



HOW TO THINK ABOUT ECONOMICS:



HUMILITY, TRANSCENDENCE, MONEY, AND THE FIGHT FOR LIFE

CHRISTIAN MICHEL

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Christian Michel was born in Paris 57 years ago. After dropping out of the Sorbonne University, he did odd jobs in the film and advertising industries, before entering real life as a telex operator at an American stockbroking firm. Working his way up the corporate ladder, he eventually became finance director of a public company in Geneva. In 1986, he bought his employer's small portfolio management unit. It grew into one of the largest trust and corporate services companies, with twelve offices throughout Europe. Having sold the business to his partners, Christian Michel moved to London in June 2000. He is the author of "La Liberté, deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle", published by the Institut Economique de Paris, 1986, and numerous articles and conference papers (for some of which see the Liberalia website).

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CHRISTIAN MICHEL

What follows is the transcript of a paper presented at the XVIII Annual International Society for Individual Liberty World Conference Costa Rica, 1999. The original title was “How Should We Think About Economics Today?”.

Of all our modern worries, economics is certainly the most important. Even in our concerns about our health, families, and friendships, topics that most of us would consider exempt from economic considerations, money still remains an element. Economics is the continuous thread running through all our actions. Yet paradoxically, everyone talks about the economy — it is the main subject of political discourse and the principal preoccupation of the media — but these discussions focus merely on describing economic phenomena; they do not tackle important questions about how to *think* about economics, questions such as: What makes economics possible? What is its function? What purpose does it serve? What meaning should we give to it?

The theme of this conference, dealing as it does with prosperity and globalisation, provides us with a starting point for reflection. If there is one thing that is global today, it is the economy. Marx understood very well that the distinction between primates and *homo sapiens* lies in socially organised work. Work is an activity common to all human beings, and enables any one of us to associate with anyone else. Economics organises our planet as a unique space in which all human beings can be distinguished by what they share as human beings (and by this I do not mean what they have in common, for instance that they are all citizens of a certain country, all members of a particular culture, or so many other symbols of their differences). Economics is the one unifying factor between peoples. This is a first point. But economics is not only global, it is also something that enables us to *apprehend globality*, for it involves not only the interaction of human beings among themselves, but of humanity with its environment, of the human mind with matter.

To demonstrate this unifying function of economics, I would like to illustrate how economics is both science and wisdom, and to show what it can teach us within these two domains.

Economists and Con Artists

Economics is a science that aims to examine how human beings obtain the goods and services they need without resorting to violence. Of course, there is another way of obtaining what we need — certainly a very efficient way in the short-term — and that is to steal. Some delinquents do surrender to this type of activity, sometimes even organising themselves into *mafias*, but their impact

on society remains only minimal. The practice of theft on a grand scale, the kind which affects us all, is the type practised by the institutions we call *states*, with the support of armed police forces. Thus, one could argue that the non-economic way of obtaining goods is the political way.¹

Economics is a science of a particular kind. It is neither an exact science like mathematics, nor an empirically precise science like physics. It so happens that business people — more so than, say, artists or philosophers — make use of numbers in their work: the shepherd counts the number of sheep in his flock, the wine-grower monitors his production figures. The pseudo-scientists of the 19th century saw in this use of numbers a golden opportunity and a new territory to claim: where numbers exist, they imagined, it is possible to create mathematical formulae and construct associated models. They set about compiling dubious statistics that did not correspond in any way to reality, the most famous of all being the GNP. But why a “gross *national* product”, and not a “gross *feminine* product” or a “gross *Alpine* product”? Knowing a country’s GNP is only useful to pandering to its leaders and to the jingoistic sentiments of a handful of nationalists (a few years ago, the Italians rejoiced at having “surpassed the United Kingdom”). But this statistic is no more relevant than knowing that 80% of air crash victims had eaten chocolate during the month before their fatal journey, or that the death rate of taxpayers is 100%. As you see, these numbers do not explain wealth, growth, employment, innovation, etc. The mystery of economics is not unveiled to us by mere numbers.

Economics is not an empirically precise science simply because it is an activity performed by human beings in the service of other human beings. Human activity cannot be moulded into mathematical models like the movement of boulders in space for the simple reason that with human consciousness comes uncertainty. Therefore, it is as meaningless to speak of mathematical laws or models in relation to economics as it is to speak of “models of art” or “laws of education” or of any other similar principles of human activity.

