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Kierkegaard on Economic Issues

Years of Transition, 1846–1852

> In the end, therefore, money will be the one thing people will desire, which is moreover representative, an abstraction. Nowadays a young man hardly envies anyone his gifts, his art, the love of a beautiful girl, or his fame; he only envies him his money. Give me money, he will say, and I am saved.
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> —Søren Kierkegaard (PA, 40–41)

> *I am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*—its deterrent power—is nullified by money. I, according to my individual characteristics, am *lame*, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honored, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good. Therefore its possessor is good.
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> —Karl Marx[1]

The evolution of Kierkegaard's thought was time-and-space bound. The Denmark of the 1840s experienced the transition from the feudal and agricultural system to the economy of liberal ideology. With the new government of 1848–1849 mercantilist capitalism was replaced by laissez-faire capitalism. Kierkegaard's own development from his earlier conservative position to his later critical attitude can be observed as far back as 1846. Alastair McKinnon has argued persuasively that the attack upon Christendom of 1854–1855 was not an isolated episode that took place at the very last period of Kierkegaard's life. According to

1. Marx and Engels, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 324.

this Canadian scholar, that critique was present at least as far back as the writing of the *Unscientific Postscript* in 1846.[2]

On March 30, 1846, Kierkegaard wrote his *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, which has been considered his most political book,[3] though Kierkegaard definitely arrived at a much more radical position during his final stage. This is not the place to analyze the content of *Two Ages*, yet I should mention a couple concepts that are relevant for our purposes. In this book, he addressed the issue of the revolution with an affirmative attitude. Kierkegaard elaborated a critical and dialectical appraisal of the revolutionary age. According to him, in view of the substantial political changes that were taking place in those days, a new society was emerging. True, there were losses and gains: the new society lost intensiveness (passion, character) but gained extensiveness (democratic government). Kierkegaard celebrated the new synthesis through his dialectical appraisal of the new form: "Generally speaking, compared to a passionate age, a reflective age devoid of passion *gains in extensity what it loses in intensity*. But this extensity in turn may become the condition for a higher form if a corresponding intensity takes over what is extensively at its disposal" (TA, 97; italics original).

For Kierkegaard, the dialectic of society consists of the fact that "[t]he individual is primarily related to God and then to the community, but this primary relation is the highest, yet it does not neglect the second" (Pap. VII 1 A20 n.d., 1846) (JP, 4110).

In order not to do violence to Søren Kierkegaard's thought, we must bear in mind that he was a careful maieutic thinker who knew how to place the forces of society in tension with the absolute, as he himself stated in 1848: "that I know nothing about sociality. The fools! . . . always when I have first presented one aspect sharply and clearly, then I affirm the validity of the other even more strongly" (Pap. VIII 1 A4) (WL, 18).

A year later, in the midst of the signing of the new constitution, Kierkegaard made a summary of his ideas, highlighting his social and political agenda: "In old times there lived only an individual; the mass,

2. McKinnon, "Kierkegaard's Attack on Christendom," 95–106.

3. "While most of his largely unsystematic social theory and criticism are located elsewhere in his books, journals, and letters, *Two Ages* remains one of the most explicit and concentrated of his writings in these areas" (Plekon, "Towards Apocalypse," 20).

the thousands, were squandered on him. Then came the idea of representation. Those who really lived were again only individuals, but the mass nevertheless saw themselves in them, participated in their life." And he concluded: "The last stage is: the single individual, understood in such a way that the single individual is not in contrast to the mass, but each one is equally an individual" (Pap X2 A265 n.d., 1849) (JP, 2019). Kresten Nordentoft has rightly pointed out that Kierkegaard's visualization and realization of this "final situation" is the key to understanding his whole corpus and his attack upon Christendom as well.[4]

Having mentioned the way Kierkegaard approached the social and political system, now let us proceed to verify the manner in which he deals with economic issues, again, from a structural perspective. By the same token, it would be very helpful to be aware that since Kierkegaard is a dialectical author, he deals with the subject of material poverty even when he develops the treatment of wealth (*Rigdom*) and money (*Penge*), always within the general framework of the attack upon Christendom.

