

Michael Kuur Sørensen.

Young Hegelians Before and After 1848 – When Theory Meets Reality.

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Michael Kuur Sørensen’s thesis places the intellectual development of the Young Hegelians firmly in the socio-historical context leading up to and following the events of the European revolutions of 1848–1849. Their ideas were tied to their expectations for political and social change, ideas that changed or shifted with the revolutions. To show how this is so, Sørensen works from the writings, books, and journals of Arnold Ruge, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess, and Karl Marx. He chooses these particular thinkers because, according to Sørensen, they are some of the “foremost representatives of different positions within the Young Hegelian school of thought” (1). These four thinkers are said to provide a “sort of microcosm” of the overall group of Young Hegelians, which also includes thinkers like David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, Carl Nauwerck, Max Stirner, Friedrich Engels, August von Cieszkowski, Karl Schmidt, and Edgar Bauer. While Sørensen touches on some of these others, his focus is plainly upon Ruge, B. Bauer, Hess, and Marx.

In the *Preface* of the book Sørensen is referred to as a “historian of ideas,” for whom a particular history of philosophy is described in terms of the interplay between a particular group of philosophers and the world they inhabited. This is an apt description of the book. It very much is a historical account of ideas. Reading like a PhD dissertation, the book starts with a straightforward research question: How did the events of 1848 and after influence the political thought of Ruge, Bauer, Hess, and Marx?

In terms of methodology, Sørensen himself sets the stage for the book when he notes in his introduction: “I remain convinced that the study of ideas must proceed from the authors’ reading of their total relations in life and not only their relation to other academic authors” (3). These “total relations” are made up of both the intellectual, i.e., an understanding of theory as an intervention against contemporary positions, and the socio-political, i.e., the political climate of Europe at the time. Sørensen cites Christophe Charle’s approach to transnational intellectual histories, which evaluates academic production and transmission (intellectual transfer, mobility, and reception across borders and academic cultures), as figuring quite prominently in his work and methodology. So, too, do Quentin Skinner’s views on the need to understand theory as an answer to issues and conflicts within a specific intellectual context and his insistence on the need to understand the intention behind a theory’s usage. These approaches are used to perceive and ground the Young Hegelians within a process of discussion and exchange. For Sørensen, accordingly, his chosen research question is best answered by giving a deep sense not only of the theories propounded by the authors under examination, but of the circumstances that precipitated their writing.

From what I know of the Young Hegelians, Sørensen’s arguments and the overall picture he presents seem to make a lot of sense, although he maintains somewhat contentious positions at times. In my opinion, “making sense” and the critical self-awareness that typically

accompanies taking self-professedly contentious positions are two of the primary requirements of a good philosophical read. These, then, count as some of the positive things about Sørensen's book. That said, I do not always agree with the generalizations made in the book about G.W.F. Hegel and his philosophy. For example, I believe the Young Hegelians' polemics against Hegel's ideological views were misplaced; it seems to me that the Young Hegelians often stood much closer to Hegel than they themselves seem to have realized. This is especially true of Marx. This being a book on the history of ideas presented by a particular group of thinkers, the criticism should perhaps be directed at the four Young Hegelians, rather than Sørensen: still, at times the author seems far too taken by the Young Hegelians' caricature of their master-antagonist.

A summary breakdown of the chapters may be useful to potential readers. In Chapter 1 of the book Sørensen describes the interactions between Ruge, B. Bauer, Hess, and Marx. He delves into their individual experiences with the political climate of the time and what they saw as the pressing problems in society. Chapter 2 is about how these four read Hegel in light of the times' conservative political climate. In Sørensen's own words:

One of the major contributions in [Chapter 2] is to see their reading of Hegel as a consequence of their experience of the [times] political context... How they approached Hegel... and how they set out and developed their own theoretical interventions on the basis of their questioning of central ideas in Hegel's philosophy are of key importance to understand [the four Young Hegelians'] intellectual development. (8)

In Chapter 3 Sørensen examines how the four sought to realize philosophy in praxis. The major argument of this chapter is that Ruge, Marx, and Hess each adhered to the 'form' of religion as a way of realizing philosophy, while Bauer rejected both the form and content of it. Sørensen also claims the following in Chapter 3:

In their departure from Hegel's pantheism they all rejected Christianity as an inhuman form of thought. However some Young Hegelians wished to retain the form of religion as a tool for realizing philosophy, whereas they all agreed on rejecting the content of Christianity. (9)

Some of the conclusions of this chapter may be open to debate, but even so – or maybe, as a direct consequence of these conclusions – Chapter 3 was among my favorite chapters.

Chapter 4 is a look at the ideas put forward by the four thinkers on how to organize society. The main point made by Sørensen is that the positions they adopted (B. Bauer is portrayed as a critical republican, Ruge as a democrat, and Marx and Hess as varying types of communist) conditioned the way they approached the role and place of the masses in society. All four, according to Sørensen, were engaged in an attempt "to go beyond Hegel's philosophy of right, which they... identified as being too conservative to deal with the problems they experienced" (9). In Chapter 5 Sørensen analyzes their theories of history, with the basic goal of examining their responses to Hegel's own theory of history. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the period after the 1848–1849 revolutions. In Chapter 6, Sørensen endeavors to show

how the Young Hegelians at the beginning of the revolution were enthusiastic and optimistic, and thought the last bells for Absolutism were ringing. This enthusiasm was gradually eroded in favor of a skeptical approach, for then to become disillusioned with the prospects of overthrowing the monarchy and realizing their theories. In Chapter 7 [he] shows how this disillusionment led to a change in their theoretical outlook. (10–11)

A personal anecdote: *Young Hegelians Before and After 1848* struck me, in both the metaphorical and literal sense. I make it a habit of reading while I walk, and I was so engaged with this book – I was reading Chapter 3 at the time – that I walked into a signpost, and as a result the book struck me in the face. The only harm done, thankfully, was to my pride – alas, some people witnessed my semiotic collision. But I enjoyed the book, and I found it to be a worthwhile and informative read. It captured my interest and inspired me to delve deeper into the philosophies of some of the less popular Young Hegelians.

Truth be told, I also found it to be a strength of the book that it reads so much like a dissertation. I enjoyed reading and reviewing a book that starts with a very clear research question, and I appreciated how the book progressed to its *General Conclusion*. I thus recommend the book to readers.

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