The Critique of the Liberal Public Sphere

The Self-Criticism of Liberalism

Hermann Baumgarten's work *Der deutsche Liberalismus: Eine Selbstkritik* (German Liberalism: A Self-Criticism) was first published in 1866 in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* but in the same year also went on the market as a separate book.\(^1\) Response to Baumgarten's thesis was varied and controversial. Heinrich von Treitschke and Julian Schmidt, speaking for the liberal right, welcomed his critique warmly and called for a new foundation for liberalism.\(^2\) According to Baumgarten, who viewed the development of liberalism in Germany from the perspective of state and national strength, the history of German liberalism was a history of failure. He gave the endeavors of southwest German chamber liberalism (*Kammerliberalismus*) no more than condescending approval, because he did not regard emancipatory strivings and political strategies as identical, as they had been by the prerevolutionary liberals, but rather as antithetical. Although Baumgarten conceded that the southwest German administrations were efficient, "it was utterly impossible for these pseudostates to contribute to the development of a real political life." To the limitations of the small German states Baumgarten preferred the moderate absolutism of Prussia, which at least had the advantage of being effective in power politics. He summarized the position of Vormärz liberalism as follows: "Of course,

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\(^1\)Preussische Jahrbücher 18 (1866): 455–515, 575–628. Published separately by the G. Reimer Verlag.

anyone who evaluates these circumstances impartially will recognize the failure of liberal efforts before 1848. Surrounded by many small states that attracted only minor strength to the political stage; pressured by Austrian and Prussian absolutism; opposed by dynasties whose unnatural existence could only be maintained if the nation continued to lack a sound political life; opposed by a nobility inseparably linked to these dynasties, in which liberalism predominated; opposed, finally, by an often meritorious bureaucracy that included the best political strength of the middle class, liberalism could never become a governing power in the state.” Having already distanced himself so far from classic liberalism, Baumgarten failed to see that liberals did not regard their theory as a governing power but rather as a public force aimed at bringing government under control. It was essentially on the basis of its theory that the role of opposition was ascribed to early liberalism. By concluding that national unity was the principal objective of liberalism and by extending this conclusion back to the 1848 period, Baumgarten treated the classic emancipatory demands of the liberals as “secondary concerns.”

The change is strikingly demonstrated by the difference between Baumgarten’s view and that of his teacher Gervinus. Whereas the failure of the revolution induced Gervinus to call even more urgently for democratization of the state, this was precisely what Baumgarten opposed: “German liberalism in our time can, indeed, be said to exhibit this [tendency toward democratization] to the highest degree. The question is only whether it is a laudable and desirable characteristic. I maintain that as long as it operates in this one-sided democratic way under the dominance of monarchic forms of government, it will have to forgo realizing its own ideas; i.e., entering with full power into the life of the state.” Renunciation of the critical tradition is Baumgarten’s prerequisite for participation in state affairs, because the politician is concerned with positive ideas that have practical application.

This position was the basis for Baumgarten’s assessment of the constitutional conflict; he regarded the liberals in Prussia and in the smaller states as a narrow party, but characterized Bismarck as the representative not only of Prussian but of national German interests. With a certain masochistic satisfaction, he showed that on the issue of Schleswig-Holstein public opinion was against Bismarck, but that the public did not prevail. He basically identified with Bismarck’s position, equating it with the national view while treating liberalism as the particularism of a small state. Characteristically, he scarcely touched on the

3Baumgarten, Der deutsche Liberalismus, pp. 40, 47, 48.
4Ibid., p. 119.
domestic side of the constitutional conflict, regarding the existing Prussian state as essentially identical with the sought-for national state. His failure to express opinions on the organization of the army and the budget issue shows that, after the Prussian military victory and the defeat of the Progressive party, he based his hopes for national unity on the constitutional realities of 1866 and the Prussian government. Baumgarten’s pride in the military victory totally obscured his view of the domestic political conditions with which the new liberalism was allied. He openly favored a realpolitik deriving its right from the force of circumstances: “With legal means we would always have come out short against the tenacious particularism of the Hanoverian or Schleswig-Holstein peasants or the inhabitants of imperial Frankfurt.”

An alliance with the Prussian state included an alliance with the nobility. In contrast, Baumgarten was skeptical about the emancipatory demands of the middle class. Since he denied the middle class the capacity for political sovereignty on the basis of its origins and education, his interpretation came close to a neofeudalist concept of society.

Political Räsonnement, Baumgarten proposed, should once again be restricted to the circle of the initiated: “To assume that every capable savant, lawyer, merchant, or official who is interested in public affairs and diligently reads the papers is capable of taking an active part in politics, that absolutely no special preparation, no special study, is required for this, and that politics can be admirably carried on alongside other professional duties is one of the most destructive errors to which our totally unpolitical style and lack of political experience has led us.”

This was precisely the early liberal interpretation, in which politics was the concern of all citizens. By drawing a distinction between the citizen and the politician, Baumgarten distanced himself from the classic theory of the public sphere.

In the second volume of his *Grundsätze der Realpolitik* (1869), Rochau came considerably closer to Baumgarten’s point of view. He reduced the importance of public opinion even more than he had in the first volume (1853). In 1866 Baumgarten had viewed national unity as the central goal of liberal policy—a goal that could not and should not be questioned. From the perspective of 1869, this idea turned out to be an ideological legitimation of powerful interests. National German unity was an answer not so much to idealistic and emotional needs as to material ones: “The German striving for unity does not stem from the sympathy of souls, as is claimed, but from more or less legitimate self-interest; it is aimed not at the fulfillment of a national emotional need

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5Ibid., p. 145.
6Ibid., p. 44.
but at the safeguarding of this or that common interest. . . . In short, unity for the Germans is at heart purely a matter of business, in which no one wants to lose and from which everyone wants to derive maximum personal benefit—reduction of taxes, easing of the military burden, civil rights, and guaranteed internal order and external peace.”

This list accurately describes the wishes of the German bourgeoisie in the 1860s, and despite his cynical tone, Rochau stood behind these demands; in fact, they alone made the goal of national unity meaningful for him. In doing so, he shifted the problem of political unity much as Baumgarten did, equating moderate liberalism, with its preference for constitutional monarchy, with particularism and viewing it accordingly as the foe of national unity. His discrimination against small-state liberalism led to a higher estimation of preconstitutional Prussia and the conservative policy of unity advocated by Bismarck.