I am personally interested in Søren Kierkegaard's postrevolution (1848–1849) period. I wish to emphasize that in order to do justice to his thought, the treatment of this subject should include the Danish journal entries that remain untranslated into English,[5] as well as the *Journals* available in English and his published books of the last years.

I would like to argue that some of Kierkegaard's economic ideas, as we shall see, are definitely useful and relevant for our current situation. But first, I must hasten to mention that during the years of 1846 to 1852 there is a clear turning point in Kierkegaard's emphasis.

Wealth and Poverty as Correlative Terms

> "what I have, another cannot have; the more I have, the less another has." (CD, 120)

Mammon (*Mammon*) means for Kierkegaard not only wealth but also prestige and power. In his *Christian Discourses* he refers to the unrighteous mammon as the earthly goods that necessarily do injustice to the poor: "All earthly and worldly goods are in themselves selfish, invidious, the possession of them, being invidious or envious, must of necessity

4. Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, 252.
5. See Appendix B.

make others poorer: what I have, another cannot have; the more I have, the less another has." The nature of mammon is unrighteousness and inequality, therefore it: "cannot in and for itself be acquired or possessed equally, for if one is to have much, there must necessarily be another who gets only a little, and what the one has, the other cannot possibly have" (CD, 120).

Regarding the manner of acquisition of the relative goods, one can accomplish that by pure accidental means such as playing the lottery, inheriting a fortune, by the change in the value of the currency, by purchasing a piece of furniture from a dealer. Furthermore, in 1846, Kierkegaard made the concession that mammon also can be reached by hard work (CUP, 382). Nonetheless, what is sure is that mammon is unrighteous, i. e., unequal, ergo contrary to the gospel: "mammon, which has the quality of confirming the distinction between man and man and in an altogether indifferent way. For this is the very nature of 'money'" (Pap X 1 A 55 n.d., n.d. 1849) (JP, 2769).

For some who represent economic liberalism there is a correlation between the number of rich people and the welfare of their society. The more the wealthy people, the more benefits will their community enjoy because the profits will penetrate from the top to the bottom.[6] What is

6. John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), the British economist for whom "what is rational for the individual and the firm is not necessarily rational for the government," played an important role in the constitution of the International Monetary Fund. In 1930 Keynes delivered a lecture in Madrid where he showed his cynical and macabre conception of wealth and poverty:

> When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals. We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues. We shall be able to afford to dare to assess the money-motive at its true value. The love of money as a possession—as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life—will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease . . .
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> I see us free, therefore, to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue—that avarice is a vice, that the exaction of usury is a misdemeanor, and the love of money is detestable, that those walk most truly in the paths or virtue

lacking in this conception of society is Kierkegaard's dialectic in dealing with matters of wealth and poverty which are neither accidental nor fortuitous terms but dialectical ones. Wealth and poverty then, are not natural phenomenons but historical products: "the more I have, the less another has."[7]

Kierkegaard agrees with thieves in the sense that money is a great good, and also with slanderers in considering honor and reputation as great goods. But Kierkegaard disagrees with both for expropriating those goods from him as a person: "'O miserable, despicable mammon.' that is what his life expressed, 'miserable mammon,' with which a person defiles himself by hoarding, which he accumulates to his own ruination, which he possesses to his own damnation, in order finally to curse himself eternally in hell" (FSE, 177).

I have set the year 1846 as an important milestone in Kierkegaard's work but, from that does not follow that he was blind to some matters before that year. For instance, in 1842 he portrayed what was happening within the Danish elite for whom the theater, prostitutes, rides to Deer Park, funerals, and funeral eulogies would be free, since for them "money is always available," and therefore "everything is free in a way" (E/O I 287).[8] What was at stake was the absolutization of money, as the opening quotation of this chapter reflects.

> and sane wisdom who take least thought for the morrow. We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honor those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin.
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> But beware! The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight. (Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren," 329–31)

7. Surprisingly enough, even Adam Smith saw the dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty! "Wherever there is great prosperity, there is great inequality. For one rich man there must be at least five hundred poor . . . and the affluence of the rich supposes the indigence of the many" (*The Wealth of Nations*, 709–10, cited in Meeks, *God the Economist*, 197 n. 31).

