
The Politics of Ideas of the (Prussian) Reformers

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The paper subjects the „culture of memoranda“, characteristic of the Prussian Reforms, to a global comparative perspective and seeks to develop a grid or typology of what drives a reformer and what motivates the people around the reformer. Many among the leading Prussian Reformers (not just Stein and Hardenberg) of the early nineteenth century had an experience of studying cameralistics at Göttingen University during the second half of the eighteenth century. Apart from Göttingen, at the Prussian University of Königsberg Christian Jakob Kraus held lectures in classical economics, based on Smithian principles¹. Kraus's lectures were mandatory for everyone seeking employment in Prussian state service. Even though Kraus was dead in 1807, his teaching represented a nucleus of liberal reform ideas. The reformers proposed their ideas on the reform of the legal system and public institutions under difficult political circumstances: a lost war against Napoleon Bonaparte, occupying forces in Prussia and the need to pay contributions. These circumstances demanded specific efforts to provide reasons for reform activities, to establish leading concepts and boost their circulation in the public sphere, within the specific meaning that this term had at the turn of the nineteenth century. The efforts are subsumed into the notion a politics of idea. The paper is drawn on John Maynard Keynes's argument that it is ideas, not interests, that determine the path of political development², but also, and not to the least degree, the mistakes that are being made in the course of the implementation of the reform project.

Politics of ideas had several tasks, first and foremost to motivate the reformers and the officials implementing the reform and to define their goals. Secondly, the ruler with his immediate entourage had to be won for the reform project. Thirdly, the concepts and ideas making up the reform had to be transmitted to the lower echelons of the Prussian state administration. Fourth and finally, the general public, even if it was hardly entitled to participate in government in Prussia, had to develop a positive attitude towards the project. While Hardenberg consciously made use of the *opinion* (the abridgement for *opinion publique* that commonly appears in the sources for the public opinion that was felt rather than documented at the time) for his purposes, already when he was the leading administrative official in Ansbach-Bayreuth. Stein did the same rather without specific intention.

In 1807, the notion of reform was fully developed in political theory and political philosophy. In his theory of law, Immanuel Kant had anticipated what was initiated in 1807. Kant had argued³ that a change of a flawed state constitution that may become necessary at times, can only be implemented through the sovereign by way of reform, not through the people by way of revolution. Reform stood in contrast against revolution, as August Ludwig von

Schlözer had written in 1793⁴. However, conceptual history, as Eike Wolgast displayed it in his important article in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, yields different evidence⁵. According to Wolgast, the reformers used neither the word reform nor, as they might have done, the word reformation, but words like reorganisation or regeneration, or, as Hardenberg wrote in his Riga memorandum, a „revolution in the good sense“ without hesitation to employ that terrifying word. Altenstein, another leading reformer, demanded that „a revolution of internal and external matters should be carried out orderly“. Reform was not the general catchword of the period even if the sources, specifically Hardenberg's and Altenstein's Riga memoranda⁶, did contain reference to sectoral matters under terms like financial reforms, reforms of the educational and the university system, the emancipation of Jews. Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote of „improvements“ throughout⁷, an idea that has completely come out of use in current reform processes. Heinrich von Treitschke coined the important phrase of the „Epoch of Reforms“ in 1879, when he referred to Stein as the „pathbreaker of the epoch of the reforms“ in his *History of Germany in the Nineteenth Century*⁸.

Hardenberg's reforms implemented Smithian economic liberalism in Prussia at a more principled level than in the United Kingdom⁹. Appeals to the *Zeitgeist*, to its progress and specifically to the sum of the achievements of the French Revolution, is characteristic of the Altenstein memorandum, which abounds of references to the idea of equality. French models were in the foreground even though such liberal ideas as the demand of the freedom of trade and business could have been drawn on English models as well.

An essential part of the reform legislation occurred during Hardenberg's tenure of office in the year 1810 the agrarian laws, the introduction of the freedom of business, the emancipation of the Jews, the legislation of customs and taxes and, above all, the edict on the change of the constitution of the higher state agencies of 27 October 1810. In his office, Hardenberg employed a constantly changing group of press policy people, of whom many did not have the status of officials, among them Varnhagen, Friedrich von Coelln, and others. Hardenberg used critical journalists, some of whom were even under police surveillance, so that reports on the achievements of the reformers were combined with criticism of Prussia and even revelations about Prussia's financial situation. Of course, these articles appeared outside the reach of Prussian censure, at Stuttgart with the Cotta publishing houses among others¹⁰.

In 1811, Hardenberg explicated the theoretical base for the financial and business reform in clear terms in a comprehensive address. According to Hardenberg, the „new system“ was to be the only one laying the foundation for wealth and should rest, among others, on the principles that every inhabitant of the state should be personally free, should be able to develop and use his powers freely without being constrained by someone else's will, and that through education, through a genuine sense of religion and through purposeful implementation one national spirit, one interest and one purpose should be formed on which the Prussian wealth

and security can be firmly established.

