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Michael Ende's Last Words to the Japanese

On May 4th, 1999 the Japanese Television Corporation NHK (*Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai*) broadcasted the documentary program »*Ende no yuigon*« - "Ende's Last Message". The program was received with great interest by the public and has been repeated three times since. The film begins with parts of an interview that Michael Ende gave to the Japanese Television in February 1994. In his last years he had been intensely engaged in questions of economy and the monetary system. His masterpiece MOMO contains many hints to these topics. The macro-economist Werner Onken intuitively guessed the meaning of these hints and told Ende of his presumptions. In his answering letter Ende confirmed this:

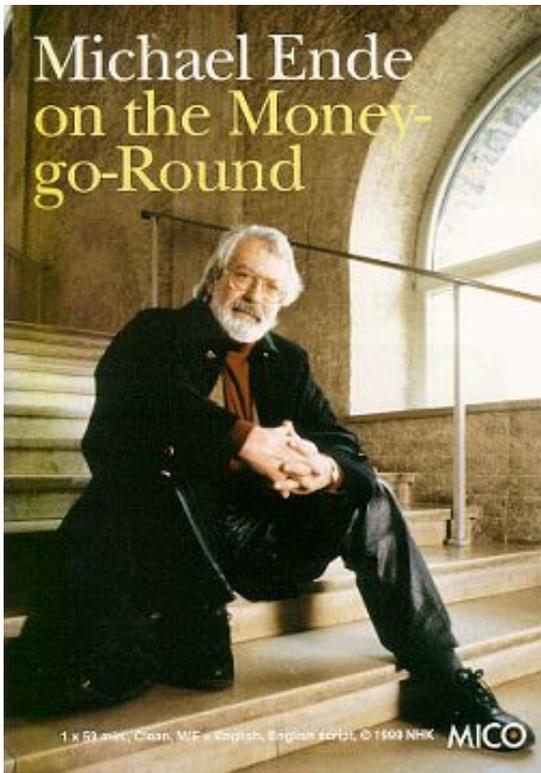
"By the way, you are the first one to realize that the idea of aging money dwells in the background of my book MOMO.

During the last years I had been deeply involved with precisely these thoughts of Steiner and Gesell since I have come to the conviction, that the whole of our cultural question cannot be solved without solving the money problem at the same time or even before."(1)

This subject dominated the talk with the TV-people from Japan. More than two hours he was talking about things his heart was full with and the Japanese TV-team listened attentively. The talk gave the impetus for a TV-series about the subject with the cooperation of Michael Ende. Unfortunately this plan couldn't be carried out since Ende died in August 1995. The TV-team, however, took up the challenge. Among the books he had left behind there were quite a number concerning money and economy. Those books and the interview served as the basic material for the documentary TV-program "Ende's Last Message".

Michael Ende loved Japan, her people, her culture. And the Japanese love him. In no other country besides Germany his work was so completely absorbed and nowhere else was the number of printed copies of his books as high. Talks which he had with Japanese scientists and artists resulted in books that do not exist in German. And this is why his ideas about monetary systems, economy and their inner relation to culture are better known in Japan than in Germany. At first glance Germany and Japan seem to have a few things in common: both have an old, grown culture and both belong to the industrially most advanced countries. These preconditions may have Ende made inclined to offer his proposals to Japan. He was convinced that the economically most powerful countries have to fulfill a duty towards the world and hence, he propounded his idea for a conference to be held in Tokyo, where entrepreneurs and economists should build an organization to investigate anew the very roots of the capitalistic economic system. In an international context the contribution of the rich countries should not consist in donating money to the poor countries but in realizing wise enterprises.

How come that an author like Michael Ende, who is loved and admired for the



richness of fantasy in his stories, confronts the hard side of reality? Perhaps imagination and reality are not quite as incompatible as our official culture still wants to make us believe. The realm of fantasy, which reflects the inner, subjective condition and the world of objective facts, the outer conditions, may be interrelated. Outer actuality may stimulate the fantasy and with the power of imagination new facts can be created. During a conference of economists and managers in Switzerland, which Ende was invited to, he read a passage from one of his books and then tried to stimulate the imagination of his listeners. He invited them to imagine the future society, what it should look like. But he didn't get so far. His listeners only saw the condition of reality: "What we need is an economic growth of

3% every year, otherwise we won't be able to survive." And there was no more room for fantasy.(2)

In order to approach Ende's world of fantasy it may be useful to find out about the way he perceived the facts of reality. In a former interview for a Japanese TV-program he said:

"He who pays orders. Since our whole development in technological and scientific fields are being paid by economic institutions and from the side of the state for military purposes, a very distinct kind of natural science had been created and pushed ahead with tremendous speed."(3)

The expenditures for military armament resulted from the competition of the two dominating power blocks. And at this point the question arises, why the »real existing socialism«, which aimed at offering a more human alternative to capitalism, had failed so miserably. According to Ende's view, however, Marx' doctrine was no alternative to capitalism, Marx had not discovered the basic failure in capitalism and therefore could not solve it.