8. Apocalypse, on the contrary portrays a golden city where everybody walks on golden streets and by doing so is telling us that "[w]here everything is gold, the gold is no longer money. Everything is available" (Hinkelammert, *Sacrificios humanos y sociedad occidental*, 111).

The absolutization of the relative good of money is treated in *The Christian Discourses* and other works under the subject of seriousness of life. Kierkegaard confronts the overly busy person: "that busy man also must have been in the wrong when he argues that he had a great deal of business from the fact that he keeps five clerks and himself has no time to eat or drink" (CD, 59–60). These human beings, by having lost the dialectical character of wealth and poverty, have centered their life in business and money: "he slaves from morning till night, makes money, lays by, engages in financial transactions" (CD, 92).

Around the same time, Kierkegaard writes about the relative character of money and its difference from the reality of spiritual wealth: "even though a change, a currency change, may also occur in the external world, turning concepts, language, merit, etc. upside down, he who possesses spiritual wealth does not lose one whit of what he possessed—no, not even in all eternity" (LD # 274, 273, 189 to Conferenstraad J. L. A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge). The magnification of money, on the other hand, is carried out by the "people on the mountain" or the supervisors of Denmark's market economy, "the promised land of paid jobs," where morality consists of the fact that "everything revolves around a paid job" (Pap. VIII 1 A 417 n.d., 1847) (JP, 6077).

Kierkegaard noticed how money had penetrated dimensions foreign to it. Money had primacy even within conjugal relationships. For instance, he reports a fortune hunter who married a rich girl for her money; but she, in return, wanted to have the advantage of knowing that it was she who made him rich (TA, 38). Kierkegaard also writes about the scandalous contradiction of the wealthy who are increasing their treasure and declare their not having worries about making a living; however, the reality is quite different. These rich persons are compared with "someone who owned a costly collection of excellent medicines that he used every day to say as he pointed at the medicines: I am not sick!" (TA, 181).

Søren Kierkegaard de-absolutized the place that had been given to money: "If you make earning money into the earnestness of life, then you have fallen from Christianity" (Pap. X, 3 A 347 n.d., 1850) (JP, 1787). The relativization of money is another way of describing Kierkegaard's conception of wealth and poverty as correlative terms, and Kierkegaard's attack upon a wrongly oriented society as well. For him, secularism not only has to do with the lack of faith but also with economic matters: "the same secular-mindedness which expresses itself in amassing money because one believes neither in providence nor in himself. The greater the faith in God, the less one feels the desire to hoard" (Pap. X, 4 A 13 n.d., 1851) (JP, 1266).

The magnification of money is connected also with reduplication or double life. Kierkegaard examines the life of the academically educated and artistically trained, who live in style within the refined circle but who, above all are interested in having money, "and lots of it" through dishonest means.[9]

For Kierkegaard, in money matters there is always a tension: "the rich man's possession of money being a kind of envy which has taken this money from the poor, who perhaps in their turn envy the rich for it; for there is envy in both situations, because earthly riches is itself envy." (CD, 121) Nevertheless, money is to be shared: "Money is the numerator; mercy the denominator. But the denominator is still the more important" (Pap VIII 1 A 209 n.d., 1847) (JP, 2768).

Kierkegaard was aware of the irrationality concerning the logic of the mercantilistic economic system: "The first barrel of gold, says the capitalist, will be the most difficult to gain; when one has that, the rest comes of itself. But the first farthing, with the knowledge that one is beginning to lay up for abundance, is also earnest-money" (CD, 28). His *Christian Discourses* draws a line between the society's rationality in relation to wealth and the Christian point of view: "God does not, as though he were a capitalist, want his fortune to be increased by sagacious investments, but on the contrary, to have it administered in an entirely different way, if He is to be well pleased" (CD, 32). Kierkegaard concedes the existence of wealthy Christians but with the substantial qualification that wealth is to be shared: "the rich Christian realizes that they are God's, and that they are to be administered as far as possible in accordance with the proprietor's wish, administered with the proprietor's indifference to money and money value, administered by giving them away at the right time and place" (CD, 33). The tangible fruits of faith in God are measured by putting wealth to the service of people: "the rich Christian is in a position to have joy in his earthly riches, finding joy whenever he is granted opportunity to do some good with his

9. Kierkegaard, *Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, 1201; Pap., X 4 A 214.

riches, that he can do another man a service, and by this same act can serve God" (CD, 35-6).

