I. Modernity has not only entailed man’s emergence from his self-incurred inefficiency; it also provided an agent responsible for this—an agent called *homo economicus*, or ‘economic man.’[1] In fact, modernity has proved itself quite innovative in this respect, and with varying degrees of earnestness it has tried to invent a series of different ‘men.’ As if merely being-man were not enough, it kept looking for new formats and developed different predicates for different fields of application. More or less successfully, it has experimented with classical and humanist types, proletarian and Soviet subjects, with military and fascist men. Or, dissatisfied with these designs, it has simply opposed the new man to all expiring models—as it has since the early 20th century. In our day, this series of attempts leads into uncertain territory. The species finds itself besieged and called upon to extend its life expectancy by developing a form of life that measures itself against machines, cyborgs, or modified genetic material.

The history of these homunculi and their laboratories has not been written, but one thing is clear: this “noch nicht festgestellte Tier” (Nietzsche), this “as yet undetermined animal” has inspired various creative fantasies, of which only *homo economicus* has survived to this day. Despite man’s ontological indeterminacy, only *homo economicus* has maintained himself for several centuries in various fields of operation. He moves through life as he moves through theory, at home and far away, in concrete situations and in complex systems—and one can safely say he has become the most successful export product of Western society.

The tentative beginnings of this new human type can be traced back to a certain disquiet at the end of the Middle Ages. First traces are found in merchant offices of Renaissance Italy. His primal scene may be seen in the ‘freely trading’ subjects of the Enlightenment, or in books of political economy; or, clearer still, in the expansive entrepreneurial spirit that—following Schumpeter—colonized the world with its creative destruction. But wherever one locates his beginnings and however these various origins have coalesced into a clear and recognizable shape, it is clear that *homo economicus* does not only have a long and fruitful history—he has made
a good deal of history himself.

In the light of his resilience, two things stand out. First, there seems to be a general agreement that the success of *homo economicus* has to do with his ability to operate as an islet of rationality in a confusing, contingent, and ultimately irrational world. Like one of his most luminous examples, the island-stranded Robinson Crusoe, he knows that the order of the world is neither given nor impossible, but must be brought into being. *Homo economicus* manages himself so well because he does not sort the things of the world into true and false, good and bad, just and unjust, but acts according to criteria of profit and loss. As economic theory shows, there would be no economic man if reality did not allow the multitude of its phenomena to be organized like a business, using criteria of use and disadvantage.

Second, *homo economicus* could only survive until the present because he has proven himself to be extremely malleable, adaptable and ready to reform. He constitutes a theoretical and practical passe-partout that can readily be combined with a series of anthropological substrates and with varying political and social orders. He is just as compatible with the religious as he is with the godless or profane; with ascetics as well as with excessive types; with liberals and authoritarians, eccentrics and the ‘bourgeois.’ The immune responses triggered by *homo economicus* are few and predictable, and one can safely say that he displays a high degree of compatibility, compossibility and combinability.

*Homo economicus* is a historical being through and through—he emerged, went through mutations, and perhaps one day will reach his end. Only the passing of time has made him into a universal model, a substitute for man as such, largely charged with the organization of the world. He was produced by different media and institutions, by fictions and forms of knowledge, by specific ideas of functionality and concrete requirements; and he can be understood as a medium that produces economic as well as social systems. When we speak of a ‘poetics of *homo economicus*’, we mean to investigate this human type from the perspective of his fabrication, his *poiesis*; to grasp him as both a subject and object of cultural practices. Our inquiry is connected with the question how this figure came to be a hegemonic human form, even a measure of man as such. Of course, this touches upon his historicity, his temporality—as the guiding thread of an era that began five hundred years ago and that today has reached a specific limit or threshold, if it has not altogether reached its end. In the following, we will trace several lines of origin and modifications of this so-called economic man.

II. To begin with—and this would be our first thesis or consideration—the appearance of *homo economicus* seems related to an eventfulness that first acquired its outlines in early modernity. One could speak here of an emancipation of the accidental, an isolation of contingency. For a long time the accident, *tyche*, was seen as an ontological, epistemological and aesthetic exception: an event located at the bounds of reason, that testified to the workings of higher powers, and that joined itself with the course of destiny—a storm that came down like a trial and that could only be mastered or succumbed to. Accidents assumed the shape of Fortuna—the wheel of fate, whose caprice called to mind the vanity of earthly existence.

