

rather than outbursts of applause was the medium of success" (87). Machiavelli anyone?

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Daniel Cohen: *Homo Economicus: The (Lost) Prophet of Modern Times*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2014. Pp. vi, 155.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670515000443

Daniel Cohen's *Homo Economicus: The (Lost) Prophet of Modern Times* is an intriguing, puzzling, and flawed work. It aspires to offer an accessible and comprehensive critique of the impact of the dominant economic model of competitive, rational agency. Perhaps it is to be welcomed as a manifestation of an emerging new economics, critical of the discipline's basic assumptions, drawing on experimental economics, history, and social theory, rather than on deductive and game-theoretic models. Yet Cohen never provides a clear or comprehensive theoretical framework for his criticisms of *homo economicus*—his work is impressionistic and anecdotal, the economist's equivalent of the pictorial tourist maps that pick out points of interest, using appealing not-to-scale pictures to orient the reader. Just as pictorial maps have a function for the inexperienced tourist, so Cohen's book may provide a serviceable sketch of various critical claims concerning the dominant model of economic agency. It is not, however, likely to displace that model or to prove an essential reference point for those who wish to do so.

It is regrettable that *homo economicus*, the central concept of Cohen's book, is a moving target, never clearly defined. Broadly speaking, the term refers to the model of instrumental rational agency that has predominated in modern economics and in capitalist market activity. According to Cohen, this is increasingly seen as the exclusive model of all human agency and experience and the central vehicle of individual happiness. *Homo economicus* emphasizes individual competition for material benefits and rational profit-seeking/-maximizing behavior over all other human goals and practices—empathy, ethics, and politics—with distorting effects on the pursuit of happiness and on all practices of cooperation and reciprocity.

Essentially, this is a critique of commodification, and much of Cohen's energy is devoted to listing the types of distorting effects brought about by commodification and to furnishing examples or illustrations of them. This is in fact the main thrust of his argument—an account of the various negative

consequences of treating a limited model of competitive behavior as the model for all human activity.

Cohen asks: why do we find that modern Western societies, virtually defined by their dedication to the idea that earthly happiness is the goal of humanity, and despite significant improvements in the material conditions of life, are manifesting increasing signs of unhappiness? In fact, there are various possible explanations for this phenomenon, some couched at the level of history of ideas, others psychological. One might also wonder whether this is a single phenomenon, or whether trends with different sources—secularization, political alienation, social atomization, global crises, and discontent with growing inequalities—are producing and reinforcing behaviors and self-perceptions associated with unhappiness. Cohen does not seriously consider these matters, asserting instead that the specific cause of modern unhappiness is the dissemination of the attitudes of *homo economicus* to areas of life whose value and significance are destroyed when their intrinsically spontaneous and cooperative qualities are not recognized. One of the numerous anecdotal or illustrative examples of this tendency provided by Cohen will suffice to convey the nature and style of his argument. Faced with shortages, the director of a blood bank began to offer financial remuneration to donors. To his consternation, the result was a drop in the number of blood donors. According to Cohen, this is because the offer of payment failed to recognize that blood donors are typically motivated by generosity and a sense of the noninstrumental character of their act, both of which are undermined by payment (2, 25). The meaning of the act was destroyed by turning it into a financial transaction.

Besides causing widespread distortions in forms of social interaction, Cohen thinks that overreliance on *homo economicus* also has perverse economic effects. Here he recounts a very familiar story—the outsourcing of jobs engaged in by firms since the 1980s, driven not by the goal of technical efficiency, but by that of profit maximization. Because work has a cooperative as well as a competitive aspect, this has undermined the social value of work, and, in the absence of such a shared moral sense, has necessitated the increase of material incentives and penalties, producing a “new age of inequalities,” in which “residual inequalities” are accentuated and the emergence of a “hyper-class” is facilitated. In some throwaway remarks, not successfully integrated into the main line of argument concerning commodification, Cohen gestures toward the political impact of this situation—a decline in voluntary political participation in America, and a heavy dependence on defense expenditure and military technologies.

In addition to the critique of commodification, there is a second prong to Cohen’s argument: the claim that this model of economic agency and rationality is ill equipped to recognize and accommodate the potential implications of a number of new developments in contemporary society, the most significant of which seem to be “the digital society” and revolutions in genetics. Here, though he is no Marxist, Cohen flirts with Marxist terminology, citing Marx’s claim that a contradiction exists within capitalism between the forces and the relations of

production, or, as he glosses this, between these new technologies and the existing framework of private property. A new model of agency will be necessary if the full potential of these new technological and scientific developments is to be realized. Unfortunately, Cohen does not explain the exact nature of the contradiction at work here. In his discussion of digital society, he wavers between the suggestion that file sharing necessitates a more cooperative model of profit seeking, and the pessimistic claim that a new kind of individual is emerging: “a being that seems deprived of a clear awareness of itself, simultaneously in exteriority, under the constant gaze of others, and in inferiority performing under the multiple masks the unsatisfied portion of his or her fantasies” (94). The discussion of advances in the science of genetics manifests a similar oscillation between calls for a more open sharing of knowledge than is likely to occur under current economic pressures, and the expression of concerns about the impact of the genetic reengineering of the human body. All this produces the impression that, despite his obviously negative assessment of *homo economicus*, Cohen is far from sure about how to replace this model, or whether attempting to do so will unleash new monsters.

This impression is reinforced by one of the strangest sections of the book. In chapter 3, Cohen draws an analogy between the increasing inequalities in the later years of the Roman Empire and its growing reliance on war as a source of revenue, and the contemporary West. These tendencies were reined in by the advent of Christianity, which provided a new conception of selfhood, the origin of modern individualism, and a counter to Roman hierarchy. Cohen wonders whether “a spiritual revolution of the same scope is conceivable today, one provoked by the return of new social tensions, and the difficulty of making intelligible the way the world is moving” (41). It is, of course, heartening to encounter a work by an economist that displays a broad interest in history and social theory, and a quite impressive imaginative and literary breadth. It is disconcerting, however, to find buried at its heart a vague call for spiritual renewal.

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François Furet: *Lies, Passions, and Illusions: The Democratic Imagination in the Twentieth Century*. Trans. Deborah Furet. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. xxxv, 89.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670515000455

When François Furet died in July 1997, at the age of seventy, he was the world’s leading historian of the French Revolution, occupying distinguished