

Materialism, Ideals and Political Myths. Friedrich Lange's Interpretation of Schiller and its Legacy

PAOLO PECERE

I. Friedrich Lange's original development of Kantianism in *The History of Materialism and Critique of Its Present Importance* has long been interpreted through the historiographical category of "physiological neo-Kantianism"¹. This notion has led to the mistaken view that Lange *reduced* Kantian idealism to physiological concepts. Moreover, focusing on physiology as the defining element of Lange's neo-Kantianism downplays its fundamental aesthetic, moral, and political dimensions. An examination of Lange's interpretation of Schiller is revealing in this regard, beginning with his striking statement that "among all the Kantians, the one who comes closest to my view is none other than Schiller" (GdM¹, p. v).

Although Lange had several other models for his theoretical reframing of Kantian idealism, Schiller's poetry proved exemplary for the shaping of Lange's original ideas on freedom and religion. Lange's view was to reconceive historically changing ideals – including religious representations – in aesthetic and poetic terms, independently of their illusory theoretical value, as a fundamental factor that must accompany and support social and political change. These ideas were formulated in the final section of the *History of Materialism*, "The Standpoint of the Ideal", which commentators have notably considered obscure and problematic. As we will see, the same ideas resurfaced in Lange's posthumously published *Introduction and Commentary to Schiller's Philosophical Poems* (1897)². A parallel reading of these works, I will argue, sheds light on Lange's conception of Schiller's work as a model for improving Kantianism.

II. Lange believed that Schiller's insight genuinely helped to correct "mistakes" in Kant's "deductions": "Above all, Schiller grasped the very core of his teachings

¹ This notion was established by Hermann Cohen's critical interpretation of Lange's view, as based on a "mistake": "He puts the apriority in the 'psycho-physical organization' of human beings and does not recognize the possibility of experience as the starting point of transcendental investigations" (Cohen 1871, p. 208). This contrast between a "physiological direction (Helmholtz, Lange)" of Neo-Kantianism and the "logical [*logizistische*] Kantianism (Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer– the Marburg school)" was reprised by Friedrich Ueberweg (1923, p. 417) and became a historiographic standard, with the former view usually described as "unorthodox" (Lanier Anderson 2005, p. 306), if not untenable. For a critical outline see Kuehn 2010; Pecere 2021.

² On this book see Russo Krauss 2025.

with divinatory power and purified them of scholastic slag” (GdM², p. 416). The mistaken element corresponded to Kant’s rational idea of the moral law as a necessary principle of morals, which, in turn, was grounded in the doctrine of freedom as a kind of noumenal causality. Lange made clear that he intended to amend Kant’s system already in the first edition of the *History of Materialism*, where he summarizes the “core” of Kant’s philosophy in three propositions:

The phenomenal world results from our concepts: this is precisely why it is the most important and most rewarding object of our knowledge. Only a relative truth is accessible to us, and this lies only in experience.

Ideas do not give us knowledge but lead us into an imaginary world; precisely therein lies their usefulness. We deceive ourselves if we want to expand our knowledge through them; we enrich ourselves if we make them the basis of our actions.

The only absolute that man has is the moral law, and from this firm point an order is to be brought into the fluctuating world of ideas just as securely as it is already given for the intellectual world by the arrangement of our mind (GdM¹, p. 277).

As Lange puts it: “The first two contain the permanent [element]; the third the subjective and contingent” (ibid.). Kant’s mistake lay in the counterfactual belief in the timelessness of the moral law, whose foundation through the postulates of pure reason restored a spurious metaphysical element to critical philosophy. Lange’s philosophical project was to reconceive the Absolute as a “picture”, notably a “symbol” (GdM¹, p. 539).

This replacement of a rational with an aesthetic notion immediately evokes Schiller’s work. Since the *Philosophy of Physiology* (1779), Schiller had engaged with the rising physiological materialism, dealing with the connection among the sensory organs, nerves and the “organ of thought [*Denkorgan*]“, and especially the foundation of “morality in humans”, arguing that the beautiful morally improves individuals (Schiller 1869–1870). These topics resurfaced in the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), where Schiller famously challenged Kant’s sharp opposition between morals and sensibility, arguing:

It is therefore one of the most important tasks of culture to subordinate man to form even in his mere physical life, and to make him aesthetic as far as the realm of beauty can ever reach, because only from the aesthetic, rather than from the physical state, can the moral develop (Schiller [1795] 2000, p. 92, my translation).