Modernity did not simply involve a secularization of the accident; rather, the accident became an innerworldly category because it was met with a specific form of management. A famous reference to this modern risk management is found in *Merchant of Venice*, where the author distinguishes between the workings of fate and fortune and the administration of contingent events. Do not believe, the melancholy merchant says, my business depends on luck alone:

> My ventures are not in one bottom trusted, Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate Upon the fortune of this present year: Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.[2]

This mercantile subject, surveying his flotilla from his home, manifests himself as a cunning adventurer because he subtracts from adventure the adventurous. And he does so in his reliance on a number of techniques that can lay claim to a certain novelty in the Renaissance, and that made a first important contribution to the formation of *homo economicus*.

To begin with, we may notice how the unruly, fateful or dangerous element of the premodern accident has changed into mere risk. Modern sea travel used the Italian word *risco*, “that which ruptures”, to refer to a cliff that may sink a ship;
this cliff then became the risk, *rischio*, to which transported goods are exposed at sea. Shakespeare’s merchant no longer knows blows of faith, only risks, because he puts his money on several ships at once, insuring one investment with the other. The history of this merchant is bound to a history of insurances, especially the early sea insurances whose system allowed entrepreneurs to compensate one danger with another, managing risk through calculation. The merchant does not bet on success or failure, survival or demise (that was the business of knights), but on a system of events; and whatever may happen, it can always be balanced with everything else that happens, now and in times to come. In a certain way, the merchant’s attention for the negative consequences of actions and events becomes productive.[3]

Yet this risk calculation requires—and this is another aspect of *homo economicus*—a specific form of observation, a medium whose first traces can be found in the 13th century and which forms an essential component of the system in which *homo economicus* begins to operate. It is the technique of accounting using the system of double-entry bookkeeping. This technique, which first spread out in northern Italian trade cities, should not only be understood as a colonization of the world by writing; it also represents a specific and consequential technology of the self. It is characterized by four elements, listed in one of the earliest printed tractates about bookkeeping from 1494.[4]

1. Bookkeeping concerns a full registration of events. The account books of each new company begin with an inventory that lists all events and things without exception: the available sums of money, real estate, goods and instruments, even household items, clothes and linen. Whatever is not listed in the books does not exist. The being of things cannot be separated from their being-written; and with this initial act of writing, the economic operation begins.

2. Bookkeeping guarantees a continuous record that operates on the axis of time. The account books are a business diary that controls all commercial transactions and that quickly becomes a form of continuous self-control—it is not by chance that accounting has been seen as one of the origins of the modern diary. Every day becomes a day of balance and judgment, examined according to its returns.

3. Bookkeeping provides a selective perception of events. The merchant works with three different books, each of which carries out a further filtration: first, a daybook that records all occurrences from hour to hour, day to day, like a narrative; then, a journal that translates this chronological order into specific assets and liabilities, transactions and payments; and finally, a ledger on which all this information is sorted into different accounts, documenting profit and loss. The events of the (commercial) world are brought into a so-called “beautiful order”[5] that can be scanned with a single glance; an order that translates everything that happens into a series of payments.

4. Finally, double bookkeeping brings all events into an interconnected nexus. The ledger does not only use separate accounts for things, persons and occurrences; all items also appear in two different forms, as debit and credit; that is, as present and absent at the same time. This makes the ledger into a space that, together with the interconnectedness of all relations, also makes visible their quality. Things and persons are listed under the aspect of circulation, exchange and interdependence; and in this world, nothing is lost: every disappearing item appears elsewhere in the field of beings.

