

I.

*Until control of the issue of currency and credit is restored to government and recognised as its most conspicuous and sacred responsibility, all talk of the sovereignty of Parliament and of democracy is idle and futile... Once a nation parts with control of its credit, it matters not who makes the nation's laws... Usury once in control will wreck any nation.*

William Lyon Mackenzie King

*Since the real purpose of socialism is precisely to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development, economic science in its present state can throw little light on the socialist society of the future.*

Albert Einstein

Philosophers are often and rightly accused of dealing too much with the past, pondering endlessly upon origins, reasons and causes, and too little with the future, leaving hardly any room to proposals, solutions, or calls to arms. To prove myself capable of the latter kind of activity, and despite the unavoidably old noble opinions quoted above, I shall keep Minerva's owl nailed to a perch. Though Pythonesque, this little cruelty should delay any backward-looking blathering of mine, which is to come eventually in the other sketches.

After all, we are facing a dramatic twofold crisis, ecological and economic, which even uninfluential public figures like the current UN Secretary and US President have acknowledged and denounced as deadly. As for the title under which I allow myself to do so, I shall be content with declaring myself a professor of philosophy who has studied value for some time, i.e. what is important and what is not. In this pursuit, which I regard as valuable, I have reached a fairly simple conclusion: that which keeps all of us and our descendants alive and well is very, very important indeed. Those who deny it or claim my claim to be unscientific can do so because they are tacitly doing all that is necessary in order to stay alive and well enough to be able to talk a lot of nonsense.

But let us dwell no further on this simple subject, about which I have written around fifteen complicated essays in the past ten years—I need another nail... Worthy of Epicurus, I can

offer a *tetrapharmakos* to today's world, confident to be received by no-one in useful time, for that seems to be the fate for all who dare criticise—as I am going to do—large-scale private banking, the profit motive as paramount, the private ownership of strategic resources, deregulation, and the managerial mind. Some may even call me a “socialist”, as though it were a derogatory and disqualifying term, similar to “criminal”, “pervert” or “rascal”. Probably, given the notoriety of Italians and academics, “old pig” or “bore” would be more fitting insults. Politically, however, I would describe myself as “life-grounded”, not “socialist”. Still, I shall not mind and endure the epitaph with grace, even gratefulness. I shall keep company with Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte of Saint-Simon, Albert Einstein, and Bertrand Russell. An aristocrat, a physicist, and a logician...

### (1)

First, fundamental medication, upon which all else depends: nations should establish, or in most cases re-establish, good public banks. Why? Well, here is something that should have become obvious to anyone who has eyes to see and a fat wallet. As stated by Russian President Vladimir Putin when speaking last year at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the economic crisis that we are witnessing today has destroyed, in about one year, approximately twenty-five years of pecuniary wealth, i.e. the sort of wealth that our intrepid yet “virtual” capitalists were aimed to produce in the first place. Private banks and financial institutions, left to their own devices by prolonged tidal waves of worldwide deregulation, brought themselves down and, with them, much of the world's “real” economy. Do you remember the real economy? If it goes down, down go also the starving children of unemployed sub-Saharan family fathers. Down into the earth they go, whilst shareholders moan for lost profits and fire a few more people to ease their pain.

Clearly, many private banks cannot do their job unaided. As they were busy concocting mathematically byzantine derivatives and variously vehicled securisation packages in the deregulated shadow of global finance, they forgot about honest bookkeeping, sound reserves, mutual trust, and other basic old-fashioned principles of chronically anachronistic banking. They even forgot about that primitive slave invention, morality. Alas! Such is the genius of the invisible hand free from State direction or, as Icelandic philosopher Mikael Karlsson dubs it, “the invisible brain.” This is not meant to be an insult to anyone, unlike “socialist” or “pervert”. The so-called “Free Market” promoted by “deregulators” has no

visible brain, insofar as State-centred social and public planning is regularly rejected as anathema. Still, who came to the rescue of self- (and other-) destructive private banks? The State.

Turned into the banks' pork-barrel, the State has thrown trillions at the banks in order to keep them afloat—in the Land of the Free, in Great Britain, in Benelux. Was it necessary? No, for the State could have simply taken over the banks. Was it desirable? No, for public banks, still run in communist countries such as China and North Dakota, can spur development, employment, and take far fewer risks than private ones.

It must be emphasised that it is not enough for the State to own the banks; these must be run like public banks i.e. banks for the public good. Some morality is required in the process. Prudently restricted by various strings, these public banks can respond more easily to the needs and aims of actual populations, rather than to the whims and fancies of absentee owners or of their volatile servants, that is to say their bonus-benefitting managers.

What am I saying? Have public banks and run them as such. They must spur real development, not inflate bubbles that transfer wealth from the bottom to the top. Will it hurt the shareholders and wealthier customers of private banks? Certainly. They have already enjoyed the State's helping hand; it may be time to repay the State with gratitude. Doesn't anyone remember how to do it? Read history books, study the European Payments Union of the 1950s, ask retired Italian or French bank managers, use your imagination. A few rules of thumb may assist those who lack enough imagination:

(a) Ban financial and currency speculation, at least within and *via* public banks: the casino belongs to "competitive" gamblers. Yes, people who used to claim that they would succeed or fail like Promethean heroes... Before they all asked for help to the Great Nanny, of course, lost as they were on their er-rand. And please, let the State never again salvage these hypocrites from their own myopic greed. They are now trying to wash their guilty conscience by returning one hundredth of what they have received from the public purse, whilst re-filling their pockets at the State's expense, with fierce bearish appetite

(b) Lubricate the real economy, if forward-looking, so as to launch much-needed public

works, create long-term employment, and generate steady streams of income within the nation. Public banks can do so, at low interest rates: they must be profitable, but not at all costs

(c) Monitor inbound and outbound capital flows, so as to direct investments to socially beneficial areas, and counter tax evasion as well as tax avoidance: far too much has been denied in the past to the very public purse that has then saved the incompetent affluent from themselves. And remember that a stable currency and genuine economic sovereignty can only be secured by abandoning the disastrous freedom of capital flows that has flooded the world with crisis upon crisis since the 1980s: tequila, vodka, whiskey or brennivín, ouzo, they all taste the same

(d) Secure reserves by compelling the capitals of public bodies, pension and social security savings, and the revenues of public banks to be invested in the public banks themselves. The State must be as free as possible from the bondage and the blackmail of its current masters i.e. foreign direct investment and international bondholders

(e) Pay bank managers State salaries comparable to those of other leading promoters of public wellbeing—surgeons, health-&-safety inspectors, judges—and avoid attracting the covetous, self-indulging, big-jet and big-penthouse penis-length-comparing “best and brightest” who plunged the world into a massive crisis. Communities need not such beastly best and brittle brightness. Forget them and their barbaric macho ethos—made of turrets of money, performance-enhancing bonuses (as though they alone were working), fee-demanding buddies-consultants, and PR companies using invariably words like “aggressively” and “targets”.

