

## HOMO CREATOR. THE CONCEPTION OF MAN IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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# Homo Creator.

## The Conception of Man in Social Anthropology

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La notion d'*homo creator* exprime l'idée que non seulement l'espèce humaine n'adhère pas aveuglément à une grammaire biologique établie par les lois spécifiques de la nature, mais qu'elle n'est pas non plus façonnée par des déterminismes sociaux, culturels et psychologiques.

Certainly, the concept of man in social anthropology differs substantially from the one tacitly shared by economists. Therefore, we ought to clarify at once that *homo creator* and *homo aëconomicus*, notion proposed by utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, are two radically divergent concepts, though they have some interesting similarities that we will discuss subsequently.

The notion of *homo creator* expresses the idea that the human species does not blindly adhere to a biogrammar established by specific laws of nature, nor is shaped by unavoidable social, cultural, and psychological compulsions. By likening social life to a stage on which either a comedy or a tragedy is enacted, we can say that the characters do not always stick to the text or to the play director's orders, but improvise and innovate, though not straying much from the play's plot. Therefore, the actor is not only a passive role player but also a co-author of the drama. Most likely, social life, in which we are all involved, can rightly be regarded as something resembling the *commedia dell'arte* in which actors improvised according to a scenario, i.e. a plot outline. Otherwise, in fact, the words individual

creativity and socio-cultural change would be meaningless and could be deleted from dictionaries.

The theatrical comparison wished to highlight that the idea of *homo creator*, as a specific anthropological view of man, firmly counters any attempt to cage the human being within the boundaries of scientific determinism, such as sociologism, anthropological culturalism, and psychological behaviorism. The first of these *isms*, drawing too superficially on French sociologist Emile Durkheim, sees man as a 'judgmental dope', i.e. as an unaware prisoner of social norms and resultant behaviors. The second one, inspired by the US 'culture and personality school', considers the human being as a subject whose personality is so conditioned by the culture he lives in that he can only slavishly follow the *cultural patterns* learnt in socialization processes during his infancy and adolescence. Finally, the third one, likewise from the US, reduces the person into someone who can only respond automatically to external stimuli.

Given the above, we could be induced to think that the anthropological view of man based on the notion of *homo creator* has a strong

L'idée d'*homo creator*, en tant que vision anthropologique et particulière de l'homme, s'oppose vivement à toute tentative d'enfermer l'être humain dans les limites du déterminisme scientifique, tels que le sociologisme, le culturalisme anthropologique et le comportementalisme psychologique.

Ainsi, nous pourrions être amenés à penser que la vision anthropologique de l'homme basée sur la notion d'*homo creator* présente une forte connotation volontariste. Il n'en est rien. L'anthropologie considère toujours que l'individu est impliqué dans un corps social et un système culturel.

voluntaristic connotation; wrongly so, though the anthropological post-modernism current has lately popularized a vision ruled by 'everything goes', i.e. individuals' total freedom to act without any socio-cultural bonds.

### ***Homo creator* invents his future**

Aside from this quite odd way of conceiving the individual without a society and cultural conditionings, anthropology still believes that the individual is *embedded* in a social body and a cultural system. According to anthropology, sheer voluntarism and radical individualism are illusions, utopias, or, in the worst case, ethic ornaments at the service of political interests. Thus, man is not entirely free to act as he wants to, but rather is enclosed within a social and cultural frame, which gives him ample leeway nonetheless. Members of a society build their present and devise their future by activating knowledge inherited from the past. This certainly does not mean that they reproduce the latter, as used to be thought, mistakenly so, about societies identified as traditional ones. The *homo creator* mobilizes, reconsiders, revises, rejects, and distorts the past into the present in order to plan the future. The past in general and history in particular, as historian Reinhardt Koselleck says, are the 'space of experience' (both direct and mediated from collective memory and intergenerational transmission) through which the *homo creator* de-

fines his 'horizon of expectations', i.e. invents his future. Yet in turn, the space of experience is ultimately a cognitive capital, i.e. the social knowledge of each individual, lacking which he would not be able to interpret the world and thus would not be able to act coherently in his social context.

### **Condemned to live in society**

When the anthropologist speaks about cognitive capital and social knowledge, he expresses and highlights the fact that the grounds to find one's bearing in the world, and thus also the elements and traits that make up a culture and its traditions, are not fixed but rather are continuously modified. The *homo creator*, according to his experiences in the present, constantly removes, adds, and redefines his knowledge, thus reconfiguring his store of knowledge, which by definition has a variable structure. This is why human identities, both individual and collective, cannot be unchangeable and static, notwithstanding what is commonly believed. The *homo creator* is *creator* precisely because of his potential to elude determinations and shape his own historicity.

