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Is It Possible to Think about Capitalism with María Zambrano? A Review of the Philosopher's Early Writings

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Abstract

Thinking about capitalism with María Zambrano may at first seem like a strange gesture. It is true that she does not devote much space to it throughout her work. However, there are a couple of writings to which I would like to pay special attention: on the one hand, her first published book in 1930, *Horizonte del liberalismo*, whose conclusions are particularly relevant; on the other, an earlier, unpublished manuscript titled *Lo económico y lo humano*, dated 1926 and preserved at the Fundación María Zambrano. This manuscript contains the initial intuitions that would later be developed in the published book. Thus, in the first section, these early texts are contextualized within her life; in the second, the unpublished manuscript is described in detail and analyzed in

dialogue with the published work; and in the third, final reflections are presented, synthesizing the findings and pointing toward new avenues of research.

Keywords

María Zambrano – capitalism – liberalism – economic thought – unpublished manuscript – intellectual youth

Thinking about capitalism with María Zambrano may at first seem like a strange gesture, since she is primarily known for her critique of abstract and reductive reason and for articulating an alternative form of rationality capable of embracing the plurality and complexity of life—what she calls 'poetic reason'.[1] In this regard, Zambrano has rarely been approached as a thinker of political economy and, to some extent, this is understandable, since economic questions occupy only a marginal place within her writings. Not one of her publications specifically addresses the topic; beyond occasional references to the term, economic considerations tend to appear in connection with other themes rather than the central focus of analysis.

[1] This proposal runs throughout her philosophical oeuvre, but it reaches its fullest expression from the 1970s onwards, when poetic reason assumes a less theoretical and more experiential character. Rather than merely reflecting upon it, Zambrano enacts poetic reason in her own writing, allowing it to unfold through a language that seeks to welcome the multiplicity of experience. This shift is particularly evident in the final chapters of *El hombre y lo divino* (1973), as well as in later works such as *Claros del bosque* (1977) and *De la Aurora* (1986).

Among all her writings, however, there are a couple to which I would like to pay special attention in this study.[2] The first text is her first book, published in 1930 by the publishing house of Javier Morata in its *Nueva Generación* series, spanning barely seventy pages and bearing the titles *Nuevo liberalismo* on the cover and *Horizonte del liberalismo* on the dust jacket; the latter ultimately became the official title (Moreno Sanz 2015, 787). This first book is relevant because, although it deals with the paradoxes of liberalism and is therefore essentially a political essay, the conclusion it reaches by analyzing such contradictions points to a fundamentally economic problem. In this essay, the aim is thus to focus on those final considerations to observe what implications they have for the development of her thought and whether there is anything to be learned from them today.

The other text I would like to refer to is an unpublished manuscript completed prior to her first book, titled *Lo económico y lo humano* (Zambrano 1926). This manuscript is held in the archives of the Fundación María Zambrano in Vélez-Málaga and was dated by Rosa Mascarell (2009), the philosopher's secretary in her later years, to 1926. In this way, it is one of María Zambrano's earliest writings which, although unpublished, helps us to unravel the subsequent conclusions reached in her first publication. I venture to suggest that this essay constituted the initial thoughts that four years later would be reflected in *Horizonte del liberalismo* (Zambrano [1930] 2022).

Therefore, these are texts written by a very young María Zambrano, as will be discussed in the first section. It is important to note, however, that using contextualism as a method—interpreting philosophical ideas in light of their historical, social, and biographical context—

[2] This study has been carried out thanks to a predoctoral FI-SDUR contract (2024), co-financed by the Generalitat de Catalunya and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

should not diminish the value of these essays.[3] On the contrary, approaching them allows us to become aware of the author's initial concerns, which provided the first impetus for her to develop her work over the years, attempting to address the same philosophical inquiry from different angles and positions. For this reason, it is important to consider the unpublished manuscript, because although she chose never to publish it, a decision that must be acknowledged, it does reveal the philosopher's earliest interests and intuitions. In the second section, a detailed description of the manuscript will be undertaken, followed by an exploration of how it dialogues with the published book. Finally, in the third section, concluding reflections will be presented on the implications of Zambrano's thought and some new avenues of research.

1. María Zambrano in Her Twenties

María Zambrano was born in the Andalusian town of Vélez-Málaga in 1904, into a family dedicated to teaching.[4] In fact, it was precisely because her mother, Araceli Alarcón, obtained a teaching position in a school in Madrid that the family had to gradually move to the capital between

[3] As Laura Kotoveska (2022, 32–34) rightly points out, contextualism applied specifically to the study of women philosophers can distort or diminish their thought, undermining their intellectual autonomy by focusing too much on their personal lives (their relationships, mentors, or circumstances). In this article, Kotoveska's suggestions are followed, and the study concentrates solely on María Zambrano's ideas, avoiding anecdotal or sensationalist details of her personal life, and considering context only when it genuinely helps to understand her thought (Kotevska 2022, 40–42).