"In essence Marx believed to solve the problem of capitalism by replacing the many private entrepreneurs with only a single entrepreneur, namely the state. Marx' main error was that he actually didn't want to change capitalism, but just to hand it over to the state. During the past 70 years the two hostile twins we had were private capitalism and a state's capitalism. But nowhere did we have a non-capitalistic economic order. Marx' great merit remains, however, that he had created terms which allow a critique of economic life."

In Ende's view capitalism is just the effect of the dysfunctional structure of the monetary system itself. Marx did not recognize this basic relation and this is why the »real existing socialism« and capitalism of Western making didn't differ so much, not even in their effects.

"The victims of our systems are the peoples of the Third World and nature. They have to pay the bill. They get recklessly exploited, so that the system goes on functioning.

In order to invest money as profitably as possible, so that capital increases and grows, they have to pay the bill, for, of course, this growth does not come out of nothing."

On his search for a solution to end »the tyranny of money«, Ende met many experts - politicians, scientists, artists, economists - and he discussed with them. One of the most original personalities among these experts is the Swiss political economist Hans Christoph Binswanger. In Binswanger's view the limitless economic growth expresses man's longing for infinity. But this longing has completely switched to the field of matter where it cannot reach its goal. Behind it lures, so he presumes, the striving of medieval alchemy to transubstantiate lead into gold. In Binswanger's interpretation Goethe's drama of »Faust II« is a detailed critique of subliminally working alchemistic ideas and it is an urgent warning of modern economy.(4)

"In my interpretation the recognition is new that Goethe describes modern economy as an alchemistic process of which he insistently warns: especially in those parts where the talk is of creating gold, of creating money and money creating experiments... Here lies an essential part of Goethe's message in »Faust«. Alchemy is not a medieval superstition - it's being practiced more consequently than ever, today it experiments with the globe as a whole and this giant alchemistic experiment is called »modern economy«... What's happening in economy today? Something just »grows« by something »being added«. Strange only, that nowhere something is supposed to decrease. Exactly this is alchemy, the continuation of the process of creation out of nothing."(5)

Binswanger says, economy has become something sacred and money has become transcendental -, it doesn't get spoiled, it cannot be used up because it just circulates. It doesn't rot, it doesn't rust - it resembles gold. "Thus, in our feeling money has become a metaphor for immortality."

But this grotesque self-multiplication of money, the sacred within, is some kind of Black Magic for Ende.

"In the ancient cultural places of the world there was a temple, a church or a cathedral in its center. From there came the order of life. In every modern big city there is a bank building in its center. In my »Pied Piper« I have tried to depict this as a kind of demon cult, where money is something to be prayed to like something sacred. It's even being expressed there in words that it is »God«. It performs miracles, because the multiplication of money itself is yet a miracle. After all, the dealings there are with a miraculous multiplication of money. It has the character of everlastingness. But if there is anything that is just a purely man-made thing, then it's money."

Black Magic has it that it is self-destructive, in the end it consumes itself. In the »Pied Piper of Hamelin«, the old fable, on which Ende based an opera, the Pied Piper appears as a saviour who leads the children from a sick, miserable region, where the pestilence causes havoc, to a new healthy place. This is possible in the world of fantasy, but how would a solution look in reality? Well, if the problem arises from money becoming a symbol of infinity and immortality, although it's being used in the finite and transitory world, the solution seems obvious. At the peak of the talk with the Japanese TV-team he now mentions the name of Silvio Gesell.

"I only know that it all began with Silvio Gesell who was one of the first to rack his brain. He was a man from the Council Republic in Bavaria right after World War I. For example, he said, »money must be able to age«. He said, that things have to be organized in such a way that the money disappears at the end of the

economic process."