Rochau criticized the Greater Germany faction in the south because it proceeded from abstract demands rather than from actual political developments. In this respect he regarded the resistance of the democrats to unity without political freedom as an illusion: “This protest would have a certain justification only if entrance into the North German Confederation involved some kind of meaningful sacrifice. But anyone who has some knowledge of prevailing constitutional conditions in the German states and judges them with a modicum of understanding would have to deceive himself in order to conclude that they offer even a single guarantee of popular rights which would not be far outweighed by the mere existence of the new federal order and the Reichstag that is dependent on it.” Rochau counted on the “egoism of the state” to guarantee a free constitution in a great power, whereas in a small state the egoism of the prince was paramount and thus worked against the constitution. Eventually, however, Rochau returned to an idealistic interpretation, for he argued that only national unity could guarantee internal freedom; yet he failed to take into account the other possibility—the achievement of national unity without basic rights and civic freedom. Despite his polemic against political idealism—against the German tendency to conduct policy according to theory rather than empirical principles—Rochau remained in the liberal tradition, which he modified and weakened but was unable to dissolve. Whenever Rochau advocated a particular system of government, he chose constitutional monarchy, which accommodated the middle class and at least took into account the masses, since they could no longer be denied. On the other hand, he warned against a form of government that “pro-

claims number to be the only principle of public law and public power and accordingly wants state matters left solely to the discretion of the majority."8 The superior strength of the crowd, in his view, was no guarantee of stability.

This judgment affected Rochau’s assessment of public opinion: he restricted its function even more decisively than he had in 1853. Public opinion was supposed to articulate the political views of the middle class as against those of the state; in this lay its unquestionable justification: “The claim of public opinion to recognition in the state system scarcely needs to be argued for. The institutions and procedures of the state must accord with the judgment, the wishes, and the intentions of the educated middle class if the common cause is not to suffer. Moreover, in today’s world this middle class has the greatest variety of coercive means for restoring harmony.” In contrast, the invasion of the political public sphere by the political masses is explicitly described as a danger: “In most cases . . . the opinion of the multitude proves to be a hindrance to progress, if not indeed a tool for reactionaries.”9 Public opinion, for Rochau, was mainly an effective instrument used by the middle class to force adoption of its legal demands against preconstitutional or semiconstitutional cabinet rule. Thus he believed that public opinion was responsible for the achievement of personal and professional freedom, the standardization of law, and the abolition of local police regulations. On the other hand, in his view, public opinion was no help in solving the real problems of power politics. The effective role of the public sphere was that of a middle-class weapon against the absolutist state.

In rethinking the relationship between politics and morality, which had been central to the concept of the public sphere from the start, Rochau went farther than Baumgarten. He drew a distinction between private morality and the morality of the state: the individual was universally subject to moral law, whereas the state could not be held strictly to moral norms, because its existence was of fundamental importance to society. “By acknowledging self-preservation as the primary moral responsibility of the state,” he wrote, “one gains a vantage point in the investigation of the relationship between politics and morality which makes it possible to a degree to grasp the scope of this question.”10 The principle of self-preservation, which Rochau thought justified because society needs a functioning state, permitted the use of force and explained the state’s insatiable demand for power. Yet Rochau was not

8Ibid., p. 239, 240, 265.
10Ibid., p. 215.
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prepared in principle to remove the state from the realm of morality and surrender it to its own legal authority; he did grant it a special status, however, which made politics subject to its own rules. Rochau's politician accordingly was no longer a citizen carrying out his duties but a specialist—an expert entrusted with an office, who looked after the interests of the state. Although Rochau was apparently unaware of it, this line of argument deprives public opinion of its legitimacy. When a high value is placed on the self-preservation of the state, the public sphere largely loses its raison d'être as a controlling factor. Prevailing public opinion retains only a secondary function as an instrument of articulation.

Between 1853 and 1869 the significance of the state as part of a system shifted in Rochau's political theory. In its later phase, the state is no longer the effective instrument of social forces but tends to be seen as a power independent of society. In 1869 Rochau gives the state an autonomy he had not given it in 1853. He calls this autonomy a bulwark of middle-class interests against the masses, which he denies the capacity for Räsonnement and public spirit. He depicts the crowd as "the stooge of conservative forces or in pursuit of imprudent, selfish objectives. . . . The great multitude demands before anything else the lowest possible taxes, cheap bread, high wages, a direct share of public revenues . . . , positive help from the state against all affliction, guarantees for its physical existence from the community, and more of the same." Characteristically, it is the social demands of the proletariat that he considers unreasonable.

Conservative and Socialist Criticism

The weakness in the logic of the liberal position did not escape observers in the conservative and socialist camps. They saw clearly what liberals did not care to admit: that liberal theory no longer gave legitimacy to general interests, but rather to special interests. Liberals thus found it increasingly difficult to develop a consistent democratic interpretation of the public sphere. In Die gegenwärtigen Parteien in Staat und Kirche (Contemporary Parties in State and Church), a series of lectures published posthumously in 1863, the conservative political theoretician Friedrich Julius Stahl treated the problem of liberalism in depth. Stahl mainly emphasized the contradiction in liberal doctrine, whose political postulates, unlike those of conservatism, had a general

11 Ibid., p. 229.
character but were not meant to be applied universally. He described liberalism as the rule of the middle class:

It [the liberal party] affirms popular sovereignty, inasmuch as the king reigns not by the grace of God but by the will of the people. . . . Except that when it comes to carrying out the idea of popular sovereignty, . . . to not subordinating one class to the authority of another, even among the people, it abandons the idea; it summons only the middle class to power, only the affluent, the educated—that is, itself. Similarly, the Liberal party maintains the idea of equality against the nobility, against all estates as such. . . . Except that if equality should be adopted, if the poor should be given the same rights it has, it abandons the idea and makes politically determined legal distinctions in favor of the affluent. It wants a census for representation, guarantees for the press, admits only the fashionable to the salon, and does not grant the poor the same respect and courtesy as the rich.

Thus the bourgeois public sphere is not what it claims to be—the place where general interests are debated—but rather an instrument for advancing class interests: "Public opinion is but the will of the middle class." 12

Citing the example of the French monarchy, Stahl tried to show that principles such as freedom of the press were always restricted to the use of the bourgeoisie. Not that Stahl meant to conclude from this criticism that the public sphere should in fact be enlarged; quite the contrary, as a conservative he wanted once again to make it dependent on feudal estates. Yet with satisfaction he determined—and this is characteristic of the Nachmärz situation—that tensions had increased between the middle and lower classes. It was from this observation that Stahl derived his conservative strategy: to restrain the middle class, especially in its attempt to use Parliament to usurp political rule. Even before the Prussian constitutional conflict began, Stahl accurately characterized the conflict between the crown and Parliament: "The heart of the system, the supreme article of faith of the Constitutional party, has always been the right to reject taxes and budgets. This is the magic wand it covets, and once it is attained, only one touch will be needed to bring the state to a standstill and, since the king will have to concede everything in order to free himself from the spell, to make the parliamentary government well again." 13 Stahl imputed to liberalism nothing less than

12 Friedrich Julius Stahl, Die gegenwärtigen Parteien in Staat und Kirche (Berlin, 1863), pp. 73, 77.
13 Ibid., p. 128.
the intention to deprive the king of power and establish parliamentary rule.

