

In Memoriam Zbigniew Andrzej Pełczyński OBE (29 December 1925–22 June 2021)

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Zbigniew Pelczynski (Pełczyński in Polish) was one of the most important figures in the ‘Anglo-Saxon Hegel Renaissance’, which began in the 1940s with the work of G. R. G. Mure and T. M. Knox,¹ picked up speed in the 1950s and 1960s, and led to the publication in the 1970s of seminal works by Shlomo Avineri and Charles Taylor.² In particular Pelczynski played a significant role (in the wake of Knox’s translation of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* in 1942) in countering Karl Popper’s influential but seriously distorted interpretation of Hegel’s political philosophy.³ He did so through his long and detailed Introductory Essay to Knox’s translation of Hegel’s lesser-known political writings,⁴ and through his editing of, and essays in, two invaluable volumes on Hegel’s political philosophy.⁵ In 1979 Pelczynski made a further significant contribution to Hegel studies by co-founding the Hegel Society of Great Britain (with Raymond Plant, W. H. Walsh and Charles Taylor), and he also served as the first Editor of the *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* (later *Hegel Bulletin*). As the 1980s progressed Pelczynski’s attention turned increasingly to his homeland, Poland, and he was left with less time to devote to Hegel. Yet his ground-breaking work, and generous support of other Hegel scholars and of graduate students (including my younger self), had already helped lay the foundations for the future growth of Hegel studies in the UK.

Pelczynski was born in Grodzisk Mazowiecki in Poland in 1925, the first of two children. When he was seven, however, his parents separated, and by the start of the Second World War he was living in a Warsaw flat with his father. Despite the German occupation he began learning German from a Polish professor, Jan Rybarski, who lived in a flat below, and he developed a particular love for Hölderlin’s poetry. In 1942 he entered the Polish underground educational system and studied German language and literature, Polish language and literature, and mathematics. After passing the Matura in 1943, he then enrolled in the secret University of the Western Territories (set up by expelled teachers from Poznań University), and also joined Catholic discussion groups. In the latter he taught Catholic philosophy (including a work by Jacques Maritain), as well as Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (see McAvoy 2012: 3–4, 12–19).



In November 1943 Pelczynski (known to friends as Zbyszek) joined the ‘Armia Krajowa’, or Polish Home Guard—the principal armed resistance movement—and received training in sabotage and the use of explosives. When, however, the Warsaw Uprising began in late summer 1944, he found himself more than once in mortal danger. On one occasion, he was caught in the cellar of a building that was bombed by the Germans and was saved only by a broken wooden beam above him, while everyone else in the cellar was killed. Then, in September 1944, after being promoted to lance corporal, he was in the sewers with two comrades trying to escape German soldiers in the street above, when the soldiers started dropping grenades into the sewers. In the words of Pelczynski’s biographer, David McAvoy,

they faced a stark choice: stay underground and be asphyxiated or blown to pieces, or climb up and probably be shot. Zbyszek made his decision. He would not die like a rat in a sewer. His friends agreed. They reached the nearest iron ladder and at one o’clock in the afternoon they emerged from a manhole, surrounded by German soldiers. Half blinded by the sunlight, Zbyszek squinted at their uniforms. If they had the insignia of the SS he would almost certainly be dead within minutes. He saw instead the collars and badges of the Wehrmacht. He was taken prisoner. The worst eight hours of his life were over. He had survived, though he did not yet know how lucky he had been. That same afternoon, just a few hundred yards away, some 120 Poles were machine gunned by the waiting [German] Gendarmerie as they left the sewers. They had chosen the wrong manhole (McAvoy 2012: 31; see also 19–21, 27).

Pelczynski spent the next seven months in relative safety as a prisoner of war and signed up for English classes taught by other prisoners. He continued his study of English after being liberated in April 1945, and in the autumn he was (just about) proficient enough to become a corporal in the British Army of the Rhine. In January 1946 he then sailed to Britain to study in the Faculty of Polish Law at Oriol College, Oxford. He was unable, however, to get a place as an undergraduate at Oxford for the next academic year, so in the autumn of 1946 he began studying Economics and Political Science at St Andrews (McAvoy 2012: 36–37, 40–43, 47). It was here that he ‘first heard Hegel’s name’ in Knox’s first year lectures and ‘unconsciously imbibed Knox’s own respect for him’.⁶

After graduating with a First in 1949, Pelczynski started a two-year BPhil in Politics at The Queen’s College, Oxford, where he attended seminars on Political Theory run by G. D. H. Cole. In one seminar, McAvoy reports,

one of Pełczyński's contributions was on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Although the paper was no more than an uncritical précis of the book, Cole's reaction was apoplectic. The lifelong champion of pluralism and guild socialism could not bear even to hear about a thinker whom he perceived as the apostle of the monism and statism which he abhorred (McAvoy 2012: 56; see also 52, 55).

