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The Museum Piece

Let's let Mr Money retire from the management of our mode of survival and find shelter in a museum niche to rest beside flint stone hammers, anvils and bronze axes. Visitors might then like to stop a while in front of the niche, ponder over the antique family accommodated therein and discover Mr Money among them; but this time with a difference. For the old, Mr Money might still rouse great reminiscences, but for the young merely an inquisitiveness about an odd article, now stripped of any individuality.

Our kids would surely be much amused to observe the currency note with printing on the paper and ask "What's that, mummy?", "Papa, what is it?" and we "papas" and "mummies" would be prompt enough with our ready knowledge: "That was money."

"Well, what was money?" our kids would wonder.

"Money was what money did."

"What did it do?"

We should then recite what we had to memorise by rote from the lecture-notes of, and texts written by, our revered professors in the lately-dead economics departments of universities—"Money had four functions: exchange, measure, payment, store."

"Exchange? Peculiar." "What did it mean?"

"Buying and selling."

"And, what was it that buying and selling stood for?"

"You see, in actual fact, functions do not define a thing; they only describe its form; but it has also its content which has to be sought in its source. The source of money was exchange-value that expressed value that stood for the social labour necessary to produce something useful. Exchange, or to sell to buy, so to say, was engendered by private property relations. You couldn't sell what wasn't exclusively yours; you couldn't buy what was exclusively yours. Money couldn't be eaten; money couldn't be worn. You couldn't use money to build houses. Money did not lay and hatch eggs, or bear fruits, or produce young. You couldn't sow money and reap a harvest. Nothing useful could be produced merely by laying and sowing money. Money did not even produce money."

"Why was it necessary, then?"

"Because there was a social alienation—an owner/non-owner divide."

"Why was society divided that way?"

"Oh Dear! Why do you need to know all this here and now? It'll take a lot of time to explain the whole lot. Anyway for the time being, try to understand just a difference. Nowadays, as and when we feel hungry, what do we do? We just take what we need from where it is stored; and that's all, simply because we all have free access to them, we all collectively own and control them. But in those days when only a few people privately owned and controlled all means of production and distribution, the vast majority of us had little or nothing to own or control but our ability to work, which we were obliged to sell for a wage or a salary which was always less in terms of value than what we produced, and then we had to spend the money thus received to buy what we ourselves had produced and stocked at the behest of our employers—our food, clothes and all that we needed."

"Really, very interesting! But, what happened when you couldn't find a buyer for your ability to work?"

"Can't you follow? We had to starve. It's as simple as that!"

"Starve? A strange word, but what did it mean?"

"It meant to die of hunger. Understand?"

"Did it? Die of hunger? Even if there were enough stocks to meet everybody's need? And that merely because you didn't possess these coloured pieces of worthless paper to buy the products of your own labour? Horrific! What a shame on you!"

"Indeed! Quite so, the state of affairs was exactly what you've just stated. Yet, my sweet little observers, money wasn't just coloured pieces of worthless paper. In itself it might have been worthless, but it represented a great worth—private property. It was the ultimate form of expression of a relation between people mediated as though it was a relation between things. A relation between active social forces carried through a unique, indirect and roundabout manner working exactly like natural forces, irrespective of people's will, forcibly, coercively, destructively, blindly, behind the backs of the producers themselves. A totally inhuman relation reigning over humanity."

"And, that day, when we were listening to you reading off a passage from your school history book, we heard the author boast, claiming such a society to be civilised, and you said you were required to go on cramming such stuff for your exams. How stupid you were!"

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(Socialist Standard, London, April 1998)