To avoid any misunderstanding, we need to stress that the *homo creator* is a being who is literally unable to exist alone and therefore lives, or, one could say, is condemned to live in society. A person's cognitive capital is certainly subjective but most of it is shared by other members of a

L'homme n'est pas entièrement libre d'agir comme il le veut. Il est plutôt inclus dans un cadre social et culturel qui lui laisse néanmoins une large liberté d'action. Les membres d'une société construisent leur présent et imaginent leur futur en s'appliquant sur les connaissances héritées du passé. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'ils reproduisent ce dernier.

C'est pourquoi les identités humaines, qu'elles soient individuelles ou collectives, ne peuvent être immuables et statiques. Condamné à vivre en société, l'*homo creator* est précisément *creator* grâce à sa capacité à échapper aux déterminismes et à façonner sa propre historicité.

collectivity. So that others might understand what I mean when I shake someone's hand or wink at a woman, there is the need for a shared knowledge to properly interpret the messages and find one's way about in the above-mentioned situations.

### **Each action is meaningful**

In some Southeast Asian countries, the assumption that even brushing against the body of another person with one hand must be avoided, because polluting and thus offensive, belongs to the cognitive capital shared by members of these societies. Westerners exchange handshakes with the right hand to communicate respect or a reciprocal joint nature. At first however, this handshake was a peace gesture that meant 'we will not use a sword', which was placed on the left and drawn with the right hand for obvious practical reasons. This is the by now forgotten reason for shaking hands with the right hand and not the left hand. If we clap someone on the back, this gesture shows we are on friendly terms, that there is comradeship, and quite a close friendship. These examples are further evidence of what we have stated; in order to understand each other and respond adequately, we need a shared cultural grammar, i.e. the rules of the social game known to all members of a given collectivity. Max Weber's comprehensive sociology was already based on the assumption that the most commonplace daily action implies referring to the other; thus, in order to act, one

must be able to foresee and forestall the other's possible reactions thanks to the shared knowledge, which the *agents* take for granted.

However, this also means that cognitive capital and social knowledge as collective phenomena vary from one society to another and from one culture to another. One of anthropology's main tasks is in fact to study the variety of behaviors and point out their normality. Therefore, the normality of the differences characterizing the *homo creator* needs to be reconstructed through an interpretative method that takes into account the viewpoint of the subjects themselves. This project, though, implies that each action of the *homo creator*, unless due to sheer emotion such as specific panic situations, is *meaningful*. Thus, US anthropologist Clifford Geertz is in the right when he says that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.

### **Economic, social and symbolic capitals**

According to Geertz's definition, man is *homo creator* because he is a producer of meaning. In that case, we also need to add that he doesn't act solely to obtain means of subsistence or to better his material status. As the well-known adage says, 'man cannot live on bread alone'. On the contrary, he is a relentless producer of social representations and symbols that often become far more important than economic resources. Without this assumption, how could we

Le capital cognitif et la connaissance sociale, en tant que phénomènes collectifs, varient d'une société à l'autre et d'une culture à l'autre. L'une des tâches principales de l'anthropologie est en fait d'étudier la variété des comportements et de mettre en lumière leur normalité.

L'*homo creator* est un producteur inlassable de représentations sociales et de symboles, qui souvent deviennent bien plus importants que les ressources économiques, car ils peuvent être la condition nécessaire pour avoir accès à ces dernières, et donc à la richesse.

explain that the past hundred years have been the century of ideologies in which millions and millions of men all over the world have massacred and have let themselves be brutally killed in the name of ideals that have little to do with material needs? How should we explain the still relevant importance of honor, reputation, prestige, and respect (individual and collective) for which men, even now, are capable of taking their lives or taking others', of squandering entire fortunes, or sparking off bloody conflicts?

The feeling that one's honor is wounded, or losing one's face and thus the prestige, reputation, and respect of others, can be far more painful and unbearable than missing a chance for a good deal or dissipating a large sum on the stock market or gambling it away.

Thus, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is right when he maintains that there isn't only an economic capital but also social and symbolic ones, and that all three types are closely related to each other and influence one another.

In fact, anthropologists often observe that the first one can readily be changed into specific forms of the second and third ones. Then again, in many cases social and symbolic capitals can be the necessary conditions to gain access to economic resources and thus to wealth, i.e. economic capital.