Lange pointed out that Schiller’s investigation of the physical, aesthetic and moral dimension of human beings ran parallel to Kant’s; but what he valued most was Schiller’s transition from philosophy to poetry, which he considered a more radical departure from academic Kantianism. In poems such as “Das Ideal und das Leben” and “Die Spaziergang”, Lange found the “ripened fruit” of Schiller’s philosophical engagement with Kant (EKS, p. 26).

Despite these parallels and references, Lange’s idea of a “corrected Kantianism” drew on other sources. It is important to consider these sources as a background for the peculiar role of Schiller’s poetry in Lange’s philosophical project.

III. In the section of the *History of Materialism* devoted to contemporary natural science, Lange included a long examination of the physiology of sense organs, introduced by Johannes Müller and completed by Hermann von Helmholtz, arguing that the latter was the “developed and corrected Kantianism” (GdM¹, p. 482). According to Lange, a proper understanding of this single scientific theory made it possible to establish the separation between the phenomena of matter – whose properties are conditioned in general by the human sensory “organization” and belong to the domain of knowledge – and the world in itself, which cannot be an object of knowledge. This result, achieved through natural science rather than through a metaphysical deduction, served to accommodate features of experience such as the quality of sensations and aesthetic values within the domain of neurophysiology, avoiding both reductive materialism (of the kind advocated by Karl Vogt and other 19th century “scientific materialists”) and metaphysical claims³.

The connection between this scientific field and Kantianism was established by Helmholtz in his speech “On Human Vision” (1855), where he maintained that Kant’s philosophy investigated “the contribution of our particular innate laws of the mind, as it were, of the organization of our mind [*Organisation des Geistes*], to our representations” (Helmholtz 1884, p. 379). Lange similarly argued that “our whole experience is conditioned by a mental organization which constrains us to experience as we experience, to think as we think, while to another organization the same objects may appear quite different” (GdM¹, p. 236). However, Lange’s interpretation of this notion differed from Helmholtz’s. In his later works, Helmholtz incorporated ideas of transcendental philosophy, arguing that space is indeed a “form of intuition” and that causality is “a law of our thought, preceding all experience”, i.e. a condition of unconscious inferences that establish perception. These were epistemological conditions with no metaphysical implications, whether materialist or idealist. The domain for investigating these non-empirical conditions of experience – “the laws and nature of mental activities” – was called “pure psychology” (Helmholtz 1867, p. 427).

In contrast with this reformed view of a priori conditions, Lange conceived a more naturalistic project based on the idea that materialism is correct as a method for scientific investigation, although it is mistaken as a metaphysical claim about the world. In this regard, he coined the expression “materialism of the phenomenon” (GdM², p. 702) Hence the organization of the mind included all kinds of conditions of human experience, such as space and intellectual categories, ruling out any reference to the “supersensible” in the Kantian style. As Lange put it: “we are still using the materialistic method to explain the alleged supersensible, thought, from the sensible” (GdM¹, p. 492). On this project, “the highest functions of reason”, including Helmholtz’s unconscious inferences, were consistent with materialist explanations (*Erklärungen*) (GdM¹, p. 496).

³ On the 19th century German “materialism controversy” (*Materialismusstreit*) see Gregory 1977, Bayertz, Gerhard, Jaeschke 2007, Beiser 2014, pp. 53-69; Morel 2017, Pecere 2024.

In Lange's view, Kant's highest condition of experience, the unity of synthesis, was no longer associated with the I, and there was no "pure thinking", only "connection". In this respect, the mediating role of the subject is "superfluous" (GdM¹, p. 490). The justification of phenomenalism was achieved through the physiology of perception and did not rely on transcendental concepts⁴. A parallel shift concerned logical and aesthetic values: while Kant had defended the autonomy of judgment through pure principles – whether of logic, morals or aesthetic judgement – Lange developed a different view. He abandoned a priori arguments and granted that every kind of value was entirely based on neurophysiological processes: "Even the most abstract concept is hardly anything other than a sum of an infinite number of very intricately connected nerve impulses in the subject who thinks it" (GdM¹, p. 457). Nevertheless, he maintained that spiritual values cannot be described merely in terms of neurophysiological processes:

As far as the *spiritual value* of the sensory content is concerned, this too cannot be completely separated from the *physical phenomenon* [...] we therefore have not the slightest reason to look for *the spiritually meaningful, the artistically formed sensation or the meaningful thought* outside the ordinary sensory processes. But of course, we must not proceed like a person who wants to discover the melodies that an organ can play in the individual pipes" (ibid.).

