

Source Exploration (Revised version)

The document I chose to analyze is an excerpt from the "Open Letter in Response to the Central Committee for the Calling of a General German Workers' Congress in Leipzig" (1863). The first version of this document is located in the *Arbeiterprogramm: Ueber den besondern Zusammenhang der gegenwärtigen Geschichtsperiode mit der Idee des Arbeiterstandes* (44 pages), edited in 1863 by Ferdinand Lassalle and published by von Meyer and Zeller Editions in Zürich. This original edition of Lassalle's *Offenes Antwortschreiben* is kept in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University. Several German versions of Lassalle's Letter were also published before the Bernstein's 1919 edition: for instance, the 1864 Wolff u. Höhne edition,¹ published in New York (stocked at the *Deutsche Nationalbibliothek* in Frankfurt) and the 1872 Rössner edition,² published in Dresden (and stocked at Columbia University). However, the *Offenes Antwortschreiben*'s most common German version we have is contained in Lassalle's *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften* published in 1919 in Berlin by Paul Cassirer Editions and edited by Eduard Bernstein; the GHDI cites this source. The Letter is available in several editions of Lassalle's *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften*. The original complete version of this book can be found online on archive.org thanks to a scan from a University of Toronto's copy (2008). Another German version from 1920, published in Vienna by C. Konegen, is conserved at UCLA's Library.

This letter, dated 1st March 1863, was written by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), a Prussian political theoretician and politician considered as one of the 'founding fathers' of German socialism. Influenced by Hegel and Fichte's philosophies, Lassalle developed an intense criticism of the capitalist system, denouncing the workers' enslavement through the 'iron law of wages' he presented in his *Offenes Antwortschreiben*. Lassalle broke with the idea of workers' political dependence on the Progressive Party and advocated the opposite, an independent workers' movement's emergence. Close to Marx until 1862, he, however, strongly disagreed with him about Nation and State notions.³ Indeed, in a Hegelian perspective, Lassalle theorized the idea of a "State of Socialism," as a leading structure to workers' condition improving. One can notice the influence of historicism on his theory (the State as a way to accomplish the 'goal of History' which is the Nation in Hegel's philosophy), explaining his partial rapprochement with Bismarck during the first war of Unification (1864). These views were poles apart with Marx's internationalism, which could explain the growing tensions between both theoreticians. On May 23rd, 1863 he founded the first Socialist Party in Europe, the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein*, which claimed workers' independence from the "bourgeoisie" and demanded universal suffrage. Ferdinand Lassalle's charisma and eloquence were recognized by his contemporaries and partly accounted for his theories' success.

Lassalle wrote in the context of the fundamental transformation of the German social and economic

¹ Ferdinand Lassalle, *Ferdinand Lassalles gesammelte Reden und Schriften* (New York: Wolff u. Höhne, 1864)

² Ferdinand Lassalle, *Zur Arbeitfrage : Lassalles Rede bei d. am 16. April 1863 in Leipzig* (Dresden: Rössner, 1872)

³ Paul Claudel, "Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864)," *Universalis*,

structures. These elements were part of the modernization of “Germany” and came with the emergence of the *Soziale Frage* (since the 1830s) as a significant political stake in universities and radicals’ spheres as revealed by the ‘Springtime of Nations’ in 1848. Especially, workers’ working conditions drew the attention of some liberal-radical intellectuals reconsidering the validity of classic economic theories, as testified by the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* published in February 1848 by Marx and Engels. To this ‘macro’ context one can add a ‘micro’ context to the *Offenes Antwortschreiben*’s publication. Indeed, the beginning of the 1860s is characterized by open conflict between the constitutional Liberals and the conservative chancellor, Bismarck: the latter bypassed the Prussian Diet to obtain military credits. His attitude aroused internal tensions in Liberal camp about the best way to respond to this unconstitutional situation. Besides, within the Progressive Party, workers’ factions were removed from Liberal leaders’ political priorities. The *Offenes Antwortschreiben* was a stratagem,⁴ elaborated by Ferdinand Lassalle and the Workers’ Leipzig Committee, to denounce the Progressive Party’s clemency toward Bismarck’s government and to advocate workers’ political emancipation through a new party’s creation. Carl Wackernagel, an important German philologist, was the first intellectual to respond to Lassalle’s Open Letter through his *Offener Brief eines Urwählers dritter Classe der nicht “Arbeiter”, an Herrn F. Lassalle*, published in 1863 in Elberfeld.

