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Today and Destiny: The Judgment of Moses Hess

One way to look at it is this: the spiritual history of European communism is divided evenly into two parts by the name of Moses Hess. And the essay *Über das Geldwesen* (*On the Essential Nature of Money*) is nothing less than the watershed which divides it. Ernst Bloch has famously distinguished *two* currents in the history of thought: "a warm current" and "a cold current." If much of Marx is swept by a cold current, all of Hess is infused by the warm. If it can be said that "the cast of Marx's mind was fundamentally scientific," the cast of Hess's entire spirit was moral, prophetic, eschatological. He is less a subject for academic social science than a lonely and much-neglected figure in the tragic story of *The God That Failed*.

Another way to look at it is this: When the academy comes around to "studying" Moses Hess, it is destined to violate Auden's ultimate commandment: Thou shalt not commit a social science! Scholars will, on largely irrelevant grounds, tax him with a lack of scholarship! They will, predictably, correct him on life in the Middle Ages, or "what happened" here or there. Such critics are fated forever to miss the mark: They may be the better scholars, Marx may be the better theorist but, morally speaking, Hess might be the better man. As a cast of mind, social science is intrinsically incapable of grasping the essential nature of his essay: by its very method it is precluded from any penetration of the outward form: *Über das Geldwesen* is prophesy and judgment in the form of social philosophy. Hess's essay furnishes man with a myth, not merely an analysis, a vision of first and last things, not simply rational analysis, analysis drained of all moral passion and rhetoric: not the icy

current of the logicizing intellect (method, analysis, theory, fact, linguistic distinction, etc.) but the life-giving stream of Hope, the *revelation* of what is, what might be, what can be, if only. . .

Such critics will be wasting their time if they merely attempt to set him right on the facts, point up some "contradiction," show up some theoretical flaw. His essay *is* a capital work in the history of German socialism, and therefore of our times. But more than that: it is a moral document of prophetic dimensions in the formative vision of world communism, the inverted *theology* which explains its moral fervor. In its innermost nature, it is not only an essay in social philosophy but in myth and myth-making. A myth sets forth facts, but only to teach a lesson. Even if that lesson is 50 percent wrong (e.g., in its vision of socialist society), it is not ignoble. And if it is, at least, 50 percent right (e.g., in its wrathful indictment of bourgeois society), it is 100 percent right in its feeling about Ends and Means—if the history of the Marxist movement shows nothing else, it proves this to the hilt.

But there is yet a third way to look at it: Edmund Silberner calls it "a landmark in the early history of German socialism." More recently, David McLennan suggests that Marx's *Judenfrage* "can only be accounted for on the supposition that Marx copied heavily from Hess's essay presuming it would not be published." But these are academic niceties, and we can leave them to academics. Our task here is altogether different.

Vergil sings of arms and the man, Hess of the promise of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. His language and imagery, his metaphors of a fallen world, his wrath at the degradation of a life in which our souls are dragged through the muck and the mire and the love that will bond us in the new organic world to be, all conspire to whisper one thing which looks back to Ecclesiastes and forward to socialist humanism, to Erich Fromm. Without for a moment questioning its importance in the history of ideas, its true value is the insight it provides us into the literary structure of a prophetic mind

preaching salvation to a world without a sense of sin.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Über das Geldwesen violates the fundamental canons of modern social science, prominently the fact/value distinction. As such, it is a folly to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews, or at least the Christians. Hess concludes his essay on a note which will never be found in a text in social science:

The formative period of society has come to a close; soon the last hour will strike for the social animal kingdom. Time has run out for the money-machine, and it is quite in vain that our progressive and reactionary politicians attempt to salvage the old order. . . .

The "old order" is an "evil world," an "unnatural world," a fragmented world, one in which the individual is isolated and stripped of his generic and communal quality, "naked" persons driven by egoism, windowless monads in a bourgeois milieu, "cannibalistically consuming their own fat," an obscene temple to the power of Money. If much of this is by now familiar, Hess's conception of the original cause is not: he traces it to *Christianity!* Here, then, is the story in his own words:

For our philistine, our Christian shop-keeper and Jewish Christian the individual is the *end*, while generic existence is the *means* of life. They have created their own world *for themselves*. In theory, the classic form of this inverted world is the Heaven of the Christian. In the *real* world the individual dies, in the Christian *heaven* he lives *on forever*. In real life, the species is manifested through and by means of the individual, in heaven, the generic essence, God, lives outside of individual men, and these individual men are not the medium through which God manifests himself, through which the generic essence lives, but quite the opposite: individual men live by means of God. The generic essence is here degraded into becoming the *means* for the life of individual men. The Christian "ego" *needs* its God; it needs him for its *individual existence*, for its sacred, immortal *soul*, for its *salvation!* . . . Christianity is the *theory*, the *logic* of Egoism.

Hess's essay is among the earliest works on the relationship

between religion and the rise of capitalism. Christian theology prepared the ideological way for the *justification* of bourgeois society by legitimizing sale: the principle of vendibility:

Christianity is the *sophistry of the awakened bad conscience* of a depraved mankind, the attempt at liberation from the reproaches of this bad conscience. . . . The Christian distinguishes between the "inner" and "outer" man, i.e., between *reality* and *unreality*. The human "spirit," i.e., the part which remains when everything "corporeal" is abstracted. . . . is thus the holy and inalienable aspect of the life of man; the human "body," however, is *bad, unholy, contemptible, external*, and is therefore the *alienable* side of life. . . . The *immediate* result of this doctrine was that men allowed slavery to exist *as a fact* and even considered it to be justified, since they no longer sold *men* but merely *bodies*—a big step forward, but a step forward deeper into the muck. Once the principle of vendibility was legitimized in this way, the path was cleared for *universal* bondage, for the *general, mutual, and voluntary* self-bartering of our shop-keepers.

The Christian "idea" or form had remained "unrealized," but now in the bourgeois world, in civil society, the word had become flesh through the very distinction between body and soul:

A form of social life had to be found in which man's alienation had to take shape in as universal a form as it does in the *Christian Heaven*. Free spirits-without-flesh had to manifest themselves in the *here-and-now* as well—a truly *colossal bit of nonsense*, and which the schrewdness of our modern economists and legislators has promoted. In our shop-keeper world is *Christianity realized*.

The technique by which this sleight-of-hand was pulled off before our eyes is composed of three parts which taken together constitute his counter-theology. The "organic" foundations of collective life have been dissolved by the acids of egoism; the generic quality of man resolved into a series of fragmented particulars, or "individuals"; the new God is Money:

All that remained was to sanction, to canonize the *de facto* already existing *private citizen*. . . for whom everything belonging to his *generic life* had been destroyed, taken away,