Hence, for the modern merchant one might say that in the beginning was the Account; in the beginning was a systematic notation and filtration of events. And in this beginning we may recognize the origin of several practices that set the standard for the modern organization of subject and world. When a subject defines itself through a position on which an actor moves from theory to practice, the merchant technology described above has supplied an extremely efficient method for this transition, for this *passage à l’acte*. Bookkeeping separates the realm of commercial acts from the living individual; business becomes autonomous. The movements of the individual separate themselves from the movements of the subject: bookkeeping makes it possible to travel on paper, like the merchant from Venice does. He moves across the earth while staying in his office, leaned over his books: an important form in which distant lands are addressed as close relations. Yet this merchant subject is also a sleepless subject, restless and ever waking. Luca Pacioli, the author of the tractate about bookkeeping mentioned above, has described the merchant as a being with a hundred eyes and compared him to a rooster, “which of all the animals is the most alert,
and in winter and summer keeps his night vigils and never rests.”[6] Finally, this has given rise to a subject of balance sheets, annual statements and continuous self-control; a subject who places a layer of account books between himself and worldly events. From now on, lives start looking like careers, in which success leads to further success and time capitalizes itself through revenue. Early economic man navigates his methodological equipment into a world of accidents and finds there his profane unfolding. The result is a connection between bookkeeping and narration that will determine concrete biographies as well as literary models.

III. In modernity, the earth started to revolve around the sun, and money started to revolve around the earth.[7] This monetary orbit goes hand in hand with a moral revolution that constitutes a second pivotal component of homo economicus: he brings with him a radical shift in moral and ethical matters, in theory as well as practice. In this context one may remark that Adam Smith, one of the founding fathers of classical economics, primarily understood himself as a moral philosopher, and that his Wealth of Nations from 1776 appeared as the second volume of a course about ethics. But first of all we ought to note the rising critical awareness of so-called ‘real man’—an awareness that can be traced back to the 17th century.

Since the Baroque, teachers of natural right and moral philosophers agree that man can no longer simply be understood as a zoon politikon, a political animal directly and unconditionally intended for a life in society. On the contrary: man distinguishes himself from most other beings by his social dysfunctionality. He has become an unpleasant contemporary for his contemporaries—and a voluminous literature about concepts like “self-love” and “self-preservation” shows that, considering man, one ought to follow Kant in speaking of an “unsocial sociability” or a “race of devils.”[8] Considerations of this kind can be understood as the first signs of a political anthropology, perhaps as signs of the emergence of anthropology as such, but especially as an essential step towards the realisation of homo economicus. “Real” man, as described since the Enlightenment, finds himself in a “verdorbenen Zustande,” a “foul condition,” as the natural law theorist Pufendorf remarked; he is a “creature replete with wicked desires.”[9] But what is so special about these reflections? How does this corrupted human figure distinguish itself from the sinful human being of Christian theology?

To begin with, this man, as described since the 17th century, strictly follows his own desires; he is moved by appetite and aversion, attraction and repulsion—in short, he is composed of social deficits and malfunctions. But that is not all. For close observation shows that precisely these lacks give rise to a social order that functions better than all others. This is the meaning of that famous formula: “private vices—publick benefits”, which figured as the subtitle to Bernard Mandeville’s moral philosophical work The Fable of the Bees. Written in the early 18th century, it laid out a far-reaching social theory.[10] Of course—says Mandeville—man is ruled by affects, desires and passions; among them even former mortal sins like superbia, avaritia, invidia and luxuria: pride, greed, envy and lust. Nevertheless, Mandeville continues, not our restrain but our immoderation is innovative, clever and productive; and as different passions mutually invoke one another and keep each other moving, they compensate for one another and balance each other out. A’s avarice holds B’s waste in check, and the ploys of each contribute to the good of all. This is the vanishing point of Mandeville’s argument: what appears as immoral, irregular and despicable for the individual, amounts to a dynamic and harmonious social order. Following Mandeville, a good politician counts only with the worst in man; he does not suppose virtues and average qualities, but extremities of unrestrained passion, which he observes like reagents that, when mixed well, “the noxious Qualities being by mutual Mischief corrected in both, they may assist each other, and often make a good Medicine between them.”[11] What is unbearable in the individual is beneficial for the whole; an important realization. Modern man appears in the world not as a rational subject, but as a particularly passionate one that can turn even mortal sins into new assets.

