

REPORT ON THE MASTER THESIS

IEPS – International Economic and Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Title of the thesis:	Homo economicus and Nature of human beings
Author of the thesis:	Luka Djikanovic
Referee (incl. titles):	Dr Janusz Salamon, Ph.D.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED:

CATEGORY	POINTS
<i>Theoretical background</i>	12
<i>Contribution</i>	12
<i>Methods</i>	9
<i>Literature</i>	9
<i>Manuscript form</i>	9
TOTAL POINTS	51
The proposed grade (1-2-3-4)	3

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings.

1) Theoretical background.

The Author of the thesis undertook an ambitious task of exploring the relationship between “Homo economicus” and “human nature”. He seems well aware of the enormity of the challenge, as he announces – in the style characteristic of the thesis - that “[the] author will not be in situation to explain the mentioned phenomenon from the economy and human nature theory as a whole due to insufficient space. Only part of the theories will be applied, but it should provide the basic notion of the selected problem.” (p. 5). Actually this declaration identifies the main weakness of the thesis, namely that attempting to address a topic which has been explored by many distinguished social scientists and unable to deal with the subject matter in a comprehensive way, the Author ends up discussing a stream of selected comments of selected authors, and it is hard to see what is the theoretical principle governing this selection. This is relevant for the overall evaluation of the thesis, because the Author often adopts a “method” of quoting or referring to some “authority” in the field (be it A. Smith, J.S. Mill, or E. O. Wilson) in such a way, as if the very fact that these writers held certain views constituted an argument for their plausibility. For example, the entire p. 14 is devoted to presentation of the views on “human nature” held by Edward O. Wilson, who as a biologist is hardly an authority in economics, anthropology or philosophy. His controversial views are not just left without any critical assessment, but – more importantly – it is hard to see how they are related to the views that are discussed on the next few pages of the thesis and what is their relevance for the thesis. At the end one is left wondering why other – more prominent and more relevant - views were not given preference.

One other thing which strikes a reader of the thesis is that the Author does not define the two key terms which feature in the title of the thesis (“Homo economicus” and “human nature”), as if taking for granted that the meaning of these terms will be somehow self-evident. Instead of making clear that these terms are used to name theoretical *models* or approximations for human behaviour in market institutions, the Author employs them in a loose way which leaves a reader with a sense of vagueness and lack of intellectual rigour. This initial impression of vagueness is magnified by the fact that “Introduction” to the thesis is preceded by a number of brief statements (“Topic Overview”, “Abstract”, etc.), and despite the fact that all of them aim at informing the reader about the content of the thesis, the reader is left somewhat confused as to what exactly is the research question and what will be the main focus of the thesis.

Having said that, some sections of the work are much better than other and, e.g. in Chapter 2 the Author shows a good command of the subject matter.

2) Contribution.

While the objectives of the thesis may not be straightforwardly and precisely stated at the beginning of the work, once one reaches the end of Chapter 2 it becomes clearer that the one claim which the Author aims to establish is that the *social* nature of human beings limits the practical applicability of the Homo economicus model, if such model it is understood to imply not just rationally self-interested orientation, but also essentially *individualistic* approach to decision making in the economic context. Thus it can be said that as a whole the thesis is conceived as a criticism of at least some formulations of the Homo economicus model of human behaviour. This can be seen as the most praiseworthy aspect of the thesis. The Author is clearly determined not to limit himself to the presentation of the Homo economicus model, but in the sustained criticism of what he perceives as weaknesses of the model one can detect his own personal commitment to particular ideas which bring to mind some tenets associated with communitarianism. While it cannot be said that the Author takes into account in a systematic way all the main arguments against the Homo economicus model which can be found in the recent literature, one can say that his critique of the model contains elements which constitute an added value relative to the knowledge that one might expect from a university-educated person familiar with the topic.

3) Methods.