In this and other passages, Lange hinted – using the terms of today's philosophy of mind – at a theory of supervenience and emergence. This theory echoes similar non-reductive attempts by scientists and philosophers that were dealing with the physicalist foundation of psychological and scientific processes, such as Emil du Bois-Reymond and Wilhelm Wundt⁵. A logical foundation for such non-reductive view of values had been notably attempted by John Stuart Mill in the perspective of associationist psychology. According to Mill, "complex ideas" (e.g. moral ideas) cannot be considered the "sum" of the effects of the concurring causes and may be of a different kind from those effects (Mill 1843, II, p. 502). According to Lange, in general, Mill "asserts the rights of psychology [...] against the strictly materialistic view" (GdM², p. 701)⁶. This parallel with Mill is instructive for our purposes. Lange's rejection of the I and the a priori led commentators to characterize his phi-

⁴ "Given that there is a physical mechanism in the body which produces the inferences of the mind and the senses, we are immediately faced with the questions: What is the body? What is matter? What is the physical? And modern physiology, as well as philosophy, must answer to these questions that all these are only our representations" (GdM¹, 500).

⁵ On du Bois-Reymond see Tennant 2007, Finkelstein 2013 and Pecere 2020. On Wundt see Araujo 2016.

⁶ Cf. Mill 1843, II, pp. 590-591: "Further, that every mental state has a nervous state for its immediate antecedent and proximate cause, though extremely probable, cannot hitherto be said to be proved [...] and even were it certain, yet every one must admit that we are wholly ignorant of the characteristics of these nervous states [...] The successions, therefore, which obtain among mental phenomena do not admit of being deduced from the physiological laws of our nervous organization [...] Since, therefore, the order of our mental phenomena must be studied in those phenomena, and

losophy as “naturalist” or a “skeptic” rather than Kantian⁷. Nevertheless, Lange’s dissatisfaction with some of Mill’s views is revealing. He criticizes Mill’s empiricism for denying the “necessity” of empirical inferences, which he takes to be grounded on our organisation (GdM¹, p. 249). As regards morals and aesthetics, he points to the absence of the Ideal in Mill’s views. Mill, he argues, “fails to recognize in his “utilitarianism” the ideal, form-creating element that underlies this striving for harmony in the moral world as well as the aspirations of art” (GdM¹, p. 523). Here Lange diverges from all the above-mentioned thinkers and takes an original turn – one that leads toward the model of Schiller’s poetry.

IV. As we have seen, Lange’s reshaping of Kantian philosophy is driven by a firm anti-metaphysical stance. However, his sharp rejection of metaphysics as a cognitive enterprise – aimed at the supersensible and the transcendent – introduces a shift to an entirely new concept of metaphysics, defined as the “edifying art of conceptualization” (GdM¹, p. 266). In the *Introduction and Commentary to Schiller’s Philosophical Poems*, he speaks of “fictitious truth” (*Erdichtete Wahrheit*). This notion does not concern scientific truth, which stands in its validity, but remains limited to the alleged knowledge of the Absolute. In this respect, Lange concludes: “We can only poetize about absolute truth [*Eine absolute Wahrheit können wir nur noch dichten*]“ (EKS, pp. 9-10).

Commentators have often lamented the obscurity of this part of Lange’s philosophy (see e.g. Köhnke 1991, p. 160). It is arguably clear that, by conceiving metaphysics as “art”, Lange sought to articulate his own alternative path in philosophy – one that, as we will see, could develop into a political-cultural project. First, he intended to deny any truth-value to metaphysics, turning it into a historically contingent and relative worldview, thereby disposing of the alleged speculative knowledge of post Kantian idealists. On the other hand, he aimed to reaffirm his anti-reductive claims against materialism.

But if our thoughts and actions generate and demand ideas that lie beyond all experience, then at least no materialistic metaphysics can sit in judgment on them. There is no truth that can exercise absolute dominion in the realm of the beautiful and the good. Even if one were ever to arrive at a complete explanation of the emergence of an idea from psychological and physiological conditions, the idea itself would neither be explained nor judged. The sculptor can make use of anatomy and physiology; but he will never make his judgment of the beauty of the human body dependent on an insight into its physical conditions (GdM¹, p. 276).