In order to illustrate this he uses the comparison with blood, which in a certain location - the bone marrow - comes into existence, circulates through the body by providing nutrition to all parts, in the end it grows old and vanishes.

Silvio Gesell was born in a small place close to the Belgian border, emigrated to Argentine as a young man where he founded a successful enterprise as a merchant, studied the economic fluctuations and found the cause for critical developments in the monetary system. His insights served as basis for his theory. After having returned to Europe he wrote his voluminous main work »The Natural Economic Order« and tried to pass his knowledge on. But even after the second still more disastrous catastrophe nothing had been changed in the existing monetary system. And again today we are on the verge of an economic situation, which becomes threatening and according to Ende it is high time for urgent measures to be taken:

"If not reason motivates man to change something then it will come through events.

But I believe, that mankind will get a slap round its face which will sound in its ears for centuries to come."

During the 20th century mankind had already received a few strong slaps round its face. And before every disaster which occurred, there were voices of reason which warned of the catastrophe. Gesell's letter to the editor of a Berlin newspaper dates from the year 1918:

"Despite the holy promise of the peoples to banish war for all times, despite the call of the millions: »no war ever again!«, against all hopes for a better future, I must say: »If nowadays's monetary system, the economy of interest, will be upheld and continued, then I dare say today, that it will not take 25 years until we finally confront another even more horrible war."

In a few additional, short phrases he described, what would happen until the breakout of that catastrophe and it did happen. But Gesell was no clairvoyant. His prediction was just a precise description of the consequences which necessarily arose from the inner laws of the monetary system. But in times of increasing excitement voices of reason and thoughtfulness will be overheard.

The domain of the writer Michael Ende is the realm of fantasy, of subjective imagination and this seems to have nothing to do with reality. But the so-called realists who only see the necessity for »3% economic growth« are possibly under the duress of an idea of reality which they are not aware of. Michael Ende tried to direct the attention of people to this inner world of imagination. It could lead to the insight that the compulsion for »3% economic growth« is nothing but a monstrous invention, but an unconscious one.

"I regard my opportunities as a writer, which are very weak, only from this point of view. I'm trying to think thoughts, to develop imaginations, that might be helpful for those, who survive the events and are not under the spell to repeat the same mistake. A totally different kind of society will grow then."

Michael Ende didn't overestimate at all his chances for exerting influence in a culture, where fantasy and reality, subject and object are being considered as separate spheres which exist side by side seemingly without relating to each other. But this idea is not at all universal and valid everywhere.

Mr. Atsunori Kawamura, the head of the documentary department »Group Gendai« of NHK (6) reports that Ende, despite his sympathy and appreciation for Japan and

her culture, felt quite remote from the everyday reality of life of the Japanese today. In contemporary Japan the economy and even the culture are totally under the control of the bureaucracy. What is called the reconstruction of economy consists only in investments of huge sums from taxes in the capital organization of private enterprises. Even the cultural and spiritual creative work depends on subsidies and authorities which thus influence the direction of the development. The democratically elected politicians are mainly engaged in creating a distinct image of themselves for the public in order to be elected again. The bureaucrats who don't need to gain the favour of voters can concentrate on factual questions without distraction. It must be noted, however, that the members of the Japanese bureaucracy are the most apt, the best educated people of Japan. This may well be a unique phenomenon in the world. This bureaucracy is very efficient, it doesn't make decisions onesidedly but in close cooperation with concerned institutions. In this way a paternalistic system had been created based on consense and harmony but incapacitating the citizens in a very subtle way. Ende's ideas largely follow the theories of the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner with its threefold structure of society. The fundamentals of democracy are the equal rights of citizens and therefore the basis for majority decisions in public affairs. In spiritual and cultural life, however, different theories must be applied. The most precious thing in these realms is freedom. What is art cannot be determined by majority decision or even by decree. The economic sphere should comply with the ideal of fraternity. This division of society corresponds to the catchwords of the French Revolution: freedom in the spiritual, cultural sphere, equality in the building up of the rights of citizens and fraternity in satisfying the basic human demands.

