

HOMO ECONOMICUS AND THE ABSURD HUMAN

The neoliberal project offers a vision of two classes, the rich, and homo economicus, the consuming human. Homo economicus is a new creature in the world, one of a long string of visions offered to the great mass of humans by the elites. It has sunk in so quickly that we are often unable to perceive the changes in our fellow humans, or even in ourselves. A simple way to imagine this is to ask what happened to the 40-hour work week, that triumph of social engineering, that badge of the middle class, handed down to baby boomers by their parents as a proud accomplishment of their parents and grandparents. Now we, all of the workers of this country, scramble to put together a work life from bits and pieces, a misery endured by adjunct professors and fast-food workers alike; or we are so moored to work that we have no actual human life, like these hominids described by Digby.

Philip Mirowski describes homo economicus in his book *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, especially Chapter 3, Everyday Neoliberalism. One of the central attributes of neoliberal humans is ignorance, meaning a perfect inability to decide on what will bring about the best outcome for society. The only function consuming humans can perform is choosing among the alternatives presented by the markets at the moment, whether it's for consumption or for the purchase of their labor. Mirowski quotes a passage from *The Birth of Biopolitics* in which Michel Foucault discusses Adam Smith's invisible hand:

For there to be certainty of collective benefit, for it to be certain that the greatest good is attained for the greatest number of people, not only is it possible, but it is absolutely

necessary that each actor be blind with regard to this totality. Everyone must be uncertain with regard to the collective outcome if this positive collective outcome is really to be expected. Being in the dark[,] and the blindness of all the economic agents are absolutely necessary. The collective good must not be an objective. It must not be an objective because it cannot be calculated, at least, not within an economic strategy. Here we are at the heart of a principle of invisibility. ... It is an invisibility which means that no economic agent should or can pursue the collective good.

Again, ignorance in this sense means that individuals are not capable of doing more than deciding what is in their personal interest. In other words, they are the rational choice mechanisms in the markets envisioned by neoliberal economists, and, in fact, among almost all economists through the theory of microfoundations. Individuals lack any useful agency beyond satisfying their desire of the moment. Perhaps at a later moment, they discover and satisfy another desire. Then perhaps they work at their jobs, to earn money to consume something to satisfy the desire of some other moment.

Now look at the absurd Mersault, as drawn by Camus in *The Stranger*. He has no interest in past or future, only the present. He only moves to satisfy a want in a moment of time. Here's an example from the older Stuart Gilbert translation:

I told Marie about the old man's habits, and it made her laugh. She was wearing one of my pajama suits, and had the sleeves rolled up. When she laughed I wanted her again. A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't. She looked sad

for a bit, but when we were getting our lunch ready she brightened up and started laughing, and when she laughs I always want to kiss her.

Mersault is not stupid. He has a good job, does well at it, and is offered a transfer from Algiers to Paris to open a new branch for his employer. Here's his response.

I told him I was quite prepared to go; but really I didn't care much one way or the other.

He then asked if a "change of life," as he called it, didn't appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another, and my present one suited me quite well.

At this he looked rather hurt, and told me that I always shilly-shallied, and that I lacked ambition—a grave defect, to his mind, when one was in business. I returned to my work. I'd have preferred not to vex him, but I saw no reason for "changing my life." By and large it wasn't an unpleasant one. As a student I'd had plenty of ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile.

Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married.

Here's how Jean-Paul Sartre, another investigator of the absurd, describes *The Stranger*:

Each sentence is a present instant, but not an indecisive one that spreads like a stain to the following one. The sentence is sharp, distinct, and self-contained. It is separated by a void from the following one, just as Descartes's instant is separated from

the one that follows it. The world is destroyed and reborn from sentence to sentence. When the word makes its appearance it is a creation ex nihilo. The sentences in *The Stranger* are islands. We bounce from sentence to sentence, from void to void...

The sentences are not, of course, arranged in relation to each other; they are simply juxtaposed. In particular, all causal links are avoided lest they introduce the germ of an explanation and an order other than that of pure succession...

[Can] we speak of Camus's novel as something whole? All the sentences of his book are equal to each other, just as all the absurd man's experiences are equal. Each one sets up for itself and sweeps the others into the void. But, as a result, no single one of them detaches itself from the background of the others, except for the rare moments in which the author, abandoning these principles, becomes poetic.

This describes *Homo Economicus* perfectly. I buy something, and the marketplace moves on to the next instant. Perhaps I buy something else. It really doesn't matter. The market doesn't care. It has no meaning. The next instant occurs. The absurd person has no sense of past or future. There is only the minute. Then the next minute. Both the market and the person are unable to see a future or a past. This is the life neoliberals envision for us.

In the middle of *The Stranger*, Mersault kills a man. At the end, he is convicted and sentenced to death. It doesn't mean anything. It could have happened another way. Mersault is happy with his life. So is *homo economicus*. I guess.