Overall, art remained for Lange the way to freely and creatively explore the field of the unknown and the ideal – territories that had traditionally been assigned to dogmatic metaphysics. Precisely because artistic and poetic fictions make no claim

not inferred from the laws of any phenomena more general, there is a distinct and separate Science of Mind”.

⁷ Köhnke 1991, pp. 161-167; Beiser 2014b, pp. 356-397, in part. pp. 358, 386; Edgar 2016, p. 113n.; Hussain, Patton 2021.

to absolute truth, they are protected from any confutation: “Art is free, even in the field of concepts. Who wants to refute a movement by Beethoven, and who wants to accuse Raphael’s Madonna of error?” (GdM¹, p. 269).

It also appears evident that Lange considered this view a way out of the misguided claims to universality of Kant’s moral philosophy. As he writes, following the passage just quoted on art and materialism:

But the right which Kant attributed to his moral philosophy is likewise due to every other moral philosophy, and if Kant believed that he had proved his own absolutely, he was only committing the common error of all metaphysicians (GdM¹, p. 277).

Of course, on this view metaphysical ideas appear divorced from rational argument, which is philosophically problematic – especially since Lange, as we will see, introduced this view as a means for realizing his cultural project. I will return to this issue in the final section. To be sure, Lange was perfectly aware that he was advocating the value of a contingent and non-demonstrative form of expression, reviving a connection between art and religion that had been extensively investigated in early nineteenth-century German philosophy.

Religion has therefore always been *inseparable from art* in times that unite a certain degree of education and piety. There the true value of ideas lies in the form, as it were in the *style* of the architecture of ideas and in the *impression* of this architecture of ideas on the mind (GdM¹, p. 539, my italics).

This emphasis on “style” and on the “impression” made upon the mind (*Gemüth, animus*) immediately evokes the semantic field of rhetoric. The same is true of the notion of “symbol”. This conceptual shift can read interpreted against the background of German idealism. Any reader of Kant’s Third Critique could recall the aesthetic use of “symbol” in § 59, where Kant’s entire discussion of “hypotyposes” relied on the language of rhetoric: “schemes” exhibit concepts, “symbols” exhibit ideas – notably, “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (Kant 1900 ff., V, pp. 351–353). Now, once the field of the supersensible is reduced to a fiction and no longer serves to make room for the ideas of reason, the Absolute itself can become a symbol. If we consider at how Hegel reworked this constellation of notions in the Philosophy of Spirit – one more background presence here – we may understand Lange as rejecting Hegel’s return to philosophy as a science of the absolute and his claim that religion stands over art. The result is a “symbolic” art understood as the production of historically changing ideas (and ideals) that, being art, shares with rhetoric the power to move feelings.

This latter point is explicitly mentioned in the book on Schiller, where Lange characterizes the “task” of philosophical poems:

We would almost like to say that the task of the poems of the philosophical genre is the reverse of that of the prose writings, namely to create a certain sacred awe by revealing their full depth” (EKS, p. xiv).

We are now in the position to characterize more precisely how Lange understood Schiller's poems as models for a poetic replacement of metaphysics and religion.

V. Lange clearly spelled out the great historical-philosophical importance he attributed to Schiller's poetry in the second edition of the *History of Materialism*, juxtaposing the poet with Kant and Plato. The crucial point, once again, was the transformation of metaphysics into poetry, now endowed with the specific function of counteracting the pessimism that can arise from the unilateral contemplation of effective reality.

Kant did not want to recognize what Plato did not want to recognize: that *the "intelligible world" is a world of poetry* and that its *value* and dignity rest precisely on this. For poetry in the high and comprehensive sense [...] is a necessary birth of the spirit, bursting forth from the innermost life roots of the species, the source of all that is high and holy, and a fully valid counterweight to the *pessimism* that springs from a one-sided dwelling in reality (GdM², 415, my italics).