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, most of the information in this biography comes from the chronology compiled by Jesús Moreno Sanz in volume VI of *Obras completas de María Zambrano*. For further information, see Moreno Sanz 2014, 45–54.

1906 and 1908.[5] The same process occurred shortly afterward, when in 1909 her father, Blas Zambrano, secured a teaching position at a school in Segovia. Thus, it was in this Castilian city that María Zambrano spent most of her childhood and adolescence.

In Segovia, Zambrano completed her secondary education[6] and became immersed in the first readings that would shape her thought: among the books available in the family's library, she was particularly drawn to the writings of the Generation of '98 intellectuals, from whom she chiefly absorbed their treatment of contradiction as an awareness of blurred boundaries.[7] Her early readings of José Ortega y Gasset, together with those of Friedrich Nietzsche—introduced to her by her cousin Miguel Pizarro—helped her to develop her critique of modernity and nihilism and to appreciate life as a decisive aspect of her philosophy (Moreno Sanz 2019, 21–23). Through the readings provided by her cousin, María Zambrano also encountered for the first time the poetry of Lorca, as well as the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī—via Asín Palacios, as David Fernández Navas notes (2024, 395). Combined with the Christian mysticism of Saint Juan de la Cruz and Saint Teresa de Jesús, which she was also reading at the time, these influences guided her toward one of her

[5] First the mother, Araceli Alarcón, in April 1906; then María Zambrano herself, in early 1908; and finally the father, Blas Zambrano, in the autumn of that same year.

[6] According to the introduction to the letters of Gregorio del Campo written by Marifé Santiago Bolaños (2012, 22), the only women studying it that year were Zambrano and one other girl.

[7] According to Rodolfo Gutiérrez Simón (2024, 50–51), from texts such as *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* by Miguel de Unamuno or *Juan de Mairena* by Antonio Machado, Zambrano grasped contradiction as a constitutive aspect of the human. This is especially important for the texts analyzed in this article because, as will be seen, Zambrano's intention in both writings is to resolve the problems produced by both liberalism and socialism, integrating their advantages into a 'new liberalism'.

greatest philosophical aspirations, visible even in her earliest writings: the pursuit of unity without eliminating or diminishing the multiplicity of life.

In October 1920, she officially began her studies in philosophy as an unaffiliated student at the Universidad Central de Madrid. However, she did not regularly attend classes until late 1926, when her family moved back to the capital and María Zambrano was able to participate in lessons in person. During this six-year interval, it is worth noting that her status as an unaffiliated student required her to prepare courses independently, which on the one hand slowed the normal progression of the degree,[8] but on the other hand gave her the time she needed to delve as deeply as she wished into philosophical readings.[9] Even so, the atmosphere of collective excitement preceding the proclamation of the Second Republic in Spain, which she experienced in Segovia during those years, introduced a significant counterpoint that some scholars have already explored.[10] It should not be forgotten that her father, Blas Zambrano, together with his friend, the

[8] As Pedro Chacón Fuertes explains (2024, 25–26), María Zambrano's academic record shows that it took her seven years to complete a degree that, according to the curriculum in force—designed by Minister Antonio García Aliz (under the Royal Decree of July 20, 1900, partially amended by the Royal Decree of August 15, 1913, both published in *La Gaceta de Madrid*)—was supposed to take four years.

[9] However, her life during that period should not be idealized; Zambrano tried to attend university classes in person, but an interrupted pregnancy kept her in Segovia during the 1922–1923 academic year. The unpublished letters to Gregorio del Campo (Zambrano 2012, 103), María Zambrano's academic record (Chacón Fuertes 2024, 25), and the chronology updated by Jesús Moreno Sanz (2019, 24) confirm this.

[10] To explore this aspect in more depth, it is essential to consult the section titled "Segovia: la contribución de la ciudad al proyecto intelectual de María Zambrano" in the book *Pensamiento y palabra en recuerdo*

poet and professor Antonio Machado, and other Segovian teachers and intellectuals, launched various cultural initiatives at that time, notably the founding of the Segovian Popular University in 1919, "with the laudable and almost unique aim of generating enthusiasm and calling for an effort that would help the resurgence of the community, with letters as a pretext,"[11] recounts Juan Manuel Santamaría (2005, 318).