Finally, do not underestimate the fact that it is difficult to deal with cronyism by voting new governments into office. Yet it is much more difficult to do the same thing by waiting for anonymous and short-lived shareholders to reform their servants, who are so free from supervision as to jot down any number they like in the books without anyone finding out. As Adam Smith forewarned us some time ago, the corporation is amongst the least competitive and the most corruptible of human institutions, hence amongst the most damaging to the proper functioning of capitalism.

And inflation? Don't worry. Nobody talks about it—a sudden silence. After all, common people are no longer able to buy anything, not even on credit. If anything, the real problem to come will be deflation. Besides, more than 90% of the money circulating around the globe is the result of financial leverage by private institutions. (And that is why, to prevent inflation, common people's demand must be choked. Hence stagnant wages, mass unemployment, etc.) Still, old-fashioned, knee-jerk reactions may be reoccurring soon: pensions and salaries must not go up, for the poor must repay the money lost by the rich; States must rein in public expenditures, which they have been doing for thirty years, unless there was a war to be fought; public assets must be privatised, so as to further enrich the incompetent and further weaken their only saviour; cheap money must stop (now), lest we tax the wealthy to give some jobs to the restless youth, etc. By the way, how is it that bonuses for bank managers could always go up? It must be the same people who think that only private firms can be valid multipliers...

It is ironic that, after two decades during which we had been told that the State and, for that matter, its independent Central Banks could not issue money for schools, hospitals, public works and social projects, quite mysteriously they started printing so much money. Sure, they now tell us that we need private banks to keep credit flowing, for credit is the life-blood of the economy. Without it, there shall be no green-spanning across the meadows. And yet, enterprises and households worldwide are still struggling to get the credit that they need. In truth, the selectively generous Central Banks' cheap money benefits financial speculation, which is where the trouble started in the first place. How could ever a heartless economy pump any actual life-blood?

Indeed, in California, the local government is at risk of being terminated by the refusal of private banks to subscribe local public bonds because they are deemed "unsafe": the State of California could go bankrupt. "What a cheek!" my mother would say, and she has dealt with banks for most of her life. The banks refusing to purchase these sunny bonds today are the same banks that were saved by public money yesterday, when it was raining. But there is more.

Were even these banks to provide enterprises, households and public authorities with the credit they need, they would not do it for free, for the common good, or for a little interest; they would do it for profit, and for as much of it as they can get. Thus, things would be so

arranged and, sadly enough, they are being so arranged, as to have public money given very prodigally to private banks, so that these banks may give it to the public far less prodigally.

What is more, in order to be worthy of the bailed-out banks' money:

- Enterprises have been reducing their workforce to be more “competitive”
- Households have been returning their homes to banks that had sold highly reliable mortgages towards the purchase of... homes
- The State has been thinning out its already skinny body in order to be attractive to the banks, which the State has just rescued from themselves

After decades of TINA-like reduction of all that is public, public money is being given to glaringly incompetent private banks so that their losses be made public and their profits, which were always private, recover and be still private. In the process, public money is not used to counter dwindling employment, secure houses, and, say, fund hospitals, schools, university research, care for the elderly and the mentally ill, public gardens, public football fields, archaeological preservation programmes, amelioration of penal institutions, better garbage collection, sanitation and, why not, aid to starving children. How many tramps will get trapped in the revolving doors of the wealthy's tower?

That the State may have money for the bankrupt banks but not for its own social functions, it is something that defies imagination, morality, and even legal obligations. Many of them ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, didn't they?

## (2)

Second, life-saving medication: if you skip the middle man, operate good public banks, and have money to use for the common good, then launch a vast programme of green public works. More severe and threatening than the economic crisis itself is the ecological crisis. Ask the United Nations about that. The former crisis threatens fat wallets at the top and starving children at the bottom, yet at different degrees of dangerousness. The latter crisis threatens all equally with death. The grim reaper is the great leveller. Since so much private enterprise has caused the ecological crisis in the first place—the smoky days of the Industrial Revolution—and has continued it in the face of scientific alarm calls as old as

Britney Spears, then it is advisable that the State be able and willing to step in and, both by regulation and by direct economic action, reverse the tide.

Forget speculative carbon emission quotas and reduce carbon emissions; ban outright or force rapid conversion of the most obvious forms of life-destructive economic activity; tax the remaining polluting activities and de-tax non- or less-polluting ones; have a major public company undertaking proper refitting of houses on a massive scale so as to make them less energy-consuming; create large public recycling facilities so as to counter illegal dumping of waste at large; found and fund new public research centres for the development of green technologies, free from the yoke of short-term corporate desiderata; ration carbon-based power and use it only for vital and life-enhancing activities...

There are so many tokens of environmentally constructive planning, yet so few that have not been resisted as “too costly”, “too rigid”, “too much for us, who have already done so much”, etc. Were only the people uttering such phrases to consider seriously the fact that they can be so garrulous because the environment is still, barely, able to support them, their bodies, their minds, and the natural and social infrastructures that have allowed them to grow, socialise and, limitedly, mature...

In addition to a life-enabling aim and a counter-cyclical alternative to depressing austerity, politics would also regain its dignity by having a green mission. Strangled by powerful yet incompetent lobbies, and fettered by incompetent yet powerful central banks, politics has been reduced for far too long a time to day-to-day management of production costs in the domestic market and salesmanship in the foreign ones.

### (3)

Third, important medication: since some neighbours may not like your policies and your currency, then they might respect your resources. States should increase or secure public control of strategic assets: water, oil, gas, the knowledge of its own population—this knowledge having been fostered by public education, healthcare provision, and cultural activities.

Whether by safeguarding the revenues originating in natural resources that would

otherwise enrich few and often foreign shareholders, or by reclaiming a knowledge-based industry that would otherwise be outsourced by corporate giants, the State must secure a steady source of income for itself and for the nation's economy. This income alone should help democratic governments to respond to their constitutional sovereigns, not to rating agencies and "markets" whose lords regularly reside offshore.

As Norway's long experience in State-run oil extraction and refining illustrates, it is the one and only "trickle-down" strategy that has produced tangible results for an entire nation. States' assets are not a factor of market distortion, but a factor of production—and one that can help businesses to grow by providing cheap goods and services, as opposed to the endless and costly bloodsucking of postmodern privatised economies. Ideally, it would be good for States to regain control over money-creating central banks, but there are limits even to one's dreams.

Incidentally, even the many wars paid by the American public purse to secure control over other nations' oil, or at least force its trade in US dollars, indicate that the public control of strategic assets is not so foolish an idea. And yes, also that getting bombed may be a risk for the nations pursuing the path recommended hereby: when the purse is at stake, even liberals can stop wearing a tie and put on a black shirt instead. Apart from the landowners, cunning agents and financial moguls, who have charged prices well over any real cost of production, for all others there is no such thing as a free lunch—Miltons have always known the devil very well.