But his critique of liberalism did not lead him, as one might expect, to a revision of the conservative position which would give greater validity to the interests of the masses. The accusation of inconsistency was merely a formal argument; for Stahl was no less afraid of the masses than were the liberals. Popular sovereignty, in his view, plainly represented the revolutionary principle advocated by the Jacobins during the French Revolution. At that time, the foundation of the social order was torn down by the demand for equality, and a demonic underground of violence and brutality was exposed. Like a moderate Girondist, Stahl complained about the absence of law and order: "All this is an eruption of the violence that is the very essence of democracy; it is an eruption of the demonic power of destruction, which lies in wait beneath the God-given foundation of the social order like a volcano, and whenever this foundation is maliciously or carelessly undermined, it unleashes its devastating forces."14 Stahl's stand on practical political issues was not very different from that of the liberals he denounced, since he too regarded constitutional monarchy as the best contemporary form of government, but only as long as the sovereignty of the monarch was respected. A Bonapartian solution, which brings the monarchy and the masses together so that control can be gained over the middle-class center, was still foreign to Stahl's kind of conservatism, since he consistently maintained the theological legitimacy of the ruler.

Ferdinand Lassalle's polemic against liberalism accorded with Stahl's critique in maintaining that liberal theory was a class ideology that ultimately served specific material interests. His attempt at a radical critique was, however, completely contrary to the intentions of legitimism. Unlike Stahl, who insisted on the priority of theory, as did liberalism, Lassalle, in his 1862 lectures on the constitutional system, was interested precisely in showing that from a political and social standpoint, the constitution was nothing else than a transcription of the power structure embodied in political institutions: "The actual power structure, existing in every society, is that active effective force that lays down all the laws and legal arrangements of the society in such a way that they essentially could be nothing other than what they indeed are."15 For Lassalle, the text of a constitution was never anything more than a justification of actual conditions. Thus the constitutional conflict was for him—in contrast to what the Progressive party thought—not a legal issue but a question of power disguised as a legal dispute.

14Ibid., p. 196.
Not only did Lassalle draw the anger of the conservatives with this interpretation of the constitutional conflict, but the liberals too rejected his resolutely democratic exposition of the parliamentary claim as dangerous and destructive. Lassalle sought to politicize the constitutional struggle by stripping away its legalistic form and bringing the actual power structure to the fore. The pseudoconstitutionalism of the Prussian government, he thought, should be called by its proper name. Thus he suggested not that taxes should be rejected, which in his view would have been ineffectual, but “that sessions should be postponed indefinitely, in fact until the government demonstrates a willingness to discontinue the rejected expenditures.” The rejection of parliamentary cooperation would expose the force used by the government. Lassalle was clearly proceeding from the assumption that the government could not govern without Parliament, because it had to have a constitutional form in order to function. In this respect he showed himself trapped by the liberal theory he was fighting against; for he was unaware, first, that the government could dispense with the cover of constitutionalism and, second, that the concrete material interests of the middle class necessarily led it to side with, not against, the government, because these interests could not be realized without the help of the state. Lassalle’s hope of forcing a democratic solution to the constitutional conflict by denouncing the Prussian government as the enemy of the constitution was based on the assumption that the pressure of public opinion would force the government to yield—that is, it was based not on an understanding of the material power structure but on a belief in a radicalized public opinion. He thus declared: “There should be interaction between the members of Parliament and public opinion. Make the means we have found a slogan for action.” In complete accord with the original liberal interpretation, he understood Parliament as the extended arm of the public sphere—as an organ that would destroy itself if it ceased to fulfill its function as an opposition. Lassalle assumed that the members of Parliament were in fact what the constitution intended them to be: representatives of the people as a whole; and he overlooked the fact that as spokespersons for the middle class, they had to take its particular interests into account and could therefore not break completely with the government.

The Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Spheres

The results of this study so far can be summarized as follows: between 1850 and the founding of the Reich—that is, before the onset of

16Ibid., 2:105, 111.
monopoly capitalism—significant changes had already taken place in the structure of the public sphere. These were particularly evident in liberal state and constitutional theory and in the strategy of the Progressive party during the constitutional conflict. It was generally conceded, not only by the conservative and the radical democratic camps but also by such leading liberal theoreticians as Rochau and Baumgarten, that classic liberal theory and its category of the public sphere were no longer applicable. It was far more difficult, of course, to understand the character of this change, because it largely eluded contemporary categories. The zones of conflict had shifted, but with few exceptions no overall view of the changed structure emerged in the political theory of the time. A new point of conflict appeared, first, in the intensified contrast between the middle class and the proletariat (the fourth estate could no longer be regarded as an integral part of bourgeois society) and, further, in the changed relationship between state and society (the dependence of the economy on the state, a prolonged cooperation that cast doubt on the autonomy of the economic system). That the economic problems resulting from rapid industrialization were also political problems was evident to clear-sighted observers of the political scene. For the liberal center, which understood the relationship between political and economic goals, Lassalle’s radical democratic solution—a total break with the state, a complete rejection of cooperation—was no longer feasible, because the liberal center counted on the help of the state as much as the government counted on the support of the bourgeoisie in its foreign and economic policies.

The collapse of the classic public sphere is best characterized as a transition to Bonapartism. Such a characterization differentiates more sharply between variants of the postliberal public sphere. Some, though not all, of the qualities singled out by Habermas are applicable to the Bonapartian phase. We are assuming here that classic liberal theory was rooted in precapitalist conditions, that it essentially formulated in heightened form the interests not of the haute bourgeoisie but of the petite bourgeoisie. Certainly the economic bourgeoisie was able to participate in the classic public sphere and largely adopt classic liberal theory, since it guaranteed individual freedom of movement and autonomy in economic affairs—desirable aspects in the early phase of Western European industrialization. The educated German middle class was less involved in economic exploitation of the public sphere, because its closeness to the state (the bureaucracy) led it to support state modernization. But here, too, there was a tendency in the Vormärz to enforce

17 Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, 2d ed. (Neuwied a. Rh., 1965), pp. 157–256.
the basic classic rights by institutionalizing the political public sphere (Parliament) in opposition to the late-absolutist state. In this respect, the bourgeois intelligentsia essentially became the spokespersons for the broader middle class. This common interest in a fully developed public sphere broke down after 1850, although the monarchic institutional state survived. Both the educated Mittelstand and the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie turned away from the classic model of the public sphere, which had provided for control over political sovereignty, and reconciled itself to the idea that political sovereignty was in itself a necessity. It was desirable to strengthen the executive in order to safeguard economic interests and provide protection in case of social conflict.

