

# Wilhelm Wundt and the Workers' Educational Movement

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***Abstract:** Although Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) regarded politics as the "most powerful motive" of his life, this aspect of his career continues to be questioned and misinterpreted by scholars. The present article describes Wundt's involvement in the activities of the Workingmen's Educational Association in Heidelberg (HWEA) between 1863 and 1866. The implication of Wundt's political views will be discussed within the context of recent research on the political role of German academics in 19th century Germany.*

***Zusammenfassung:** Obwohl Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) die Politik als stärkstes Motiv seines Lebens angesehen hat, ist dieser Aspekt seiner Laufbahn von seinen Schülern infrage gestellt und fehlinterpretiert worden. Dieser Beitrag beschreibt Wundts Engagement in der Arbeiterbildungsbewegung in Heidelberg zwischen 1863 und 1866. Die Bedeutung der politischen Ansichten Wundts wird im Kontext neuerer Forschung zur politischen Rolle der deutschen Akademiker im 19. Jahrhundert in Deutschland diskutiert.*

Historians of psychology generally regard the establishment of the Institute of Experimental Psychology at Leipzig University as the most important contribution of Wilhelm Wundt to the development of modern psychology as an independent science (Hilgard, 1987). It comes, therefore, as a surprise to read in Wundt's autobiography, *Erlebtes und Erkanntes* (1920, p. V) That he viewed politics, "...the active participation in the interests of state and society" as the "most powerful motive" of his life.

With few noticeable exceptions (Bringmann, Balance, & Evans, 1975; Ungerer, 1979, 1980), Wundt's political involvement was for the most part derided, denied or distorted by scholars discussing this aspect of his career. As early as 1868, Hermann Helmholtz (1821-1894) suggested in a letter to Emil Du Bois Reymond (1818-1896) that Wundt only "dabbled in politics" and "workers' clubs" to make money (Kirsten, 1986, p. 228). In turn, Du Bois Reymond took the position that "Politics may well be the best field for..." Wundt, who after all was a terrible scholar and a clumsy experimenter (Kirsten, 1986, p. 230). Edward B. Titchener (1867-1927), who is widely recognized as "Wundt's foremost

disciple" in the USA (Viney, 1993) considered the political claims of his famous teacher "...as the illusion" of "an old man", who "...had not fully learned to know himself" (Titchener, 1921). Only a few years later, Wundt's biographer, Peter Petersen (1884-1952), correctly characterized Wundt as a typical "nineteenth-century liberal" but incorrectly concluded, that Wundt became an admirer and ardent follower of Bismarck after the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 (Petersen, 1925). Finally, only recently, a Brazilian historian of psychology, savaged Wundt as "the bourgeois socialist" and "Bismarck admirer", for his moral failure to speak out against the widely reported "ethnocide" of the Hereros by the German colonial authorities (Stubbe, 1992, pp. 129-130).

It is our chief objective to provide more accurate and detailed information about Wundt's active political involvements as a member and as president of the Heidelberg Workingmen's Education Association (HWEA) between 1863 and 1866. To remedy the problems of previous accounts, the following primary resources were utilized: (1) Wundt's own political newspaper articles between 1863 and 1868 (Wundt, 1920, pp. 5-7), (2) more than 200 contemporary articles about Wundt's WEA work from Heidelberg, Baden and other South-German newspapers (Ungerer, 1980), (3) Wundt's major psychological publications, which touch on general political matters (Wundt, 1926, pp 48, 53), (4) A variety of archival and documentary source materials about the HWEA branch, including letters from and to Wundt, and (5) Wundt's pertinent but difficult autobiographical writings (Wundt, 1926, p. 56).

## The Background

To fully understand Wundt's political views and activities, it will be necessary to provide basic information about the political situation in Germany, Prussia and Baden, and major events in his personal life between 1859 and 1863.