#### **(4)**

Fourth, integrative medication: since some powers-that-are may not be pleased with your plans, make sure you can deal with them. Create a just fiscal and regulatory framework, which empowers the population at large and weakens the usual lobbies: close tax loopholes and tax breaks for the usual lobbies; withdraw passports and freeze assets of tax fugitives; tax rents (land, inheritances, capital gains) and de-tax hard work, so as to reward merit and distinguish sharply between earned and unearned income; end subsidies, legal privileges (e.g. limited liability) and tax-breaks to private companies, lest they never compete in a truly free market; nationalise the companies that are too big to fail, as John Kenneth Galbraith advised us to do long ago; reclaim research and development grants and whichever other



public credit given to private firms leaving the country; confiscate the assets of companies outsourcing to countries with lower labour and environmental standards; put regulatory agencies and grassroots associations on the boards of private and public companies to fight corruption; inspect constantly and reward those inspectors who discover illicit activities.

Taxes matter. Especially when there is an ever-richer tiny elite of super-rich whose fortune comes as a long free lunch over accumulated wealth, whether in property or capital. They hardly ever pay taxes. They pay fewer than most, since someone else paid taxes before them: those who actually earned that property or capital in the first place. In truth, they may quite simply avoid taxes by shoring their assets off to tiny islands or Alpine valleys. The members of this tiny elite are above and beyond the common citizen, whilst their trusted and highly paid managers rarely go to jail when guilty of fraud or cheating. Above-and-beyondness is a transferrable asset too. If and when hijacked by this elite, States are likely to commit suicide by taxing those who work instead. And if the people sweating and bleeding don't have enough money, then State activities are to be reduced in the name of, say, the Big Society-of the hopeless and of their hopeless resilience.

In brief, internalise costs that have been externalised regularly and mercilessly at the expense of natural and societal well-being; and effectively re-regulate the disastrously de-regulated playground of the free enterprise-especially but not exclusively of the virtual type-whose only known freedom is that which cages every possible aspect of reality into the life-blind logic of profit-making.

Will anyone undergo this cure? History will tell. The past is known or, at least, it should not be forgotten: by way of poetic license granted by decades of financial deregulation, "2008" rhymes with "1929". What happened after 1929? As some clever *graffiti* on a wall near my home in Italy did state crudely but concisely: "The bourgeois bitch makes fascist puppies"; all that she needs are a severe crisis and the stubborn refusal to take the medication outlined in this sketch of mine. Yet history does not have to repeat itself. If anything, it is full of surprises. Who would have ever thought, for example, that little furry animals could outlive giant dinosaurs and become the first species ever capable of destroying the ecological structures that allow them to live!

## II.

*Speculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation.*

John Maynard Keynes

*There are two ways of conquering a foreign nation. One is to gain control of its people by force of arms. The other is to gain control of its economy by financial means.*

John Foster Dulles

In the year 2003 I published a review of *Value Wars*, written by Canada's leading value theorist John McMurtry. In it I provided an account of the stunning whistle-blowing by World Bank Chief Economist Joseph Stiglitz *vis-à-vis* "deregulation" and "globalisation", two terms that had been dominating economic and political discourse for some time. Quite unexpectedly, and rather shockingly, a well-connected, mainstream, Nobel-prize-winning economist denounced the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for implementing over a period of at least twenty years a merciless four-step process of re-colonisation of independent nations by international private capital. This was the sort of suspicion that radicals like pop singer Bono Vox and Polish actor Karol Woitila, better known as Pope John Paul II, had been voicing for a long time. As for John McMurtry, he took due notice, since Stiglitz's revelation was consistent with his own description of world affairs as directed by the profit-motive of the few *versus* the vital interests of all others. Preferring truth to originality, I endeavoured to spread this description of world affairs around me. In fact, I had given lectures about it, also in Iceland, before 2003.

Nobody seemed to care, however, at least here in the north. Stiglitz's views were not widely discussed and even less were they taught at the university level, except by a few—sometimes foreign—eccentrics. McMurtry's views, hadn't it been for the same eccentrics, would have been left to gather dust in local libraries. Meanwhile, the policies of deregulation and enthusiastic participation in globalisation were not halted. On the contrary, in the year 2003, the three largest public banks were privatised. Immediately, they started to sail the seas of international speculation, never seen before in Icelandic history. "Carry trades" and "financial leverage" became mantras recited on the first page of all newspapers, whilst the businessmen who were dubbed the "new Vikings" set out to raid

foreign banks, enterprises, supermarkets, and football clubs, with money that they did not have. But such is late- (or post-) modern capitalism, or “the Icelandic way of doing business”, as I was told back then. Besides, it would appear that only professional economists are entitled to teach about why they, unlike a mere philosopher like McMurtry, got it so wrong. And there’s so much to learn!

What did Stiglitz’s whistle-blowing describe? And how does it apply to the Icelandic case?

First, the permeability of the nation’s borders to private foreign capital is increased by deregulating capital trade and privatising strategic national assets. Barriers, bottlenecks, and “obsolete” protections are removed, whether material or immaterial. Nobody quite remembers why they were there, and even fewer wonder why. Above all else, money must flow. That’s the consensus, at least in the district of Columbia, which is obviously populated by zealous reformers. Their principles are crystal-clear: “public is bad, private is good.” They believe in “The Free Market”, whatever that may be thought to be; and they believe in it so ardently and unflinchingly that Stiglitz and others refer to them as “market fundamentalists.” They even set complicated rules at roundtables to force dissenting markets to be free. Anyhow, this very first step, which may take some time, is achieved by lubricating slow-moving and slow-thinking local politicians, business leaders, present and future ideologues with adequate amounts of grease. Grease, yes, such as co-opting these people into the international jet- and yacht-set, promising or securing that they will have their own golden toilets, washing their brains at spectacular conferences and exclusive think-tank meetings, baptising their best-and-brightest first-borns in the sacred founts at the sacred shrines, stirring their simmering jingoistic sentiments, or bribing them straightforwardly—indeed Stiglitz talks of this process as “briberization”.

Secondly, money flows into the country. A bubble ensues; in fact, a cyst. Depending on the country’s economic conditions, the cyst can take different forms, but all of them eventually become painful. In the case of a reasonably well-off country, glittering streams of foreign capital inundate the land, turning modest entrepreneurial fields into a glorious harvest of unprecedented projects. Thus refreshed, the local currency and the local shares pupate into surprisingly light-winged and seemingly fertile young fairies, whose well is said to be full of diamonds. Moreover, the nation’s financial institutions become large fountains that can quench the thirst of anyone who is eager to drink from them, including those who do not

need it, but have the misfortune to possess a belly. New buildings spring up like mushrooms in the vast new wetlands, luxury and consumer spending—mostly dependent upon credit—fly high like gleaming droplets out of a geyser's mouth. So mesmerising is this sight, that more permeability is actively sought.