I chose to analyze both excerpts from Lassalle’s Open Letter because it reflects political and economic theories which triggered socialist movements’ rise across Germany in the 1860s. Both are interconnected because of their central questioning of relations towards Liberals and Prussian government. Indeed, Lassalle responded to the Progressive Party’s claim to defend workers by highlighting its reluctance to fight against Bismarck’s government. Military and budgetary stakes appeared as major and crystalized Lassalle’s criticism towards the Progressive Party. There was a divergence into the ‘democratic’ camp of the 1860s with two definitions of democracy: one of compromise and moderation, as a legacy of 1848 moderate revolutionaries, and one that disrupted the Prussian state and wanted to implement a balance of power between the parliament and the government. We recognize signs of the German Empire’s pseudo-democratization in this ‘compromise’ version of democracy. The *Offenes Antwortschreiben* is also crucial because it defined the workers’ movement for *itself* and not in relation to a ‘bourgeois’ party: even if Marx had already called for in 1848, Lassalle’s claim is considered as more important in the formation of a workers’ political party. Furthermore, Lassalle’s political positions as exposed in this letter were not similar to Marx’s ones: even if he characterized workers for *themselves*, relations with the Progressive Party are not ones of class struggle. Indeed, Lassalle advocated a potential rapprochement with Liberals in case of a common agreement on specific subjects (which Marx throws out). As we can analyze in his letter, Lassalle argued for workers’ insertion into a parliamentary system (considered ‘bourgeois’ by Marx) to defend a particular program (i.e. universal suffrage, means of production appropriation, State production associations implementing) in contradiction to Marxist political activism (cf. Tchernychevski, *What to do?*, 1863). But one of the mistakes

⁴ Eduard, Bernstein. *Ferdinand Lassalle as a social reformer* (London: S. Sonnenschein Lowrey & Company, 1893)

to avoid is to link Lassalle with reformism: it would be anachronistic. Indeed, as shown in the economic part of his letter, Lassalle remained revolutionary. He violently denounced the capitalist system and theorized the “iron law of wages” to explain workers’ immiseration. The excerpt we analyze emphasizes Lassalle’s hostility towards capitalism: one cannot find any compromise between workers and the owners of the means of production. Indeed, according to his theory, workers’ wages will always remain around the level of subsistence to maximize capitalists’ profits. To understand Lassalle’s political theories a parallel with Russian Mensheviks could be useful: In Lassalle’s mind, the revolution should happen through the workers’ movement’s control of a unified-German parliament as a legitimate way to destroy the ‘iron law of wages.’ This democratic theory is deeply connected to his conception of the State as protective and a structure leading to the *res publica*: Lassalle understood Hegelian absolutism as the State’s ability to implement global and legitimate progressive reform. As we can see, Lassalle’s political theory was poles apart from Marx’s activist thought, even if their aims were similar.

We will now discuss several articles and books that cite the *Offenes Antwortschreiben*. Many of them are not German but international, demonstrating the crucial influence this letter had on the European theorization and perception of socialism in the 19-20th centuries. Indeed, Ferdinand Lassalle’s works, and especially his *Offenes Antwortschreiben*, were translated into different European languages before 1919. For example, the first English version of Lassalle’s Letter, published by John Ehmann and Fred Bader, was published in 1879 in New York by International Library Publishing (and re-edited in 1901)⁵. The first French translation of Lassalle’s works dated 1880 but the *Offenes Antwortschreiben* was only available from 1903, included in the *Discours and Pamphlets* of Lassalle, published in Paris by Giard & Brière.⁶

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- Lassalle, Ferdinand. “Socialist View of the Results of the Free market Economy: Excerpt from Ferdinand Lassalle’s “Open Letter” (1863).” *GHDI*.

Books

- Bernstein, Eduard. *Ferdinand Lassalle as a social reformer*
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A critique of Political Economy* (Volume I)
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Volume II)

Articles

- Adler, George. “The evolution of the Socialist Programme in Germany (1863-1890).” *The economic Journal*, Vol.1, n°4 (1891), pp. 688-709

⁵ Ferdinand Lassalle (John Ehmann and Fred Bader trans.), *Lassalle’s Open Letter to the National Labor Association of Germany* (New York: International Library Publishing, 1879)

⁶ Ferdinand Lassalle, *Discours et Pamphlets* (Paris : Giard & Brière, 1903)