In the last months of 1926, María Zambrano began living in Madrid and immersing herself in its intellectual and political environment. It is also during this year that the unpublished manuscript is situated. It can therefore be said that this text is the result of more than five years of formally studying philosophy, although, as mentioned, Zambrano had begun her philosophical and poetic readings earlier. It was around this time, a few months before definitively completing her degree, that María Zambrano experienced the first of her three major vocational crises. As she explains in the 1986 prologue to *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*, caught between the clarity of Ortega y Gasset's classes and the obscurity conveyed by Xavier Zubiri, Zambrano felt deeply anguished, sensing the impossibility of continuing her philosophical studies. At that moment, she decided to abandon philosophy, though she told no one, and several months later, in May 1927, she recounted:

> Through one of the cracks in the San Bernardo building that opened onto a courtyard and which was a black curtain, a ray of light entered: Professor Zubiri explained none other than Aristotle's categories, and I found myself, not within a

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de María Zambrano [1904–1991], edited by José Luis Mora García and Juan Manuel Moreno Yuste (2005, 254–440).

[11] All direct quotes, including this one, have been translated from Spanish by myself.

> dazzling revelation, but within what has always been best for my thought: twilight touched by joy. And then, quietly […] the discerned feeling opened like a flower that perhaps I did not have to stop studying philosophy. And yes, as if it were something natural, that summer I immersed myself in Spinoza's *Ethics* and in Plotinus' *Third Ennead.* (Zambrano [1987] 2023, 36–37)

It can be inferred, then, that this initial period of uncertainty was the reason for pausing the development of the manuscript. I speculate that the reason it remained unpublished was that, a few months later, just after Zambrano definitively completed her degree and began doctoral courses, this feeling resurfaced—but for different reasons: her involvement with the political and social events occurring in Spain at that time, in opposition to the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, led her to join the Federación Universitaria Escolar (FUE), a student organization founded at the Universidad Central de Madrid at the end of 1926, which advocated for a new political regime and a new way of life.

During 1928, she actively participated in demonstrations, rallies, and discussion groups organized by the FUE, while also beginning to publish articles in Madrid newspapers such as *Libertad* and, particularly, *El Liberal*, where one can observe how Zambrano's initial concerns about the economic problems of the contemporary capitalist system evolved toward the difficulties of finding political solutions, leading her to propose a socially minded and reformist liberalism. In this way, the reasons why the author ultimately abandoned the manuscript continue to be evident; the doubts arising between the first and second vocational crises caused Zambrano's concerns to shift, in line with her lived experience at the time, toward areas of reflection in which politics gained increasing relevance. However, at the end of that same year, after attending a rally at the

Ateneo de Valladolid organized by the FUE, María Zambrano fainted. Her ailment was later diagnosed as tuberculosis, which forced her into intermittent rest—though she continued to collaborate with the organization in its manifestos and letters—until the summer of 1929, when she gradually returned to her previous pace of life.

In the autumn, besides reintegrating into FUE activities, she began writing *Horizonte del liberalismo*. During that year and the beginning of the next, Zambrano continued fighting, alongside her generational peers, for the defense of democratic values; she identified with the so-called 'bull generation', who believed they were sacrificing themselves for the political transformation of the country.[12] On January 28, 1930, Primo de Rivera resigned after losing the support of the king and the army, and from that moment on, the republican forces signed the San Sebastián Pact with the intention of overthrowing the monarchy, now supported by the dictatorship of General Berenguer. It was within this political, social, and personal context that María Zambrano wrote, in a letter dated February 11, to her teacher José Ortega y Gasset, urging him to speak out against the monarchy (Zambrano 1991). It was also in this context that she wrote and completed what would become her first book, published in September 1930. What remained and what changed between that first unpublished manuscript and the book that ultimately came to light? This question will be addressed in the next section.

[12] Zambrano states in the article "Un liberal" (1987), included in the collection of unpublished articles compiled by Mercedes Gómez Blesa under the title *Las palabras del regreso*: "The time had come. The time they did not want to see. The time we young people did see, for the simple reason that we felt it. We were going to be the generation of the bull, the sacrificial generation. They, not. They did not feel sacrificed" (2009, 92).

2. Genesis and Metamorphosis of an Early Work

Now that the context in which these texts were conceived has been established, the analysis and comparison of the manuscript with the published work can be undertaken. First, the content of the unpublished manuscript is examined, and it is then brought into dialogue with the book that was ultimately published. This approach follows a methodological principle: starting from the manuscript allows us to reconstruct the original impetus of Zambrano's thought, with its initial intuitions, unresolved tensions, and the problematic horizon from which the work emerges. The confrontation with the published text, in turn, makes it possible to identify conceptual shifts and argumentative reformulations that reveal a process of intellectual maturation shaped by the political and personal context of the time. Analyzing this transition not only illuminates the genesis of the work but also allows for a more precise understanding of the early formation of Zambrano's thought and the way in which writing becomes a space of transformation.