Around this time, Pełczyński began to lose his Catholic faith and to consider himself more of a humanist than 'truly a Christian' (McAvoy 2012: 57). His interest in Hegel, however, was becoming stronger, and in October 1951, after completing his BPhil, he started a DPhil on Hegel at Nuffield College, Oxford (with two years' funding). His project was to work on Hegel's lesser-known political writings, and this in turn led to his first publication, which he was persuaded to write by Michael Oakeshott: an article entitled 'Hegel on the British Constitution', published in *The Cambridge Journal* in June 1952 (McAvoy 2012: 58–60).⁷

During his time at Nuffield Pełczyński met John Plamenatz (who would later publish *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*)⁸ and witnessed a heated discussion between Popper and Plamenatz, who had written an unfavourable review of the second edition of Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Popper had arrived unannounced and demanded that Plamenatz publicly retract his review. As McAvoy reports, however,

Plamenatz, who had never previously met Popper, naturally refused, and the uninvited guest stormed out in a rage. His promotion of the open society apparently did not require him to tolerate honest criticism. Pełczyński already had a low opinion of Popper's work because of his totally misleading account of Hegel's political views. He now developed a similarly low opinion of the man himself (McAvoy 2012: 61).

Despite his evident intellectual abilities, Pełczyński struggled to find a supervisor for his DPhil. He was rejected outright by Isaiah Berlin, and Plamenatz, though sympathetic to the project, thought he did not know enough about Hegel to supervise it. Pełczyński eventually found a supervisor, however, in Michael Foster, author of *The Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel* (first published in 1935), who taught at Christ Church (McAvoy 2012: 63–64).⁹

In 1953, near the end of his two years at Nuffield, Pełczyński still hadn't finished his DPhil thesis, but he was offered a research fellowship at Columbia University, New York and Herbert Marcuse agreed to be his supervisor. Before he could travel to the USA, however, he was given a two-year lectureship at Trinity College, Oxford, during which he would teach English Constitutional

History 1660–1832 (about which, McAvoy notes, he knew ‘almost nothing’) (McAvoy 2012: 67; see also 64). In the autumn of 1955, Pelczynski then began a new two-year lectureship at Balliol and Merton, and in 1956 he finally completed his DPhil thesis. His examiners were W. H. Walsh, who ‘appeared to have read the work carefully’, and Isaiah Berlin, who had ‘clearly only skimmed the text’. McAvoy reports that at one point in the viva Berlin asked ‘with some exasperation’: ‘Can you point to any parallels between Hegel and John Stuart Mill?’; but Pelczynski was nonetheless awarded the DPhil and later became a close friend of Berlin (McAvoy 2012: 72–74).¹⁰

Soon after Pelczynski received his doctorate, Knox suggested to him that they collaborate on a book, in which Knox would translate some of Hegel’s political writings and Pelczynski would write the introduction (McAvoy 2012: 76). The book, *Hegel’s Political Writings*, published in 1964,¹¹ comprises a revised version of Pelczynski’s DPhil thesis (as the ‘Introductory Essay’), together with translations of the following texts by Hegel on which the thesis focused: a text, started in 1799, on the ‘constitution of Germany’; a short text from 1798 on the constitution in Württemberg; the 1817 essay on the ‘Proceedings of the Estates Assembly of the Kingdom of Württemberg, 1815–16’; and the 1831 essay on ‘The English Reform Bill’. Writing in 1981, Pelczynski explained the rationale for publishing English translations of Hegel’s ‘minor political works’: ‘I had fully accepted his [Knox’s] view that Hegel’s rational modern state was a constitutional, not an absolutist, monarchy and believed that on this point the ambiguities of *The Philosophy of Right* were usefully clarified by the evidence of the non-philosophical political writings’. He added: ‘although I am obviously not the best judge of the work it seems to me that *Hegel’s Political Writings* made a useful contribution to the understanding of Hegel’s political philosophy and also did something to dispel the myth that his political views were a mere deduction from *a priori* metaphysical views of reality in general. I remember G. R. G. Mure writing to me to express just that opinion.’¹²

In November 1952, in light of the Stalinist repression in Poland, Pelczynski became a British citizen. In 1956, however, after Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin, the political situation in Poland changed and Pelczynski could return home for the first time in ten years (McAvoy 2012: 62–63, 79–80). The elections in Poland in January 1957 also led to an invitation to Pelczynski to write an essay on Poland for a volume entitled *Elections Abroad* (published in 1959),¹³ and the success of the 60-page essay led to demands for him to give interviews in the media on politics in Eastern Europe (McAvoy 2012: 82–83). His interest in Polish politics in particular would continue for the rest of his life and eventually even exceed his deep interest in Hegel.