### *Germany and Prussia*

The problem of German unification, which had lain dormant since the failure of the 1848-1849 Revolution, was the central political issue in the 1859-1863 period (Nipperdey, 1985). Traditionally, two quite different solutions of this problem were debated (Hamerow, 1969, 1972). The members of the small town middle class and the politically active Catholics of South Germany hoped to unite all German "states" in a federal union of Greater Germany" under the leadership of Austria. Alternatively, North Germans, Protestants, intellectuals and members of the middle class with industrial and commercial interests, preferred the creation of a "Little Germany" excluding Austria. Prussia and its

new king, William I of Prussia (1787-1888) were to take the leading role in such a centralized, modern, parliamentary state.

The major promoter of German unification under Prussian leadership was the elite National Union organization. This lobby was founded in the fall of 1859. Its membership of more than 25,000 middle and upper-middle-class liberals, democrats and nationalists was recruited from all German states (Nipperdey, 1985). The chief goal of the group was the promotion of constitutional government for all of Germany and each of its component states. The National Union also strongly advocated the extension of civil rights across Germany, including an independent judiciary, separation of church and state, free public education, freedom of the press, free trade, and universal suffrage.

Since the National Union was not a political party, it encouraged its members to establish Progress Parties in the different German states, which, in turn, were to compel their respective governments to work for the unification of Germany (Sheehan, 1978). The first branch of this party was established in Prussia and a similar organization was also formed in Wundt's home state.

When Otto von Bismarck (1818-1898), the Prussian prime minister closed parliament in 1863 and called for new elections, the Progress Party began to establish a network of educational clubs of "Workingmen's Educational Associations" (WEAs) throughout Prussia in the hope of gaining the political support of the working classes in its struggle with the government (Sheehan, 1978).

### *Baden*

The political situation in the Grand Duchy of Baden during this time was quite similar to that in Prussia. In 1860, the National Union held one of its organizational meetings in Heidelberg and its membership in Baden was the second largest after Prussia. In the same year, Grand Duke Frederic I of Baden (1852-1907), a son-in-law of the Prussian King, ushered in a "new era" in politics with the appointment of August Lamey (1816-1896), as his liberal minister of the interior (Becker, 1979). Lamey's controversial reform legislation included the secularization of public schools, the emancipation of Jews, and comprehensive free trade laws (Andermann, 1979). During the "new era", the Progressives became the leading political party in Baden and encouraged the establishment of Workingmen's Educational Associations throughout the state (Schadt & Schmierer, 1979). As far as the question of German unity was concerned, the Protestants in the larger cities of Baden tended to favor a "Little Germany" under Prussia's leadership. The largely Catholic population of South Baden however, strongly supported a "Greater Germany" under Austria. Many Badensians,

however, sat on the fence or endorsed a "Little Germany" without the hegemony of Prussia (Gall, 1968).

### *Wundt*

In the late fall of 1863, Wundt was a 31-year-old physician, who held a joint appointment as teaching assistant of Helmholtz and as an adjunct instructor of physiology in the Medical Faculty of Heidelberg University (Bringmann, Bringmann, & Cottrel, 1976). During the academic year, he spent about two days a week providing basic laboratory instruction to medical students. In addition, he usually offered 2 or 3 courses of his own. In addition, Wundt was recognized by none other than Helmholtz (Bringmann, Bringmann, & Cottrel, 1976) as:

.....a thorough and broadly educated scholar, who has discovered...an entire series of interesting, new facts...in sensory physiology. His philosophical and general scientific background have enabled him to work more productively in the field concerned with the relationship between sensory physiology and psychology" (p. 83).

His publication list up to 1863 covers four closely printed pages in the 1926 bibliography prepared by his daughter! Wundt, who received only a small income from his tow positions, was a bachelor sharing the apartment of his mother (Bringmann, 1975). He also had an active circle of friends among the younger teachers at Heidelberg with whom he met on a regular basis to exchange information about their respective researches in the natural sciences, philosophy, psychology and history.

Wundt became involved in the activities of the National Union in May of 1860 when he was only 27-years-old (Wundt, 1912). At that time, the executive board of this organization met in Wundt's home town to draft the "Heidelberg Declaration", which summarized its political goals for the South German states. Wundt was introduced to politics by his close friend and mentor, Eduard Pickford (1823-1866), who was a member of the executive board of the National Union (Weech, 1875). Pickford's father was a wealthy, English textile manufacturer, who had moved to Germany to raise his 10 children in Heidelberg. Pickford had tried to become a businessman but, eventually, chose the life of a journalist and university instructor in political science. In contrast to the scholarly and somewhat pedantic Wundt, Pickford was a worldly and romantic person, who was fluent in English, French and German. He had traveled widely in Europe and was an admirer and follower of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). During the early 1860s, Pickford lived in Heidelberg as editor of the iconoclastic

South German People's Journal. Research data show that Wundt belonged to those Badensians, who favored a smaller Germany but were very skeptical about the military power of Prussia and the political strategies of Bismarck (Ungerer, 1976).

## **Wundt and the Heidelberg WEA**

From the spring of 1863 to the spring of 1866, Wundt was actively associated with the Heidelberg Workingmen's Educational Association (HWEA; *Arbeiter-Bildungsverein Heidelberg*) (Ungerer, 1978, 1979). During this period, he was mentioned 83 times in local and regional newspapers! His busiest year with the group was 1864. After 1866, his involvement declined visibly. The last entry for this work was found in 1869.

The HWEA was founded on April 27, 1863 in the restaurant "Lazy Bones" in Mannheim with the strong support of the local branch of the organization. Wundt's work was first mentioned in the Heidelberg Journal of December 8, 1863. It was a brief invitation to donate books "of an entertaining nature" to the local WEA and to turn them over to "Dr. Wundt at 72 Main Street" in Heidelberg.

An initial group of 300 from the Heidelberg area was eventually reduced to a core group of about 80 signed-up members. Attendance at the various activities of the group was less regular in the Winter than in the summer. The membership of the HWEA included "tanners, dyers, coppersmiths, brewers watchmakers, furriers, rope makers, printers, upholsterers, bakers, tinworkers, beltmakers, gunsmiths, carpenters, cabinet makers, millers, saddle makers, gardeners, bottle makers, mechanics, butchers, fishers, hatmakers, basket weavers, knife makers, brick layers' and "pastry cooks." In addition, a handful of faculty members from Heidelberg University and a dozen students joined the group (Ungerer, 1978).

Wundt's friend Eduard Pickford was the founding president of the HWEA. However, he resigned in the summer of 1863 to accept an appointment as editor of a prestigious, liberal newspaper in South Baden. Wundt, who initially had been chosen as vice president, appears then to have assumed leadership of the club after his friend's departure. Interestingly, the nine-person executive committee of the HWEA included only four workers, with four university teachers and one businessman!

In order to guarantee a regular program, the HWEA rented a hot, cheap room, "next to the kitchen" in the old "White Swan" pub in Heidelberg. The small lending library, which Wundt had started, was kept in this room. There were regular business meetings, chaired by Wundt or another member of the executive, and frequent meetings of an educational or social nature. The HWEA founded a small savings and loan association for its members and a special "health"

insurance fund to provide assistance to members, who were unable to work due to illness. The organization also served as an unofficial employment office, which collected and disseminated information about social and working conditions in other parts of Germany and abroad. An active choir and a theater were organized to enrich the social life of the young workers.

The most important program was an "evening school", organized by Wundt and a mathematics lecturer at the university, to offer daily classes, except on Sundays, in "German, bookkeeping, arithmetic, writing, drawing," and "singing." These classes were, of course, held after the workers' typical 12-14 hour work day!