The implicit criticism of Kant's merely rational, Platonic intelligible world, taken as a psychologically ineffective representation, detached from reality and thus potentially conducive to pessimism, is key to understanding why Lange favored Schiller's poems over his essays. The point is not longer, as in the *Letters*, to provide an aesthetic bridge from the abstract rational rigor of morality to the sensible life of the individual, for morality is no longer separated from historically contingent values embodied in cultural objects and practices. Hence, in Lange's view, Schiller's poems are not merely aesthetically inspiring representations of a rationally defined ideal; rather, they are the actual source of the ideal. From this perspective, Lange takes poetry as a modern reprise of Plato's mythology:

Schiller rightly made the intelligible world vivid by treating it as a poet, and in doing so he *followed in the footsteps of Plato*, who, in contradiction to his own dialectic, created the highest when he made the supersensible sensual in myth [...] Schiller, the 'poet of freedom', was allowed to dare to place freedom openly in the 'realm of dreams' and in the 'realm of shadows', for under his hand dreams and shadows become the ideal (GdM², pp. 415-416, my italics).

Lange's reference to Plato's myths suggests the political dimension that his interpretation eventually takes. Ideals, as we will see, are not merely models for the moral behavior of the individual. The definition of Schiller as the "poet of freedom" can be referred to both moral and political freedom, and his poetic gift is admired for its capacity to endow "dreams" and "shadows" – contrary to standard Platonic metaphorology, where they stand for delusions as the merely unreal – with the dignity of pictures of ideals that can direct the human will.

In theoretical terms, the transition from Kant-critique to mythology had been a much-debated topic in the circle of Jena. The "religion of art" of the ancient Greeks was already debated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, with reference to Schiller's 1788 poem "The Gods of Greece", in his 1789 *Discourse on Religion* (Humboldt 1903, p.

65). While Humboldt believed that the State should not shape morality and religion, the need for a “new mythology” in the framework of modern political communities was formulated in the fragment *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, drafted in 1796/1797 by Hegel, who has been attributed to Hegel himself, Schelling or Hölderlin⁸. These ideas echoed Herder’s contemporary critique of the view of history as a progress or rationality: in *Iduna* (1796) Herder argued that reason itself “is formed through fictions”, hence he emphasized the historical importance of mythical imagination (Herder [1877] 1913, XVIII, p. 485). In the *Discourse on mythology* (1795), Friedrich Schlegel – elaborating on Schiller’s *Letters* – spoke of a “new mythology” that “must be formed out of the deepest depths of the spirit; it must be the most artificial of all works of art, for it must embrace all others”, and arguing that “poetry and mythology are one, and inseparable”⁹. In this context, Wilhelm von Humboldt was among the first to recognize the philosophical value of Schiller’s *poetry*, claiming that Schiller achieved a “transition from metaphysics to poetry” (August 4, 1795, in Humboldt, Schiller 1830, p. 119). Schiller indeed held that “poetry” (*Dichtkunst*) uniquely “unif[ies] the disjointed powers of the soul” and he was already aware of a difficulty that Lange would later highlight in the revaluation of his poems: that of bridging the “tremendous abyss” between highly educated readers and uneducated masses¹⁰.

Against this background, Lange’s view of Schiller’s poems as expression of moral and religious ideals appears historically well-rooted and not particularly original. What is characteristic of Lange’s view is that he emphasizes – besides Schiller’s poetic transformation of abstract ideals into sensory elements – their eliciting, conversely, a flight from the limited world of the senses towards the ideals. This point is emphasized in both editions of the *History of Materialism*:

What religion and morality only ever cherish as good cannot be portrayed more purely and powerfully than in that immortal hymn that concludes with the ascension of the tortured son of the gods. Here *the escape from the barriers of the senses into the intelligible world* is embodied. We follow the God who “flamingly separates himself from man” and now dream and truth change roles (GdM¹, p. 416, my italics).

In Schiller’s philosophical poems we have before us an achievement which *combines the highest elevation above reality with the noblest rigor of thought, and which gives the ideal an overwhelming power by placing it openly and unreservedly in the realm of the imagination* (GdM², 828, my italics).

I think this motif must be related to the German “materialism controversy”. The declared objective of the *History of Materialism* was to provide a “definitive solution

⁸ See Jamme, Schneider 1984. On this topic see Frank 1982.

⁹ Schlegel [1795] 1967, II, pp. 311–312. Schlegel’s ideas were mentioned by Karl Tomaschek’s in a book on Schiller that Lange takes into careful consideration (Tomaschek 1862, p. 451).