Kierkegaard realized that humans do not live on air. In fact, four times he quoted in his books the anxiety of the poor generated by past time: "for yesterday, in view of what he has eaten . . . and not paid for!" (CD, 350).[10] But it is God the great provider, who takes care of his people. Now, the greedy people who monopolize God's goods set themselves outside of God's reign: "He sows and reaps and gathers into barns, and the whole world is like his great storeroom. Boring people have had the boring idea of turning the whole world into one great barn in order to manage without God" (FSE, 184). That kind of people has forgotten the dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty: "what I have, another cannot have; the more I have, the less another has" (CD, 120).

The Romanticization of Poverty and the Established Church (den bestående kirke)

> If I am unwilling *à la* Mynster to idolize the establishment (and this is Mynster's heresy) and in my zeal for morality eventually confuse it with bourgeois mentality . . . Then I cannot personally reject what has so clearly been upon me as a task. (Pap. VII 1 A 221 January 20, 1847) (JP, 5961)

In a forceful analysis of Mynster's sermon: "Meditation upon the Fate of People with Disabilities," which was delivered during the spring of 1850, Søren Kierkegaard strongly opposed the romanticization of the disabled together with the idealization of poverty. From the start, he denounced that the sermon does not appeal to the suffering people; but to the "pleasant relief of the fortunate." Kierkegaard's sharp eye detected in this homily the transformation of life's misery into an ideal state of existence. The result is the mockery of the suffering people as well as the cunning legitimizing of indifference of the wealthy people.

What is at stake in Christendom is in fact a class issue. Throughout this entry Søren Kierkegaard unveiled the connivance between the clergy and the privileged class; the trivialization of the physically and mentally poor; the falsification of the gospel by the powerful; the correlation between the sociological setting of the preacher and his speech; the so-

10. Observation made by Pastor F. L. B. Zeuthen in a thank-you letter to Kierkegaard on the occasion of the publication of *Works of Love*.

cially loaded reading of the Bible, and so on, all of that in detriment to suffering people. Kersten Nordentoft has also convincingly argued that the institutionalized bourgeois and clerical ideology exercised a social oppressive influence that deprived the proletariat of its privileged place in Christianity.[11] This "area for psychological observation" addresses, therefore, economic, political, and theological agendas for further investigation. The radical Kierkegaardian position together with the fact that this *Journal* entry has not yet been translated in full into English deserves to be cited *in extenso*:

> "Meditation upon the Fate of the Physically Challenged"[12]
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> Mynster's sermon "Meditation upon the fate of those to whom the usual capacities are denied"[13] is not really preached for the comfort of such suffering people. On the contrary, it is for the pleasant relief of the fortunate, so that they may go home from church armed against the impression caused by those suffering people.
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> There is something cunning here. Mynster is of the opinion that he cannot completely ignore such suffering people, about whom the Gospel constantly speaks. Consequently, he treats the subject in such a way that in the final analysis he denies that the suffering indeed suffer. He does not preach to comfort those who are suffering. However he says to the fortunate: take comfort, things are not so bad; they also have their mild side. There are examples of the visually-impaired with a clearer mental-eye (e.g., I can think of Homer); that the hearing-impaired have been profound thinkers.
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> Now that is preaching! This is truly a way of mocking the suffering people. On the other hand, the fortunate are obviously happy with such sermons, which tranquilizes them so completely in undisturbed pleasure, so that they may enjoy life on the grandest possible style, undisturbed by the misery of life —"It is not so awful. It also has its mild side."

11. Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, 253.

12. Nordentoft and Plekon drew my attention to this passage: Nordentoft, *Hvad Siger Brand-Majoren?* 202; and *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, 253. Plekon, "Prophetic Criticism, Incarnational Optimism," 144–45. I also acknowledge Bruce Kirmmse's correction of my translation, and many vigorous insights.

13. *Prædikarne paa Alle Søn-og Hellig-dage i Aaret. af Dr. J. P. Mynster, Biskop over Siellands Stift, kongelig Confessionarius, Storkors af Dannebrogen en og Dannebrogsmand*, 211–24.