Precisely because he is antisocial, man contributes to the social order; precisely his unreliability allows him to be integrated as a reliable, calculable quantity. How is this possible? Which mechanism produces regularities out of this anomic being? The answers given by British empiricists, French moralists and German social technicians coincide in an essential point: the vanishing point of these libidinal dynamics lies in a
mechanics of interest. At the core of all actions and passions, desires and inclinations, we find an irreducible element that since the 17th century has been called "interest" or "self-interest." We will not consider the history of the concept of interest, but, very generally, remark on a number of aspects that allowed it to become a theoretical and practical pivot for modern human interaction.[12]

To begin with, interest is represented as a final and irreducible atom of human behavior. Whatever one desires, wherever one is driven to by passion or inclination – in every process of decision the logic of preference is at work, at the end of which stands personal advantage. Even the worst desires, the most fiery passions are marked by a trace of self-interest that directs the subject towards pleasure and away from pain. Interest is the form of a will that renounces asceticism, self-control and repression, functioning only through self-affirmation. It does not know self-renunciation; it is a principle without principles. It realizes itself in the face of concrete alternatives, it responds to the contingency of the world’s events—but it never accepts a general (moral) law. The subject of interest is not a moral subject, no subject of law; it does not accept denial. But still: whoever acts out of interest inevitably ends up in a circuit of exchange with others; the communication with one’s own inclinations brings society into being. In the sphere of interest, the passions and tendencies of all actors meet; and wherever they follow their interests, a social law of nature manifests itself. The French moral philosopher Helvetius formulated this as follows: “Like the physical universe underlies the laws of movement, the moral universe underlies the law of interest.”[13]

Taking all these elements together, the contours of a moral revolution become clear. The figure of man that is formed in the 17th and 18th centuries knows no fall from grace; he is neither good nor evil, neither sinful nor pure, neither diabolic nor angelic; instead, he is dysfunctional and functional at the same time. Dysfunctional because his integration into society is marked by reluctance; functional because precisely this reluctance leads to the regular and calculable connection of everything with everything. This becomes the law of society—one that governs it better than all moral or juridical laws.

IV. Since the 17th century a heart full of desires has beaten inside man’s chest; yet all desires and passions only disguise a naked and irreducible element that possesses the quality of interest. This libidinal constellation marks the dynamics of social interaction, making order emerge from disorder, laws from lawlessness. And it becomes the motive that sets homo economicus in motion. The social is produced through a mechanics of passions and interests, giving rise to systemic and systematic correlations that coalesce into a web of interaction that calls itself market or economic system. The reflections on markets and economies of the 17th century do not simply concern a relation between prices, goods and payments, but a field ruled by the law of interest: the substrate of homo economicus. This substrate is a medium through which an elementary form of the social is produced: a medium that connects movements with actions and actions with communications, and that leads us to a final question in this context: What constitutes the efficiency of this type of man? How does he move through these systems? What makes him so fit for the future?

Three remarks:

1. This new man, guided by interest, moves himself so surely, elegantly and reliably in a complex and confusing world because he remains blind to its complexity and does not strive for overview. Whoever follows his interests and inclinations insists on their limitations; he turns his head away from the rest of the world and at best assumes that others share his confinedness, each turning passions into interests and interests into personal advantage. His rationality is only rational because it remains local.

2. Following this, homo economicus is the subject of a limited knowledge; a subject that does not overlook the sequence of causes and effects, constantly producing effects that escape his view. Yet precisely these unintended effects, emerging out of selfish interests and inclinations, inadvertently turn into the well-being of the whole. This process is captured by a term that has become notorious since Adam Smith: the notion of the “invisible hand.” In a famous passage from The Wealth of Nations, he writes:

He [the economic agent] generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its
produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.[14]

This is one of the most important scenes in the history of homo economicus: a being that is reliable thanks to its limitations; social due to its lack of sociality. Above all, one that governs himself and others best when no one governs him. Nothing—and this will become a leitmotif in later liberalism—is more harmful than a government that wants to do good. Smith outlines a form of power that—much like Mephistopheles in Goethe’s Faust—always wills the bad, but works the good. The civil society that forms itself around homo economicus as his milieu is governed by intransparency; there is no benevolent leader that, through insight and overview, accomplishes the good for all. Homo economicus is subject to his own interests, but the medium of civil society.