In the autumn of 1957 Pelczynski began a two-year lectureship at Pembroke College, Oxford, which was extended by two more years in 1959 and then replaced by a permanent Fellowship in 1960. He continued to teach at Merton, however,

becoming friends with J. R. R. Tolkien, with whom he ‘would often go for walks around the college grounds’ (McAvoy 2012: 84–89).

In 1961 Pełczyński married Denise Cremona and the couple had three children: Jan, Wanda and Antonia (McAvoy 2012: 101–9). From 1966 to the early 1980s Pełczyński would dine regularly with Harold Macmillan at Pembroke; and in 1968 he became tutor to Bill Clinton, while the latter was a Rhodes Scholar studying Politics in Oxford, and the two remained friends thereafter. Pełczyński was welcomed to the White House on 14 October 1993 and in the evening a glittering retirement party was held for him at Dumbarton House in Washington, D.C. (McAvoy 2012: 122–23, 214–15, 233–34). It is not known whether Clinton ever discussed Hegel’s political thought with Pełczyński while he was at Oxford, but it is hard to imagine that the topic never came up.

In 1971 Pełczyński made one of his most important contributions to Hegel studies by publishing the edited collection, *Hegel’s Political Philosophy. Problems and Perspectives*.¹⁴ This collection contains two essays by Pełczyński himself—‘The Hegelian conception of the state’ and ‘Hegel’s political philosophy: some thoughts on its contemporary relevance’—as well as essays by, among others, Manfred Riedel, W. H. Walsh, John Plamenatz and Judith Shklar, the latter two having to be persuaded by Pełczyński to contribute to the collection, as both felt they knew too little about Hegel (McAvoy 2012: 118–19, 127–30).

After this collection was published, Pełczyński’s reputation as a Hegel scholar grew considerably and he received several invitations to teach or undertake research abroad—first at Yale (1976), where he wrote an essay designed to show social scientists the relevance of Hegel to their work,¹⁵ then at McGill, as a temporary replacement for Charles Taylor (1978–9), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to work with Avineri and other Israeli scholars (1981), and Harvard, as a temporary replacement for Judith Shklar (1983–4) (McAvoy 2012: 130, 146–48, 152–54, 160, 168–73).

Pełczyński, together with Raymond Plant, had been considering setting up a Hegel Society of Great Britain (HSGB) as the British equivalent of the Hegel Society of America (founded in 1968) and the Internationale Hegel-Vereinigung (founded in 1962), and on 21–22 September 1979 the inaugural meeting of the HSGB took place at Pembroke College. Papers were read by John Findlay, Andrew Vincent, Jay Bernstein and W. H. Walsh, and Pełczyński led a discussion of ‘The Nature of the Hegel Revival’.¹⁶ At the second conference of the HSGB in September 1980 Pełczyński gave a paper on the life and Hegelian scholarship of T. M. Knox, who had died in April, and his paper was supplemented by an exhibition of Knox’s writings, letters and photographs that ran throughout the conference.¹⁷ He gave further papers at HSGB conferences in 1985 (‘Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in the Light of Recently Published Texts’) and in 1986 (‘From Saving Italy to Actualising the Idea: The Hegelian Transformation of Machiavelli’s Prince’).¹⁸

From the start Pelczynski, together with the other co-founders, ‘hoped that the Society would not be confined to committed Hegelians but would be a broad grouping of scholars who agreed on the importance of Hegel’s thought, however critical they might be of its various aspects’, and he reported in the *Bulletin* that ‘the proceedings of the inaugural meeting certainly bore out this hope’.¹⁹ I attended this first conference as a PhD student and recall also being impressed, indeed exhilarated, by the animated, open-minded debate, which was fostered in no small part by Pelczynski’s own good humour, enthusiasm and generosity. Subsequent meetings of the HSGB, in my experience, have continued to remain true to his vision.