It was not Japan's facade which attracted Michael Ende, he may have been bewitched by much subtler aspects of the culture that appealed to deeper layers of his consciousness. Japan is an extraordinary country in many respects. On the one hand she is thoroughly Asian, totally embedded in traditions of Asian spirit and culture, on the other hand she has stepped beyond and could not only maintain a place in occidental civilization, dominated by rational sciences, but achieve a top position. But the culture of every country is bound to its past by an invisible umbilical cord. Even though this cannot be detected on the surface anymore, such influences continue on a subliminal level. For more than 200 years Japan was isolated (1639-1868). Virtually no exchange occurred with the rest of the world. During that period Japan remained totally untouched by the scientific-technological progress of Western countries which resulted in the Industrial Revolution and pushed them incessantly ahead. Practically no technological progress had been made during 200 years of isolation. When in 1868 Japan opened its borders for the rest of the world its economy was mainly based on agriculture. 80% of the population were farmers, the rest divided in samurai, craftsmen and merchants. But even if according to Western standards Japan may have been a backward country this is only true with respect to technological progress. As an utterly curious and highly educated people the Japanese used the time of technological stagnation for education and cultural refinement. Private schools, called *terakoya*, were founded and offered education for large parts of the population. By the end of the Edo-Period (1868) about 40% of males and 20% of females had gone through a *terakoya* and were able to read and write. Likewise, only 20% of the male population and no females had gone through education in Britain, at that time the industrially most advanced country. An educational level above average is still standard in Japan.

Different historical developments and spiritual roots are quite certainly responsible for setting different accents in dealing with things real. The American Japanologist Boye Lafayette De Mente who had been living in Japan for almost half a century said:

"There is perhaps nothing more irritating to the logical-minded Westerner than

becoming involved with anyone, much less a whole nation, who does not behave in a »reasonable« manner. To Westerners, people who allow their emotions to direct a substantial part of their behaviour are suspect and not to be trusted with anything of importance. When emotionalism goes beyond a very low level we regard it as insanity. [...]

Perhaps it was a combination of Shintoism and Zen-Buddhism that created the capacity in the Japanese to be at home with both emotion and reason, with emotion as often as not overriding reason. The Zen factor in Japanese thought gives them a considerable advantage in being able to distinguish between reality and the unreal or the imagined. The Zen eye sees beyond the facade to the core of a thing."(7)

Here may be the key for the mutual attraction of Michael Ende and the Japanese. Fantasy, the free flow of associations is a method for dissolving conditioned thinking patterns, prejudices, and to investigate new ways of thinking. Conditioned thinking patterns give security but they can also be shackles to see things as they ought to be and not as they really are. Fantasy dissolves hardened patterns of thinking and perception but it also threatens the sense of security. Suddenly new subtleties of reality become visible which could not be seen with a clouded perception. Science is the curiosity for that which maintains the world in its innermost, the recognition of the outer world, which is not I. Art is the longing for unification with the world, for doing away with the separation of the I and the Not-I. The scientist whose view is directed to the exterior reality fights with the fickleness of his subjective constitution, his moods and tempers, which seem to be a disturbance for his clear perception of reality. The artist fights with the clumsiness of the exterior objects which seem to resist the expression of his inner imagination. Both, scientists and artists, if their efforts for refinement of their methods are honest, will meet in the end.

Both spheres, science and art, are the two sides of the whole. It's probably no secret anymore that the scientific way was mainly the way of the West and the artistic way that of the East. Japan, a culture of the East and therefore more inclined to arts, has not only been successful in dealing with Western achievements but at the same time has proven how valuable Eastern achievements are. In a world which becomes smaller through new communication technologies and men come closer to each other, there must be found a way how the spheres of arts and sciences can be reconciled on the basis of equality. This is the cultural question Ende was talking about in the beginning and which cannot be solved without at the same time solving the money problem or perhaps rather in advance.

Notes:

If not indicated otherwise, all quotations of Michael Ende are transcripts from the Japanese video "*Ende no yuigon*".

(1) From a personal letter to Werner Onken

(2) Anecdote from "Fantasy, Culture, Politics", 1982; see also Yasuyuki Hirota, "Michael Ende's View of Economy"

(3) From the NHK-program "Einstein Roman 6: Ende's Civilization Desert", 1991

(4) Hans Christoph Binswanger, "Geld und Magie. Deutung und Kritik der modernen Wirtschaft." Edition Weitbrecht, Stuttgart 1985

(5) Interview in the magazine "*esoteria*", 12/1988

(6) "Ende no yuigon", NHK Shuppansha, Tokyo 2000

(7) Boye Lafayette De Mente, "NTC's Dictionary of Japan's Cultural Code Words", National Textbook Company, Lincolnwood, Ill., USA, 1994

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