Then, the cyst bursts. As swiftly as it flew in, so does the money flow out. A rumour, a token of gossip, an unfortunate diplomatic incident, a well-paid expert report, or a speculator's premeditated signal to his colleagues rapidly reverses the tide. The flood ends. A drought follows. Projects—and buildings—remain unfinished, half-mast, like flags at a funeral. The wombs of local currency and local shares reveal themselves sterile; it was all make-up, they now say, even the wings; you should never trust the books. The well in the garden is dry, and full of stones. Moreover, the fountains are dry too. Around them, stunned, jobless, emaciated peons, indebted up to their eyeballs, drown into whirling sand clutching their plasma TV sets. And their TV heroes have not come to save them, be they crusading party leaders or Viking raiders. Who will?

Nobody is without friends, especially after having become part of the international jet- and yacht-set, educating his own children in the best schools, or attending eye-opening conferences and meetings. Not to mention those friends who have already proven so generous in the past. In truth, after having advised on how to render the country prosperous, they now spare no saliva explaining what can be done in order to rescue it from its unfortunate plight. Thus, money is poured back into the nation. High interest rates are, however, *de rigueur*. One does not give much to drink too easily to a friend who has already drunk too much. What kind of a friend would he be?

The third step is therefore to make up for the mistakes of the past and repay one's generous friends. Whatever wealth remains must be scrupulously collected so as to honour the debt—or so as to secure further loans. Debt gives salvation from debt, as gamblers understand so well. Certainly, the wealth of the wealthy is better left untouched: they are the producers, the life-givers, blessed fountainheads of the nation's wellbeing, which needs them so badly under the burning sun of the new sad day. They must be treated kindly, lest they or their wealth be forced to flee by too rapacious and visible a hand—some have already fled, they whisper. The wealth of the poor—or of the poor-to-be—is a better starting point. After all, they may have little, but there are many of them. Besides, since they have

little, they cannot flee as easily as the rich, nor can their wealth flee. And whereas the wealthy can go bankrupt and be resurrected cleansed of their debt, like the imperishable Phoenix, ordinary mortals honour their debts, willingly or not. They may protest, but law and order are the last two public sectors whose resources are cut off, unless successful ways are found to privatise them too.

Finally, as the nation struggles in debt and turmoil, groaning so loudly as to disturb its neighbours, the generous friends come back to help. They cannot remain untouched in the face of so much poverty and violence. They have new “plans”, “strategies” and “packages” to sort things out. Yet, to implement them, national borders must be removed completely and an iron framework of conditions for investment and development must be imposed in order for the nation to become a proud participant in fully liberalised, multinational free trade. For example, its tax environment must be suited to foreign investors—may God bless them—and its population as flexible as unthinking reeds in gushing new brooks, to which they contribute sweat and tears.

By the way, where does Iceland stand now? Probably it stands at the threshold of deciding whether to plunge headlong into step three, with signs of the fourth step already lurking behind the waterfalls harnessed for hydropower.

### III.

*In all normal civilisations the trader existed and must exist. But in all normal civilisations the trader was the exception; certainly he was never the rule; and most certainly he was never the ruler. The predominance which he has gained in the modern world is the cause of all the disasters of the modern world.*

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

*The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that.*

Lawrence “Larry” Summers

It has been long known that Europe catches a cold whenever the United States sneezes. Yet things get even worse when the immune system of rules and restrictions to international capital and currency trade has been removed altogether. Iceland and some young, yet already former, free-market miracles on the Baltic Sea did catch pneumonia this time. Ironical indeed, as they are just another group of market miracles turned into meltdowns—Asia had a few of them in the 1990s. Miracles seem short-lived these past few decades... Though if truth be told, even Lazarus died, after having been brought back to life.

Historians of the future, if there shall be any and if they will be honest, are going to wonder and ponder upon how such intelligent and highly educated “knowledge economies”, capable of the finest mathematical-financial wizardry via the fanciest computer technologies, could bestow upon themselves so much avoidable pain, destroying in the process not solely further scores of planetary life support systems, but also man-made social infrastructures that have generated, depending on the country, genuine welfare for up to three or four generations. These future historians will be at pains to conceive of powerful, well-off, democratically elected representatives who listened to foreign bankers, and not to their own citizens, rushing to implement, whenever they could, multilateral agreements on investment robbing their own cabinets of much of their power.

These future historians will probably fail to empathise with and understand such bizarre people, very much like Voltaire, who could not really explain why our forefathers were willing to slaughter one another over the correct interpretation of the Holy Trinity. After all, they had never seen it (or them?) and Jesus himself had never said anything clear, if anything, about it (or them?). Not to mention the centuries that humankind spent warring, raping, disembowelling, burning, maiming, chaining, flogging and excommunicating one another because of errors of interpretation. Obtuseness is incredibly resilient. And we are not so different today. Check the Athenian cradle of our civilisation if you don't believe it.

Yes, embodied and expressed by the very same conventional people at the helm of the world's public and private financial affairs, the wisdom arising from the ashes of the current crisis is astoundingly similar to the one that caused the crisis. Are you indebted? Take on another loan. The private banking sector has betrayed you? Restore it with public money and run it as before. The world's economy is a gilded cage run on behest of under-taxed oligopolists, tax-evading rentiers and idle absentee owners that squeeze money out of the

real economy through banking charges, debt repayments, service fees, monopoly and land rents? Keep it going and call it a “free market”. People are suffering, jobless, and with their tax money siphoned to the creditors that inflated the bubble? Show them tough love and deprive them of further healthcare, education, culture, wages, pensions, childcare, subsidised water and power. Austerity measures turn a crisis into a depression? Implement more of the same measures. The environment is running amok in the so-called free-market environment? The market will fix it; in the meantime, profit will keep being extracted from increased prices in oil, gas, polluting consumer goods, and cancer treatments due to the ecological collapse of the planet. Apparently, the only green rules acceptable are those that transfer further money from the public purse into private pockets. All others are resisted as “costly”, “distorting”, “rigidifying”, “liberticidal”, which may be true—and good. The one and only truly binding international environmental regulation that, so far, has saved us from extinction, preventing excessive UV-irradiation, was a top-down imposition from Montreal.

But life, not to mention a happy and healthy life, has never been the paramount goal of the pursuit of profit. War was and still is a major source of profit, towards which public subsidies to private firms are given generously... Well, they call them “research & development” grants or “national security” strategies... Disease-causing pollution has been mostly an externality that had nothing to do with profit, until pharmaceutical conglomerates found a way to exploit that too. Slaves and their children were most profitable for many, many centuries. Wage slaves... Oops! The flexible working poor and their children are very profitable today too.

And for what must all this wisdom be endured? To give money to people who have money. They have enough, one would believe. They should start communicating it to those who have nothing... little... less. Jesus and Aquinas regarded this as obvious. No, it is not obvious. Money is never enough, especially to those who need yet another fancy dress. But why are these people non-satiable? Why do they complain, lobby and shift electoral allegiance whenever taxation on capital gains is vented? Why do they transfer their fiscal residence to tax havens, whilst benefitting from handouts of the State they are deserting? Why do they outsource productive structures to countries squeezing labour out of turnips, if youngsters are not available? Why do they say that “they have already done enough” whenever life-saving regulation is discussed? Why do they care more about the interest rate they can get, than they care about how their money is invested? Why do they oppose

healthcare, old-age pensions, education and culture for all, while they enjoy it for themselves?