- D'Eichthal, Eugène. “La théorie du salaire : l'économie politique et le socialisme” [The wage's theory : Political Economy and Socialism], *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Vol.89, n°3 (1888), pp. 653-680
- Unknown, “Denkschrift des sächsischen Ministeriums des Innern, betr. die Besteuerung der Grossbetriebe im Kleinhandel”, *FinanzArchiv*, 19. Jahrg, H.2 (1902), pp. 379-450

Web encyclopedia

Claudel, Paul. “Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864).” *Encyclopédie Universalis*. Visited on October 26th, 2018, URL: <https://www-universalis--edu-com.access-distant.sciences-po.fr/encyclopedia/ferdinand-lassalle/>

These different sources have been found through JSTOR, Google Books and Worldcat:

- Karl, Marx. *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume I (London: S. Sonnenschein Lowrey & Co., 1887) [first published in 1867 in Germany]

Relations between Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle were strained because of their political divergences about workers' emancipation way. Marx's opinion towards Lassalle was virulent and despising concerning his works (he discusses Lassalle's theory in only an endnote): the author of the *Communist Manifesto* denounced Lassalle's *Offenes Antwortschreiben* as plagiarism and the iron law of wages as an absurd economic oversimplification of his theory of value. He emphasized the “purposes of propaganda” (p.7) of Lassalle's economic theory while highlighting his (presumed) intellectual dishonesty. This excerpt from the *Capital* illustrated internal tensions, inherent to the German socialist movements of the 1860s and explaining the coexistence of two socialist parties until 1875.

- Eugène, d'Eichthal, “La théorie du salaire : l'économie politique et le socialisme” [Wage theory : Political Economy and Socialism], *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Vol.89, n°3 (1888), pp. 653-680

Eugène d'Eichthal was a French professor of economy at the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques (now Sciences Po). In this article, he uses Lassalle's Letter to demonstrate classical economists' theories' influence on the formation of socialist economic theory. D'Eichthal emphasizes the broad impact of Lassalle's iron law of wages on collectivist movements' ideological thought as shown in the Gotha Program's content. The author severely criticizes the economic bases of Lassalle's theory and warns about the political consequences such theory could engender. The author also highlighted Marx's influence on the economic reflection of Lassalle, what is related to the controversy about the iron law's paternity.

- George, Adler, “The evolution of the Socialist Programme in Germany (1863-1890)”, *The Economic Journal*, Vol.1, n°4 (1891), pp. 688-709

In 1891 George Adler discussed Lassalle’s Open Letter from another perspective: he advocated the *Offenes Antwortschreiben* as one of the most critical triggering elements of German *Sozialdemokratie*’s appearance. Indeed, Adler tended to analyze Lassalle’s workers’ party’s pattern as a model of arrangement for German social-democrats. Adler also considered Lassalle as the initiator of several reform ideas such as workers’ cooperation or the extension of universal suffrage. The idea of a central authority in the workers’ movement vanished with his death but gradually reappeared with the SPD emergence in the 1870s. Adler also put forward Lassalle’s influence on the arrangement of anti-Lassalleans movements in the 1860s . Finally, Adler analyzed the Gotha Program’s syncretism as the result of a strong Lassallean legacy, despite the domination of the Marxist paradigm.

- Eduard, Bernstein. *Ferdinand Lassalle as a Social Reformer* (London: S. Sonnenschein Lowrey & Company, 1893)

Eduard Bernstein identified Lassalle’s works as reformism’s vanguard on the path to legitimacy, because of Lassalle’s popularity, his theories: this anachronism (because Lassalle remained revolutionary- in his goals -and Bernstein was not) informs us about the evolution of Lassalle’s theories at the end of the 1890s. Bernstein cited the *Offenes Antwortschreiben* to discuss political and economic Lassallean thought. Even if he acknowledged the broad influence of the iron law of wages on German Social Democracy, Bernstein also wanted to put it in perspective. Indeed, according to him, the iron law’s intangibility disappeared with industrialization and only corresponded with “a particular method of production- small industry -and a condition of society resulting from it” (p.134): the 1830s immiseration of poorer classes was more due to a pre-industrial situation than to the capitalist system, according to Bernstein. Furthermore, Lassalle’s iron law was not unchanging but was due to the “uncertainty of [the] proletarian existence”: workers’ unions’ arrangement could struggle with workers’ enslavement and, consequently, improve their social condition. In these excerpts, Bernstein used the *Offenes Antwortschreiben* to develop his own political positions while claiming Lassalle’s ideological legacy, as an ‘evolved’ inheritor of German’s socialism’s ‘founding father.’