Nevertheless, the claim that economics can be reduced to mathematical models, and the desire at all cost to think of it as a mechanism, is not without its consequences. When we acquiesce to this scientific vision, in referring, for instance, to an “economic mechanism” and to analogies like “re-activating the economic machine”, we define ourselves as irresponsible beings, incapable of judgement. For if the economy is a kind of Newtonian mechanism, we are only its cogs. We have no autonomy. Even worse, if the economy is a mechanism, it will only take a bunch of miscreants to claim that they are the mechanics, with sole authorisation to intervene when the

machinery breaks down. It isn't difficult to see how agents of The State could make use of this paradigm.

However, to say that human beings are not subject to the mechanical sequence of cause and effect does not imply that everything is possible. If everything were possible, nothing would be real. Yet, economics is not an illusion. It is a genuine competence and way of doing things.² Certainly, there are laws of economics, but they are *qualitative*, not quantitative. We can state with scientific certainty that, all other things being equal, if the price of a product falls, consumption of this product will rise. What we cannot predict is *how much* consumption will rise. There is no mathematical calculation, no models that account for the free will of the people we call consumers. Therefore, the science of economics is above all a wisdom; and like all wisdom, it teaches us humility and calls us to transcendence.

Let us now examine these two aspects in turn: economics as humility and economics as a call to transcendence.

1. ECONOMICS AS HUMILITY

Psychologists tell us that a young child, at a pre-conscious stage of its development, believes in the power of its desires. It imagines a feeding bottle, and the bottle appears. Of course, parents are familiar with their baby's rhythm and physiological needs, and they know when it will be hungry. It is only after experiencing the inevitable disappointment of the bottle not appearing, that the child finally discovers reality. Freud sees in this "reality principle" one of the two principles governing the history of psychic events (the other being the "pleasure principle").³ We witness the same phenomenon in history, as if the development of each individual were repeated by certain stages in the evolution of the species. Prehistoric hunters painted cave walls with the figures of wild game that they hoped to kill.

At a certain stage in a child's development, as in the development of the species, the human psyche abandons the attempt to satisfy its desires through imagination, and understands that desires will be satisfied only by effecting a change to the outside world. It is this process of changing the world that economists call "work".

But there remains in the human unconscious a kind of nostalgia for an imaginary primitive era, when our desires could be satisfied before we even became aware of them, a symptom of the paranoid desire of total power over the environment, such as that found in the mythical tales of paradise lost that are told in almost all societies. This is why for the greater part of human history — in fact, right up until our modern age — work was endured as the painful consequence of a lost "Golden Age".⁴ Work was the curse handed down to humanity upon their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

The more harshly that human beings were subjected to labour, the further they strayed from the state of innocence that preceded Original Sin. Of course, monks have been great intellectual and manual workers since the Early Middle Ages, but precisely this practice is for them

an exercise in humility. For the aristocrat, work was nothing more than a demeaning activity.

White Magic/Black Magic

In defence of the aristocrat, however, it must be said that throughout almost all of human history, certainly before the machine age, work had very little impact on the world. What satisfaction could it possibly afford? Man himself was so convinced of the futility of his work that he looked to higher powers in order to achieve results. It was not the shaman's plasters and potions that healed the sick, but the spirits. The farmers scratching at the surface with hoes would not fertilise the soil, but the gods might, if the appropriate rites were performed. Efficiency laid not in the labourer working with his materials, but in the priest and the sorcerer pleading to the gods. The only power was magic power.

With modernisation, everything changed. Technology increased the efficiency of work. In doing so, it has become the only magic; for what else besides medicine and agronomy can cure sickness or ensure an abundant harvest? Thanks to technology, work, which was once the evidence of a powerless Man, has now become instead a demonstration of his power.

But then humankind, promoted to the position of "master and owner of Nature", as proudly described by Descartes,⁵ is now subjected to yet another humiliation. If work is to be effective, it only has value if it serves someone. Work itself has no intrinsic value; if anything, work consumes and destroys Nature's resources and human energy. This is why we do not reward people because they work (this is the great mistake people make, they believe they should be paid because they work), but we pay for the *product* of their labour, and then only when this product satisfies our requirements. Citroën cannot hope to convince car owners that they must pay more for a Citroën than for a Toyota simply because a Citroën requires more work to manufacture than its rival. Car owners buy an object, not an amount of work. Actually, if Citroën workers could build good cars whilst playing golf, we would be happy to pay them to play golf.⁶

So is it not humiliating for the "master and owner of Nature" to have to make a living by rendering a service to others? For many modern people there is something unbearable in the idea that others will measure the value of their work.