The wishes of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie are relatively easy to understand, but material interests cannot directly explain the changed viewpoint of the educated middle class. Fear of the destructive force of the fourth estate played an important role in this change. The educated middle class had sought since the Enlightenment to provide cultural as well as political guidance; its aim had been to enlighten the population by introducing libraries, educational associations, and so forth—but only in accordance with liberal theory. The lower classes were to be incorporated into bourgeois society. The cultural public sphere, which was to serve as a transmitter, was no less controlled by the middle class than the political public sphere. In the Vormärz it was an organ for ideas and postulates far exceeding the needs of the middle class (the possibility of radicalization through the intelligentsia); but as an institution—as the Nachmärz was to prove—it was tied to the middle class, in particular to the wishes of the educated middle class. The release of the proletariat from liberal guidance of the bourgeoisie, which occurred during the 1860s, marked a turning point. The appearance of a new class antagonistic to the middle class became a threat even where there was no close tie to the capitalist system or, indeed, even where a skeptical attitude toward Manchesterism prevailed. The mentality of petit-bourgeois crafts- and tradespersons changed as soon as the Industrial Revolution threatened their existence. The direction taken by society after 1850 corresponded so little with the expectations of the petite bourgeoisie that the petite bourgeoisie began to change course and moved increasingly toward counterrevolutionary social theories. This tendency, however, became evident primarily after 1873, as a result of the great depression.¹⁸

The new structure of the public sphere was the outcome of these

various tendencies. It was supposed to bridge potential conflicts of interest by creating a new relationship between state and society. The Bonapartian constellation can be defined as follows: the political system erected by Bismarck in cooperation with the nationalistic liberals essentially corresponded to the system of government developed in France by Napoleon III, although the French system may have had a more theatrical and exotic effect on contemporaries than its Prusso-German variant. This interpretation of Bismarckian policy, in contradiction to the feudalization theory, follows that of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, which stresses the relationship between an expansionist foreign policy and internal political necessity. Although Wehler sees no economic imperative in the founding of the German Reich, he does see a relationship between the economic and the political interests of the bourgeoisie, between the interests of industrial workers and Bismarck’s policy of German unification. We can define as Bonapartian a solution to the problem of social restructuring which replaces inevitable revolution by a state-decreed “revolution from above.” Bismarck’s Bonapartism was embodied in a system that checked the demands of the workers and at the same time supported the bourgeoisie’s desire for law and order. The years between 1862 and 1879 appear in Wehler’s interpretation as preparation for a national interventionist policy in view of a social system that was no longer able to find solutions for its own conflicts and contradictions.

Excursus: Marx’s Interpretation of Bonapartism

Hans-Ulrich Wehler refers with good reason to Karl Marx’s classic analysis of Bonapartism. In comparing France’s two great revolutions, Marx came to the conclusion that the later one (1848) was regressive, because it represented only the narrow interests of the various bourgeois factions. Marx described Napoleon III’s coup d’état as the consequence of a social logic in which the pressure of the revolutionary proletariat, the loser in the June battles, reacted successively on various bourgeois groups—initially on the democrats and strict republicans, then on the middle-class center (that is, the advocates of constitutional monarchy), and finally on the legitimists, who favored the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty:

The proletarian party appeared as the appendage of petty-bourgeois democracy. It was betrayed and abandoned by the latter on 16 April, on 15

May, and in the June days. The democratic party, for its part, leaned on the shoulders of the bourgeois-republican party. As soon as the bourgeois republicans thought they had found their feet, they shook off this burdensome comrade and relied in turn on the shoulders of the party of Order. The party of Order hunched its shoulders, allowed the bourgeois republicans to tumble off, and threw itself upon the shoulders of the armed forces. It believed it was still sitting on those shoulders when it noticed one fine morning that they had changed into bayonets.

Thus, according to Marx, the revolution moved in a “descending path.” In the process, the result of the February Revolution—that is, the systematic acceptance of the political public sphere in Parliament—was gradually retracted, in fact by the very bourgeois forces that had supported the political public sphere before 1848. The republicans (who were at the helm between June 24 and December 10, 1848) demanded unrestricted rights for all citizens and advocated universal and equal suffrage without a census, albeit only after they had crushed the proletariat and put Paris under martial law. In this sense, the new constitution guaranteed human and political rights, but always with the proviso that their implementation could be restricted for the sake of public security: “The constitution therefore constantly refers to future organic laws which are to implement the above glosses and regulate the enjoyment of these unrestricted liberties in such way that they do not come up against each other or against the public safety. These organic laws were later brought into existence by the friends of order, and all liberties were regulated so as to make sure that the bourgeoisie was not hindered in its enjoyment of them by the equal rights of the other classes.” The intentions of the new constitution were contradictory, since it simultaneously safeguarded public opinion and restricted it to purely parliamentary use. As Marx showed, however, the parliamentary system gradually undermined the bourgeois public sphere, until it emerged as a postrevolutionary Bonapartist public sphere whose substance was largely lost. Since the bourgeoisie (landowners as well as industrialists and financiers) no longer found the enjoyment of civil liberties an advantage, it used the formalism of the parliamentary system to cancel basic rights and eventually the constitution itself. The emphasis in Marx’s investigation was not at all on Napoleon but on the contradictions in bourgeois society which ultimately made the coup d’état possible:

The parliamentary party of Order [the advocate of constitutional monarchy] condemned itself to quiescence by its clamour for tranquillity. It declared the political rule of the bourgeoisie to be incompatible with the bourgeoisie’s own safety and existence by destroying with its own hands the whole basis of its own regime, the parliamentary regime, in the struggle
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against the other classes of society. Similarly, the extra-parliamentary mass of the bourgeoisie invited Bonaparte to suppress and annihilate its speaking and writing part, its politicians and intellectuals, its platform and its press, by its own servility towards the President, its vilification of parliament, and its brutal mistreatment of its own press. It hoped that it would then be able to pursue its private affairs with full confidence under the protection of a strong and unrestricted government.

The bourgeoisie was prepared to surrender political rule, to subordinate itself to a dictatorial power, in order to end class antagonisms. Napoleon’s victory was a victory of executive power and bureaucracy over Parliament and the bourgeois public sphere. As a result of the coup d’état, a situation was created in which the state apparatus became independent and stood against a divided society as a stabilizing authority. In France this authority was able to find support in the mass of conservative small farmers, for whom Napoleon created an illusion of political representation. At the same time, however, Napoleon saw himself as the effective will of the economic middle class, which wanted to go about its business. The Bonapartist system restricted the political power of the middle class in order to assure its material power: “But by protecting its material power he recreates its political power.”20 Since, however, Napoleon could not disregard the interests of the peasants, which were opposed to those of the middle class, the results were contradictory interventions in the social system.

Marx described the early Bonapartian system as a state apparatus that had to establish a precarious balance between competing social groups, each of which was reassured by the knowledge that its needs were temporarily being met. Since the contradictions in bourgeois society prevented it from creating and sustaining an autonomous public sphere, this role was taken over in the Bonapartian system by the political executive. To be sure, this did not turn society back into a feudal society, as the conservatives would have liked; rather, it gave it a plebiscitic character, which was precisely what the conservative legitimists feared most. It was generally agreed in political discussions of the time that Bonapartism, whether welcomed or rejected, was something new, and that it did not fit into such familiar categories as feudalism or absolutism.21 The Bonapartian system was not legitimate; this was precisely what its conservative and liberal critics meant when they called it immoral: the system neither grew out of the monarchic tradition nor

was justified by liberal theory and parliamentarianism. Even if Bonaparte sought to restore partial civil liberties after 1860, this was not tantamount to restoring the bourgeois public sphere, the traditional role of which had been exhausted. French Bonapartism represented a transitional form restricted to a time when bourgeois society could not act as a stabilizing element and left this function to the state. During the Third Republic, the French bourgeoisie was able to regain its dominance with the help of the parliamentary system.22