It is competition, they answer. There isn't enough around for all of us, only for the really tough ones, who can then live in much-deserved luxury. But why do people compete for having more for themselves, instead of, say, competing for beauty, generosity, selflessness, equal distribution, full employment? There can be so many different and more constructive competitive aims in life: just look around. Nuns, school teachers, barefoot physicians, rocket scientists, marine biologists, old fishermen, young artists... They may not all dislike some cash, but they do not live for it, or at least they try not to. Since Divine Will is out of fashion, and if you press them long enough, the luxury-deserving competitors are going to tell you, eventually, that *we* are cruel wolves. How naïve was I! I thought that *they* were cruel wolves... The world is a cruel place—those ferocious nuns... Nobody waits for those left behind—and they don't. The market forces accept no barrier. As one of their fairest ideologues so frequently stated, there is no alternative; it is human nature. A hidden philosophical anthropology...

And yet, none less than their poorly understood hero Adam Smith taught us long ago something very different in the opening page of his greatest book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

*How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.*

This is certainly not the one and only betrayal of Smith by current capitalism. After all, his market was meant to be free from rentiers, who now run the show. Anyhow, why so much



mercilessness, then? Have we become worse human beings? Have we lost our humanity? Have we found ways to outcruel the cruel, underfed, superstitious peasants, who, when not breaking skulls in the name of God or King or Country, killed and maimed animals on a farm? Well, as modern and proud of our science-technology as we can be... Well, yes... Overall, subtly, we have. The thinning of solidarity that embraces the whole humankind, which a German-sounding French warmonger studied in depth, is a weaker barrier to the undergoing evil drives.

Or, at least, we have done our best to train impressionable young minds to being ordinarily callous and participating in the most spectacularly life-destructive economic system ever seen on Earth—a system that, as denounced by the scientific community for the past thirty years, has turned the survival of our species into a big question mark. Much is done in this direction, routinely, thousands of times a day, so that our youth may become more beastly than ruffians and more abrasive than criminals. But how? Simple. We (mis-)educate them, and we have tools for (mis-)education that no emperor or church of old has ever owned or mastered. Only a couple of totalitarian dictators gave it a go or two in the blood-drenched century of Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen... But how, where? Open your eyes. Watch.

Our TVs and media are replete with commercials. They are meant to accompany you from the cradle to the grave. Selectively and scientifically trained marketing strategists, creative psychologists and advertising gurus are paid to induce desires in the subtlest and most effective manners, starting with our children's delicate souls. These desires will blossom into poisonous "new needs", as these "experts" call them. These weed-like flowers being sheer wants perceived as genuine individual needs, the delayed satisfaction of which is to generate a sense of inadequacy, anguish, frustration, isolation, or envy towards those who do satisfy them. And these are the only flowers that must grow; hence they are everywhere. Children no longer need an imagination. Marketing strategists make sure that the only pictures that children can have in their mind are those that sell. They speak already like TVs: why shouldn't they replicate TVs in their brain? Eventually, as grown-ups, these children will be branded, like slaves of old, or cattle still is today. Perhaps, like the slaves of old, they will enjoy freedom one day a year. Or maybe all the days will have been taken away by marketing strategists, who wish to celebrate the sales of Valentine's Day, Mother's day, Father's Day, Marketing Strategist's Day...

You don't believe me? Go to any primary school and you will meet hordes of little creatures dressed according to the latest fashion code, or pestering their parents to be so dressed. Those who are not there, because they are busy sewing the actual fashion items, may well try to rob them from the horde one day. These little brats! They want and want and want scores of items that they do not need, the possession of which, moreover, does not grant happiness at all, despite the glittering promises. Were it so, no new purchase would be "needed", and that would be bad for business. Certainly, one may learn to control such a powerful impetus, but it takes years of self-re-training. Not even hunger and utter destitution placate it. Not even the full awareness of not being able to afford those consumer goods. Nothing will ever erase the deep-rooted psychological mechanisms implanted into our souls when we were little. Is this enough? No, there is more to it.

Our TVs and media are replete with role models—and the medium is the message. Rich and wanna-be-rich people of all sorts shine even when performing the most ordinary activities, such as shaving or concealing their stench with perfume. From slutty heiresses to pimping rappers, from cosmetically mummified bad actors to ignorant footballers, from divorce-addict hair-died tycoons to soon-to-be-millionaires answering questions or showing their private parts in public—these are the saints and blessed inspirers of the modern secular creed. They may be confessing their own sins to a TV host, confident that their words will be forgotten. What remains, instead, is the scent of money that perspires through their placenta-creamed pores. A powerful aura.

The same aura surrounding the action hero, who fights, kills and kidnaps for the sake of justice, peace and freedom... There he comes! Dressed in an Armani suit, he jumps out of a Mercedes, talking briefly on his Nokia. He checks his Rolex, then gets into a Ferrari and drives to Chez Maxim's. There, he meets a beautiful young lady, whose Valentino dress will soon be ripped at the Hilton's. And there he'll kick the guts out of the villain, smashing his Patek Philippe and ruining forever his Dolce & Gabbana jacket... Justice is served. Peace is conquered. Freedom triumphs. That's the message, isn't it? And if not much of the beautiful young lady is shown, then children can watch too.

Poor people are less frequently shown. They don't sell as well as our hero. Moreover, they don't buy. There exist notable exceptions, though. Poor men and poor women are sometimes on display, like animals at the zoo, to be observed, mocked and, on Christmas day, to feel

sorry for. Other times, they are actively humiliated on screen by policemen, judges and other masters of entertainment. Crime, ignorance, savagery: what a show! Once again, as long as it sells, keep it up. There, in the spotlight, for less than fifteen minutes and amidst commercial ads, the poor can shine like greasy piglets on spits, or like the tin their most unfortunate children collect in garbage dumps.

What is the result of this *Blendungsroman*? Go to any secondary school and you will meet cell-phone-talking walking replicas of the rich, parading themselves in the corridors. Give them an opportunity to put down a “loser”, and they will savour it like their own parents, whose SUVs and triple-mortgaged houses are punches into the Joneses’ stomachs. Even poverty is a risk worth taking to cast the rich’s aura.

The silent walking replicas of the poor are usually in other schools, unless they have dropped out of school already to find a job that will secure their poverty. Some are hiding in the toilets. They are poor and they know it. They look poor. It is not only their clothes that say it, but their bodies. They have bad teeth, small tits, big noses. Their parents have wrinkles. They can’t get fixed, like those people on TV, or their replicas and the replicas’ parents. To cope with this obvious inferiority, they breathe in. In Italy, they sniff cocaine to think that they too are rich. In Rumania, they sniff glue to think that they too are sniffing cocaine.