Hardenberg's approach was radical even with respect to language. Hardenberg spoke of a „revolution in the good sense“ and requested „democratic principles in a monarchical government“ with the remarkable addition that „this seems to me the appropriate form of government for the contemporary *Zeitgeist*“. *Zeitgeist* and *opinion* are the key terms in Hardenberg's text. Hardenberg has been classed by contemporaries as well as by historians as a diplomatically adaptive opportunist, given specifically his attitudes during the period of Restoration. His self image confirms this verdict. The point of time of the massive defeat against Napoleon appeared to him to be favourable for acting „in accordance with totally new principles“ and to bring forth a complete rebirth of the state. In the last resort, in his pointed and by no means anti-revolutionary rhetoric, Hardenberg's goal appeared as the „radical cure of our constitution“. The utmost possible freedom and equality was Hardenberg's main principle at that time. He was willing to draw far-reaching consequences, especially for the aristocracy: No privileges to the disadvantages of other citizens.

The communal parliaments were to consist of elected representatives. In the districts, elected representatives were to be adjuncts to state officials with an advisory competence. This was a far cry from the idea of a national representation or a freely elected general parliament. Rather, the representatives were deputies. Heinrich August Winkler¹¹ and Hans-Ulrich Wehler¹² have rightly insisted that this was not even the appearance of some form of parliament and did not flow from an intention of establishing active participation in government. The conception of Prussian Reform as a „Reform from above“ has by no means been prejudiced but has exactly represented the intentions of the reformers. In his Riga memorandum, Hardenberg made the utilitarian approach to the reform explicit: the freedom of business and a liberal understanding of policing constraint are means to the end of accomplishing wealth, not ends in themselves. It was a conscious laissez-faire liberalism of trade policy, which, even in later and current reform models, can be successfully and in the long term combined with an authoritarian political system. The genuinely reformatory feature of the Prussian reform era was the introduction of concepts of economic liberalism in the sectors of agriculture, trade and manufacturing.

In later reform projects, as we have seen in 20th century Singapore and in China since 1979¹³, the same combination can be found of etatism with liberalising mentality, of the spirit of centralisation with the methodology of a top-down approach woven into emancipatory thinking¹⁴. It can be said that technocracy and planning, administrative efficiency and purported participation and democracy have been fused into a tension-rich amalgam. The amalgam could serve a classical leftist idea of progress and, at the same time, a conservative modernisation pattern, which often turned topsy-turvy administrative institutions without sensitivity to local traditions. Hans-Ulrich Wehler interprets the Stein-Hardenberg reform paradigm as a

„defensive modernisation“, which is not just a retrospective verdict but corresponds to the intentions of the then actors. The modernisation paradigm (for good reasons, I do not speak of a modernisation theory) makes possible a comparison beyond the confines of chronology.

In retrospective, I would like to differentiate between an economic liberal type of reform and a social state model. To many adherents of the expansion of the social state in the USA as in Great Britain and Germany of the 1960s and 1970s, the neoliberal reform attempts of the 1980s appeared as straightforward political response of the economy-friendly right—even though they sometimes were implemented under a red-green government, as in Germany in 2003. However, within a wider comparative perspective, the paradigm of the Stein-Hardenberg reforms seems to have continued: the increase of the efficiency of the economy through deregulation without changing the political system.

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- 1 Christian Jakob Kraus, *Staatwirtschaft*, vol. 5 (Königsberg, 1811). For the context see: Wilhelm Bleek, *Geschichte der Politikwissenschaft in Deutschland* (Munich, 2001), pp. 92ff.
 - 2 John Maynard Keynes, *Allgemeine Theorie der Beschäftigung, des Zinses und des Geldes*, seventh edn (Berlin, 1994), pp. 323f. Vide from the opposite point of view, Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. I, seventh edn (Tübingen, 1978), p. 252, who arrived at a similar conclusion.
 - 3 Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. 8 (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 441.
 - 4 August Ludwig von Schlözer, *Allgemeines StatsRecht und StatsVerfassungslere* (Göttingen, 1793), p. 162.
 - 5 Eike Wolgast, ‘Reform, Reformation’, in: Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 313-360.
 - 6 These texts have been edited by Georg Winter, *Die Reorganisation des Preussischen Staates unter Stein und Hardenberg*. Erster Teil: Allgemeine Verwaltungs- und Behördenreform, vol. 1, (Leipzig, 1931).
 - 7 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke*, vol. 4. Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen (Stuttgart, 1964), *passim*.
 - 8 Heinrich von Treitschke, *Deutsche Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1927), p. 262.
 - 9 Hans Hausserr, *Hardenberg. Eine politische Biographie*, Part III, second edn (Cologne/Graz, 1965), p. 237.
 - 10 Andrea Hofmeister-Hunger, *Pressepolitik und Staatsreform. Die Institutionalisierung staatlicher Öffentlichkeitsarbeit bei Karl-August von Hardenberg (1792-1822)* (Göttingen, 1994), pp. 228f.
 - 11 Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. 1, fifth edn (Munich, 2002), pp. 56f.
 - 12 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. I. Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur Defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära 1700-1815 (Munich, 1987), p. 446.
 - 13 Carsten Kaven, *Die Durchsetzung der Reformpolitik in China. Analyse eines Ereignisses* (Munster, 2008).
 - 14 Cf. Paul Nolte, ‘Die letzte Euphorie der Moderne’, in: Nolte, *Riskante Moderne. Die Deutschen und der neue Kapitalismus* (Munich, 2006), pp. 27-46, at p. 35.