This is why in many societies (in the Slavic and African cultures, for example, and of course in the Hispanic-American and in the French cultures), the bourgeois who earn their daily bread in rendering a service to others are looked down upon.⁷ In these societies, all the respectable positions are held by so-called "civil servants", that is by those who do not need to provide any useful service in order to be paid.

Many people hold any work in contempt when its value is measured by those they consider to be lower than themselves on the social ladder. This approach is a remnant of the aristocratic values prevailing in agrarian and

political societies: your worth is decided by those above you, not below. The French film maker will not mind waiting like a lackey in a government minister's chambers to beg for a grant, instead of making a film that would please the general public. Scores of scientists struggle to decipher the laws of the universe, and congratulate themselves when they succeed, whether or not this research is useful to others.

Note that the scientific approach (like the aristocratic one) is a quest for power for its own sake; in other words, it is the practice of black magic. Science transforms white magic into black when it turns the young child's paranoid fantasy for total control into the real world. The bounds of the expanse of total power (and of black magic) is the economic requirement of performing a valuable service for others. This is the humility that the capitalist market expects of us so that the white magic of economics might deploy its beneficial effects.

Something For Nothing: The Myth of a Free Lunch

The fact that we need to work in order to narrow the distance between our desires and realising them, means that nothing in this world comes free.⁸ This brings us to the heart of economics.

The myth of a free lunch, whether it takes the form of "free health care" or "free education" is the ultimate dream of the *consumer society*, to take and consume everything without having to give anything back. Yet I am justified in destroying Nature's resources only if I am conscious of the value of what I am destroying. By making us believe that there is no cost for what we consume, subsidies *destroy* the link between human beings and Nature. The obligation to pay is the restraint that economics puts on human greed. Yes, we can have everything we want, but we must accept that there is a price to pay.

The myth of a free lunch is therefore another lesson in humility that economics teaches us. To produce something is to destroy human energy and Nature's resources. This is a serious act, and one which has consequences in the whole universe. By paying for what we have destroyed, we restore cosmic balance. We are told, for example, that American Indians ask forgiveness for their destruction of a life before killing a bear or cutting down a tree. The payment we make for what we consume is our tribute to Nature and the way of making us aware of our responsibilities towards humanity and to its small planet.

2. ECONOMICS AS A CALL TO TRANSCENDENCE

I have stated that economics is not only a lesson in humility, it is also a call to transcendence. The transcendence of economics is revealed in the magnificent and creative act of production. Only human beings produce, while all other species can only pillage. But how is production possible?

First, the fact that work is possible at all means that we are part of this earth. There is a tangible identity of both the subject and the object; human beings and the Earth

are on the same metaphysical plane, we are two aspects of the same world. Other-worldly ghosts, on the other hand, obey other physical laws; for example, they can pass through walls and get by without food or drink. The proof that we are part of this world is that we absorb it into ourselves through food, the production of which represents the primary economic activity. For instance, Jesus ate with his disciples at Emmaus in order to prove that he had been resurrected and was not a ghost. Similarly, we know that we could never survive on any other planet without taking a part of our own Earth with us, in the form of its air and food resources.

Next, the ability to conceptualise the world proves the existence of an identity of both mind and matter. Reality is consistent; it is subject to the laws of logic. Now human thought is also logical; there exists therefore an identity between our ideas and the world. Once again, the human mind and Earth are on the same metaphysical plane.

In the same way, economic production is possible because human beings are capable of masterminding plans, and nature accepts and receives these plans. Here we can pinpoint the difference between dreams and reality: we cannot produce in our dreams, we need to be physically confronted with reality for us to be able to shape and mould it in the image of our plans.

The product of economics is therefore a thing — an inanimate object, manifested outside of ourselves, and at the same time an object steeped in our own beings. Production is the movement of the human mind projecting itself into matter in such a way that the human being imprints his idea onto the object, he *realises* his idea; the possible and the virtual become real. Thanks to economics, the human mind penetrates into the world; in doing so, the distance between humanity and matter is reduced.