By introducing the notion of capital, we are deliberately conveying a procedural quality to the socio-anthro-

pological analysis. In fact, capital, under any shape, can be gained and accumulated via specific strategies on the one hand, or, on the other hand, can be lost, perhaps in no time at all, through disastrous and inadvertent decisions. Such a consideration, however, shows that this dynamic reality permanently confronts the *homo creator* and that, by analyzing each single situation, he tries to appropriate symbolic, social, and economic resources to keep hold of the attained social ranking, if not to better it.

### **When *homo creator* becomes *homo agonisticus***

The fact that the analysis of specific situations could be superficial, inadequate, or faulty *tout court*, so that a given decision followed by the corresponding action might seriously damage or destroy a person's or a group's social, symbolic, and economic capital, is so obvious that we need only touch upon it. The instabilities caused by the socio-cultural dynamic in which the *homo creator* is involved trigger struggles, tensions, and conflicts that constantly reshuffle social hierarchies. Thus, no one, not even in the most static and sealed societies, is utterly certain of his attributed or attained rank. Under these conditions, the *homo creator* becomes *homo agonisticus*, since he cannot avoid vying with his fellow creatures for those social, political, and economic resources that make up his capital.

L'*homo creator* cherche à s'approprier les ressources symboliques, sociales et économiques pour maintenir son niveau social, voire pour l'améliorer. Mais personne n'est totalement certain de son propre rang. L'*homo creator* devient donc *homo agonisticus*.

A la différence de l'*homo oeconomicus*, l'*homo agonisticus* ne peut être satisfait par la seule maximisation de son profit. Il doit aussi entrer en compétition pour le pouvoir, l'honneur, le prestige et la reconnaissance sociale. Être soumis à l'humiliation et au manque de reconnaissance sociale peut être une expérience bien plus redoutable que tout dommage économique.

Contrary to the *homo aeconomicus*, the *homo agonisticus* cannot be satisfied with maximizing his profit, i.e. his personal gain. He must also compete with the others for power as well as for social recognition, i.e. honor, prestige, respect, and reputation.

### ***Homo agonisticus* competes for honor**

Honor in particular is one of the fields in which the *homo agonisticus* reveals his fighter's traits at his best. As shown by the case of Mediterranean societies, besides the aristocratic *ancien régime* ones, honor, thus prestige and reputation, are crucial components of one's own and one's group social identity, which are constantly threatened by others' affronts and must be safeguarded at any cost. Duels, long vanished at our latitudes, and revenge, still widespread in several areas of the world as well as in some regions of Balkan Europe, are two different yet analogous agonistic ways to uphold one's honor.

Although these two methods may appear to us as obsolete relics of definitely bygone epochs, the *homo agonisticus* still competes for honor and prestige in public arenas. However, he employs new techniques, maybe not as gruesome and so to say more civilized ones, though certainly not less brutal. Even now, being submitted to humiliation and the resultant reversal of social recognition are dreadful experiences, far more dreadful than any economic damage. Nowadays, the most important

contests regarding social recognition occur chiefly in mass media where, via thought-out muckraking campaigns, the *homo agonisticus* carries out all his ploys consisting of rumors, gossip, half-truths, innuendo, and downright fabrications in order to undercut the other's honor and reputation.

### ***Homo ludens and homo pragmaticus***

Yet, the *homo agonisticus* can be spotted even in games and sports, so that he is also a *homo ludens*, as Dutch historian Johan Huizinga had already aptly observed. How could we picture leisure time without soccer, basketball, athletics, golf, rugby, boxing, wrestling, chess, bridge, as well as... snakes and ladders?

The fact that the *homo creator* is simultaneously a *homo agonisticus* brings to mind yet another human dimension, which is very important for anthropology. If the conflicts due to the actions of the *homo agonisticus* should become too predominant in the public sphere, they could turn out to be a threat to social cohesion. Therefore, along with conflict there is always the art of negotiation, accommodation, and compromise. Thus, the *homo creator* is also *homo pragmaticus*, i.e. a being seeking solutions through transactional strategies. The transaction involves an interaction between two or more actors, based on a fair exchange of mutual services, by which none of the partners loses out. Within a given social context, a person decides

Avec le conflit coexiste toujours l'art de la négociation et du compromis. L'*homo creator* est donc aussi un *homo pragmaticus*, c'est-à-dire un être cherchant des solutions à l'aide de stratégies transactionnelles. La société ne peut accepter des actions de l'*homo pragmaticus* que si elles sont embellies par des ornements normatifs ou éthiques.