On p. 8 the Author declares that “[T]his study will provide a wide range of theories and numerous empirical researches.” No more precise formulations of the methods chosen and applied are to be found in the work. Judging by the content of the thesis, by “wide range of theories” the Author apparently means something like: “variety of views on the Homo economicus model”, and by “numerous empirical researches” he seems to mean examples of specific behaviour of particular human beings in the economic context supposedly exemplifying certain typical patterns of behaviour. The Author discusses few such interesting “examples”, some based on his own experiences in Montenegro. In short, the analytical tools employed in this thesis are not described in any detail.

Six hypotheses are stated on p. 7, but on a closer inspection one wonders whether the Author understands the function of working hypotheses in a dissertation. Instead of putting forward a number of hypotheses which he would then be expected to test and defend, the Author summarizes few selected claims of selected authors which he will later discuss in the thesis. Some of these claims look like oversimplifications of the positions taken by the writers fond of the Homo economicus model and as such they will not be defended by the Author (e.g. Hypotheses 1 & 5). Some of them are so trivial that they don't call for any “testing” (e.g. Hypotheses 2 & 3). Some of them border on poetry rather than social sciences (e.g. “Homo economicus is the alter-ego of Homo sapiens” and “Homo economicus is lonely without human nature”).

The nature of these “hypotheses” is such that it is difficult to make a connection between them and the main thesis defended in the work. The main thesis (as “reconstructed” in point 1 above) is analyzed in variety of ways – be it in unsystematically and incomprehensively – in Chapters 2 & 3 and one can say that the work contains a kind of cumulative argument against the universal applicability of the Homo economicus model (or at least against certain aspects of that model as conceived by the Author of the thesis).

4) Literature.

The thesis demonstrates the Author's understanding and command of some of the recent literature, although given the wealth of the publications on the subject, the choice of the literature may strike one as somewhat arbitrary.

It appears that some of the positions listed in the bibliography are never referred to in the text.

More importantly, the degree to which the Author relies on some of the publications is clearly out of balance. At the end of the day, the thesis consist of just two large chapters (namely, Chapters 2 & 3). And yet Chapter 3 consists almost entirely of the discussion of just one book, namely A. Smith's “The Theory of Moral Sentiments”, and Smith's book is the only one quoted in this chapter.

5) Manuscript form.

The way the Author of the thesis quotes Smith's book (just mentioned) shows how much the style of references adopted by the Author leaves to be desired. The Author never identifies the numbers of the pages on which the quoted (or referred to) fragments of the texts occur in the original. This practice is in itself problematic and makes one wonder whether the Author ever read the original publication or is simply quoting other authors who quote the original. However, even if one accepts a possibility that the Author read Smith's book and all the remaining literature in an electronic version which does not include page numbers, one thing is surely inexcusable. The Author lists in the bibliography two different editions of Smith's book published in 2006 and 2010, and then in the body of the text he consequently quotes (Smith, 2008) which is not listed in the bibliography.

One is also less than impressed by the fact that the Author quotes one J.N. Nielsen and his "Human Nature and homo economicus" which turns out to be a short and unscientific reflection of someone who can be only described as a blogger. Incidentally, this is the only "position" in the bibliography which contains in its title both elements which feature also in the title of the thesis.

For all the reasons mentioned above the thesis makes for a challenging reading experience.

The thesis cannot be said to be very well structured. The structure also does not seem to match very well the objectives of the thesis. It is enough to say that after reading just the Table of Contents one would have no clear idea what is the main thesis and the main focus of the work.

Having said that, the quality of different sections of the thesis vary a lot and some sections of the thesis are much better than other. Chapter 2 is by far the most impressive and what is worth noticing is that problems discussed in this chapter (which deals with the importance of the incompleteness and asymmetry of information) are more economic than philosophical in nature, and the Author's command of the economic issues is more impressive than his command of more philosophical questions.

To sum up, I'm happy to confirm that the Author achieved sufficient number of the objectives to allow me to recommend the thesis for defence.

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Referee Signature