible and invisible church.” And yet it would involve “not the cancellation of religion but its rebirth” or “a new idealism, a new spiritualisation of our hardened

<sup>95</sup> Ruge, “Der protestantische Absolutismus und seine Entwicklung,” 526.

<sup>96</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Die christliche Staat,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 267–68 (1842): 1065–72, esp. 1065.

<sup>97</sup> Ruge, “Die christliche Staat,” 1069.

<sup>98</sup> Ruge, “Die christliche Staat,” 1072.

lives, a transformation of apparent religion into real religion.” It would be to make a “religion of freedom.” Or, more accurately, it would reveal “there has never been a religion besides freedom.”<sup>99</sup> Here, rather than being “granted” by an external authority, freedom would be “its own product” or “a new spiritual condition gained in battle, a completely self-contained possession, secured without any external guarantees.”<sup>100</sup>

Although Ruge’s rhetoric here was elevated, as we have seen, this conception of freedom as self-determination through collective public action was not invented at this moment but developed consistently throughout Ruge’s work in the *Jahrbücher*. What was unique here was Ruge’s willingness to be explicit with respect to what institutional arrangements would be adequate to this “new freedom,” or what lever could accomplish this “reform of consciousness.” It would, Ruge said, necessitate “the education and arming of the people” or “the combination of the school and the military.” And, practically speaking, this meant: “1) To transform the churches into schools, and organise a real popular education, absorbing all the people [*Pöbel*]; 2) To merge it completely with the military system; 3) To let the educated and organized people govern themselves and administer justice themselves in public life and in the public court.”<sup>101</sup> It was a program designed to shock, and it would undoubtedly find even fewer “liberal” proponents today than it did 180 years ago. It was a high-water mark of Ruge’s radicalism, to be certain. But it was not something he cooked up out of the blue. Its seeds could be discerned in his earliest contributions to the *Jahrbücher*. It took shape amid his confrontations with liberalism. And it was stated here with such candor largely because Ruge knew his journal was about to be silenced. It thus stands as a clear and direct expression of what Ruge and the Young Hegelians understood when they spoke of “the absolute state” or characterized the state as “an end in itself.” And it offers a glimpse into why their writings, which can seem incredibly obscure from our perspective, were so frequently disparaged as scandalous, outrageous, destructive, and revolutionary.

**Competing interests.** None

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<sup>99</sup> Arnold Ruge, “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus,” *Deutsche Jahrbücher* 1–3 (1843): 1–12, esp. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ruge, “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus,” 10.

<sup>101</sup> Ruge, “Eine Selbstkritik des Liberalismus,” 11.

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