2.1. Lo Económico y lo Humano *(1926), an Unpublished Manuscript*

Lo económico y lo humano is a manuscript—M.468, archived at the Fundación María Zambrano—in which the philosopher seeks to understand the economic, in a broad sense, although always framed within the capitalist system of her time. The text, forty-eight pages long, does not provide any explicit thematic divisions. However, to facilitate its analysis, I have divided it into five sections, following the four moments in which the author shifts her focus on the subject. Thus, the analysis will first address the introduction Zambrano provides to the prevailing crisis; secondly, the definition of the economic that she elaborates; thirdly, a classification of the two ways in which, according to the author, human beings can relate to the economic; fourthly, the two forms of

political action that follow from the previous classification; and finally, the conclusion she reaches, pointing toward a moral reflection.

Following this structure, the initial question that appears in the first five pages serves as an introduction to the philosophical problem she seeks to address, based on the specific historical moment she is experiencing: "the deep economic crisis in which the world is immersed" (Zambrano 1926, 1). And, as Enric Luján (2025, 97) rightly points out in his doctoral thesis, María Zambrano is not a thinker who confines herself to reflecting on the issues debated in Spain, since from the very beginning she engages with the European intellectual agenda[13] and, therefore, when she speaks of an economic crisis, she is not referring solely to Spain but alludes to the profound precariousness in which the First World War had left the other countries of the continent. From this passage, it is also worth noting that many studies of Zambrano's work assert that the author's thought is "a philosophy of crisis," since her starting point for philosophizing is the recognition of a deep crisis in European culture.[14] However, this first sentence of the manuscript reveals that the very first point of reference for thinking about the cultural crisis is the economic situation of the time.

Even so, this note does not invalidate what my research colleagues affirm, since Zambrano quickly goes on to say that "what is truly in crisis is not the State nor the economy, it is man, and

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[13] In fact, this interest can be traced back to the first article published by María Zambrano at the age of fourteen in the alumni magazine of the Instituto San Isidro in Madrid. Zambrano says about the events of the First World War: "Four years ago the angel of peace abandoned Europe" (cited in Santiago Bolaños 2012, 22).

[14] Specifically, this expression is used by Eduardo Subirats (1987, 95), but many others share the same view (Ortega Muñoz 1979; Gómez Blesa 2009, 17; Soto García and Espinoza Lolas 2015).

this is what makes us live lost in the chaos of the provisional" (1926, 2). This is the case, since the author positions herself among the kind of theorists who, very much in line with Max Weber,[15] think that material problems, without neglecting them, must be analyzed in light of the ways of life that emerge from the cultural discourses and dynamics in which one has been educated. It is for this reason that the author concludes this introduction by stating that:

> The economic must be understood from the depth of the human, not from one of its dimensions; and not the other way around. That is, from the human we understand the economic, but we will never be able to understand the human starting from the economic. (Zambrano 1926, 5)

In this way, the author positions herself—moving now to the second point of this analysis—within a specific way of understanding the economy: "the economic lacks substantiveness, and its essence lies in being useful" (Zambrano 1926, 6). That is, in the very definition she offers, Zambrano foregrounds the relational character of the economic as a condition of possibility. In this sense, the author understands the economy as a particular mode of the human being's relationship with things, in which what prevails in them is their usefulness. Aware that this definition may be controversial—especially when considering the Marxist critique of capitalism as a system that reduces things to mere exchange value (would Zambrano then be saying that capitalism is not

[15] Which, in fact, she read, as Jesús Moreno Sanz (2015, 787) states in the appendix of *Horizonte del liberalismo*, on the basis of a draft preserved in the Fundación María Zambrano as M.450. This manuscript contains important references to Max Weber that she would omit in the final edition.

properly an economy?)—she hastens to clarify that what is useful lacks fixed dimensions, since it is human demands that shape this experience. For this reason, she warns:

> Let us not be naive enough to believe that the demands human beings make of things in certain periods in any way coincide with their true needs, and this disparity takes on a malleable shape in our time in the flagrant social injustice that suffocates us. (Zambrano 1926, 10)

Therefore, in this essay Zambrano endows the notion of the 'useful' with a dimension that exceeds basic biological needs, introducing demands as the claims of one who considers themselves entitled or authorized to formulate them. Precisely for this reason, she denies that a non-human economy can exist, arguing that the economy only acquires meaning for the human being:

> If we take "need" in this merely natural sense, it is not legitimate to speak of the economic world, because the economic only makes sense when, [...] in addition to making use of [things], we do something different, such as, for example, thinking them. In this sense, there is an economic world only for the human being; the animal has only needs. (Zambrano 1926, 19–20)

By this means, it can be argued that Zambrano, at this stage, seeks to critique the autonomy of the economy by defining it essentially in terms of its instrumental value. This definition brings the economic closer to a logic of use value; however, Zambrano does not aim to reproduce the

Marxian distinction but rather expands the category to include any human demand, distinguishing such demands from basic needs, proper to non-human animals. Later, it will be seen how this line of argument is modified.

