

THE "ART OF PASSIONATE DETACHMENT": GEORGE L. MOSSE, HISTORY AND POLITICS

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George Mosse was a rebel with a cause. His rebellion, shared with many other pioneers of cultural history, was that against the so-called "traditional" kinds of history: political, social, economic. His cause, shared with so many of his generation, was that of liberty: liberty against conformity and totalitarianism. Rebellion and cause went hand in hand as the historian also rebelled against conformity, and did this by bolstering the cause of cultural history as a tool for an intellectual deliverance.

The 20th century saw the historical profession haunted by the quest for the "noble dream", the attainment of objectivity in the writing of history. The Rankean parameters, dominant around the turn of the century and aiming at the observation of the past "as it actually happened", found themselves besieged under the impact of relativism in historiography, anthropology, arts, literature, and the new physics.¹ Moreover, the crisis of liberalism following the First World War, the age of totalitarianism and the decline of European supremacy led to a drastic reconsideration of the role historians were supposed to play in society. History gradually came to be viewed by more and more academics not anymore as an impersonal, value-free profession: in a world full of uncertainty and moral issues, the discipline often tended to assume the

¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1988

character of an “act of faith”. In the eyes of Mosse and others, there was an urge and a need to charge history with an ethical goal.²

Mosse, as a refugee from totalitarianism and persecution, firmly believed in this approach. In his early writings, at a time when he was still in search of integration and respectability in his new American environment, Mosse clung to the way of writing history he had been taught as a graduate student, the “ideal of historical scholarship without the personal involvement of the historian”. As he recalled referring to Ranke, “like all of my generation, I was taught his canon of writing history: to abstract myself as much as possible from my historical writing. It took me many years to realize that writing about historical problems which have affected one's own life was no barrier which stood in the way of understanding historical reality.”³ To be sure, even in his first works in English constitutional history, there surfaced a deeply felt concern with the problem of the liberty and dignity of the individual when confronted by the State, an unmistakable sign of his own preoccupation with those oppressive regimes that had made him an exile. This concern was to inform all his writings, as he plainly declared in the introduction to *The Nationalization of the Masses*: the book was, in fact, “the result of a longstanding preoccupation with the dignity of the individual and its challengers, so successful during long periods of our century in stripping man of control over his destiny.”⁴

Profoundly influenced by the thought of Benedetto Croce, Mosse believed with him that all history is contemporary history. Like he said in a speech referring to the Italian philosopher, “as all analysis of history passes through the

² Charles A. Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Jan., 1934), pp. 219-231

³ George L. Mosse, “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement. 17. 6. 85*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986, xxviii-xxix

⁴ George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1975, vii

mind of the historian, it follows that in as much as he himself lives in the present 'only an interest in the life of the present can move one to investigate the life of the past'.⁵ As history necessarily passes through the mind of the historian, no history can ever be "objective", Mosse told his students on another occasion.⁶ Hence the idea, that he shared with Charles Beard and other American "new historians" of the early 20th century, that there always is a link with practical necessity in the profession. Mosse's aim was to develop in his readers, and in his students, a critical mind that could serve as a bulwark against the power of myth, demagoguery, conformism and indoctrination.⁷

Scholarship can achieve the best results, Mosse held, "if the student has some personal or at least internal relationship to his historical work".⁸ Such relationships express themselves in the political arena in that "the past is, in a sense, 'present politics'".⁹ Indeed, the goal of history is, he believed, that of attempting to cure present ills through an analysis of the "essential analytical relationships between past and present".¹⁰ Thus the writing of history becomes, as James Wald put it, "a political endeavor"¹¹. Like the promoters of a symposium in honor of Mosse argued, politics, in his view, was much more than the "formal political process". On a moral level, not only acts of commission, but

⁵ George L. Mosse, "Culture and Civilization: The Function of the Historian", speech, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 31; Leo Baeck Institute.

⁶ George L. Mosse, "Europe and the Modern World - Correspondence", lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute

⁷ See Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1943, 5, and Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith", op. cit. Mosse repeatedly expressed such beliefs: see, for example, George L. Mosse, untitled speech on indoctrination in "Is Fascism Alive? - Australian Broadcasting Corporation", 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 47; Leo Baeck Institute, or George L. Mosse, "Commencement Address", 1960, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 23; Leo Baeck Institute

⁸ George L. Mosse, "Response by George Mosse", in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement. 17. 6. 85*, op. cit., xxviii.

⁹ George L. Mosse, "Europe and the Modern World – Soviet Revolution", undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 33; Leo Baeck Institute

¹⁰ George L. Mosse, speech delivered at the Newman Club, 1946, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute

¹¹ James Wald, "Cultural History and Symbols", *New German Critique*, N. 37, Winter 1986, 183

also those of omission have a political significance that entails great responsibility: it is therefore “impossible to be unpolitical”. Mosse, indeed, barely concealed “a fundamental moral indignation against the aspiration to the apolitical”,¹² and he firmly believed that “no one has a right to be ignorant about his social, moral and intellectual origins”.¹³

History and politics, from the perspective of a historian profoundly receptive toward the thought of Hegel and Croce, become one in what has been defined “a kind of updated Hegelian totality, a dialectic in which the political cannot be separated from the religious, the scientific from the aesthetic, the rational from the mythological”.¹⁴ From these foundations, history for Mosse could never be a detached account of past events: rather, he envisaged it as a way to “keep the torch of freedom alive in an age of iron”¹⁵. His whole life was an attempt to do so through passionate commitment, inciting his students and readers not to take anything for granted, to question all aspects of reality without falling prey to conformity. As Ze’ev Mankovitz put it, Mosse “has taught us the art of passionate detachment.”¹⁶ His goal was the keeping of the balance between utopia and conformism. Along with Friedrich Meinecke, the great German historian whose reflections on Reason of State had served him as a

¹² Seymour Drescher, David Sabean, Allan Sharlin, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1982, 3. See also George L. Mosse, “European Cultural History. Old Lectures”, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 38; Leo Baeck Institute

¹³ George L. Mosse, speech delivered at the Newman Club, cit.

¹⁴ Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement. 17. 6. 85*, op. cit., xii

¹⁵ George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World – Soviet Revolution”, cit.

¹⁶ Ze’ev Mankovitz, “George Mosse and Jewish History”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement. 17. 6. 85*, op. cit., xxiv

source of inspiration, he believed in the need to “soar to the skies and yet keep a firm foot on earth.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe. Reflections and Recollections*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1963, 10