Economics unites mind and matter in order for matter to give way to life.⁹

To Have or To Be

Economics invalidates the trivial notion that differentiates between having and being. Many pundits have made this theoretical distinction the central theme of their philosophy. Even the young Marx, in his *Grundrisse* period, teaches us that luxury is as much a vice as poverty, and that we should strive *to be* more and not *to have* more (I do not know if Marx's disciples were ever conscious of being more, but they certainly succeeded in *having* less). The American psychologist Eric Fromm devoted an entire book to this question: *To Have or To Be?*¹⁰ But this distinction only exists in the minds of those who, like Marx and Fromm, have not understood the real meaning of economic activity. For in economic activity, the opposition of *having* and *being* is reconciled in the *making* of things, because to create an object is to infuse our being into this object. When we say about a statue "That's a Rodin", or about a car "That's a Citroën", what we mean is that the "being" of Rodin and of Citroën engineers, financiers and workers, has been incorporated into the

bronze of the statues, and into the metal and materials that comprise an automobile.¹¹

And here we have clarified the meaning of economics. *The aim and the importance of economics is to humanise matter.* It is to instil into matter the essence of the human. If we truly understand what is involved in the act of producing, that is in *all* economic activity, then we realise that there is only one legitimate way for human societies to co-exist, and that way is laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire capitalism is a way of life based on the dynamic relationship between “being” and “having”, without the exclusion of one or the other. The foundation of laissez-faire capitalism is natural property rights. For if what we make does not become something we have, we are dispossessed of the expression of our being that we have instilled into it. And if what we have is not of our making, what right can we claim to possess it? Being and having are inextricably bound together in humans, what we have is closely linked to what we are. Even the most spiritual among us acknowledge this to be true; they maintain that having can prevent the being from flourishing, therefore *to be* and *to have* are truly linked.

And so if human beings’ possessions can affect the essence of who they are, then to control their possessions is also to control their being.

For instance, under democratic socialism, which is the political regime of all industrialised countries today, we are only truly free to possess consumer goods, in other words objects that we have the right only to destroy. To put it another way, our governments only allow us the right to ownership on the dark side of the economy, that of destruction. The solar, or Apollonian, side of the economy — that of production and creation — does not belong to us, or at least not entirely. Governments do not permit us to fully own what we produce. About half of all wealth produced is confiscated by the State.

This is why in democratic regimes, the relationship we have with the economy is not one of creation but of consumption and of destruction. We need only observe the devastation around us to become seriously troubled about the worrying consequences of this distorted connection with Nature.¹²

3. MONEY

Let us now return to Eric Fromm to see how he was to some extent correct in his hypothesis. For if the human spirit (the being) and matter (the having) are combined at the heart of economics, which of the two drives the other? For example, it is true that none of us is today who we were at birth. It is in doing that we create ourselves, and the doing that modelled our being was in large part our work, our economic activity on things. Therefore, it is not outside the bounds of imagination that the burden of these things have enslaved some of us, and that instead of the spirit transforming matter, the weight of the matter has enslaved the spirit. There are people who are smaller than their properties.

However, this contrast between having and being emphasised by Fromm disguises the real nature of property

rights. As Ayn Rand rather astutely observes, ownership is not the right to possess a thing, but the right *to act* on this thing. This is precisely the lesson taught by capitalism. Having is always transcended by doing. Things only exist to be worked on, to be the objects of human endeavours. We establish all kinds of relationships with Nature. Contemplation or celebration, for example, are the relationships that we establish when things satisfy us as they are. Economic activity starts when we see things as we wish they were. The capitalist is a visionary, always in pursuit of other possible worlds outside of his one. Contrary to popular imagery, the bourgeois capitalist does not revere matter; matter is only the structure onto which it is possible to imprint an *idea*.

Furthermore, even after they have been shaped by an idea, things do not acquire a value. The bitter frustration experienced by artists, engineers and workers is the realisation that they themselves do not create the value of things. The capitalist economy tears us away from the materialism for things to show that these things do not have an intrinsic value. Everything exists only to be transformed and to be exchanged. In economics, things exist only to be put into circulation.

The symbol of this circulation is money. It is impossible to speak of the economy today without talking about money. These days, nothing is so little understood by the critics of bourgeois capitalism as the function of money. Money is an energy. The great transformation of our era is the transition of hierarchical agrarian societies, that were founded on the permanent ownership of lands and factories, towards another type of society, more fluid, more mobile; in fact, towards a new nomadism. Money is clearly the energy of this new nomadism.

Consider society before finance capitalism. This was a society of aristocrats and peasants, soldiers and workers, who encountered frequent conflicts, but who, in spite of these conflicts, ultimately shared the same values: a love of mother earth and the nourishment she provides, a devotion to their homeland and country, a submission to power and dogma ...

And then money disrupts the order of things, because wherever it appears, that is to say everywhere nowadays except in the most primitive of societies, its energy reverses traditional hierarchies. Money upsets human-made rules and privileges. It even prevents the restoration of new and stable orders, so powerful is its revolutionary energy.

Contrary to customary opinion, money is not an idol, it is instead the tempest that upsets idols. Unpredictable and uncontrollable, money is on the side of liberty because it does not recognise borders and it threatens all governments. It is spiritual because it tears us away from materialism.

In a certain way, finance capitalism points us in the direction of a continual journey. It shows us things and reminds us: “Don’t get attached to this, it can be sold.” This is the warning issued to us by the modern economy in an attempt to cure us of passive hoarding and of the

temptation of acceptance of dogmas, and to guide us instead towards a life of constant creation.

In Western imagery, the man with money and learning is the nomadic Jew. To all Christians, as I am, Jews are, as in the words of one of the Popes, “elder brothers in faith”. Historically, the Jews are a prophetic people.¹³

The prophetic message the Jewish people is delivering is that political power and all institutions which confine us inside borders, prevent our evolution. The Jew is forever a stateless.¹⁴ Hitler’s hatred of Jews, and also of gypsies, communists and bourgeois capitalists, was due to their getting by very well without allegiance to a particular State.

Auschwitz marked the end of an era in the evolution of humanity. What Auschwitz teaches us is that a certain type of society, the agrarian and political societies based on the trio of land, people, and State (which the national-socialists expressed in their slogan *ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* and which has been the way for human beings to organise themselves for seven thousand years) is no longer viable. In the same way that great tectonic earthquakes are followed by less powerful aftershocks, we are witnesses, after the failure of national socialism, to the final shocks of political societies in Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus. The Auschwitz lesson will take some time to be understood. But the obsolescence of political societies will leave room undoubtedly to the formation of communities that unite people who want to share the same expression of their culture and the same common projects, wherever they may live, as the Jews did for over two thousand years from Morocco to the *shetel* of Poland, from Baghdad to Lithuania. Globalisation confirms the definitive failure of those twin brothers, nationalism and socialism. We have all become Jews.

4. THE FIGHT FOR LIFE

So we can now understand why economics provokes such resistance. All the reactionary and conservative forces in contemporary societies are propped up against the winds of change that economics blows on the world.

Capitalist economics is a new way of being in the world; no longer one of powerlessness before nature, as with primitive peoples, nor one of submission to a dominant class using repressive State power, as in political societies. The values of the liberal economies sooner or later clash one on one with the traditional values of agrarian political societies: economics advocates the individual instead of the collective, generosity instead of forced solidarity, voluntary co-operation instead of forced association, contracts instead of power, exchange instead of theft,¹⁵ initiative instead of obedience, networks instead of hierarchy ...

Politics imposes uniformity: if the King is Catholic, all his subjects must also be; if the majority votes for socialism, the minority must also submit to it ...; whereas an economic vision of the world encourages both choice and diversity. If all of the people on this side want socialism, or Islam, or a communal mode of living, you can have it; leave out the people on the other side to enjoy a different

mode of living. Both sides will be happy to trade ideas, and culture and material goods, if it is mutually beneficial.¹⁶

Unlike politics, economics does not lead to uniformity, but to unification.

And unlike politics, economics allows us to choose who we want to associate with, and it may be with any human being on the planet.