3. This economic man, however, is not simply someone who misses the big picture. It would be more accurate to say that his being is marked by a fundamental lack. This lack is a productive one; around the end of the 18th century, man discovers the productivity of shortage, lack and scarcity. In this context, it may be worthwhile to recall an earlier version of Smith’s “invisible hand”, described in the first volume of his work on moral philosophy, the Theory of Moral Sentiments from 1759. The “proud and unfeeling landlord”, Smith writes, may view his extensive fields and, “without a thought for the wants of his brethren,” in imagination consume “the whole harvest that grows upon them.” The “capacity of his stomach”, however, “bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires” and functions like a physical or physiological limit. Hence, he will have to distribute the surplus amongst his workers, and precisely his desire for more “luxury and caprice” ends up satisfying the needs of others. Despite, or precisely because of their “natural selfishness and rapacity”, the rich share their wealth with the poor. Smith writes:

They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. [15]

Here too, the engine of blind and selfish aspirations drives the general good. But above all, we see here the appearance of an unquenchable desire, whose boundlessness transcends all needs and satisfactions, transcends even the capacities of its physical receptacle. One day, Marx will call this the “abstract hedonism” of the capitalist, whose accumulation of money and capital does not match any concrete needs or desires. This is another essential component of homo economicus. At last since the late 18th century economic subjects are produced through an incorporation of lack; as automatons of desire they have become artists of shortage, who always want what they don’t have. Like Goethe’s Faust, homo economicus senses lack in abundance and grounds desire in lack. In his infinite desire for finite things, he always misses something. This is the desiring machine of homo economicus; a type that, guided by selfish inclinations, limited knowledge and unlimited, unsatisfied desire, always wants what he cannot do, and does what he does not want. Or, to speak with Goethe and Luhmann: “Who ever strives with all his might, that man we can tax.”[16]

V. In modernity, homo economicus appears as a specialist of two distinct territories: the contingency of a contingent world, and the flow of his own desires, passions and interests. In him, assumptions about the state of the world are connected with suppositions concerning the nature of man, leading to an enduring change in our moral universe and the economy of human interaction. To begin with, this modern economic man appears on stage not as a rational, but as a libidinal subject, at best regulating his passions through a mechanics of interest. Second, he is the blind subject of a limited knowledge; yet precisely in his blindness he unintentionally produces a harmonious society. Third, this makes him into an enemy of the state in a quite specific sense: for him, the imposition of a good system of laws and institutions opposes the emergence of good systematicity as such. Fourth, this animosity does not prevent homo economicus from being a particularly well governable type of human being. The priorities of market and economy created a
milieu in which the interests and desires of *homo economicus* govern themselves, balancing one with the other. The law that creates order here is not extrinsic to the individual agents; it rises from their own selfish hearts and governs them better and more effectively than any regent could: as an invisible hand. *Homo economicus*—and this will often be repeated—does not need wise lawmakers or prudent politicians. The civil society that he brought into being is controlled by a dynamics in which, although individual agents are unstable and indefinite, the whole is calculable and predictable. What emerges here is a realm of regularities that does not require legal frameworks and moral laws. Since the 18th century, the market is not merely one site among others, but the place where social order is produced: a catalyst transforming passions into interests and interests into a harmonic whole. Finally, this *homo economicus* has a particular walk of life: pushed forward by his limited awareness and his narrow horizon, he is clever in ignorance. Something similar happens in the German Bildungsroman: Wilhelm Meister also ended up in the right place thanks to unintended effects and limited knowledge; that is, thanks to an invisible hand guiding him from above.[17]

From here, we can follow the fate of *homo economicus* into the 19th century, where concepts of energy and work confront him with wear, fatigue and exhaustion; where for him—as for the economic system as such—crises and instability came to be necessary and cathartic episodes of self-clarification.[18] Above all, however, the regularities of the market have come to determine the dimensions of human interaction. Classical economics had already recognized the rationality of economic knowledge at the point where the economic system manifests itself as the reality of all systems, where *homo economicus* appears as the truth of man, and where an economic society functions as the real of the social. Here, the movement in which the delineation of an economic science in the 19th century goes hand in hand with the universalization of its categories comes to an end. