

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

Hermann Wagener and the neutering of a counterrevolutionary

May 18, 2019 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

Hermann Wagener (1815-1889) was an eminent Prussian conservative who served as chief editor and co-founder of the *Kreuzzeitung* alongside the brothers Ernst and Leopold von Gerlach. While initially steadfast in the doctrines of the patrimonial state exemplified by v. Haller and v. Mueller and upholding a monarchy of provincial estates against plans for unification, his increasing focus on the “social question” later in life would lead to him shifting to Bismarck, the *Freikonservativen* and the moderate *kleindeutsch* unificationist line as exemplified by v. Radowitz in the failed Prussian Plan of Union circa 1850, undercut by the oppositional interests of the Southern German princes. Making his peace with constitutionalism, universal suffrage and accepting a form of cameralistic state socialism à la Ferdinand Lassalle and Lorenz von Stein, he would embark on the quixotic pursuit of championing a “people’s monarchy.” The ill-fated *Preussischer Volksverein* founded in 1861 was such an attempt to undercut the popularity of liberal and social-democratic ideas by allying with artisanal and rural elements, indeed going so far as to threaten the liberals with the “mass march of the workers’ battalions” in his publication *Berliner Revue*. (The legitimist credentials were still intact given the party’s opposition to Italian unification as “crown robbery” and “national swindle.”) Among his many strange bedfellows would be the Young Hegelian and Christ myth theorist Bruno Bauer, who co-edited Wagener’s *Staats- und-Gesellschaftslexikon* — a conservative answer to the encyclopedists.

Wagener’s stance on the social question will be discussed in a subsequent post. Here, I would like to draw attention to a defense of Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s legacy that he wrote in 1883 (“Die Politik Friedrich Wilhelm IV”), and its didactic role in the Kaiserreich torn by confessional and particularist strife.

Friedrich Wilhelm IV was, of course, the king who rejected the “crown from the gutter” granted by the deputies of the revolutionary Frankfurt Parliament; who had philo-Catholic tendencies and donated heavily to the renovation of the Cologne Cathedral; who was surrounded by a conservative *camarilla* consisting of, among others, Heinrich Leo and Hans Hugo von Kleist-Retzow; who implemented a three-class franchise system for the Prussian Nationalversammlung; who insisted on an armistice during the First Schleswig War against the wishes of the Frankfurt Parliament thus triggering riots (<https://www.ohio.edu/chastain/dh/germsept.htm>) by red-republicans and flaming the ire of Friedrich Engels (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/09/10a.htm>) who regarded the armistice as a counterrevolutionary sabotage of a revolutionary people’s war; the king who reluctantly called in a

United Diet in 1847 to raise funds for railway construction and infrastructural development, addressing the deputies by saying “It urges me to a solemn declaration: that no earthly power should ever succeed in persuading me to transform the natural relationship between prince and people so powerful in its internal truth into a conventional, constitutional one,” and who furthermore stated that it was “completely un-German” for representatives in a national assembly to vote per head as individual interests.

In other words, this was not a king whose memory would have much appeal in Bismarck’s Kaiserreich, dominated by the National Liberals with the hapless Conservatives and Catholic Centre in an uneasy cartel alliance.

The Kulturkampf had not only affected the Catholics, it was opposed by much of the staff of the Kreuzzeitung as its secularizing tendencies had led to a boom in civil marriages across all confessions, Lutherans included. Anti-Catholicism was not an incidental but integral aspect (<https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/44285/voegler-gross-war-against-catholicism-liberalism-and-anti-catholic>), of German liberalism, which is something I have previously noted. (<https://carlsbad1819.wordpress.com/2018/05/10/put-ultramontanists-in-body-bags/>) The Progressive deputy Eduard Windthorst in 1872 justified Jesuit expulsion by saying that “Germany is the land of the Reformation, the land of free science, the land of tolerance and enlightenment” — and this perception was reinforced by *freisinnige* court historians such as Heinrich von Treitschke and Heinrich von Sybel (on a related note, the Sybel-Ficker debate (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sybel-Ficker_controversy), was an early historiographic controversy that presaged the cultural divide between Protestant kleindeutschen and Catholic grossdeutschen).

Bismarck’s Kaiserreich was furthermore founded on the trampling of the legitimist rights of Hanover and Hesse-Kassel, a consequence of the greater fratricidal war of 1866. As J.C.G. Röhl (1966) put it: “The Catholics, the Princes, the South German and Hanoverian particularists, the Poles, the Danes and Alsatians, and indeed the Ultra-Conservative Junker landowners of East Elbia were all hostile to the new Reich. It was Bismarck’s ‘nightmare’ that these forces at home would unite with Catholic France and Catholic Austria and, with the assistance of the Vatican, undo his work.”

His introduction of universal suffrage with secret balloting led to absurdities, for instance the historian M.L. Anderson recounts a bitterly humorous incident at the Bavarian village of Oberhaid, as the newly introduced forces of mass politics encroached on traditional prerogatives of local authority:

In Oberhaid, a Bavarian village near Bamberg, the new legalities also ran up against old certainties. Royal Pastor Keck was disturbed to learn from his parishioners that outsiders-forest wardens, commons keepers, town criers, and postmen-had been coming into the village to campaign on behalf of one Herr Dr. Schmitt, the Liberal candidate. As Pastor Keck told it, he had always been “fundamentally opposed to every kind of election agitation.” But, under the circumstances, he considered it “his duty to suggest to his parish, in a suitable fashion,” the candidate put up by the Patriots-the Bavarian affiliate of the (Catholic) Centre Party. Not wanting to proceed on his own, however, the priest sought to coordinate his efforts with Mayor Fosl and the mayor’s deputy, Innkeeper Wagner. But here Keck ran up against unexpected difficulties...

Thwarted in his attempt to produce a united front, the priest determined to take matters into his own hands after all. Election day was also the feast of St. Cunigunde, and at eight in the morning, the entire village, including mayor and innkeeper, assembled for Mass. After the sermon and prayer for the king, Pastor Keck reminded his congregation of the importance of this election and, adopting “a conversational tone”-as the pastor himself described it-he bade them assemble afterward in front of the school, where he would suggest to them “the person who had his confidence” (Vertrauensmann). He hoped they would give him this sign of their trust, since he could vouch for his having, during his nine years with the community, given them only good advice. The mayor, who had already begun to distribute Liberal ballots, fumed.

The school was also the polling place. As Pastor Keck, followed by his flock, strode over with the Patriot Party’s election proclamation in hand, Mayor Fosl hurried up to him and asked him to step inside; he wanted a word with him. When the priest demurred, the mayor warned him that political discussions in the polling place were illegal. That more was at stake in Oberhaid than simply the choice of a Reichstag deputy became clear when Fosl shouted out that Keck “had cast suspicion on him in church” by claiming to have always given good advice. That, protested the mayor, no slouch at decoding a subtext, “sounded as if I had been giving bad advice!”

The quarrel quickly became a brawl. The indignant villagers sided with their pastor, forcing the humiliated Fosl, shielded by his daughter (who seems to have had some words of her own with the priest) to retreat into his house. The priest, after remarking on the arrogance of the young lady (“Naseweisheit” was his word) and the low cultural level of her father, distributed two hundred ballots for the Patriot Party. The election result, a 125 to 23 victory for the Patriot candidate, Keck considered a “beautiful” vindication of his conduct. But the mayor, who had given a speech and distributed ballots on behalf of the Liberal candidate, lodged a protest with the Reichstag, charging that clerical influence had tainted the election.

Hermann Wagener was complicit and went along with this shift. The German socialist Karl Liebknecht, who vanquished in the Spartacist uprising of 1919, spoke in 1889 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-w/1889/political-position.htm>) of a “royal Prussian court socialism or feudal socialism, as represented by Herr Wagener who incidentally adapted the machinery of universal suffrage for Count Bismarck.”

It is in this environment that Wagener aims to recast, indeed to rehabilitate the legacy of Friedrich Wilhelm IV in the eyes of a national-liberal consensus, but also to draw continuity between the different generations of German conservatism until then. In the early 1860s, Wagener himself was still an opponent of a Prussian-led German unification, and instead advocated for an “agreement and unity with and through the princes.”

Here is how he crafts his defense firstly against the accusation that his 'camarilla' of advisors was reactionary:

What was recommended to him from that side was: taking into account the circumstances and interests of the merchant class; recognizing the merits of the officials; consideration for the old servants of Friedrich Wilhelm III; express warning not to favor the nobility at the expense of merit; not to surround yourself with pietists; not to encourage certain religious and political hobbies; to follow the austerity of his father; to use the surplus of revenue less on works of art and buildings than to promote the material interests of the country; attention to every word; not too fast change of ministers; thorough examination of all complaints; attracting all classes to the civil service, and no other measure of favor than merit for the country – the people's trust is the King's greatest treasure, it is written to him – beware of the treatment of Catholics for the rumor that the king is inclined to Catholicism; the advice to see excellent merchants more often; Care for the national culture; Work for the many thousands of unemployed hands; Caring for the army; Elimination of nepotism and favoritism; Urge for consistent, inevitable obedience.

Incidentally, the King's gaze was sharp and clear enough so as not to deceive himself about the difficulties of his position. Rather, he saw from the comfort of his own home rather dimly in the future, and had no secret of it, even against those nearer to him.

At first, of course, the general joy and satisfaction came to the fore. There had been the conflict with the Romans in the question of mixed marriages and the differences arising from the efforts of the Union in the bosom of the Protestant church, within the last days of Friedrich Wilhelm III. The king began his government by dismissing the compulsory measures against the Catholics, releasing the imprisoned Archbishopric of Cologne as well as that of Poznan, and subjecting the Protestant dissidents to a mild treatment. Likewise, those condemned by demagogue persecutions were granted a general amnesty.

The "demagogue persecutions" refer to the Demagogenverfolgung, which were disciplinary measures against radical elements, especially the Burschenschaften (student societies). Wagener asserts that Frederick Wilhelm IV was a laxist in this regard, freeing him from accusations of being a mere executor of reaction, and flattering his memory to a bourgeois audience.

But to placate conservative opinion also, Wagener notes the role of the king in suppressing heterodox religious factions such as the radical Protestant Lichtfreunde (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_of_the_Light), which tended toward an atheistic rationalism, and on the other hand the schismatic and equally egalitarian Deutschkatholiken ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Catholics_\(sect\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Catholics_(sect))).

Wagener also tells us that had been opposed to the German Confederation model and was aligned with the moderate unificationist line of Radowitz and Bunsen throughout the whole period.

The rejection of the imperial crown is justified entirely by personal virtue and fidelity:

Since Austria has meanwhile strengthened again and set up its military and other organization in such a way that there was no room for the Frankfurt parliament there, they finally reached the decision to proclaim the King of Prussia as German Emperor. It was a grave temptation for the king, analogous to that of which we read: "All this I will give you, if you fall down and worship me," yet may it be said to His glory that He did not waver for a moment either that, though He kindly and benevolently accepted the deputation that was to bring Him the crown of emperors, His rejection was categorical and definite, and He was reluctant to accept the crown of emperors from the hands of the Revolution and a congregation. It was impossible for him to pass over the legitimate rights of his German fellow lords simply to the agenda.

It was not weakness, but strength of character and profound self-knowledge, which occasionally told the king of the rejection of the imperial crown: "If I were Frederick II, I would accept. I am not made to play a role for which I have no inner occupation. "And the king was right, and we owe it to his German policy that Germany is the center of gravity of Europe and the German Emperor the most powerful monarch that Frankfurt would have bestowed on us...

Furthermore, the failure of the Prussian Plan of Union (Erfurt Union) in 1850 and the return to the confederal status quo is excused as a prudent and stately measure in light of Prussia's material weakness at that time. He flips this against the democratic nationalists, saying that "for the setback from there was not only the birthplace of the reorganization of the Prussian army, but also the living source of the knowledge that *German unity was not achieved by singing and gymnastics festivals, not by diplomatic and parliamentary negotiations, but only by the Prince's approval of Bismarck could it be made and cemented by 'blood and iron.'*"

Despite his denunciation of his former allies, the "conservative roosters," he still bemoans the fact that the Prussian House of Lords had its landed element reduced through a succession of decrees, to the benefit of what he calls the "tax-draining civil servants" and "tax-exempt capitalists."

Friederich Julius Stahl's eulogy for the king in 1861 is quoted, lionizing him as a religious reformer: "Freedom of religious conscience and independence of the Church he granted as perhaps never a king before him, granting it of his own accord, still in full possession of force, from the day of his accession to the throne, but always without prejudice to the religious content and confession of the church and the Christian state, he absolved the Catholic clergymen of the blessing of mixed marriages, the evangelicals of the consecration of the marriages of the divorced."

Finally, Stahl appeals to a bunch of mushy Burkean platitudes ("not the logic of a doctrinaire system," "develop from the traditional, revitalize the dead," "not a finished program," etc.) And, of course, a world-historical mission — a must to anyone drunk on Hegelianism.

Frederick William IV was a king of a world-historical mission. It was his profession, and he recognized it as his profession, in a state of European power, the state of one of the most educated peoples of the earth, to raise the banner at the height of the throne for the eternal truths of the faith and the law. It would therefore be an inadequate characteristic to call the king a counterrevolutionary, a conservative, a restorer. These narrow concepts do not cover his rich convictions. He was not at all a party man who subscribed to finished programs. The one thing with which he opposed the movement of time was not the logic of a doctrinaire system, but a wealth of moral knowledge and historical views. It was not sufficient for him to preserve the traditional, but to develop from the traditional, to revitalize the dead, to found something new, to come to the aid of the instinct of education, to give great impulses; that was the element in which he lived. He was the true standard bearer against the apostasy of the time that he sought the whole of God-given ordinances and moral goods, though another ruler, more than he, with an iron will, maintained the suppressed prerogative and the unchanged order, and crushed the rebellions of the peoples. Nevertheless, even such a ruler did not equal the Prussian king: he was the true standard bearer against the descent of time, because he also recognized the seed of apostasy in the sins of the authorities, in his own bad example of the princes, in Machiavellian enlargement policy, in holding down spiritual life, in bureaucratic dehydration, in hierarchical pressure, which the church practices, in profane pressure, which is practiced against the church. He was the true standard bearer against the lapse of time, because he led the fight against him not for his kingdom, but for the kingdom of him who is the king of kings.

Overturn an order, wait a few decades, become a conservative who admires the ruins as the transhistorical bond of generations past, his civilization, his Kultur. Or, as Michael Oakeshott put it, "What is esteemed is the present; and it is esteemed not on account of its connections with a remote antiquity, nor because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative, but on account of its familiarity." This is woefully inadequate. But neither is the alternative to renounce conservatism in favor of calling yourself a "radical," as if that term does not belong to the suffragists, democrats and socialists, which it does.

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11 thoughts on "Hermann Wagener and the neutering of a counterrevolutionary"

1. Pingback: [Hermann Wagener and the neutering of a counterrevolutionary](#) | Reaction Times

2. [theplantationsite](#) says:

[May 21, 2019 at 10:25 am](#)

Great article. It really is sad how the kings did so much to undermine thier own political order.

Two questions though:

Are there any examples of Kings or nobility you would regard as being effective at preserving thier patch of civilization? (Other than Metternich.)

Also you have mentioned Burke critically several times, could you explain your view further?

Reply.

- Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

May 22, 2019 at 1:43 pm

> It really is sad how the kings did so much to undermine thier own political order.

That wasn't actually my point here so much as that of the king's courtiers trying to bluff before his enemies; not that the situation you mention wasn't common.

> Are there any examples of Kings or nobility you would regard as being effective at preserving thier patch of civilization?

Any of the royal saints and martyrs ought to have your admiration, e.g. Henry II, Holy Roman Emperor, and King St. Stephen of Hungary.

> Also you have mentioned Burke critically several times, could you explain your view further?