In the course of this lecture, I have noted that economic wealth is desired by the majority of people and that, ironically, the acceptable road that leads to this wealth inspires hatred. The reason for this is because legitimate wealth is only acquired by providing a service for others, and our pride, the legacy of thousands of years of aristocratic culture, does not enable us to tolerate our work being judged by others, by the general public ... Economic logic reverses the historical flow of work and remuneration. We no longer work for someone who is above us — the King, the nobility, the high priests ... — but we are asked to work for the people next door, or some distant foreigner ... In the past, the poor produced for the rich; today, in the market economy, the rich remain rich because they do not mind producing for those who are poorer than themselves.

The heroes of political societies are the warriors, defenders of the land. Today’s government employees and civil servants still pretend to live by the values of the warriors. They claim they are fighting for our modern ideals, the integrity of the Country, the Common Good, Human Rights ... and they urge us to place these ideals above our own life. The warrior is one who accepts death — that of others and his own — in the name of an ideal.

This is why the warrior will always despise the bourgeois — the man of economics — because the bourgeois fears death; the bourgeois is the one who does not want to die.

This is the great divide between the values of the aristocratic agrarian political societies and the values of the economy. The bourgeois ignores tragedy, the tragic conflict between life and a so-called “higher cause”. The bourgeois unequivocally puts life first.

The figure of the capitalist bourgeois who always prefers life to death — that is the figure of the entrepreneur, the innovator, the merchant, who places honesty and competence above national identities — this bourgeois figure can now answer the question we asked initially about the nature of economics: Economics is the attempt by human beings to give life to matter — to minerals, to oil, to land, to an indifferent Nature, to dogmas, to abstract ideals and to man-made idols, to so-called “higher causes” and to faceless institutions — to all these objects of death, by giving them a part of their own life. The entrepreneur hopes that his life will enter into the world, and in this way economics is the struggle of mankind against death. This is the call of economics to transcendence.

To sum up, the subject matter of economy is simply the Soul of the world.