Returning to this perspective, Zambrano urges us to think of human beings' relationship with things beyond their own nature, distinguishing two ways of relating to the economic: that of the vain person and that of the ascetic. The vain person is one who persists in their own nature, since, by attempting to divert attention from themselves onto *their* possessions, they cease to work on their personal worth, becoming themselves a thing (Zambrano 1926, 25). For this reason, the author places the vain person on the plane of the zoological, whereas the ascetic preserves the essence of the human (Zambrano 1926, 22). This essence consists in "rejecting what primarily interests them in the name of something that is not among things" (Zambrano 1926, 18). One can thus observe the author's effort to affirm—against an economic system that privileges the opulence of the vain—a conception of the ascetic's freedom as a transcendence not only with respect to things, but also with respect to the present, because "[life] too can and must unfold under the sign of the eternal, and perhaps eternity is attained only, like wisdom, through the decision to be eternal" (Zambrano 1926, 19).

On the other hand, María Zambrano considers that these two ways of being in relation to the economic have been transmitted into the present through two values that give rise to two distinct political orientations: while the freedom of the ascetic animates liberalism, the life prioritized by the vain person is exercised within socialism. This does not mean that these ways of being remain contained within each political proposal, since, as the author states, "the same attitudes, the same stridencies, and even the same phraseology that we find in bourgeois parties

can also be found in proletarian parties" (Zambrano 1926, 27). What is transmitted is the value that functioned as the foundation of each, albeit formulated in different ways:

> What is striking is that the freedom affirmed by liberalism is nothing more than one dimension of freedom—the capacity to use and act upon things—and the same occurs with the life affirmed by socialism, because in truth it is only one dimension of life, namely, the mere persistence of the human being as a natural being (Zambrano 1926, 29).

Liberalism, therefore, sets in motion a type of freedom—economic freedom—which is channeled through a particular kind of modern demand: property rights. These, in turn, draw the liberal, like the ascetic, toward a profound individualism that renders them incapable of perceiving the community and sets them against the rights of life (Zambrano 1926, 36–37). Meanwhile, the vain person lives in a socialized manner, in the sense that, because they must constantly attend to their surroundings, they cease to attend to themselves as a person. For this reason, Zambrano states, they "turn life into theatre" (1926, 26),[16] but she insists that:

> The tragedy of the social movements that are now in decline is that they have never been concerned with instilling in the masses [...] the belief that the abolition of property would amount to very little if they did not feel destined to live in another way. (Zambrano 1926, 16)

[16] From this assertion, Antolín Sánchez Cuervo (2024) developed an important line of interpretation concerning the role played by the metaphor of the visage throughout María Zambrano's work.

In this way, the philosopher calls for work toward a popular education, in the same spirit as her father's efforts at the Segovian Popular University. However, Zambrano maintains that Marxist parties are beyond possible resurrection, because they have never considered the value of the symbolic. She further adds that "the struggle [between political proposals] was framed as a question of force" (Zambrano 1926, 16)—a question of force because, according to the author, socialism could not have arisen except in opposition to capitalist liberalism.

Thus, it becomes clear how María Zambrano, already in this early work, identifies unresolved problems in the two major alternatives to fascism dominant in her time. If liberalism has ceased to function because it has yielded to capitalism, socialism likewise fails to offer an independent alternative, since it always operates in opposition to the liberal regime. Even so, the philosopher warns that this does not mean that capitalism has triumphed; on the contrary: "if those social phenomena that have just faded away were possible, it is because they found their proper medium in the ruins of the capitalist regime" (Zambrano 1926, 16). These are ruins that are still inhabited in the twenty-first century, and from which Zambrano's appeal addresses us more urgently than ever:

> What is now urgent is to place the economic at the service of the human, but at the same time it is urgent to seek the essence of the human by other paths, and perhaps this is the meaning of the political crisis in which Europe lies submerged. (Zambrano 1926, 17)

To conclude, the author invites us to attempt another way of living in which, in order to confront the difficulties posed by capitalism, the latter is not "the target of all demands" (Zambrano 1926, 44). It must be ensured that the economy once again depends on the human, and not the other way around, embracing a revolution in the meaning of the human which, as María Zambrano (1926, 48) states, "is imposed upon us in the name of morality."

