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Homo oeconomicus, Homo collectivus and Homo religatus

Nathanaël Wallenhorst¹

Abstract This article is an extension to ‘The Human Condition in the Anthropocene’ and ‘The Human Adventure’ (cross-reference). The former suggests that the dawn of the Anthropocene should bring about a shift in our understanding of humanity. The latter explores the potential relevance of the notion of the ‘human adventure’, as opposed to the human race. This notion emphasises the uncertainty of the future, the possibility of altering the characteristics on which we are contingent, and the need for political anthropology that acknowledges the ‘adventure’ of living. This article expands on the conceptualisation of the human adventure, dividing it into *Homo oeconomicus*, *Homo collectivus* and *Homo religatus*. Each of these concepts refers to one of the human adventure’s three dimensions: *hubris*, the world and coexistence – hence, this article should be read directly after “The Human Adventure”.

To begin with, let us look at *hubris* and the drive for profit behind *Homo oeconomicus*.

The rampant capitalism and consumerism born of the Industrial Revolution go hand in hand with burgeoning individualisation. Today’s individuals are consumers, seeking to maximise their own interests. The capitalist economy has become all encompassing, and hegemonic (Peyrelevade, 2005). Consequently, individuals today are indistinguishable from *Homo oeconomicus*, characterised by an omnipresent drive for profit and consumption. *Homo oeconomicus* is a creation of the Industrial Revolution, but also the manifestation of the utilitarian paradigm. The limitations of utilitarianism have been demonstrated by a raft of anti-utilitarian writers (Caillé, Chaniel, Dufoix, Vandenberghe, 2018). *Homo oeconomicus* is the self-interested individual so plainly described by 18th-Century Scottish economist Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, with his well-known ‘invisible hand’ metaphor. Smith contends that the pursuit of individual interests benefits the collective. This utilitarian logic was built upon and further explored by British writers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and has since been seized upon by a host of so-called ‘classic’ liberal economists.

The limitations of *homo oeconomicus* are considerable, and are regularly pointed out in the literature: *Homo oeconomicus* ‘has neither “altruism” nor “responsibility” for others and for future generations’ (Faber, Petersen & Schiller, 2002, p. 324). In a way, *Homo oeconomicus* is an extension of Descartes’ ‘subject’, one step removed from his environment, which he attempts to understand and to exploit (Flahault, 2005, p. 378). However, the rationality of *Homo oeconomicus* is relative. In the view of economist Christian Arnsperger, he is incapable of reflecting on what is behind his rationality, and is ‘deaf and blind to his own worries and existential anguish’ (Arnsperger, 2011). Thus, the dominant anthropological model today, based on *Homo oeconomicus*, is that of ‘economic growth rooted in the psychology of lack’ (Arnsperger, 2010, p. 25). The logic of accumulation at the heart of capitalism causes those

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who have too much to develop an illusory sense of immortality. Individuals fear the future, which will inevitably bring suffering, frailty and, ultimately, death; and they fight tooth and nail against that ‘horizon of existential finitude’ (Arnsperger, 2010, p. 24) through capitalism. We could even go so far as to say, as Arnsperger does, that the terror of frailty and death, which *Homo oeconomicus* cannot comprehend, is at the root of today’s economic crisis.

Hannah Arendt shows that, in contemporary society, the role of political action is assumed by the acts of manufacture and consumption. Thus, economics has triumphed over politics: labour has been emancipated, with the *animal laborans* occupying public space – though in reality, this is a private space that is exposed to public view (Arendt, 1958, p. 150). Useful articles created to serve, and artisanal products, have become consumer goods. An item such as a dress or a chair may be consumed and disposed of almost as quickly as would food (Arendt, 1958, p. 140). *Homo oeconomicus* occupies the space between humans.

Secondly, we shall look at the awareness of the world and the logic of responsibility driving *Homo collectivus*.

While the rationale behind *Homo oeconomicus* has become practically hegemonic in today’s society, it is at odds with another anthropological component, marked by collective rather than individual interest. In the academic literature, the anthropological model underlying the maximisation of collective interests is defined as *Homo politicus* (the term *politicus* was included in the 16th-Century Latin *Dictionarium* by Robert Estienne, referring to ‘civility’ or ‘civilis’ – Demonet, 2005). *Homo politicus* is an alternative concept for human behaviour, differing markedly from *Homo oeconomicus*. The concept of *Homo politicus* ‘is founded on political philosophy and hinges on human interest for justice for the good of the community’ (Faber, Petersen & Schiller, 2002, p. 324). *Homo politicus* refers to responsibility, which is the polar opposite of the individualism that is so rife today. *Homo politicus* champions responsibility and the civic desire to maximise ‘social wellbeing’ (Nyborg, 2000, p. 306). Faber, Petersen & Schiller define *Homo politicus* as ‘human behaviour which tries to consider what is best for society’ (2002, p. 328). In the eyes of British historian John Greville Agard Pocock, *Homo politicus* is linked to Aristotle’s *zōon politikon*, affirming its existence and virtue, meaning that man is in the [Aristotelian] City and that is his rightful place. *Homo politicus* is the *Homo* of the world and concern for others besides oneself – it is in stark contrast to *hubris*.