Either way, none of these kids must worry about being politically active. It is too dangerous. Yes, youngsters still remember how to bark: they haven’t been beaten up into silent submission, yet. Some will have to be locked up, so that trade be free. Don’t give them any wrong ideas. That’s socialism—or any bad “ism” of the day. Don’t give them hope. That’s socialism. Politics is best left to corporate employees, who siphon public money to their shareholders and, God be gracious, to their own bank accounts. That’s the free market. These employees alone are capable of understanding why unemployment is natural and inequality good. They’ve got talent. They’ve got the degrees that get you good jobs. Therefore, unless they are corporate employees, not even the kids’ parents have to worry about politics. Like these happy few, the kids’ parents can take happy pills too or, if pills are too expensive, drink themselves out blind.

Drunk, the poor parents can cope better with the trauma of seeing their children die. Each

country has its own special way of sending new winged angels to God. In high-tech market-miracle India, they die of cholera in open-air sewers, where they were looking for edible scraps. In coup-idity-ruled Honduras they die poisoned by pesticides in a free-market plantation, so that the bananas people eat in Canada be not too pricy. In revolutionary France they die stabbed by an angry pusher in a dark alley, but they were not really French after all. In peace-loving America, they die fighting for human rights in another country, since their own country denied them a future. How was it possible? They had trained them at killing people since they were three, on a stolen X-box... Maybe they should have trained them at doing something else, but there is no videogame that teaches you how to free a political party from corporate diktats or join a trade union... Is this enough? No, there is more.

Our TVs and media are replete with experts telling us that greed is good. They are the most interviewed and consulted members of the intelligentsia of our community. Sometimes they even become our presidents, ministers, mayors and godfathers. Go to any university. Some of them feed on tenure and enjoy healthcare and pension benefits, whilst arguing that you shouldn't have them. You will discover that there is an entire discipline built upon that notion.

If truth be told, a few of its adherents do remind their students, on leap years, that the profit-motive of the *homunculus æconomicus* is just one drive amongst many. This drive becomes one and insatiable for the sake of toying with mathematical formulae, not for the sake of describing reality, which never works quite like the models do. Facts can be so obstinate. Theory is much more flexible. Occasionally, on elective days, these beautiful souls mention even mysterious, metaphysical, unscientific words: "ethics", "morality", "duty", "respect", "goodness", "virtue", "governance", "responsibility"... They don't fully grasp them, though, for they slip out of books and balance sheets. Sometimes they even get their students to learn some history, thus half-stuttering what sort of devastation this homunculus and its *leit*-motive have caused. Still, these are exceptions, divagations, and the students, between the end of their studies and the beginning of their careers, know it very well.

Our MBAs and the many branches of science and engineering dependent upon private sponsors and future corporate employers are the convent-barracks where our crusading novices, more or less geeky and asocial, are told that only numbers really matter. The fate of

a *paterfamilias* and of his family does not. They are told that persons are not persons: they are costs, opportunities, capital, markets... They are all sorts of things that can be converted into monetary units—numbers, in fact—though most definitively they are not persons. In fact, such things, be they free individuals or free communities, can turn into dependent variables. And if some of these things are laid off by a firm that rationalises an otherwise irrational workplace—what a madness it must have been!—then it may be time to invest money in that firm. If the right numbers go up, then things are just as they should be. If they don't, they can be massaged. If they still don't, they can be fixed. If they still refuse to go up, then a couple of hospitals plus half a university, as long as they are public, can be sacrificed to a return to growth.

In the streamlined world there can be recoveries without jobs, business opportunities in famines, increased flexibility via insecurity of employment and future bread, full employment at the natural unemployment rate, goods that do a lot of bad things, and market miracles that melt into destitution because of something bad but the pious market. What lesson is learnt? Everything in the world exists in order to maximise the money of investors and/or their managers. Even old, wrinkly countries must be attractive to such people or face their own demise. Make the rich richer. That is the one and paramount commandment. Such merciless *homunculi* are no fiction; they are science-fiction: they drive around in Dalek machines. Indeed, to those who do not simply rob and run, being merciless is a fiduciary duty. Apart from this, everything else goes.

Yes, everything else, unless you get caught and cannot pay the best lawyers—what a shame. Business words of the business world tell no lies: lack of scruples is “determination”, mercilessness is “having balls”, inhumanity is “being committed”, callousness is “professionalism”, locust-like behaviour is a “hedging”, stealing traditional knowledge is a “patent”, depriving people of knowledge is a “copyright”, poisoning the destitute is “mutually beneficial trade”, taking public-sector resources to guarantee private profits is “hard work”, threatening employees with unemployment is “personnel management”, gambling is “trading futures” and other cabalistic formulae “over the counter”, oligopolies are “economies of scale” and cartels are “free markets”, sending knowingly drivers to die because of a few faulty cars is a “cost-saving measure”, sending knowingly air passengers to die because of reduced safety controls is a “cost-saving measure”, corruption of inspectors is a “cost-saving measure”, corruption of politicians is “lobbying”, and rent-exacting

parasites are “the productive class”. The list goes on and on. Read the news and enjoy the game: destroying peoples is “restructuring”, keeping them poor is “preventing inflation”, colonising a nation is “opening markets”, withdrawing rights is “reform”... By the end of it, you almost believe what they say. Such is the catechism of the beast and brightest.

Has any student still doubts or feels uneasy? Then he is told that all is well, for all ends well. Yes, those things that we unscientifically call “people” may seem to be suffering, poor things. And the others, crony criminals who have nothing to do with the free market, are the exception, though the rule just wants to be like them. After all, those exceptional exceptions were on the cover of glossy magazines like *Capital*, the *Cosmopolitan* of people who “have balls”... Don’t worry. Everything will be alright. Just wait—that’s what my old priest and the party commissar would say... The invisible hand of the self-regulating market is going to look after all of them. Free from State intervention and from trade unions—for only capitals may associate and go on strike if they don’t like a government—the invisible hand is to generate endless bounty for all—the invisible bounty? Most of the world’s trade is virtual, after all...

Such is orthodoxy today, for which even a Pope’s distribution chests are heresy, utter *hilaireous bellocs*... If you claim that small is beautiful, the giants get angry: go make your shoes elsewhere! Today, you no longer need to be red to be a danger. It is enough to be as white as a dove. The Market God likes hawks, whose endless preying is the source of all that is good. His transparent hand turns into water all the blood that these hawks spill. As to the tallest shrines, they are no longer erected for the glory of the Sun, Athena or Almighty God, but for the likes of Morgan Stanley. Behind all this, a hidden theology... Maybe Divine Will should be in fashion again.

#### IV.

*The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

*To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my*

*freedom... I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not.*

Isaiah Berlin

The child empathises with the dying bird. The adult empathises with the starving child. The nurse attempts to ease the pain of the terminal patient. The teacher smiles patiently at the pupils playing in the courtyard. The schoolmaster hides his unease as the ancient oak is felled. The gardener watches wildlife documentaries on the TV. The mayor goes on holiday to his cottage on the lakeside. None of them likes to be ill. All of them fear death. All of them experienced curiosity or elation as they held a newborn creature in their arms. All of them have been compassionate at some point. All religions have praised divinity as the fountainhead of all that is. Whether physically, emotionally or mentally, all of the above have exemplified the ultimate source of all values.