Formal lectures on a variety of practical and educational topics were given once a week by members or guests from the community. Wundt personally gave 17 lectures between 1864 and 1869 (Ungerer, 1978):

„Political and historical lectures during 1863/64 dealt with the history of Baden and Prussia from the beginning of the 19th century. Current events, like the political and military situation in Schleswig-Holstein, were also discussed. Wundt and the mathematician, Moritz Cantor, gave a series of lectures about technical and scientific topics. For example, Wundt talked on four evenings about modern physics and chemistry. Cantor lectured about telegraphy and the invention of the steam engine. The topic of emigration was discussed... [by] Professor Langsdorf. Finally, Wundt offered two lectures on ethnographic topics..." (p. 38).

As Wundt related in his autobiography, his active work with the Heidelberg WEA brought him into closer contact with WEAs and their leaders in other parts of Germany. Specifically, Wundt participated in the conferences at "Mainz, Frankfurt, Karlsruhe, Pforzheim" and "Nuremberg" (Wundt, 1920). He also met other eminent leaders of the WEA movement including the future Social Democratic leader, August Bebel (1840-1913), the Leipzig historian and politician Friedrich Biedermann (1812-1901), and the philosopher and historian of materialism, Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1875). It is possible that this acquaintance with Lange, who held a professorship of philosophy at Zurich University between 1869-1872, may have helped Wundt obtain his first, regular professorial appointment at the same institution in 1874 (Bringmann, Balance, & Evans, 1975b).

During the summer and fall of 1865, the traditional trade school system for apprentices came under serious attack by the proponents of free trade in Baden (Bringmann, 1975a). At that time teenagers, who had been apprenticed to learn a trade, were expected to continue their education through a compulsory, part-time program of instruction. Free traders, including Wundt's friend Pickford,

wanted to eliminate the school program, "because future workers should have learned all they needed during their regular school years." A number of heated public meetings took place to debate the question. Finally Wundt and the HWEA submitted a comprehensive report supporting the traditional system of compulsory trade school education (Wundt, 1865):

„...the abolishment of the compulsory trade school program will drastically reduce the attendance. Most of the ...14-year-old apprentices do not possess the maturity for voluntary school attendance...Compulsory attendance is a protection for minors, whose parents or guardians neglect their educational responsibilities ... The current trade school education programs were established because the instruction by the grammar schools was not sufficient for the needs of a modern worker. The...WEA knows this...is true, because many [of its members] have to learn with great difficulty what they did not learn when they were much younger“ (p. 12).

Wundt also suggested that apprentices in all fields should be given instruction in "book-keeping, business mathematics and business correspondence". Further, he recommended that the classes should be scheduled during the regular work day and that students should not lose any income while they were in classes. Wundt and the WEA eventually won the battle and today his recommendations are law throughout Germany.

In the early spring of 1864, Wundt became an active opponent of the political agitation for "universal manhood suffrage" in his home state. At that time the expansion of the franchise was strongly supported by the rival General German Workingmen's Association (GGWA). This rival organization had been founded by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), the charismatic labor leader. It was rumored that Lassalle supported universal manhood suffrage, at least in part, to strengthen Bismarck in his fight against his liberal opposition (Sheehan, 1978).

Specifically, Wundt noted that the Baden WEAs were forbidden by law to become involved in political discussions (Wundt, 1866b). He urged the workers "to fight Bismarck and not the liberal parliamentarians" if they really wished to improve their lot. In his view "soldiers, servants and welfare recipients" should not be allowed to vote because they "could be commanded to cast their vote for a political oligarchy." According to Wundt, the republican France of 1848 "...dug its grave with suffrage universel..." He cautioned workers to be patient for a "few more months" because the Baden parliament was already working on plans for a comprehensive election reform.

Wundt's opposition to the popular franchise clearly clashes with our modern view of civil liberties. Yet, it was widely shared by liberal and even socialist politicians of the time. For example, Lange regarded "universal suffrage" as a

"questionable experiment" and Bebel opposed the broadening of voting rights at that time because he was convinced that most workers were "not mature enough to vote" (Bringmann, 1975a).