Homo politicus is important in this understanding of the human adventure, which it helps define, without essentialisation. Human beings are constituted and defined by a range of external factors, rather than by ones inherent to their person. However, it may be difficult to conceive of *Homo politicus*, in that it is partly linked to the *Homo religatus* – the third anthropological component that we intend to study. *Homo politicus* does not exist except in connection with other humans. Indeed, ‘Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. (...). Because philosophy and theology are always concerned with *man*, because all their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics? (...) [there] is the assumption that there is something political in *man* that belongs to his essence. This simply is not so; man is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*’ (Arendt, 1993, pp. 31-32).

There appear to be two preconditions for politics to arise ‘between men’: the presence of a pluralist collective and the sharing of human existence. The term *politicus*, which refers primarily to the first condition, is ambiguous in relation to the politics we are attempting to define here. The main component of *Homo politicus*, as defined above, is the capacity to focus on the interests of the collective in a very broad sense – that broad collective cannot simply be reduced to the specific group to which the individual belongs. This anthropological subset – the individual that can focus on the interests of a collective bigger than his own group – can be

called *Homo collectivus*. The term *collectivus* has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxist collectivism or communist totalitarianism, in which the pluralistic nature of the collective is suppressed. Rather, *Homo collectivus* indicates the capacity for individuals to understand the interests of a vast, pluralist group, based on the logic of responsibility.

Homo collectivus offers a form of resistance to the hegemonic *Homo oeconomicus*, which is manifested, for example, in the thinking of Jonas and Arendt. *Homo collectivus*'s relationship with the environment is one of sustainability and durability, but founded on solidarity with the rest of the biosphere, which represents a space for political coexistence. In part, *Homo collectivus* is linked with *Homo sustinens* (Siebenhüner, 2000), and the anthropological characteristics of *Homo reciprocus* (Gintis, 2000) are also fundamental for sustainability (Faber, Petersen & Schiller, 2002, p. 332). *Homo collectivus* is responsible not only for other humans, but for everything in the biosphere, which becomes an *agora* (Cabanès, 2017; Weber & Kurt, 2015; Pelluchon, 2017; Servigne & Chapelle, 2017).

Finally, let us look at coexistence and the sense of hospitality driving *Homo religatus*.

Homo religatus refers to a human who, rather than existing in essence, in his own right, exists specifically in relation to others. The concept includes the same relationship to the universe outside of oneself as does *Homo collectivus*: that world is viewed from the perspective of human plurality for *Homo collectivus*, while *Homo religatus* relates to a singular 'other'. *Homo religatus* is the human of relationships, interconnected with others, whose coexistence (i.e. shared existence) precedes existence. The word *existence* comes from the Latin *ex stance*, meaning standing outside. It refers to the idea that we can only live by being in the world (Boutinet, 1990). Existence is the common condition which all members of the human adventure share.

From the time of Aristotle, it has been understood that *man* is made human by having a place in society. One of the fundamental paradigms in our understanding of human beings is that they are relational: our existence is preceded by that of others. Hence, existing equates to existing alongside others, and 'self-interest is inseparable from the (positive or negative) interest paid to others' (Flahault, 2008, p. 315). This logic of coexistence requires us to fit within a certain clearly bounded framework, in which each individual has their place. For coexistence to take precedence over existence, certain limitations must be imposed, which runs counter to the limitless cycle of desire and response that is the cornerstone of economics. Indeed, one of the features of the modern era is denial about the finitude of our environment, and consequently, denial about our own human finitude.

In his latest book, French anthropologist François Flahault continues to demonstrate that the individual does not precede society (2018). This is a crucial point, because as a corollary thereof, economics is the cornerstone of societies. Drawing on a series of contemporary scientific works – particularly ones in the field of biology, focusing on the principle of 'coevolution' – Flahault constructs a post-Promethean anthropology that flies in the face of work such as Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus* (2015), which has enjoyed widespread success. Humanity did not shape itself; and no more does each individual shape themselves without outside intervention. Against the modern, individual-centred utilitarian ideology, Flahault demonstrates the importance of relationships, and the need for joint reflection about the living world, the environment, the organism and its biotope (also see Delannoy, 2017). This is a drastic paradigmatic shift away from the modern concepts of individuals and subjects.

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