Years of research about value have led me to conclude that nothing is more valuable than that which allows value itself to emerge: life. Without life—biological, emotional and mental—there can be no value, whether ethical, aesthetic, economic or political. Those that deem life's value instrumental acknowledge its value nevertheless. Besides, none of them seems likely to prefer beauty or other values to eating every day and being in good health: take away their bread, and they will sell their dearest painting... Of all crazy philosophers ever alive, only a handful rejected life as a value and one alone behaved in a way that denounced actual indifference to life: Pyrrho the sceptic, whom his friends prevented from walking under carts and falling off cliffs. One. As for the few who told us that life is a valley of tears and an endless stream of horrors, none of them ever stopped eating, drinking, and philosophising, i.e. one of the activities that they clearly enjoyed the most. But what can the lives of crazy philosophers teach us about economic matters?

As usual, philosophy can reveal the heart of an issue. If life is so crucial, indeed the source of all values, then it can be inferred that a successful economic system provides universal access to vital goods across generations. Economic efficiency means that the lives of all benefit from it and nothing is spoiled to the point that those who come after us may not benefit too: resources are left for others the way in which we would like to have them left

for us, if not better. Improvement is a possibility. An economic system that achieves its vital aims more effectively, thus opening the door to a richer fulfilment of planetary and human potential, is yet a better system. On the contrary, an economic system that does not fulfil its vital aims, either because access is limited to few or some, past or present, or because it delivers goods that are deadly, detrimental to life or irrelevant to life needs, whilst leaving some of these needs unanswered, is a failure.

The current economic system is a failure. As repeatedly denounced by the international scientific community at its highest and most representative levels, human civilisation has become for the first time in its history a threat to the planetary environment that allows for humanity's own existence. There is no aspect of the Earth's environment that has not been depleted in the three centuries that have seen the affirmation of capitalism worldwide: the biosphere-protecting Ozone-layer, breathable-air-producing and reproducing pluvial forests and oceanic life-systems, self-regenerating water aquifers, nourishing-food-producing arable spaces, and natural-equilibrium-maintaining and science- and technology-inspiring biodiversity. The continuation of life as we know and enjoy it is at risk.

Much has already been destroyed beyond repair, to the point that bioengineering is being discussed as a tool to cope with the most tragic consequences of "development" awaiting us. Emblematically, one nation of the world is planning already the purchase of land in India in order to transfer its entire population there upon the day when the ocean will have swallowed their ancestral islands. And yet, in the face of current profit losses, all this is treated as secondary. Just read the news and you shall see that the focus of collective action is upon a "return to growth", as though the sad and deadly harvest of greed were not still vivid before our eyes.

What is more, the mantra of competition goes on unchallenged. But competition for what? To generate profits? And why? Why should rich people become richer? There's more than enough to go around. Even more ludicrous is the idea that schools, healthcare, free time, old-age security, peace of mind and all those gains for life that people acquired in decades of blood and humanity should be dismantled so that competition be won. By whom? What sort of victory is the augmentation of the money heaps of people who already have it, whilst the quality of life and the living conditions of most are worsened?



F.D. Roosevelt told us seventy years ago that greed is not only bad morals, it is also bad business. When business' sole purpose is to make as much money as possible as soon as possible, then the somewhat constructive role that business may play in society disappears altogether. It doesn't matter if any private business actually makes a lot more money, gets bigger internationally or pervades even more diffusely the lives of millions: the standards of evaluation and appreciation for the constructive role of private business belong to the sphere of public wellbeing. And public wellbeing cares about long-term indicators: happy workers retiring in good health, healthy mothers making plans for their children's education, educated youngsters looking forward to playing on the beach with their grandchildren. If this horizon disappears, then you'd better start to worry. Private business is known to have played far too often a destructive role, as everything, the long-term survival of private business included, can be sacrificed to man-eating Baal.

Short-termism, combined with the relentless pursuit of profit, characterised roaming Goths, wooden-legged pirates and cigar-loving gangsters. The entrepreneur, the glorious creation of modern capitalism, has always been expected to be something different. Restrained by family and personal pride, religious morals, annual dividends, trade unions and other 20<sup>th</sup>-century legal suasions, his horizon has been defined as a somewhat distant future, his playground the real world of flesh-and-bone persons like him, his reward the admiration of affluent or fully employed fellow citizens that participate in and benefit from his endeavours.

As long as alternative economic systems were either widely discussed or experimented with, the entrepreneur had to justify his existence by creating some tangible, albeit sometimes debatable, token of social worth, such as employment, community networks, or nice new gadgets. Only the speculator, hardly distinguishable from fraudsters, trotted relentlessly upon a different path. But speculators were said to be the exception, not the rule...

Yet the day came when Gordon Gekko and his friends got to control more than three quarters of what is still incautiously dubbed "world trade". The decades of my life, infested by Maggies, yuppies and wall-less oligarchs, launched "The Financial Revolution", a pivotal process in contemporary history that no historian has yet so baptised: let this label be my grand legacy to international scholarship.

An equally bombastic historian used this term in the 1960s to describe the emergence of

public creditors in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England... It doesn't quite compare, I'm sorry. We've just witnessed thirty long years of national barriers coming down—and how long it took for both nations and their barriers to come into existence!—so as to allow for a gigantic flood of miraculously leveraged liquidity springing out of... books and vast pools of capital formed by privatising public money in all of its shapes, squeezing profit from de-unionised workforces threatened by—what a coincidence!—unbarred international competition, and such ingenious tokens of financial engineering that only professional mathematicians could make sense of them. All this money travelling much faster than any good or service ever before: computers have replaced the pens and ink of old. The world of Gekko and other reptilian inhabitants of city hedges and wall streets is indeed a very bizarre world.

Originally, these creatures were meant to trade pieces of paper granting a share of the profits made by fairly large private companies. It is something that had begun in Genoa a long time ago and that their trading partners, the Dutch, had brought to the North Sea around the year 1600, sailing thence to the New World, another Genoese discovery... But a share of the profits may be less remunerative than profiting from shares. Gekko's forefathers started betting on rises and falls in the price of those pieces of paper, sometimes causing them by moving massive amounts of money or dropping a few words into the nearest ear...

In the days of poor old Nixon, in the Big Apple, they traded about 20 million stocks every day. Today they trade 1600 million or so—and there's more fruit in the basket than just a big apple. Also, as of Nixon's time, they started playing games with the world's currencies, namely the money with which common people buy their bread. Again, they started slowly, about 20 billion USD a day, but now, after "freeing" trade worldwide, they are up to 2 trillion. It is by far the largest chunk of trade in the world and it has one severe drawback: it makes the form of trade that normal people think of when they hear the world "trade"—buying and selling bananas, timber, cars, computers, etc.—much more complicated. Not to mention buying bread. But the reptiles don't worry: they own the future. They buy and sell it.

