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The Decline of Ideology

Modern German Thought, anthology of articles, translation from the German, edited by V. Kossovsky, Dresden, Vostok Publishing House, 1921, 203 pages.

THIS ANTHOLOGY contains articles by Heinrich Mamontov, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Deibler, Paul Ernst, Heinrich Keyserling, Oswald Spengler, Karl Kautsky and Albert Einstein, in short, by authors of the most varied orientation, from the mystic, Keyserling, to the new member of the German Communist Party, Professor Einstein.¹ These are not articles in the usual sense, but excerpts, or separate chapters from the most characteristic works of each author. Despite the fact that the intellectual profile of the authors is wide-ranging, a unified impression will arise for the reader.

In the article, “Mechanical Heart,” Paul Ernst condemns Western European civilization, searches for “other shores,” and finds them.

Where is this new promised land?

Before the war the universal scapegoat was considered to be capitalism. It is entirely possible that people will begin to find relief in the system of state socialism. We, however, already see that no essential changes will be found in this way; life will only be enriched with a new series of painful complications and conditions. We must understand that the cause

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1. As far as I have been able to determine, Einstein never joined the German Communist Party. Trans.

for human suffering is not institutions, but the ideas which give birth to these institutions.

China is teeming with people, moreover people who are clever, obedient, reliable, intelligent and undemanding, from whom would come the most outstanding factory workers. In China there are so many wealthy people that to raise money for any goal whatsoever would not present the smallest difficulty.

China has coal mines and deposits of iron ore; its canals are the cheapest and most accessible form of transport. Why is it that capitalism didn't take root in China long ago? For the simple reason that the Chinese love and honor agricultural labor, and they can always find the necessary plot of land and produce on it everything that is required, given their modest needs. If such an outlook dominated in Europe, then not only would this terrible war have been superfluous, but Europe would have before it a happy and peaceful future (p. 62).

To moderate or reduce one's needs, to return to the "moral maxim" of the Chinese—this is the escape from the impasse of European reality. While Paul Ernst seeks escape from the impasse behind the Great Wall of China, then Heinrich Keyserling has already found it on the banks of the Ganges and ... in the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery outside Moscow.

Divinity must be sought on the banks of the Ganges. For thousands of years the Hindus have honored this river as a sacred place. "By virtue of this, due to the wondrous power of faith, it has indeed become sacred." Keyserling is convinced that the "psychical atmosphere" is without any doubt an objective reality. Evidently, the German philosopher proposes, the question can be reduced to the fluctuations of some kind of "ether," or in any case, to the vibrations of a material character.

"Thoughts are undoubtedly 'things' to the same degree as objects of the external world.... The 'spirit of the times' is something no less objective than the physical atmosphere. If conceptions contained nothing material, then they would not be able to infect" (p.93).

Since he is firmly convinced that "psychic atmosphere" is of a material character, Mr. Keyserling has little trouble sensing the presence of the divinity not only on the banks of the Ganges, but also in the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery. "Between the majority of pilgrims whom I met, first on the banks of

the Ganges, and then in the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery, there lies only the difference of denomination.... Yes, Russia, simple, peasant-shirted Russia, is now the only Christian government which is close to God” (p.100).

Keyserling is critical of Protestantism, and more receptive to Catholicism, but believes that only Hinduism has attained “the essence of things.” “In the Catholic church, profound commandments continue to live in distorted form; in Hinduism, however, they live on in their true meaning. The Hindu religious and ceremonial philosophy is the richest mine of psychological and metaphysical wisdom” (p.105).

Hinduism’s main merit is that it knows “that each religious creed should be approached pragmatically. In order for absolute truth to become accessible to man, it must, of course, be clothed in some form ... but this form always emanates from man, and is only an earthly vessel” (p.111). “The divine always reveals itself to man within the framework of his own true biases” (p.112). “No single form is adequate to divinity” (p.121).

Thus a bridge is thrown from the latest philosophical constructions of pragmatism and Bergsonism to primeval Hinduism and to the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery. Not long ago, before the war, heated debates were held about the nature of pragmatism, in which people were found who tried to unite pragmatism with Marxism by presenting the former as the furthest “deepening” of Marxism. Time has ended this debate, dotting all the i’s. You can have whatever attitude you like toward Keyserling’s religious and philosophical conceptions, but you must agree that his pragmatism differs in no substantial way from the pragmatism found in second-year seminary textbooks (see: moral theology). It is no accident that the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery is so close to Keyserling.

The end of the article is devoted to attacks against reason. “Wherever reason becomes the dominant element of the soul ... the soul loses its former ability to immediately realize its secret essence ... and becomes superficial” (p.122).

Paul Ernst looks with hope toward China, Keyserling looks toward the Troitsko-Sergeyev Monastery, and Oswald Spengler doesn’t look anywhere. In the chapter “Philosophy of the Future,” taken from his sensational new book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* [The Decline of the West], he is more inclined to make assertions. Western European civilization is in a period of decline—that is Oswald Spengler’s general conclusion. In particular, with regard to philosophy, Spengler claims that only one possibility remains—skepticism.

“Systematic philosophy closes with the end of the eighteenth century. Kant put its utmost possibilities in forms both grand in themselves and, as a rule, final for the Western soul. He is followed, as Plato and Aristotle were followed, by a specifically megalopolitan philosophy that was not speculative but practical, irreligious, social-ethical. This philosophy begins [in the spirit of Zeno and Epicurus] with Schopenhauer” (p.167).¹ It finds its adepts in Nietzsche, the “Hegelian” Marx, and in the “Malthusian” Darwin. But it has “exhausted the cycle of true philosophical possibilities” (p.168).

“Systematic philosophy, then, lies immensely far behind us, and ethical has been wound up. But a third possibility, corresponding to [Hellenistic] skepticism, remains” (p.168).

Unlike Hellenistic skepticism, which is ahistorical, modern skepticism is thoroughly psychological and historical. “It proceeds by understanding everything in a relative sense, as a historical phenomenon.... Skepticism ... dissipates the world picture of the culture that has gone before. All older problems are turned into those of genetics.... Everything in general ... must be the expression of something living. What has come into being reflects becoming. In the old formula, *esse est percipi*, the primeval sensation shines through: all that exists must stand in relation to living man and for the dead, nothing exists anymore.”

But did he “leave” the world, his world, or did he annihilate its existence with his death? That is the question!

The answer to this question is given by the immediate feeling of life, for which “the entire picture of the surrounding world is only a fiction of life itself, a mirror, an expression, a symbol of a living soul.... The morphology of world history inevitably becomes a universal symbolism” (p.170).

The world is turned into a symbol. Everyone has his own truth. This is a very comforting, obliging point of view, and is indeed skeptical to the very end. With Keyserling we see where this leads. The circle of development is complete. The decline of ideology is for all to see.

To dwell on the boring, mediocre article by Kautsky would make no sense. As for the article by Professor Einstein, in the next issue the journal’s editors will give a special critical assessment of Einstein’s theory of relativity.

In conclusion, we might wish that our Gosizdat [State Publishing House]

1. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. 1 (Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 45. Trans.

will at the first opportunity follow the example of the Dresden publishing house, "Vostok." It seems to me that communism will be strengthened in such editions, particularly if they are supplied with sensible critical articles.