2.2. Horizonte del Liberalismo *(1930), María Zambrano's First Published Book*

Taking as her point of departure the conclusion of her unpublished manuscript—the "attempt to try out another way of living" with which it ends—María Zambrano will articulate in *Horizonte del liberalismo* her first definition of politics: "one engages in politics whenever one thinks about directing life," and she continues, "politics is always reform, creation, revolution" ([1930] 2022, 31–32). Thus, the author resumes her reflection where she had left it in the manuscript, taking up some of the themes already addressed, such as the construction of political forms grounded in freedom or in life. At the same time, she introduces significant changes, especially in the cases she uses to analyze them: while capitalist liberalism remains her reference point for thinking about politics based on freedom, in the sphere of those centered on life she abandons the socialism that existed in Europe—which, for her, no longer appears as a viable option—and turns instead toward an analysis of contemporary Russian communism. Likewise, the problems she identifies in both models continue along the lines of the earlier manuscript, though they incorporate new nuances. Thus, policies inspired by life are grounded, according to Zambrano ([1930] 2022, 38), in a rationalized life that seeks to dominate spontaneity rather than surrender to it; for their part, policies based on freedom may lead to a problem of tolerance, in which "no more than one individual is acknowledged: our own, rejecting all diversity" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 39).

She goes further, proposing a new distinction between revolutionary politics, those that reckon with time, and conservative politics, expressed through a demand for permanence, thereby betraying their own dynamic essence (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 41–43). These political forms do not directly correspond to those previously mentioned but rather constitute a new axis within which any kind of politics may be situated. What is particularly striking in this classification is the shift in the appreciation of time: whereas in the manuscript the emphasis falls on transcendence, in this first book the importance of not underestimating immanence is highlighted:

> Every system of thought—save for rare exceptions—was atemporal; it erected its ideological castle upon the stripped, skeletal foundations of the ideal, of the supratemporal, disdaining the humble earthly silt where the ferment of time makes life germinate. We now long for a politics that recognizes this humble yet powerful factor of time. (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 43)

It is such a politics that María Zambrano proposes through a socializing reformulation of liberalism, since "'Liberty, equality, fraternity,' proclaims the venerable motto in its latest incarnation. Yet from the very beginning, the latter two were sacrificed for the first. It was inevitable" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 69). Based on this diagnosis, the author defends the need for a "new liberalism" capable of overcoming the limitations of the prevailing model. To this end, in *Horizonte del liberalismo* her analysis operates in a double direction: on the one hand, in a negative sense, through the examination of the internal paradoxes of contemporary liberalism; on the other, in a positive sense, through the formulation of a series of suggestions aimed at resolving these contradictions. Let us first consider the critique she articulates.

The first contradiction lies in its ethical framework, since liberalism has discarded the legitimacy of instinct, passion, and the irrational—that is, not only its relation to the suprahuman, but also to the infrahuman—in favor of the will of reason. The author considers that: "Liberalism is the greatest faith in the human being and, therefore, the least in everything else […]. It inspired the utmost confidence in his own forces and left him navigating alone" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 82–83).

The second contradiction lies in its close relationship with Protestant religion, since the most solid liberalism developed in history, according to Zambrano, is the English one, rooted in Protestantism. This religious liberalism of the Protestant "contains within it the ancient and dangerous question […] of the individual and the species, of the individual and every supra-individual organization" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 89). In other words, it carries with it the medieval problem of Aristotelian universals, which divided realist theorists—who upheld the independent existence of universals and, by extension, of society—and nominalists—who denied such existence outside the particular individual. The inheritance of nominalism taken up by Protestantism, combined with the modern aspiration to scientific knowledge, leads liberalism to establish the priority of the individual, thereby intensifying what already follows from its ethical paradox.

The third and final contradiction revisits the considerations of the manuscript, arguing that "the spiritual postulates of liberalism cannot be realized through liberal economics" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 104), i.e., through capitalism, because it is based on "the effective enslavement of immense human masses, which sustains the aristocracy" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 101). This not only reveals an economic problem but, as noted at the end of the unpublished text, also a moral one: the very slavery that sustains capitalism is what makes cultural creation possible, since only

those who do not need to work can devote time to thought and creativity. This technique upon which the European cultural edifice rests is what Zambrano calls a "sapience of domination" ([1930] 2022, 102). However, she reiterates, as in the manuscript, that communism does not constitute a solution either, since its spiritual dimension is entirely permeated by economic dogma, which Zambrano describes as "anti-dynamic," insofar as it denies any supposition that transcends the human and revitalizes it ([1930] 2022, 96–98). Thus, in the concluding chapter of the book, one finds a proposal for a new liberalism that includes a new economy capable of maintaining the tension between economic freedom and the full socialization of the means of production (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 100).