Bismarck’s System and the Public Sphere

Whether Bismarck’s system was a variant of Bonapartism is a controversial question. Wehler and Gugel accept the comparison in principle, but Gall has recently questioned the very category of Bonapartism and its value as a basis for comparison.23 For Gall, the emphasis in Bismarckian politics was on a balance between the traditional leadership (the nobility) and the middle class. The constitution of the North German Confederation, in Gall’s opinion, provided for such a state-guaranteed balance, which differed from the French situation containing fundamental precapitalistic elements that had already been superseded in France. In this respect, according to Gall, the Bismarckian system was endangered by capitalism. One can argue, together with Wehler, against this interpretation that it underestimates the extent of structural change that occurred after 1850.24 The Industrial Revolution gave rise to a modern class society that had not yet undergone a successful bourgeois revolution. It was this situation that created the Prusso-German variant of Bonapartism: the latter was the product of a postrevolutionary industrial society forced in the course of modernization to seek a balance; and it found that balance in state power. Thus Wehler regards Bonapartism as the typical form of rule in an early industrial society that has undergone revolution without achieving the goals of civil liberty and parliamentary government. This interpretation is applicable to German conditions, but it does not apply to the situation in France, where a successful revolution, one that overshot the material interests of the bourgeoisie, led to Napoleon’s coup d’état.

A comparative typological definition of Bonapartism must take into account these special conditions. The significant point, also emphasized

by Marx, is the abdication of the middle class, which restricted its own political sovereignty in order to assure its material dominance. Both in France and in Germany the middle class searched for an agent that could assume political leadership without supporting hostile classes. This was achieved in 1866, during the Prussian constitutional conflict, when the unsuccessful liberal opposition finally came to believe that in Bismarck it had found a guarantor of its particular interests. To be sure, this was not simply a repetition of the French events of 1850, because in Prussia the monarchy and nobility had a stability they no longer had in France after 1789 and 1830. Still, the situations are comparable—first, because the bourgeoisie regarded the pressure of the proletariat as a threat that had to be countered by a strong executive and, second, because the rival social groups canceled each other out politically and demanded a strong state. The differences should not be overlooked: the Prussian state could count on the support of a traditional elite interested in its preservation. But beyond such differences, the Bismarckian structure was similar enough to be considered a variant of Bonapartism.

I believe that the structure of the public sphere already differed significantly from its classic model before the foundation of the German Reich. This can be demonstrated by the example of the press under Bismarck. The primary function of journalism in the Vormärz was to disseminate opinion; in other words, commercial utility was of secondary importance. Even Cotta’s *Allgemeine Zeitung*, despite its great influence, remained a subsidized undertaking. This did not prevent the publisher from standing behind the paper and its relatively independent editors. A perpetual battle was waged in the mass media against the intrusion of state censorship, making the tactical use of language a necessity. Before 1848 the fight over the political public sphere was largely a fight for freedom of the press. Liberals, democrats, and socialists united in the struggle against suppression of the truth by censorship. The issue was forced even before the revolution by an excessively harsh Austrian plan to make the strict Austrian censorship laws applicable in all states of the German federation—a plan opposed by the other states, especially Baden and Saxony. The events of the spring of 1848 soon surpassed the bounds of the old constitution. Restrictions on freedom of the press were lifted. In accordance with article 4, paragraph 13, of the constitution, every German was given the right “to express his opinion freely in word, writing, print, and pictorial representation.” Paragraph 13 expressly assured that “freedom of the press” could not be restricted through political or any other means.  

restrictions still existed after the failure of the revolution, and the conservative government returned to the practice of censorship, the principle of freedom of the press was not revoked. This made the situation in the Nachmärz fundamentally different from that of the 1840s. The political press was recognized as an instrument of public opinion—even by the conservative forces, who no longer wished to deprive themselves of this important tool for the formation of public opinion. The public sphere was regarded as an arena in which different opinions could compete until the strongest gained general acceptance. The conservatives, too, saw the possibilities for influencing public opinion through the press and founded the Kreuzzeitung as their organ. By and large, the problem of freedom of the press went unaddressed. Censorship was no longer the real issue; the central question was how to influence the public sphere. As the article “Pressfreiheit” in the Deutsche Staats-Wörterbuch observed, freedom of the press was taken for granted: “There is scarcely any difference of opinion among discerning men nowadays about the system on which the state should base its laws concerning the treatment of the press; only freedom of the press serves both the law and the interests of politics.”

Bismarck’s policy, which differed clearly in this respect from the reactionary measures of Manteuffel’s cabinet, aimed to have a positive effect on public opinion by influencing the press. Despite Bismarck’s often hostile treatment of the press when he became minister president, he did not underestimate its importance as a political instrument. We need to investigate this policy, because it was an essential aspect of the Bonapartist public sphere. When necessary, Bismarck used the classic means of suppressing public opinion. During the Prussian constitutional conflict, for instance, he made full use of the restrictions permitted by the constitution. Nor did he hesitate to violate the constitution. More characteristic, however, was his attempt to make the press tractable, so that public opinion could be swayed toward the government’s point of view. Although such press manipulation had been attempted before Bismarck, under his guidance it was systematically developed. By discreet organizational means, he created an effective instrument that allowed him to intervene in public discussion at any time. If for no other reason, he avoided great bureaucratic expense so that this systematic manipulation would not be too obvious: “He considered it decisive for his work with the press that the influence of the state should remain hidden and that official political control should not be apparent from outside.”

26 Deutsches Staats-Wörterbuch (Stuttgart, 1861), 8:228.
27 Irene Fischer-Frauendienst, Bismarcks Pressepolitik (Münster, 1963), p. 27.
was the establishment of a bureau of information, whose task it was to collect information and distribute it to a specified circle of recipients. This was done with the help of news agencies—especially that of Theodor Wolff, whose English competition was largely eliminated by Bismarck in the interest of Prussian policy. Through his connection with Wolff's agency he exerted influence on the dissemination of news and was consequently in a position to manipulate the reaction of the German press and to produce specific, commensurate effects in the public sphere. These measures were accompanied by the founding of an official news sheet, the *Provinzialkorrespondenz*, which all Prussian newspapers would draw on. Another important institution of Bismarckian press policy was a literary bureau (*Literarisches Büro*), which was added to the Ministry of the Interior in 1862 and whose responsibility it was to issue official publications and supply correspondents for foreign papers. In addition, with Bismarck's entry into the government, a special agency had been provided for press matters, which was directly under the jurisdiction of the minister president and served primarily to support Prussian foreign policy. These different organizations were only loosely interconnected. Although Bismarck occasionally complained about the lack of a concentration of power, he never changed the structure of the apparatus. Concentration of power was not in his interest, since a centralized apparatus could easily become independent, and he preferred to keep the various organizations exclusively as his own tools.