In 1980 the first issue of the *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* was published, edited by Pelczynski and with a striking image of Hegel as the ‘owl of Minerva’ (*Athene noctua hegeliana*) on the cover (designed by Jan Pelczynski) (McAvoy 2012: 159). Pelczynski edited eleven more issues, and, as he noted in his farewell editorial, he endeavoured throughout his years at the helm to reflect in the *Bulletin* the ‘interestingly different responses’ produced in different countries by Hegel’s philosophy. He did so by devoting much space to reports of ‘developments abroad’ and to reviews of works in languages other than English, and in this way he aimed to show that ‘the Society is not just an isolated British organization but a part, so to speak, of a “Hegelian International”’.²⁰ In this respect, once again, Pelczynski established a vision for the HSGB (and the *Bulletin*) that has guided members (and Editors) ever since.

In 1984 Pelczynski’s second volume of essays on Hegel was published, entitled *The State and Civil Society. Studies in Hegel’s Political Philosophy*.²¹ The volume contained essays by prominent philosophers, including Jay Bernstein, Michael Inwood, Klaus Hartmann and Seyla Benhabib, as well as three contributions by Pelczynski himself: ‘Introduction: The significance of Hegel’s separation of the state and civil society’, ‘Political community and individual freedom in Hegel’s philosophy of state’, and ‘Nation, civil society, state: Hegelian sources of the Marxian non-theory of nationality’.

1984 also saw the publication of *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy*, co-edited by Pelczynski and John Gray.²² This collection, while less well-known than the other two volumes, contains essays by, among others, D. D. Raphael (on Hobbes), Patrick Gardiner (on Rousseau) and Charles Taylor (on Kant), as well as a fine essay by Pelczynski on ‘Freedom in Hegel’. In the latter—which nicely encapsulates the main components of his interpretation of Hegel—Pelczynski argues that Hegel’s conception of freedom ‘identifies and incorporates more elements, aspects or dimensions of freedom than any other conception of it in Western political theory’. In particular, we are told, Hegel understands freedom to take the form of a rational state—‘the most fully developed and highly organized form of political community’—in which ‘individual freedom reaches perfection

and the most complete realization'. The free, rational state thus combines a political sphere, in which self-determining individuals pursue '*public* ends', with a civil society, in which they also pursue 'their *private* ends', that is, their own 'particular interests and subjective choices'. This Hegelian idea that freedom unites the pursuit of particular, subjective interest with the promotion of 'common interests, shared values and jointly held ideals' is one that clearly appealed profoundly to Pełczyński. Indeed, it informed his own social and political activity throughout his career.²³

Pełczyński stepped down as Editor of the *Bulletin* in 1987, but his connection with the HSGB did not end there. W. H. Walsh, who had been executive Chairman of the HSGB since 1985, died in April 1986 and in the following September Pełczyński was elected as the new Chairman—a position he retained until 1989. Yet, as already noted, Hegel was not the only focus of Pełczyński's attention during his long and distinguished career. The other was Poland. Indeed, after 1989 his native country would occupy most of his time and energy, though much of his work on behalf of Poland would itself be underpinned by his commitment to Hegel's conception of freedom and civil society.

In the late 1970s Pełczyński wrote the last six chapters of *The History of Poland since 1863*—chapters that covered, among other things, 'the rise and ebb of Stalinism', 'the decline of Gomułka' and 'Poland under Gierek'.²⁴ Then, after 'Solidarity' was founded in 1980, he wrote several articles for *New Society* on the changing situation in Poland and visited Lech Wałęsa in a hotel in Gdynia ('where he was warned that every room in the building was bugged') (McAvoy 2012: 192–99).

In 1982 Pełczyński delivered his influential and prophetic McCallum lecture 'Poland: the Road from Communism'—'prophetic', since it would be another seven years until the fall of the Berlin wall (McAvoy 2012: 199–200). He also conceived the Oxford Colleges Hospitality Scheme which would offer Polish scholars free board and lodging in Oxford during the summer vacations. Initially, he had to persuade the Communist authorities in Poland to allow scholars to travel, but from 1982 to 1992 some 600 scholars were to benefit from the scheme. On the tenth anniversary of its inception Pełczyński and a colleague, Mike Glazer, were received at the Belvedere Palace in Warsaw by President Wałęsa and awarded medals in the Royal Castle; and one Polish academic, Jakub Basista, has subsequently described the significance of Pełczyński's scheme as follows: 'Zbyszek—like it or not—was a revolutionary, who revolutionized many Polish research programs and the lives of many young scholars. Unlike many other revolutions, these bore wonderful fruit, and we all thank him for them' (McAvoy 2012: 205–6; see also 201–4).