¹⁰ See Pinna 2018, p. 153. Pinna aptly connects Schiller’s worries with the problem of unifying Kantian universalism and historical contingency (ibid, p. 161).

to certain cardinal points in the controversy on materialism" (GdM¹, p. v), and these arguably included not only the theoretical issue of scientific materialism as a mistaken interpretation of natural science, but also the ethical, religious and political dimension of materialism – dimensions closely tied to the hopes and pessimism that followed the revolutions of 1848.

VI. One of the boldest claims of the "Standpoint of the Ideal" was Lange's theory of a replacement of traditional religion. To understand this debated section – the culmination of Lange's book – and its connection to his interpretation of Schiller's poems, we must consider the broader framework of the political and cultural situation of post-1848 Germany, a period of wars and political turmoil marked by clashes between conservative forces and revolutionary and workers' movements. Lange participated in the 1848 revolutions; their failure forced him to migrate to Switzerland, and he later shifted to non-violent political activity. He was particularly supportive of the worker's movement and of its economic background, to which he devoted *The Labour Question* (1865)¹¹. Against this background, Lange envisioned the replacement of traditional religion with secular forms capable of inspiring political action.

He mentions Schiller's poetry in this perspective. After reiterating that "free poetry" can leave the ground of effective reality and become a new mythology, he writes that "In his 'Realm of Shadows' [*Reich der Schatten*], Schiller generalized the Christian doctrine of redemption into the idea of an aesthetic redemption" (GdM², pp. 829-830). To understand this connection between the work of a contemporary poet and a millennia-old religion, we must consider two further contextual elements. First, Schiller was a celebrated figure who played a pivotal role in shaping German national identity and the education system. Lange's unfinished book on Schiller, in fact, responded to a series of publications devoted to the poet's centennial anniversary. Second, the Christian Church represented a deeply conservative force which, from Lange's point of view, had lost its original function of embodying the ideal against political power:

Certainly, as long as religion is cultivated in closed church communities by priests who present themselves to the people as privileged dispensers of divine mysteries, the *standpoint of the ideal* in religion will never be able to emerge purely (GdM², p. 838).

Lange's recourse to Schiller thus belongs to a broader belief in the political potential of idealism. For example, he celebrated the "poetic elevation" of Fichte's revolutionary speeches (GdM², p. 835). More generally, he held that inspiring ideas and social activism were inseparable conditions for raising the condition of the oppressed masses:

If a new age is to come into being and the old to pass away, two great things must be combined: a world-inflaming ethical idea and a social effort powerful enough to lift the

¹¹ On this side of Lange's activity and thought see Chiara Russo Krauss' essay in the present collection.

depressed masses up a great step. This will not be achieved by sober reason, by artificial systems [...] Only a great ideal will achieve victory over fragmenting egoism (GdM², p. 840).

Lange's political-cultural perspective is thus clearly formulated and firmly partisan. At this point, we must return to the problem of the historically contingent content of ideals, which Lange himself connects to relativism. In the *Introduction and Commentary to Schiller's Philosophical Poems*, he reformulates the shift from Kantian systematic idealism to the relativity of systems. According to Lange, Kant was mistaken in believing in a single "architectonic of human knowledge" (by which he means any systematic organization and justification of ideas). The validity of a system is like a "style" in architecture. This shift from the rhetoric to the aesthetic notion of style illustrates the intrinsic historicity of systems of knowledge and of their validity: "Strictly speaking, any system can only have its full meaning for the individual who creates it, and the *objective validity* of the system can only be *relative*" (EKS, p. 7, my italics).

In Lange's description of the subject matter of an ideal poem, he includes the "logical relativity of all our concepts", only to remark that the recognition of the limits of intellectual endeavours drives toward the ideal:

The subject matter of the poem would be the annihilation of all metaphysics, the proof of the *logical relativity of all our concepts*; the purpose, on the other hand, which becomes more and more firmly and insistently expressed in each such negative part, could be expressed in the words: 'So escape the vain musings of the mind, and *when the mechanism of the world of appearances oppresses you, rescue your mind into the realm of ideas*' (EKS, p. 15, my italics).