Bismarck's press policy, however, was not limited to the development and use of an internal apparatus. It was even more important for him to penetrate the "free" press and transform it into a government organ. This could be accomplished by exerting personal influence on editors or through financial support. Such relationships, naturally, were established primarily with conservative papers such as the *Allgemeine Preussische Zeitung* and that important organ of foreign policy, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, since liberal papers remained closed to the Prussian government during the constitutional conflict. This situation changed only after 1866, when the compromise reached between the liberals and Bismarck was reflected in the mass media as well. Liberal organs such as the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Schwabische Volkszeitung*, and *Grenzboten* offered to cooperate with Bismarck.28 When such cooperation was not forthcoming, it could be exacted—provided there were no ideological reasons to preclude it—by withholding important news and thereby depriving the paper in ques-

28Ibid., p. 56.
tion of its topicality. Bismarck was not afraid to apply this kind of pressure.

Bismarck's highly diversified press policy, the full effect of which was not felt until the 1870s and 1880s, was based on the systematic manipulation of the public sphere. He used the public sphere without respecting its purpose, allowing the press to function only to the extent that it preserved the impression of itself as a free and independent shaper of opinion. It was thus important for him not only to have official organs at his disposal but to have influence over newspapers whose independence was generally accepted in the public sphere. Bismarck's actions were always pragmatic: when public opinion supported his policy, it was welcome; when it opposed him, it could be turned. This made the formation of public opinion essentially subordinate to national aims. It also meant that Bismarck denied the public sphere the quality that made it important to the liberals: the Räsonnement that was supposed to give rise to political decisions. As a result, Bismarck not infrequently reacted angrily to hostile opinion in the press or even questioned the press's fundamental critical function. Skepticism of, indeed antipathy against, journalists—an attitude that certainly did not exclude their manipulation—was one of the conspicuous hallmarks of Bismarck's style.29

The structure of the Bonapartist public sphere is recognizable in Bismarck's press policy. Whenever possible, the Bismarckian system did not encroach on existing liberal institutions (for example, Parliament, the press), preferring instead to use them; it made no difference to Bismarck whether this action fundamentally contradicted the original function of the institution. A redefinition of the function of the public sphere had clearly occurred, undermining its autonomy with respect to the state, which had been underscored in the classic model. Bismarck was interested in agreement, not in Räsonnement; he sought publicity, not deliberation among citizens. For this reason a plebiscitary element was by no means unwelcome to him as long as it could be controlled—as it was, for instance, in the fight against the lower chamber during the constitutional conflict. It is known that Bismarck disputed the right of Parliament to represent the people because it had been voted into power by only a small part of the population.

The Bismarckian system was characterized by a fabricated public sphere that was largely dependent on the government, or at any rate never developed an initiative of its own. It became a sounding board for the journalistic self-promotion of the state. In reality this was merely a

tendency, because Bismarck’s apparatus was never strong enough to manipulate public opinion continuously. In the long run, he was unable to suppress the partisan press of the right and left. In the Bonapartian phase of restructuring, his primary aim was still to bring the economically weak press to heel. To this end, Bismarck drew on resources from the Guelph Fund (*Welfen-Fonds*), which only he could control. This meant that the commercial dailies, which had dominated the market since the 1880s, could no longer be influenced. Here, as in the case of the newspapers of the workers’ associations, common interests played a greater role.

The Beginnings of a Counter-Public Sphere

The reduction of the classic public sphere through self-curtailment or state-induced erosion to a Bonapartian public sphere, in which state and society already tended to intertwine, presented the question whether and in what form the critical element could be restored. Among German socialists, Lassalle had the clearest perception of this problem. In his “Arbeiterprogramm,” a lecture delivered in 1862 to an association of Berlin craftsmen, he declared that “even public opinion, gentlemen—I have already indicated by what means, namely, the newspapers—receives its impressions from the mint of capital, and from the hands of the privileged wealthy Bourgeoisie.”

This critical remark was aimed at the assumption that the lower classes presented a danger to the public sphere because they were uneducated. In opposition to this opinion, Lassalle pointed out that from a historical point of view the public sphere was constituted precisely as a weapon against the state and the privileged classes and therefore could not be directed against the people. One might conclude from this critique of the capitalist public sphere that Lassalle was no longer interested in the institution of the public sphere and thus developed no theory of his own. This conclusion would be precipitate, for it overlooks the fact that in his “Arbeiterprogramm” Lassalle fastened on the normative aspect of the public sphere. He argued that the inherent immorality of the third estate, its self-interest, must be lacking in the fourth estate, because it represents the entire citizenry. In other words, the working class lacks the distinction between private interests and general cultural development; rather, interests and morality coincide in the fourth estate.

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emancipation of the fourth estate thus would lead not to the dissolution of the public sphere but to its realization as a socialist entity.

In Lassalle, this overcoming of the bourgeois public sphere leads to redefinition of the relationship between state and society. In its extreme reduction to the proverbial “caretaker state” (*Nachtwächterstaat*), the liberal state no longer offers assurance that “the unhindered exercise by himself of his own faculties should be guaranteed to each individual.” Lassalle in no way wished to minimize the importance of the state. On the contrary, he demanded of the state apparatus that it “carry on this development of freedom, this development of the human race until its freedom is attained.” Since Lassalle granted the state a central role in the unfolding of a free society, the idea of supervision, of critical examination, lost its earlier significance. The will of the state was made identical with the will of the working class, which propelled and emancipated itself, as it were, through the activity of the state.

Lassalle’s assessment of liberalism and parliamentary government largely accords with Bismarck’s; he, too, was convinced of the weakness and uselessness of the bourgeois public sphere. In a February 24, 1864, letter to Huber, he spoke out strongly against parliamentarianism. He consequently sought new, unorthodox ways of accomplishing his democratic goals, not the least of which was negotiating with Bismarck over the possibility of an alliance between the proletariat and the monarchy—bypassing the parties of the middle class. What he had in mind was a radical democracy that would unite with a strong monarchical state, as he had already envisioned it in his “Arbeiterprogramm,” albeit without considering the possibility that such a state could be the one currently in existence in Prussia. Gustav Mayer spoke of the Caesarean tendencies that led Lassalle to relentlessly advance his leadership role in the *Arbeiterverein* (Workers’ Association). But the real question is whether and to what extent one can speak of a Bonapartian socialism. Lassalle was convinced that the historic alliance between the progressive forces of the middle class and the workers, which the left wing of the Progressive party sought to maintain, was no longer in the workers’ interest. The establishment of an autonomous, politically independent labor movement would create a new political power, which would pursue its own interests apart from the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and in the process would be able to align itself with the monarchy.