In June 1992 Pełczyński was awarded an OBE for services to Anglo-Polish cooperation,²⁵ and from July 1992 until September 1993 he was an advisor to the post-Communist Polish government (McAvoy 2012: 211–14).²⁶ Pełczyński

retired in 1993, but he had one more initiative in mind: in 1994, with financial support from the Open Society Institute, he opened the School for Young Social and Political Leaders in Warsaw. This school—later named the School for Leaders, and still flourishing—has as its mission ‘the development of civil society through training and support of leaders who perform their activities within the public sphere in NGOs, local government institutions and political parties’, and it has so far had over 4,000 Polish graduates who are active within various political and social institutions in Poland and across Europe.²⁷ In McAvoy’s view (expressed in 2012), ‘the School for Leaders is Pelczynski’s crowning achievement and a fitting conclusion to his long career’. In particular, it brings together ‘his interest in Hegel and in the role of civil society in open, accountable politics, and his deep, abiding commitment to his native Poland’ (McAvoy 2012: 241–42; also 232–36). There is also a nice irony in the fact that the School for Leaders was founded by someone passionately devoted to Hegel’s conception of a free society with financial support from the Open Society Institute whose name is inspired by Karl Popper’s infamous book.

In the 1990s Pelczynski’s deepening involvement with Poland left him with little time for Hegel and the HSGB. Both the Society and the *Bulletin*, however, are the brainchildren of his open-minded passion for Hegel and matchless talent for organization. We are also indebted to him for some of the clearest and most forceful writing in defence of Hegel’s commitment to freedom—a commitment that owed much to his wartime experiences of violence and brutality and that in turn informed his tireless work on behalf of Polish civil society. Pelczynski left an extraordinary legacy that enhanced the lives of hundreds of people. It is one for which students of Hegel in particular should be profoundly grateful.

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Notes

¹ See Harris 1983: 77–78.

² See Avineri 1972 and Taylor 1975.

³ See Hegel 1967 and Popper 1966, vol. 2. In Hegel 1967 the original publication date (with the Clarendon Press) is given as 1952, but the Translator’s Foreword is dated 1942. See also Pelczynski 1981: 3, and Harris 1983: 78.

⁴ See Hegel 1964: 5–137.

⁵ See Pelczynski (ed.) 1971 and Pelczynski (ed.) 1984.

⁶ Pełczyński 1980a: 16.

⁷ See Pełczyński 1952.

⁸ See Plamenatz 1975.

⁹ See Foster 1965.

¹⁰ In a later essay Pełczyński provides an answer to Berlin's question. See Pełczyński (ed.) 1984: 74: 'As for J.S. Mill so for Hegel, representative government is an essential agency of national education (cp. *PBR*, §315A)'.

¹¹ See Hegel 1964.

¹² Pełczyński 1981: 6–7.

¹³ See Pełczyński 1959.

¹⁴ See Pełczyński (ed.) 1971.

¹⁵ This was later published as Pełczyński 1979. Among the important points made in this clear and engaging article is the following on p. 8: 'The Preface [to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*], which was intended to appease the Prussian censor and the Prussian court circles, has unfortunately also misled a lot of intelligent readers of the book (even specialists in political theory) into thinking that Hegel denies philosophy any critical role. It is one of the worst misconceptions about this frequently misrepresented thinker! Hegel is not in the least reluctant to praise, condemn, or make suggestions about rational political arrangements.'

¹⁶ See Pełczyński 1980b: 2.

¹⁷ See Easton 1980: 2–3.

¹⁸ See Priest 1985: 4 and Walker 1986: 12–13.

¹⁹ Pełczyński 1980b: 2.

²⁰ Pełczyński 1985: 3.

²¹ See Pełczyński (ed.) 1984.

²² See Pełczyński and Gray (eds.) 1984.

²³ See Pełczyński and Gray (eds.) 1984: 150, 164–66. See also Pełczyński (ed.) 1984: 61: 'the unity of private interests and community values is realized in a conscious and organized manner'.

²⁴ See Leslie 1980: 299–457.

²⁵ See http://www.polishheritage.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=201&Itemid=207

²⁶ See also <https://www.britishpoles.uk/zbigniew-pelczynski-a-story-of-how-a-renowned-academic-paved-the-way-for-polish-students-at-british-universities/>

²⁷ See <https://www.szkoła-liderow.pl/?lang=en> and <https://www.britishpoles.uk/zbigniew-pelczynski-a-story-of-how-a-renowned-academic-paved-the-way-for-polish-students-at-british-universities/>

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