Up to this point, the initial intuitions of the manuscript remain in the published work. However, in the final two pages, a shift in perspective occurs regarding the economic. María Zambrano admits that the economy "represents a dependence of the human being, a necessity to secure one's sustenance" ([1930] 2022, 113). In this sense, the author acknowledges that, although "the economic must be understood from the depths of the human" (Zambrano 1926, 5), as she states in the manuscript, its essence does not lack substantiveness—as she had claimed on the following page (Zambrano 1926, 6)—but rather that it "must be freedom *from*, freedom *based upon*, and not freedom in a void" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 110). With this, Zambrano admits that the economy constitutes the necessity of securing sustenance, and whereas in the unpublished text she denied the possibility of a non-human economy—arguing that the economy acquires meaning only for the human being, insofar as it goes beyond the satisfaction of biological needs—in the published book she revises this argument and accepts the following: "Let us acknowledge this servitude and let it not trouble us to be slaves to necessity—which, in one form or another, must always weigh upon us—in order to be free in our own sphere" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 113).

Thus, it can be argued that, whereas in *Lo económico y lo humano* the author seeks to differentiate the human animal from the non-human through the economic, in *Horizonte del liberalismo* her gesture moves in a more nuanced direction, one that brings the human being closer to its natural environment, establishing a continuity between human singularity and the world. This appears more clearly in this paragraph:

> The profound significance of liberalism [...] represented the utmost confidence, the most intense faith in the human, and at the same time the most absolute exclusion of all non-human forces. Consequently: solitude; the solitude of the human being before the immense world. For this reason, it shuns grace, the unforeseen, everything that is the fruit of spontaneity. In elevating the human, it deprived it of a total and absolute world of communication with nature, which creates and sustains. Hence also its sterility. (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 108)

The main shift in perspective regarding the economic between the unpublished manuscript and the published book lies in María Zambrano's appraisal of nature and, more broadly, of the earthly world. Whereas in the manuscript she disparages it—bringing the essence of the human closer to the ascetic, who "thus affirms its freedom in the midst of the fatality that governs natural events" (Zambrano 1926, 14)—in the final publication she criticizes both the resigned attitude of one who waits "for angels to come down and tend our orchard while we look on," and that of the liberal who, "expecting everything from himself, wishes—jealously, modestly—to resolve all the cares of his existence by himself" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 109–110). In response, she asks: "would it not be right to cultivate—like the active liberal—our orchard with our own hands, and

to leave to the angels […] the intimacy, the hidden flow of our inner orchard?" (Zambrano [1930] 2022, 110).

Finally, it is seen how the philosopher seeks to build bridges between the political and economic proposals of her time through the complementarity between the material and the symbolic. In this sense, María Zambrano does not renounce the autonomy of the individual in the management of their material life—that is, in the possibility of freely shaping their living conditions—but neither does she accept that this autonomy should be exhausted within a purely economic or self-sufficient horizon. Rather, she proposes a recovery of the symbolic as a shared dimension of existence, in which intimacy is not confined to the private sphere but maintains a certain openness to the collective. It is precisely at this point that she distances herself both from liberalism—due to its individualist retreat—and from socialism or communism, which, while affirming the collective, fails to articulate it with symbolic depth. It is also here that her thought becomes most relevant today, if the neoliberal present is considered—the latest iteration of capitalism that she did not live to see, and which represents the most extreme form of individual enclosure, something Zambrano already anticipated. Even more relevant is the mediating space she proposes between these dimensions, material and symbolic, collective and individual. This space is not abstract or ideal, but concrete and material: the orchard. In it, labor and the care of life are brought together with an inner dimension that is not separated from the common, turning her proposal into a reconciliation between individual, community, and nature.

3. Conclusions

As a final reflection, it is worth emphasizing that María Zambrano's thinking on the economic—and, more specifically, on the capitalism of her time, which she intertwines with liberalism—lies

at the very foundation of her philosophical work as the initial impulse of her reasoning. This journey through the early texts of Zambrano allows for a more precise appreciation of the genesis and development of her economic thought, which later takes on a political dimension.

In the first section, the vital and historical context reveals how her personal experiences, her philosophical training, and her immersion in the political debates of the 1920s constitute the background of her initial reflections. In the second section, the unpublished manuscript *Lo económico y lo humano* (1926) reveals, on the one hand, that the initial point of reference for thinking about the cultural crisis—and the reason why many scholars have described her thought as "a philosophy of crisis"—is the economic situation of her time. It also reveals her first intuitions about the economy as a human relation to the world, distinguishing between the sphere of the utilitarian—to which the economy ought to be confined—and that which enables us to transcend it. On the other hand, her first published book, *Horizonte del liberalismo* (1930), shows both the consolidation and transformation of these ideas: the author reaffirms the need to think about the economy, while situating it within a broader framework in which political questions assume greater significance. This shift is accompanied by an acknowledgment of economic dependence as a vital necessity, adopting a more nuanced perspective that places the human being in closer continuity with the natural world.