1863 to 1866 was also successful for Wundt's academic and research career (Bringmann, 1974b; Bringmann, Bringmann, & Cottrel, 1978). During this period he published 3 books (Wundt, 1863, 1865, 1866) and 8 research articles. He also gave up his humble assistantship under Helmholtz, was promoted to the "titular rank" of professor, and opened a small laboratory of his own (Bringmann, 1975a).

After Wundt's friend Pickford, the incumbent Heidelberg delegate to the lower house of the Baden parliament, died in March 1866, it was clear that Wundt was the local favorite as his successor. He had become well-known through his work with the local labor organization, was a rising star at Heidelberg University, and came from an old and respected family in the region. Consequently, it was not so big a step from the presidency of the HWEA to membership in the Baden parliament (Wundt, 1920). However, Wundt first had to be elected.

The election was a complex process. Candidates for public office had to be male citizens of Baden and at least 30 years old. They also were expected to have an income of at least 10,000 guilders or about \$4,000 per year. Wundt, who lived exclusively on his meager earnings as an untenured academic, managed, with the assistance of relatives and friends, to obtain a license or "patent" as a wine dealer, which was regarded as sufficient proof of his financial qualifications.

At that time, Election to the Baden parliament was carried out by an electoral system after several candidates had been nominated. The electors met on April 26, 1866, and 41 of 50 ballots were cast for "Professor Dr. Wundt" (Bringmann, 1975b). His competitors, two editors of local, conservative newspapers, received only 6 of the 50 electoral votes.

## Discussion

In summary, Wundt belonged to a progressive group of young university teachers at Heidelberg between 1859 and 1869, whose political goals included the separation of church and state, free elections and the constitutional support of civil liberties. They favored a people's militia, rather than a standing army and a "Little-German" federation of Germany with Prussia but without Bismarck. They hoped to solve the social question by improving the education of workers and eventually by the expansion of the franchise to all adult males. Initially, Wundt seems to have closely followed the platform of the Progress Party, later the interests of his constituents became more important for him.

In closing, four points merit special attention. First, Wundt was a real dyed-in-the-wool politician and not just a starry-eyed amateur. Nevertheless, he managed to continue his research and to strengthen his academic position during the same period.

A truly old-fashioned liberal, he can be distinguished from the somewhat late "academic socialist" because of his extended, practical experience with the WEA movement (Ringer, 1969).

It appears that his political work was influenced by his academic writing and researches in experimental psychology and the new field of anthropological or folk psychology (Smith, 1991):

„Wundt saw his own political experiences as matters of great importance: not because of his deep involvement in them, but because, by focusing and ordering the experiences of the community, politics shaped his thought and work even though, as a scientist, he recognized the need to be as objective as possible. In fact Wundt's intellectual development corresponds fairly closely to the pattern that we have observed in other members of his generation: that of a liberal social scientist confronting the problems of liberalism and in consequence looking for new theoretical patterns in cultural crisis“ (p. 122).

In other words Wundt and some of the other social-minded academic politicians of the time (i.e. Virchow, Welker, Bluntschli, etc.), were led to politics by their academic work. A detailed documentation of this pattern, which will be based on an analysis of Wundt's major anthropological writing, is currently in progress.

Finally, it was a pleasure to discover the value of a novel source of information for the history of psychology. We are, of course, referring to the hundreds of newspaper articles in the popular press about Wundt and his politics. These articles are of particular value, since they were published in newspapers, which often disagreed sharply with Wundt's political activities and ideas.

In conclusion, we hope to have shown that Wundt was a real politician, who devoted much effort to the betterment of the working classes in his home town. Thus, we do not find it difficult to accept his claim that "politics - active participation in the interest of state and society" were one of "the most powerful" motives of his long and productive life.

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