- Unknown, “Denkschrift des sächsischen Ministeriums des Innern, betr. die Besteuerung der Grossbetriebe im Kleinhandel”, *FinanzArchiv*, 19. Jahrg, H.2 (1902), pp. 379-450

This memorandum is addressed to a *Land* Minister and is written by a civil servant: it supports the German State. The author emphasizes the influence of Lassalle’s blueprint on the ideology of the last

19th Century Social Democratic movement. Here it concerns relations between the SPD and institution of self-help (*Selbsthilfe*) cooperatives in Germany. The author explains the Social-Democrats' reluctances because of their loyalty to Lassalle's iron law of wages theory. The excerpt I chose to compare the Imperial social welfare structures implementation with Lassalle projects (especially state production cooperatives) to demonstrate the imperial regime's superiority on socialist theories: this document testifies to Lassalle's influence on socialist conceptions of the German State.

- Karl, Popper. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, fifth edition) [*first published in Princeton in 1962*]

The second volume of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* focuses exclusively on the influence of Hegel on Marx's thought, and, how the latter formed his political and economic theory of capitalist societies. However, the philosopher demonstrates also the similarity between Lassalle's theory of wages and Marx's theory of value: "The true value of the worker's whole labour power is equal to the labour hours needed for producing the means of his subsistence" (p. 172). Thus, Karl Popper used Lassalle's 'iron law' of wages to partly explain Marx's economic theories and the ideas' flow in radicals' movements in the 1850s-1860s: indeed, Marx's definition of the value of labor power as "the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the laborer" (p.113, *Capital*) is pretty close to Lassalle's equation: 'workers' wages = necessary amount to sustain means of subsistence'.

Finally, one could also find interesting statistical clues about Lassalle's influence on political literature in comparison to other authors, like Marx. The main observation we can analyze thanks to Google Ngram Viewer concerns relations between Lassalle and Marx: one can observe Lassalle's works have been discussed in the same time that Marx's works (in 1922/3 and 1965/6) but in a much smaller proportion (for 1922: ratio 1:170) from 1880-1890. Despite his acknowledged influence on the SPD pattern and socialists' corpus of ideas, Lassalle remains less important than Marx for Socialist theorization. However, Lassallean "Iron Law of Wages" was significantly evoked from 1890 to 1934 in English publications: it is interesting to notice that German discussions of this Lassallean concept followed the same pattern (but at a fewer level) except from the 1930s because of the Nazis' accession to power. Indeed, the concept is mainly debated during periods of economic crisis such as between 1885 and 1890 and during the inflationist crisis of 1921-1923. Such results are evidence of Lassalle's theories relevance on economic debates, even if his name became less emblematic than the one of his rival.

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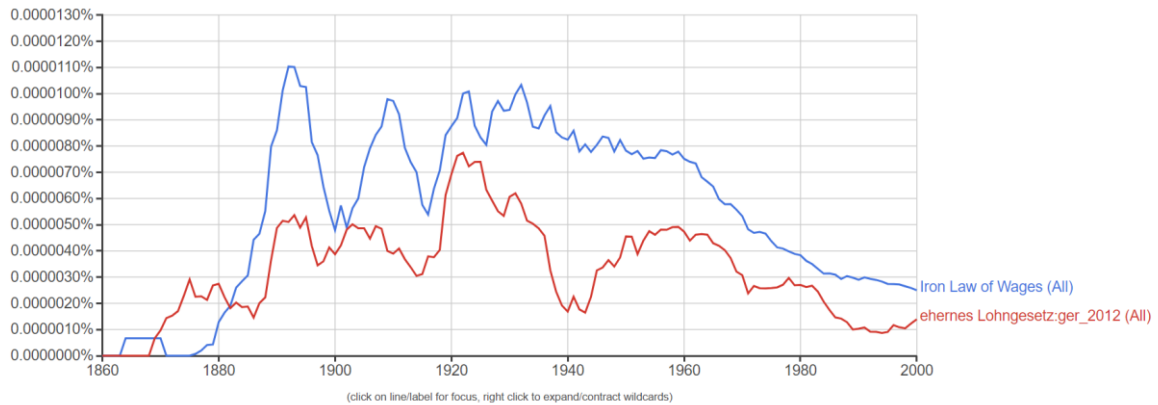
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Google Ngram's graph representing the discussion of the "iron law of wages" in German and English literature (1860-2000)

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Google Ngram's graph representing the discussion of Marx and Lassalle in German literature (1860-1939)