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31 Ibid., pp. 54, 56.
Lassalle’s political agitation against the Progressive party in September 1863 (during an election campaign) could only benefit the weak conservatives and Bismarck, for, as Mayer has rightly shown, there was no possibility of independent political representation for the workers. By arguing that three-class suffrage had been introduced in Prussia illegally and should be revoked, Lassalle sought to urge on Bismarck a plebiscitary election reform that would undermine the political public sphere of the middle class. Thus he, too, unmistakably opposed a rational bourgeois public sphere: “But a bourgeois movement, that would be altogether impossible without newspapers, for the philistine customarily lets the papers determine his opinion; he rehashes in the evening over his wine what he has read in the morning over his coffee, and he cannot do it any other way. The nature of the working class, however, requires that one be able to emancipate oneself from the dominance of the press. The working class [Arbeiterstand] has a profound class instinct, which makes it stand firm and independent against anything a wretched press may say.” That this description was far from the actual situation is irrelevant to our investigation. It is more important that Lassalle wanted to lead the labor movement away from the bourgeois public sphere and at the same time bring it into alliance with the state. He attacked the liberals, not Bismarck; he attacked their moderation and inconsistency, the consideration they gave to their material interests, which was reflected in the press by the combination of political opinion and advertisement. The capitalist press, Lassalle told his listeners, had lost its progressive force. It gratified him to cite Bismarck’s remark that “newspapers are written by people who have missed their vocation.”

Strikingly, as soon as Lassalle offered positive solutions, contradictions appeared in his argument. At this point Bonapartian elements become evident. To counter corruption in the middle-class press, Lassalle recommended, first, that securities should be abandoned, because they permitted only capitalists to found newspapers; second, that the stamp duty should be revoked; and, third, that all advertising, which gave a paper its commercial value, should be banned. These radical democratic demands would reconstitute the press as an organ of pure political opinion; they amounted to the restoration of an ideal early bourgeois public sphere. Lassalle’s argument here is thoroughly idealistic: “These are all papers that neither receive nor publish advertisements, or ever hope or strive to publish them. Thus they are also papers written by men who devote themselves to this career not for the

33Ibid., p. 103.
34Lassalle, Gesammelte Reden und Schriften, 3:343, 360, 366.
sake of their own enrichment but because they have a real interest in intellectual argument.” To the question how this new press would be financed in a capitalist society, his answer was the state. He expected the press to be liberated because the state would use newspapers as public heralds and would therefore finance them.

This confidence in the state is astonishing and can only be explained if Lassalle conceived it as a neutral, suprasocietal force. In September 1863 he was hoping for an electoral victory of the Progressive party, but only so that it would demonstrate its incompetence in Parliament. He was thus agitating basically for a Prussian state led by Bismarck. The goal of this strategy was a radical democracy with a monarchy at its head and a strong executive—at any rate, a state that would address and solve standing social problems. Lassalle had already developed this program in his Open Letter to the central committee of the National Labor Association of Germany, presented in Leipzig in March 1863, in which for the first time he explicitly named the bourgeoisie, rather than the conservative nobility, as the real adversary. Lassalle expected the state to promote workers’ associations; that is, he counted on an interventionist state, by whose dynamism social and cultural progress would be generated. With his dubious arguments equating the state with the mass of the population (“you, the people, make the state!”), Lassalle avoided the obvious question how such a state could have fallen into the hands of the conservatives. According to Lassalle, the workers’ associations had to depend on the state if they wanted to free themselves from the capitalist bourgeoisie. This position led him to a Bonapartian solution. In contrast to the liberals of the left, Lassalle realized that social problems could not be solved by purely economic means. In other words, he recognized the limited value of the bourgeois public sphere for the proletarian struggle, but his solution moved in the direction of a controlled plebiscitary public sphere. With the help of a universal franchise, Lassalle sought to establish a state under the control of the proletariat which would intervene on the side of the workers: “When the law making body of Germany owes its existence to the popular vote, then, and only then will you be able to control the Government in the interest of labor.”

The alliance between Lassalle and Bismarck, which both regarded as merely a tactic, sheds a revealing light on the direction in which the public sphere was changing: on Bismarck’s part, the attempt to modernize the Prussian monarchy and state and disconnect it from the

[35]Ibid., p. 369.
policy of the conservative nobility; on Lassalle’s part, the intention to exploit the crisis in the liberal public sphere for the benefit of the proletariat by establishing a dictatorial power.37

Was there an alternative beyond a reduced Bonapartian public sphere? Habermas concluded that the socialist alternatives conceived by Marx existed only in theory. Since Habermas drew a connection between the collapse of the classic public sphere and the development of organized capitalism and the interventionist state, the direction of change was already established for him: the postliberal public sphere was essentially determined by the changed economic structure, which fundamentally changed the relationship between state and society. In fact, the socialist movement in the German Reich did not succeed in radically changing the character of the political public sphere. The more it could participate in the Reichstag as an organized political party because of its electoral successes, the more it was integrated into the existing political system, which in theory it opposed.

Would it have been possible to develop a plebeian or proletarian counter-public sphere? During the Revolution of 1848, the left wing gave rise to a democratic, plebeian public sphere composed of radical craftsmen and manufacturers. But even this radical variant was more an offshoot of the early bourgeois public sphere than the beginning of a new proletarian countersphere. Initially, the progressive elements still relied largely on the basic concepts of liberal theory, even if they rejected moderate bourgeois liberalism. The labor movement of the 1850s continued this democratic tradition. It was only in the sixties that the democratic and proletarian lines diverged, and by no means in a straight path. When the limitations of the Enlightenment model, which was based on the notion of a civil society rather than one of class struggle, became evident, the labor movement had to find alternative forms.

Discussion began in the early fifties with Marx’s decision to break sharply with the democratic movement. He demanded a clean separation of the proletariat from the petit-bourgeois democracy. In his circulars he insisted that “this situation has to come to an end; the workers have to become independent.” Marx distinguished between the petit-bourgeois democratic movement and the haut-bourgeois liberal movement, and tried to show what connections were open to the proletariat and what dangers confronted it. Above all, he feared that the labor movement would become part of a political movement that would be unable to transcend middle-class ideology because of its class status:

37 For a critical presentation of Lassalle’s politics, see Gerd Fesser, Linksliberalismus und Arbeiterbewegung (Berlin, 1976), pp. 40–49.
“The petit-bourgeois Democratic party is very powerful in Germany. It not only comprises the great majority of middle-class inhabitants of cities—small industrial merchants and master craftsmen—but also counts the peasants among its followers and the landed proletariat as well, as long as the latter has not yet found support among the independent urban proletariat.”38 This coalition was capable of exhausting all the postulates of the bourgeois public sphere: it could demand equality and justice, and it could strive for the improvement of the existing social order—but it could not do away with it. For this reason, Marx warned against the limitations of the democratic movement. He overestimated the momentum of the German petite bourgeoisie, however, which after 1850 was no longer able to assume political leadership. In the sixties, it was not the democrats but the liberals with whom the labor movement had to contend—not infrequently with the help of democratic ideals. Moreover, the sharp theoretical distinction did not correspond to the diffuseness of the actual situation. Both from an ideological and a class point of view, the early labor movement was so closely tied to the guild movement that a separation was practically impossible. The politically aware and organized workers were mostly journeymen who had been trained in the guild tradition and in the customs of the handicraft fraternities. The goal of forming a counter-public sphere could hardly fail to take account of these experiences.

