Chapter 8

Hans Freyer’s Economic Philosophy
After World War II

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I. Biography of Hans Freyer
II. Progress as a “Cataract” – Freyer’s Theory of History
III. The Economy of the Industrial Society
IV. The Human Being in Industrial Society
V. Ethics and the Development of the Industrial Society

The work of the sociologist Hans Freyer is not well known, not only in today’s English-speaking community of the Social Sciences, but also among the younger German sociologists. Many regard Freyer’s biography as having been on the wrong path, because he supported the National Socialist movement at times. His work appears to be an illegitimate deviation from the mainstream of a nomological social science, a “Historical and Social Philosophy” or a “critique of culture”. But especially his later works from the 50s and 60s (on which we will concentrate here) include some remarkably modern and relevant aspects.¹

After giving an overview of Freyer’s biography, this paper introduces his theory of history which differs very much from the common idea of history as a process of progress and modernization, although it shows some semantic parallels. The third section describes how the economy of the industrial society works from Freyer’s point of view. In the fourth section, I will ask how

¹ Up to now, the literature on the history of economics and the social sciences has not paid much attention to Freyer’s later works from the 50s and 60s. Concerning Freyer’s scholarly work from the 20s and 30s see MÜLLER (1987), ÜNER (1992), SIEFERLE (1995). Concerning Freyer’s later work see KRUSE (1994).
the structures and functions of the modern economy and society have an effect on the social character of the human being. The final section deals with the possibilities and ways in which the economy and society can be organized from an ethical standpoint. Freyer saw Sociology as a comprehensive Social Science, integrating economic, historical and philosophical-ethical elements.

I. Biography of Hans Freyer

Hans Freyer was born in 1887 in Burgstadt, a small town in Saxony, and grew up in a pious, Protestant family. He first studied Theology in Greifswald and later went to Leipzig to study Literature and Political Economics. In 1911 he received a Ph.D. ("Promotion") and went on to complete his second dissertation in Philosophy, the qualification as a postdoctoral lecturer ("Habilitatation"), in 1920. In 1922 he became Professor of Philosophy in Kiel and was named to the first professorship in Germany exclusively devoted to sociology in Leipzig in 1925.

Freyer was a member of a generation that was very much influenced by the "Jugendbewegung" ("Youth Movement"), a specifically German phenomenon which spread rapidly at the turn of the century. It saw itself as a protest movement against industrial civilization and romanticized nature and life in the countryside. Freyer's philosophical-poetic writings emerged in the context of the "Youth Movement": "Antius - Grundlegung einer Ethik des bewuβten Lebens", ("Anteus - Principles of an Ethic of Conscious Life"), Jena 1918 and "Prometheus - Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Kultur" ("Prometheus - Ideas on a Philosophy of Culture"), Jena 1923. In the tradition of Wilhelm Dilthey, Freyer then wrote about the logical priniciples of the Humanities: "Theorie des objektiven Geistes ("Theory of the Objective Mind"), Leipzig 1923. In the late 20s, Freyer became increasingly political. His use of concepts such as "Volk" ("people"), "Volksgemeinschaft" (people's community"), "Volkswerdung" ("the development of a people") and "Führer" ("leader") show him to be representative of the right wing of the spectrum of those years. He interpreted the National Socialist movement as a power that

2 Concerning Freyer's biography see the outstanding work of JERRY Z. MULLER 1987; in addition, for the early phases of Freyer's life see MANHEIM 1948.