However obscure or counterintuitive these claims may appear, they can be connected to Lange's philosophical-political views. On the one hand, he rejected all forms of metaphysical rationalization of the present, as conducive to inaction and resignation (examples include religious providentialism, the Hegelian rationalization of the Real, and even Marxist dialectics conceived as a historical mechanism). On the other hand, his analysis of society convinced him of the need to support the oppressed masses. The empirical investigation of economy and welfare may have been provided Lange with a means of scientifically justifying a historically contingent ideal without abandoning his thesis of relativity: the ideal in question was indeed relative to a specific historical moment.

In any case, Lange certainly formulated these views I response to the critical historical conditions of contemporary Europe, where the "flag of a great idea" could decisively shape the future. The "social question" was

a question in whose broad field all the revolutionary elements of science, religion and politics seem to have found their *battleground* for a great *decisive battle*. Be it that this battle remains an unbloody battle of wits, be it that it throws the ruins of a past world-period thunderously into the dust like an earthquake and buries millions under the rubble: certainly *the new age will not triumph unless under the banner of a great idea*

which sweeps away egoism and sets human perfection in human fellowship as a new goal in place of restless toil which almost exclusively focuses on personal gain (GdM¹, p. 557, my italics).

VII. I have tried to show how Lange's ideas about a new mythology for socialism related to the historical-political context and were consistent with his estimation of Schiller's poems as an example of how poetic language can move the masses. I have also suggested how these ideas could be compatible with Lange's thesis of the relativity of all systems of values. Nevertheless, the legacy of this constellation of views was both controversial and diverse.

On the one hand, neo-Kantian thinkers developed different theories of ethical values. Hermann Cohen, who took over Lange's chair in Marburg, rejected Lange's "organization of the mind" and "Standpoint of the Ideal", driving a turn back to transcendentalism and systematic philosophy. Although a socialist himself, Cohen thus departed from Lange's philosophical-political views. Baden neo-Kantianism developed a theory of values that responded indeed to Lange's account but abstracted from its political framework (see Russo Krauss 2023).

A different legacy characterized non-Kantian thinkers. Nietzsche famously admitted his huge debt to Lange's *History of Materialism* and his pragmatic theory of truth and values mirrors some of Lange's formulations, e.g. in his famous definition of truth as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished" (Nietzsche [1873] 1999)¹². Of course, Nietzsche's view of ideals was different from Lange's and very distant from socialism, showing the plasticity of relativism.

A particularly interesting case concerns socialist thinkers. Eduard Bernstein notably invoked a return to Lange as a model for his socialist revisionist challenge to dialectical materialism (Barker 1986). Thus Lange's work continued to circulate in socialist circles. A suggestive hypothesis is that his ideas about new myths – directly, or possibly through Nietzsche – could have inspired George Sorel. As is well known, Sorel theorized the need for new secular myths for socialism, taking as an example the "syndacalist 'general strike' and Marx's catastrophic revolution" (Sorel 1915, p. 22). As is equally well known, his ideas eventually influenced Mussolini. As shown by Carlo Ginzburg, the idea of political myths in the early twentieth century engaged socialist and communist intellectuals and eventually characterized the rise of fascism (Ginzburg 2001 and 2023, pp. 41-96). The return to political myths was already connected to totalitarianism and to the legacy of Plato by the last representative of Marburg neo-Kantianism, Ernst Cassirer, in *The Myth of the State*. To Cassirer, this political and cultural development was entirely and violently opposed to the legacy of the Enlightenment represented by Kant and Schiller (Cassirer [1946] 1961).

¹² On Lange and Nietzsche, see Stack 1983 and Eibl 2001.

Lange's hope that collective, poetically shaped ideals could lead the masses to free themselves from oppression stands in sharp contrast to these later interpretations. To be sure, it is not clear whether Lange inspired Sorel, and hence had any cultural connection to these developments, although a passage of Sorel's *Reflections on violence* (1908) echoes Lange's words and suggests that the power of political myths, detached from rationality, could hardly be guided by libertarian ideas.

Men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph [...] This construction of future events, based on no rational analysis, but on the power of myth, is indispensable to their struggle (Sorel 1915, p. 22).

Abbreviations

- EKS F. A. Lange, *Einleitung und Kommentar zu Schillers philosophischen Gedichten*, Velhagen & Klasing, Bielefeld-Leipzig, 1897.
- GdM¹ F. A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Baedeker, Iserlohn, 1866.
- GdM² F. A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, 2 vols., Baedeker, Iserlohn, 2nd ed., 1873-1875, republished in 1887 with an Introduction by H. Cohen.

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