While remaining attentive to this contextual and conceptual framework and without seeking to attribute to Zambrano intellectual currents that do not properly correspond to her work, these concluding remarks also point to possible new avenues of research in light of contemporary concerns and debates, particularly those emerging from the Anthropocene understood as an ecological, political, economic, and philosophical problem. In this sense, what is being suggested here— and further elaborated in other works— can be understood as a hermeneutical approach

that reads texts from our situated present, following Haraway (1988), but also Gadamer (1998), not in order to detach them from their historical context or to project contemporary categories onto them, but to bring into view dimensions that may not have been foregrounded in previous readings and to explore whether they can still offer something to think with, or even open up new perspectives on authors who already belong to history. As Elena Laurenzi (2024, 255) similarly suggests, in her reading of Zambrano through the theory of sexual difference:

> It is not intended to attribute a feminist position to Zambrano, but rather to consider her thought in light of the questions, themes, methodologies, and hermeneutical categories that have been developed within the framework of feminist reflection.

From this point of view, María Zambrano's reflections on capitalism in the unpublished manuscript *Lo económico y lo humano* (1926), when interpreted through the lens of the environmental humanities, place her in an interesting dialogue with the critique developed by Anna Tsing in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

Whereas Zambrano (1926, 44) argues that the capitalist system has become the target of all our demands, Tsing challenges the vision of capitalism as "a giant bulldozer [that] appears to flatten the earth to its specifications" (2021, 61). Although they proceed from different intellectual traditions, both question the centrality often attributed to capitalism. Moreover, while Zambrano calls for thinking beyond capitalism—since, if socialism could arise as an alternative, it is precisely because it found "its proper medium in the ruins of the capitalist regime" (Zambrano 1926, 16)—Tsing likewise draws attention to those non-capitalist elements upon which capitalism depends,

which become particularly visible in the ruined forests left by capitalist expansion (Tsing 2021, 66).

In this sense, both thinkers shift their attention toward what capitalism cannot fully absorb or exhaust, a move that brings the notion of ruins to the forefront of their reflections. To this end, Tsing develops an account of capitalist ruins as the traces left in forests across the world when they are struck by the destructive forces of capitalist expansion. This perspective could be enriched by María Zambrano's reflections, both in the unpublished manuscript and in the chapter on "Ruins" that she would develop years later in *El hombre y lo divino* (Zambrano 2024, 287–297), whose conception of ruin temporality offers a distinctive perspective from which to rethink Tsing's forest ruins.

Similarly, *Horizonte del liberalismo*, when approached from contemporary ecological concerns, foregrounds Zambrano's perspective on nature and non-human forces, opening up new ways of reading her thought. The same applies to her approach to care. More specifically, toward the end of the text, Zambrano ([1930] 2022, 109–110) speaks of caring for the orchard as a material and symbolic space in which the individual must act as an agent, while also cultivating a form of openness that enables relations with others.[17] This aspect might have remained underexplored were it not for the fact that contemporary thinkers, though coming from different historical and conceptual contexts, have begun to make similar claims. A notable example is Alicia Puleo, who in the introduction to *Claves ecofeministas para rebeldes que aman a la Tierra y a los animales,* proposes the cultivation of an ecofeminist garden-orchard:

[17] On this point, the article by Piergiacomo Severini (2022) is especially noteworthy, as it connects María Zambrano's thought with that of Simone Weil and Jeanne Hersch, precisely through their shared awareness of alterity in the natural world as a condition of possibility for individual freedom and transcendental truth.

> The ecofeminist garden-orchard that I cultivate does not preach withdrawal from the world, but rather a historical commitment against patriarchal forms of insatiable will to domination that led to the ecological crisis. Green and rebellious, free and full of life, its sunlit paths and shaded trails invite us to imagine and project a future world […] without human or animal exploitation and in which diversity is not a cause for oppression. (Puleo [2019] 2022, 9)

Puleo's image invites us to return to Zambrano's text to ask what kind of orchard she calls us to care for, and what affinities and divergences emerge between these two visions. More importantly, it raises the question of whether Zambrano's orchard can still speak to the present. Read from this perspective, the orchard appears not merely as a private space of cultivation but as a figure through which to rethink forms of responsibility to and coexistence with both human and non-human others.

Taken as a whole, this paper not only contributes to a renewed understanding of Zambrano's intellectual development but also highlights the continued relevance of her thought and opens up new lines of inquiry, particularly in relation to her sensitivity toward nature. The comparison between manuscript and publication suggests that this sensitivity, still incipient in her early texts, gradually becomes consolidated, revealing the importance of exploring how her ideas on economy, politics, ontology, and ethics intertwine with her conception of the natural world.

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