Actually, they take bets—only a tiny fraction of trade in existing "futures" fulfils the official excuse that these are ways to hedge against risks on purchases of actual goods—on nearly anything that can be grown, mined or brought into existence, influencing the price of all

sorts of goods, including the bread that common people wish to buy. Still, since even this casino was not big enough, the reptiles added onto the table the so-called “derivatives”, which are pieces of paper whose value is derived—hence the name—from something else, whether another piece of paper or a price arising from combining a few of them. Anything goes. Also because you can buy or sell these pieces of paper any way you like—over the counter, under the counter, beside the counter... You can actually buy and sell the option to buy or sell them, for short-termism can be so short that, to spare time, it allows certain persons to sell what they don’t have.

Is this too complicated? Too silly? Well, today, around the globe, there’s an ocean of derivatives, for a value of about 500 trillion USD. It is a lot of money... Strangely enough, however, the reptiles that invented them also felt the need to insure themselves against any risk that may ensue from trading in... derivative paper. So they started buying “credit default swaps” from insurance companies and let their friends and colleagues, the bankers, pile them up as assets, claiming that these “swaps” were as sound and good as gold itself. Probably they would have started taking major bets on them as well, had the entire mathematically engineered and economic-science-backed system failed from collapsing under its own virtual weight. Too much genius had been spent for the business world to bear. Under so much talent and foresight, the reptiles’ joints felt suddenly empty of market force. Amazingly, the invisible hand was nowhere to be seen. Fortunately, the State ran to their rescue and gave them a visible, reinvigorating bailout with other people’s money, lest the bank’s own mouthpiece uttered “BBB” or some other silly rating. And that’s where we stand today. The real suffering surrounding us, from the unemployed Spanish worker to the starving Senegalese farmer, is due to a virtual catastrophe. And if the starving Senegalese farmer tries to move to Spain, he shall meet a wall and possibly drown in the sea, while frustrated unemployed Spaniards, trained by modern corporate journalists, will hate guts those that didn’t. Strangely enough, these migrants are to be loathed, not the freely migrating virtual capital that cannibalised both Senegal and Spain.

Like all human endeavours, business can be either good or bad. To know what makes it good or bad, what is nobler than money, means to know how to measure real growth, real development, real utility, real goodness. Who, though, after Pareto’s Protagorean reinvention of economics, is allowed to know what real value is? Certainly not serious economists, who can only acknowledge preferences... The Pope may know, perhaps. He

claims to be right like no-one else and that's maybe why so many people cannot stand him: who likes an old moralising grandpa, in an age in which we are told by our media gurus to give into any juvenile urge of ours that can make them a buck?

Or maybe any living creature knows: they're all God's creatures, after all. Yes, even by watching slugs and bugs we can evince something important, which degree-honoured geeks may have neglected while sitting in front of an inanimate computer screen. They are not forgivable, though: no matter how much you masturbate, avatars are not human beings. Here comes the slap; Zen masters should love it: entomology can rescue economics from its value slumber. *Vade ad formicam*. What a twist! Or maybe not. It all started with Mandeville's bees, to be honest...

Let me be brief and clear on this. What consistent pattern of behaviour can be observed amongst slugs and bugs? Watch them in your garden, if you have one. Or go and watch them in a public garden, if it hasn't been sold to developers. As small and allegedly stupid as they are believed to be, all invertebrates try to do their best to survive at all times. And when they take risks, it is because they either look for food, shelter, safety, or attempt to ensure the survival of their species. As economically irrational as animals can be, these small beings can even sacrifice individual utility—one's safety, food or head—for the sake of keeping, indeed at times just making, their young. Future generations matter, to them. Some seem even to care for their fellows in the anthill, hive or nest in which they live... Life, in truth, matters to living creatures, and yet life can be sacrificed, for more life may thus ensue. The only higher value that life acknowledges is, in fact, life.

And yet, in today's world, money is still prioritised over life. Listen to our leaders, and with the exception of a pair of Caribbean politicians that corporate media describe regularly as lunatics, what matters most to most who matter most is to keep "growth" going. Capitalism or the "free market", as they like labelling it despite its dictatorial logic, must keep generating profit, free from State intervention, which does not serve that one paramount end. All this is held, despite the well-known biocide implications of such a process. Yes, capitalism is responsible for the ecological degradation that we are living in with, and leaving to, our children. Has nobody really put together the Industrial Revolution and the collapse of the planet's life support systems?

I shall help you: the causal link between the pursuit of profit and environmental degradation becomes visible every time environmental regulation is resisted as “too costly” or by-passed by illicit behaviour or by off-sourcing to countries that have actually little such regulation or none at all. Unless business is forced forcefully to comply with existing regulation, which is much more difficult in a barrier-free worldwide market, common praxes show that the primacy of profit persists over, say, not killing other people by dumping toxic waste onto them.

Indeed, in economics, it is methodologically impossible to address the environmental preconditions that make life possible and can secure its long-term flourishing. To the eyes of the economic observer, bread is as much and legitimately a “good” as nuclear waste, as long as a lawful market exists for both of them. It is only through direct State intervention that a bad “good” becomes officially what it is: a bad—and that is just the first step, for enforcement is yet to be secured from lobbying and bribes.

States alone can ban slavery, organ trafficking, child labour, exploitation, air pollution or aquifer poisoning as the bads they are. States alone can make the real economy and earned income primary, and the virtual economy and unearned income secondary. There is nothing intrinsic to market mechanisms leading to that and we have known it for nearly two hundreds of years. Read Charles Dickens’ subversive novels to get a clearly bleak picture. Also, ecosystems are “externalities”, as the language of economics reveals, at least as long as they are not turned into a cost by environmental legislation, into a loss of profit by reduction in reputation *and* actual sales, or into a market opportunity by persistent spoliation of it—see the oxygen cans sold in the subway in Tokyo.

Protecting life and the environment is something that runs against the logic of profit, even if some business leaders may themselves desire it ardently. Profit can only relate to the value of life instrumentally: as a means to further profit. Money is a fetish, and one that eats living creatures and their dwelling spaces if that generates revenue. Nothing leads profit-driven “rational” agents to doing that which is necessary for planetary survival and, for that matter, for a decent social life on a vast scale. Even public health, the most obvious case of socially beneficial public agency, is opposed as unprofitable hence bad. Not to mention all the money that is made by “growth” via sales of carcinogenic “goods”.

As the world's money is controlled by gargantuan private institutions and managed to enrich their rich shareholders, even if it means strangling debt-ridden public authorities and diverting resources from public sewers to private coffers, there is little hope that the dominating logic may change. Some used to argue that money should be controlled by public authorities and managed for the public good, as written in certain constitutions... But we have already talked about such a peculiar notion. For the moment, let's see whether the Philosopher-Kings of Greece will crumble because of the Goths, after being failed by Chelsea-resident haven-seekers and the advice of Goldmen-sackers.

Share this:

Share