The decision of these journeymen to call themselves workers was of course an important step: a search for freedom and equality while surrendering class guarantees and privileges. The early workers’ fraternities of the revolutionary phase were directed not so much against a repressive class as toward the gaining of an acceptable status in society. They demanded a place in the political and cultural community of citizens. Thus Franz Schwenniger remarked in an 1849 proclamation that in 1848 the workers had stepped forward for the first time as people “who wanted to help themselves, fully conscious of their rights and their power, and by working together had laid the cornerstone of the holy Temple of Humanity, which with its battlements still belongs to the future.”39 Here we can probably speak more of a plebeian democratic public sphere than of a proletarian one: it conformed to the classic public sphere and drew radical conclusions, but it did not yet oppose it in order to create a separate public sphere. Apparently insignificant details, such as the desire to share middle-class forms of social intercourse rather than be addressed with the familiar du by masters

39Quoted in ibid., 1:51.
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and authorities, show clearly that society was still regarded as a unified structure in which the workers could find their proper place.

The organization of the workers' fraternity, led by Stephan Born, similarly conformed to the prototype of middle-class parties and associations, but it went a step beyond the liberal model in its development of a strictly managed apparatus. Whereas liberalism, even in the Nachmärz, scarcely went beyond being a party of dignitaries, the workers' fraternity immediately created a more solid framework for its political and social work. Its characteristic features included a national central committee and an administrative board. This marks the beginning of a professional party bureaucracy that was lacking in the democratic and liberal movements. Characteristically, the founding of the fraternity went hand in hand with the founding of a newspaper that would represent the organization publicly and at the same time provide for communication within the party. Since under Born's leadership the workers' fraternity did not develop a socialist theory—which earned it a negative assessment by Marx and Engels—no fundamental debate ensued over its relationship to the middle-class emancipatory movements. That the idea of fraternity did not accord with liberal concepts can, however, be concluded from the opposition of such a left-wing liberal as Schulze-Delitzsch, who argued that the fraternity offered no material incentives to the workers. On the other side, the complaints of the conservative social politician Viktor Aimé Huber against the political activity of the workers show that the opposition was thoroughly aware of the potential political strength of the labor movement. Schulze-Delitzsch hoped to transform it into a cooperative movement based on the principles of competition capitalism. Early labor movement leaders, who tried to think not in terms of classes and professions but of people, opposed this goal. In contrast, those workers' associations that had formed out of professional groups and whose demands were primarily economic, such as the cigar workers and book printers, were less inclined to join the workers' fraternities.40

Association was supposed to take place on a local level and to assure workers an independent position in society—indeed independent of both the conservative guilds and capital. This was to be accomplished through production and consumer cooperatives that could count on help from the state. Thus, in a petition for the workers' associations, ten million taler were requested for the fraternities. These goals can be called socialist only if the concept is extended and not equated with the theories of Marx and Engels. For the representatives of scientific socialism, who sought precisely to dissociate the Bund der Kommunisten from demo-

40See ibid., 1:67–69.
cratic trends, the weakness of the fraternities lay in their very disregard for a revolutionary transformation of society. The speeches to the Bund by its central officials in March and June 1850 were explicitly directed against the Democratic party, which was composed of the upper bourgeoisie, the constitutional petite bourgeoisie, and the republicans:

The democratic petty bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole of society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible. They therefore demand above all else a reduction in government spending through a restriction of the bureaucracy and the transference of the major tax burden onto the large landowners and bourgeoisie. They further demand the removal of the pressure exerted by big capital on small capital through the establishment of public credit institutions and the passing of laws against usury, whereby it would be possible for themselves and the peasants to receive advances on favourable terms from the state instead of from capitalists.  

This description of petit-bourgeois goals applies only in part to the demands of the fraternities. It is misleading in that it draws too sharp a distinction between the petite bourgeoisie and proletarians, whereas this separation was not yet complete in Germany. In reality, the fraternity of the workers saw no necessity for a fundamental confrontation with existing society; but neither did it limit itself to supporting petit-bourgeois interests. The demand for equal rights—that is, the Jacobin heritage—should not be viewed simply as a façade for petit-bourgeois interests; fraternity offered workers trained in crafts a way of life in which they were protected by solidarity against the fragmentation and reification of capitalism. Through fraternity, workers preserved the democratic core of the early bourgeois public sphere—but also its idealistic premises. By inscribing the ideas of equality and fraternity on their banners, they continued to advocate a harmonious solution to social problems adopted from early socialist ideas and suited to their needs.

Although the democratic movement emphasized the plebeian aspects of the public sphere and thus undoubtedly offered a correction of the liberal-capitalist view, after the failure of the revolution Marx and Engels were determined to go beyond the bounds of the bourgeois public sphere altogether. Support of democratic demands therefore became a tactical matter. As soon as the democratic movement had attained its goal and political momentum was on the verge of being lost, Marx and Engels sought to intensify social conflict by posing further demands,

which the petit-bourgeois democrats were forced to oppose because their interests were no longer being served. Radicalization of the democratic movement would expose its contradictions, and a crisis would be inevitable. Since Marx and Engels assumed a clear split between petit-bourgeois and proletarian forces in 1850, they anticipated a confrontation between the radical democrats and the proletariat. The revolutionary overthrow of society, as Marx and Engels envisioned it, aimed at a takeover of executive power—that is, at a centralizing solution, not a federalistic one (as in Switzerland): “The democrats will either work directly towards a federated republic, or at least, if they cannot avoid the one and indivisible republic they will attempt to paralyse the central government by granting the municipalities and provinces the greatest possible autonomy and independence. In opposition to this plan the workers must not only strive for the one and indivisible German republic, but also, within this republic, for the most decisive centralization of power in the hands of the state authority.”

This demand negated an essential element in the organization of the democratic labor movement.

For Marx, the takeover of the state was the prerequisite for revolution. Thus, the relationship of the proletariat to the state apparatus was a decisive issue for the new proletarian public sphere. The liberal bourgeois public sphere had come into existence by confronting an absolutist state. The Marxian model of a counter-public sphere that would supersede the bourgeois public sphere reckoned with the disappearance of this opposition. In the hands of the proletariat, centralized state power would become the instrument of social revolution. Thus, the public sphere of the revolutionary proletariat had to develop in two phases. Before the revolutionary takeover of the state, it existed as a secret society protected from the penetration of state power; afterward, it became the public sphere of a centralized, tightly controlled party. In the latter, progress would depend no longer on the consent of the citizens but on that of the party, which had a revolutionary task to accomplish.

Marx and Engels’ assumption, in their second circular of June 1850, that a revolutionary situation existed proved false. Looking back at the communist process in 1875, Marx spoke of the practical harmlessness of the movement: “After the failure of the Revolution of 1848, the German labor movement existed only in the form of theoretical propaganda—limited, moreover, to a narrow circle— which the Prussian government did not, for a moment doubt was practically without

42 Ibid., 1:328.
danger." The success of the labor movement was not the result of a strategy of revolutionary secrecy but rather of confrontation with the existing liberal bourgeois public sphere. As soon as the labor movement began in the early 1860s to build its organizations on a national scale and broke definitively with the liberal party, a peculiar situation developed: the proletariat turned into a Bonapartian public sphere so that it could continue its political struggle, but at the same time it established a position of solidarity by which it set itself apart from the middle class.