NOTES

1. Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*. (first published in Germany 1908; the last English edition from 1922 does not include the additions Oppenheimer made in the 1929 German edition). Until now, all modern societies have been subjected to State violence, a domination that was made possible by a hierarchical and agricultural way of life. For the majority of people who do not reflect on this question (and who themselves often hope to benefit from political violence), it is therefore difficult to imagine the extraordinary outpouring of energy that could result in societies where violence is outlawed. Some analogies can only be glimpsed, for example the general improvement that resulted from the abolition of serfdom.
2. As shown by Ludwig von Mises as *praxeology*. See *Human Action*, trans. from Raoul Audouin, Paris, PUF Libre Echange, 1985; Murray Rothbard, *Economistes et charlatans*, trans. from François Guillaumat, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1991; and Hans Hermann Hoppe, *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property*, Boston, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Au-delà du principe de plaisir*, in *Essais de Psychanalyse*, Paris, Payot, 1951.
4. Work was the degrading occupation that Aristotle considered good enough for slaves in Athens. The etymology of the word clearly shows the kind of esteem held for work. In the Latin of the Middle Empire, *tripalium* referred to an assembly of three stakes on which an animal was immobilised ready for castration.
5. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Part 6, Librairie Larousse, Paris.
6. When we purchase a service or a product, our payment corresponds directly to the value of that item to us, and not in any way to the human qualities inherent in the people who created it. Whether in the world of business or of art, a creator disappears behind his creation, and this is how it should be. In an economic relationship, we do not judge people (and even less their personal qualities), but only their creation. Because payment for service is independent from the person who makes it, it is not even the merits of a worker that is paid for. It is very admirable to build a dam with bare hands, but those who are waiting for the electricity down there much rather prefer that they use bulldozers.
7. It is difficult to imagine the heroes of Corneille, Racine, and Madame de Lafayette returning as wealthy men. They return as victors. Their values are those of the aristocracy: the sense of sacrifice to the community, physical courage. These values disappeared in 1914. In actual fact, they are being called for today, especially in Continental Europe, by “public servants”, but in the way that servants put on their masters’ clothes.
8. Here, however, we must make one important distinction: giving something away for free (what I shall call here a “free lunch”) is different to giving a gift. A gift associates people; one person to give and one to receive. Giving a gift is an eminently capitalist act; it symbolises the right of ownership, because the giver can only give what belongs to him, and the act of giving reveals the central characteristic of the right of ownership.
9. Père Serge Boulgakov, *Filosofia Hozajstva*, Moscou, 1912, French Translation *Philosophie de l'économie*, Lausanne, Editions de l'Age d'Homme, 1987.
10. Eric Fromm, *To Have or To Be?*, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1976, French Translation *Avoir ou être?*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1978.
11. This infusion of life into possessions, which is the bare essence of capitalism, cannot be understood by those who are still prisoners to the view of a feudal world. For these people, a being is deteriorated as a result of its contact with having. Friedrich von Schiller: “Base natures are respected on the basis of what they do, noble natures on the basis of what they are”, quoted by Alexander Rüstow, *Freedom And Domination*, Princeton University Press, 1980.
12. Current ecological discourse confines itself to space, and remains grounded in the values of agrarian societies. But social democracies cause yet another kind of damage, one that has nothing to do with our relationship to space and the environment, but to time. One primary characteristic of social democracies is the diminishing relationship to time. This manifests itself in the depletion of national savings in all Western societies and in our own carelessness towards the future. Ostensibly there are others who are concerned for us — namely the State — and we are supposed to put our confidence in them. When we invest, we understandably have a preference for schemes that show immediate profitability, because the bad habits of fiscal and monetary policies in social democracies, and the whims of the majority, make any long-term commitment very hazardous. The State creates conditions of insecurity that make it impossible to plan long-term investments, and then accuses capitalists of only investing in the short-term.
13. The function of a prophet is to impart to the world the necessary information for Creation to be accomplished. At the moment of the Creation, the information that leads to evolution is embedded in matter; later on, it gets replicated in the genes of the first living beings. With the appearance of the human being, however, evolution is no longer programmed into our DNA; instead, it becomes conscious, and we are free either to accept or refuse it. The very special mission assigned to the Jewish people is to impart to the world the constantly renewed information that God puts before humanity in order that evolution may advance. This is how evolutionary progress is abruptly accelerating for humanity. For if all living species are subject to evolution, there is no reason why ours should be an exception. To the contrary, we can state that it is not only humanity that is evolving, but for the first time this evolution is taking place on two levels: genetic and conscious. In fact, the blending of human populations that has intensified remarkably over the last decades is preventing the populations’ evolving genetic characteristics from settling, and in our era of globalisation, it would not be untrue to say that human evolution is now entirely the product of consciousness. We can even divide the long evolutionary process — now billions of years old — into two periods, a before and an after: there is the pre-conscious — i.e. pre-economic — evolution, and the conscious — i.e. economic — evolution.
14. The creation of the State of Israel is understandable after the Shoah, but it was no less a blasphemous act in the eyes of the Orthodox Jews. I remember my surprise when on my first visit to Israel I saw huge posters denouncing the State of Israel pasted on the walls of the Mea Shearim quarter where the more traditional communities lived. For Orthodox Jews, the State of Israel is heretical because only the Messiah would be able to create it. The political institution was unknown to the first Biblical tribes. It is only in the era of the prophet Samuel that the Hebrews demanded to become “like all other nations” and to be granted a king (see *1 Samuel* 7:3-8:22, 10:17-27, 12, which records the solemn warnings of the prophet against this aberration of submitting to political power).
15. A great lord, as opposed to a shopkeeper, only settles his gambling debts. There is a story about the Count Robert de Montesquiou (who was one of Proust’s models for the character of Baron de Charlus) haggled with all his suppliers like a second-hand clothes dealer in the kasbah. One of his friends exclaimed: “Why are you so determined to make them lower their prices, when you’re not going to pay them anyway?” “It is only out of kindness towards them,” replied the generous lord, “so that they will lose less.”
16. If people wish to live according to the principles of socialism or Islam, or of any other way of life, *grand bien leur fasse*, the others who have adopted a different philosophy will be happy to exchange their commercial and cultural goods with those who live differently — as long as each person gets something out of it — and to converse, to compare their experiences, in short, to do everything typical to the market. And if those who have adopted the life style of socialism, for example, are so happy, this example will gradually make the entire planet wish to live like they do, and the dream of universal socialism will be realised without violence. If you do not believe that this could happen, that is to say if you do not believe that people would agree to share their revenue, to give up their legacies, and to share the means of production, and that as a result they will need to be encouraged to do so by political initiatives (such as to throw the resisters in prison), then perhaps socialism is not compatible with the human nature; if so, what right do we have to deny this reality?