C'est précisément parce qu'il vit en communauté ou dans un groupe, et non seul, que l'homme ne peut éviter d'être rationnel. L'anthropologue considère qu'il existe une pluralité de rationalités qui doivent être considérées en rapport avec l'immense variété sociale et culturelle à l'intérieur des espèces humaines.

to act in a specific way not so much in consideration of fixed values and rules, but rather according to what is considered profitable. However, society can accept the actions of the *homo pragmaticus* only if they are embellished with normative or ethic ornaments. A group or a community often reckons the so to say *plain and unvarnished* social pragmatism as being too opportunistic and thus dictated by particularistic interests. Therefore, it is perceived as egoistic, unreliable, if not dishonest, corrupt, dangerous, or disruptive so that it is made legitimate and respectable by way of a clever stratagem, i.e. by concealing it behind a false front of morality. However, it would be definitely wrong to assume that the *homo pragmaticus* acts without taking into account specific moral limits set up by the society he lives in.

### ***Homo rationalis* and social logics**

The foregoing considerations regarding the *homo creator* as well as the *agonisticus* and *pragmaticus*, bring anthropology face-to-face with the problem of human beings' rationality. Anthropological analysis observes that man, as a person who lives in society, is characterized by his rationality.

Precisely because he lives in a community or in a group and not alone, he cannot avoid being rational. Irrationality or inconsistency would make him unable to live among his fellow human beings. Yet, this does not imply that in some situations he

doesn't react irrationally or in a way that for others is hardly comprehensible.

The anthropological idea of *homo rationalis* under certain aspects resembles the *homo æconomicus* one and the concept of man endorsed by philosophical doctrines linked to Enlightenment. The apparent similarities and alleged affinities can turn into a trap leading to gross mistakes. The major difference between the anthropological view of man and the other two points of view lies in the fact that the latter consider rationality as unique and universal, while the anthropologist reckons that there is a pluralism of rationalities that must be viewed in connection with the huge social and cultural variety within the human species. The *homo rationalis* is not inherently so, as instead 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalists believed somewhat naively, but rather is rational both of necessity and of his own volition. Depending on the type of society he belongs to, the *homo rationalis*, being also *homo creator*, intentionally develops different social logics, which at first sight may seem to lack logic or to be at odds with any logic.

Thus, human rationalities are types of subjective yet collectively shared coherence, inherent to societies themselves. Max Weber had already noticed such diverse socially produced and legitimated rationalities when he drew the fundamental distinction between rationality as regards the ends and rationality as regards values. As far as anthropolo-



Selon le type de société à laquelle il appartient, l'*homo rationalis*, qui est aussi *homo creator*, développe intentionnellement différentes logiques sociales. Les rationalités humaines sont donc des types de cohérence subjective, pourtant collectivement partagées, inhérentes aux sociétés elles-mêmes.

En conséquence, l'anthropologie est la discipline qui s'efforce de révéler le sens, souvent insoupçonné ou mésestimé que l'homme, en tant qu'être social, crée chaque jour.

gists are concerned, they encounter this plurality of rationalities when, for example, they study the differences between magic and science.

### Anthropology reveals the meaningfulness of man

In his renowned classic study on the beliefs of the Zande, a segmentary society in southern Sudan, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard showed that the system of representations and magic practices is not an incoherent, meaningless, jumble of thought and behavior models that highlight primitive man's irrationality. On the contrary, the British anthropologist was able to reconstruct the stringent logic linking sorcery, oracles, and other manifestations of magic within the specific context of the Zande society. After all, magic is but a different form of knowledge resembling under several aspects science, which, from a Western point of view, is the epitome of rationality. Thus, one of the Western world's most deep-rooted myths is overthrown, i.e. that *primitive man* is intuitive, emotional,

spontaneous, and thus basically irrational, while the *civilized* one is the representative par excellence of the stringency of logic, reflexivity, coherence, and thus rationality. Actually, as Evans-Pritchard clarifies, this dichotomy is misleading since both the *primitive* and the *civilized* are expressions of the *homo rationalis* to the same extent.

In conclusion, the anthropological view of man challenges a dull, one-dimensional, and likewise standardized conception of the human being, dictated by a too hasty universalism. Anthropology instead strongly upholds the idea that man, precisely because he is *homo creator*, though sharing some basic characteristics with others, organizes his collective existence in accordance with countless socio-cultural models, which, from the viewpoint of the persons involved, have a clear-cut meaning. Consequently, anthropology is the discipline that endeavors to reveal the meaningfulness, often unsuspected or overlooked, of what man as a social being creates every day. •