I covered this topic in my essay on the case of the Tory absolutist John Reeves' trial. Broadly, he did much to reconcile Toryism with Whig commonwealthman history, and you can see this influence as well in Red Toryism in Canada. The crown as an abstract corporation and not an actor in its own right, the triumphalism of Westminster parliamentarism as the apex of political development, one-nation conservatism over a conservatism of class distinctions, etc.

Reply.

- theplantationsite says:

May 23, 2019 at 1:10 pm

Thank you.

Reply.

- pedanticmoron says:

May 30, 2019 at 8:34 am

The "Red Tory" is the most despicable creature in existence. Everything contemptible about your average libcon distilled into its perfect form.

We have such a lack of political tradition up here that the Red Tory label is thrown around at every "conservative" who isn't an adamant free marketeer, but the genuine Red Tory is truly a work of Lovecraftian madness.

Reply.

3. Kokumin Domei says:

May 21, 2019 at 11:34 pm

"It was impossible for him to pass over the legitimate rights of his German fellow lords simply to the agenda."

How hilarious, I'd like to respond to this with a quote by another German:

"Names and individuals are unimportant when Germany's final fate is at stake." – Franz von Papen

Reply.

- Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

May 22, 2019 at 10:30 am

Germany's final fate sure was at stake, and the price that the Germans paid for their war against legitimacy was losing everything east to the Oder-Neisse line, plus all their settlements in Transylvania, Bukovina, Vojvodina, the Banat and others. All of this punctuated by Scheidemann standing on the window balcony of the Reichstag declaring the "old, rotten monarchy" dead giving them a good decade-plus of Weimar decadence, followed by National Socialist adventurism that has ended up defining their entire history since and rendering everything to the left of the SPD a political impossibility, 45 years of Bolshevism, and then Frau Merkel presiding over a unified state retaining the official post-1945 ideology of "streitbare Demokratie" where agencies like the BfV are authorized to ensure no "anti-democrat" however defined (mostly rightists) ever stands a chance, i.e. Metternich is now a Jacobin.

Reply.

- Kokumin Domei says:

May 25, 2019 at 9:50 pm

If getting rid of small lords means a war against legitimacy, then the obvious solution is to never again set up small lords. I don't see how German ultranationalism is somehow to blame for the triumph of other ultranationalisms which subsequently destroyed the Germans in their own territories. Why is Germany the sole loser here? Why did France and Britain not pay for their wars against legitimacy? Why does this "legitimacy" sound more like a din of post-mortem torture inflicted on Germany, someone who is considered to be uncontroversially deserving of such a cruel fate because of one lost war (what excellent Will to Power liberalism speaks!)?

Reply.

4. Pingback: Conservatism, the social question and the idea of a socialist monarchy | Carlsbad 1819

5. Aldon says:

February 8, 2021 at 9:39 am

This was a quote from Bergson but it's really something I got from thinking about the hermetic elements of Deleuze's view of Morphogenesis.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 5, 2021

A true traditionalist carries the torch on and engages with thousands of years old problematics and tries to spin new solutions to embody who we are. It is those thinkers who privilege, affirmation over negation, performance over ethics, the divine will over the universal.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 5, 2021

We can't just be Spinozists anymore and come up with crazy logical arguments for immanence and other perennial themes. The rebel has to meet the challenge of a striated system and overcome it in creative ways also to affirm the perennial themes.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 5, 2021

My loyalties in philosophy are to the project of Faustianism which was inaugurated in the nominalist revolution. I am also loyal to the tradition of western hermeticism and the creative lines of flight away from the tyranny of orthodox (heretical) Christianity.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 5, 2021

to prevent this outcome. But the fact that classical philosophy and theology overturns itself in many ways and points straight back to Indo-European perennial themes proves the eternal recurrence of the Idea. It always comes back no matter how hard Bureaucrats try to suppress it.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 6, 2021

The Eternal return is the most profound idea of all time and strikes a line beyond Cyclical and linear history and encapsulates the essence of tradition better than anything else I've seen whilst also breaking out the new.

— Marcus Cunningham (@MarcusC31391111) February 6, 2021

Is this a good stance on tradition?

Reply.

- o Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

February 8, 2021 at 9:53 am

What a tangled web the philosophizers weave...

Reply.

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