

**THE ORIGINS OF *HOMO ECONOMICUS*:  
A NOTE**

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Searching for the origins of *homo economicus*, a cherished certainty of mainstream economics, is similar to the experience of the archaeologist. One never knows beforehand where the next dig will lead and what tiny piece of evidence may be all important in fixing the origins of this expression which is used so widely and so readily in teaching the economic way of thinking. Our research to date has been prompted simply by a need to know, to know more or in Latin *cognoscere*. Perhaps someday it will lead to identifying definitively where, when, and at whose hand this expression first came into use.

Three articles in the September 2000 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* call attention to a two-part question regarding the economic agent which from the very beginning economics has answered by taking hold of one part and setting aside the other. Does human sociality play a role in economic behavior or is it strictly human individuality which is the proper domain of economic science? Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1976a) embraces human individuality while his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1976b) opts for human sociality.

Fehr and Gächter frame the issue as follows:

We believe that for important questions in these areas [such as labor market interactions, public goods, and social norms] progress will not come from additional tweaking of a pure self-interest model, but rather from recognizing that a sizable proportion of economic actors act on considerations of reciprocity (Fehr and Gächter 2000:178).

Ostrom phrases the question in terms of the self-interested agent.

It is possible that past policy initiatives to encourage collective action that were based primarily on externally changing payoff structures for rational egoists may have been misdirected -- and perhaps even crowded out the formation of social norms [such as reciprocity, trust, and fairness] that might have enhanced cooperative behavior in their own way (Ostrom 2000:154).

Manski presents the issue in terms of core concepts.

The very first step in undertaking research on social interactions is to get the concepts right. The core concepts -- of preferences, expectations, constraints, and equilibrium -- offer a coherent framework within which one can define rigorously and analyze constructively many interaction processes (Manski 2000:132).

The placement of these articles in the same issue, along with Joseph Stiglitz's (Stiglitz 2002: 488) observation in his 2001 Nobel lecture that "the economists' traditional model of the individual is too narrow," indicates that all is not right with *homo economicus* even in mainstream economics.

We began our search for the origins of *homo economicus* in 2001 by asking several colleagues to suggest sources which we might search. We were startled to learn that no one

knew for sure where the expression originated. They did, however, suggest numerous sources and leads all of which we pursued to no avail. For a listing of the sources we examined which were of no help in identifying the origins of *homo economicus*, the interested reader to avoid wasting time tracking down those sources may contact the author at edoboyle@earthlink.net.

Even so, we realized that we were not digging alone, though at times it has seemed so. Others have been interested at least in the archaeological sense that they regard *homo economicus* as a creature of the past, one that needs a fitting burial service and final resting place. For example, *homo economicus* has been constituted to embrace reason but not faith, philosophy but not theology, self-indulgence but not self-denial, thereby eliminating the messy problem of reconciling the radical tension between such opposites that enter into everyday human events including economic affairs.

Our search of the literature uncovered these replacements for *homo economicus*: *homo reciprocans* (Gintis and Orr no date:2), *homo politicus* (Nyborg 2000:306; Carruthers 1994:165-194), *homo sociologicus* (Hirsch, Michaels, and Friedman 1990:39-56; Weale 1992:62-72), *homo socio-economicus* (Nitsch 1982:20-49; Nitsch 1983:16-18; Lindenberg 1990:727-748; O'Boyle 1994:287-288), *homo hobbesianus* and *homo darwinianus* (Wiker 2002: no page number), *homo orthodox* (Dinello 1998:no page number), *neo-homo economicus and paleo-homo economicus* (Doucouliagos 1994:1-5; Pearson 2000:933-989), *homo erroneus* and *homo gustibus* (Pearson 2000:933-989), *homo sovieticus* (Josef Tischner)<sup>1</sup>, *homo heroicus* (Drucker 1939:137), and *homo sapiens* (Thaler 2000:133-141). There have been as well a few attempts to re-make *rational economic man* such as Jensen's *socio-cultural person* (Jensen 1987:1039-1073) and, citing Pareto, Aspers' *moral man and religious man* (Aspers 2001:no page number).

As we continued to dig, we encountered some confusion regarding the origins of *homo economicus*. Sheasby (Sheasby no date:2), for instance, attributes the expression to Adolph Löwe's *Economics and Sociology* (Löwe 1935). With Zabieglík (Zabieglík 2002:3-4) concurring, Persky (Persky 1995:222) identifies the term as originating with Vilfredo Pareto's *Manual* (Pareto 1906) though he openly admits that he had not completed a thorough search of sources in Europe. Pareto<sup>2</sup> himself ascribes it to Vito Volterra (Volterra 1901:436-458).

To date, we have clearly identified Maffeo Pantaleoni's *Principii di Economia Pura* (Pantaleoni 1889)<sup>3</sup> as the earliest use of *homo economicus* in print. We also discovered use of *oeconomicus* alone in Karl Rau's *Grundsätze Volkswirtschaftslehre* (Rau 1847, 1826) suggesting that perhaps the full expression originated in the German-language economics literature well before Pantaleoni's use. It is well-known that Xenophon's

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<sup>1</sup> See Goldfarb (Goldfarb 1994:1), Halik (Halik no date:4), and Alakbarov (Alakbarov 2002:2).

<sup>2</sup> In English text (Pareto 1971:12); in Italian text (Pareto 1906:14).

<sup>3</sup> Pantaleoni (1889) used it on pages 11, 30-31, 53, 58, 67, 68, 106-107, and 120. However, he was not an enthusiastic advocate of *homo economicus* (see Bellanca 1997:117-118).

Socratic dialogue on household management [*οἰκονομικός λόγος*] centuries later was translated by Cicero into the Latin *oeconomicus* (Botley 2004:9).

In a private exchange of correspondence a colleague who has addressed the meaning of *homo economicus* extensively in the German-language economics literature volunteered that indeed it might be traced to an early or mid-19<sup>th</sup> century German economist who initiated its use in order to add more weight to the underlying concept. We were unsuccessful in finding *homo economicus* in the published works of Carl Menger, though our digging through his work and others published in German cannot be taken as definitive because we do not speak or read that language. That part of this archaeological venture is best left to those with the necessary language tools. See the appendix for a listing of German and Italian language sources that could be helpful in identifying the origins of *homo economicus*.

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**APPENDIX**  
**GERMAN AND ITALIAN LANGUAGE SOURCES WHICH MAY BE OF SOME HELP IN**  
**IDENTIFYING THE ORIGINS OF *HOMO ECONOMICUS***

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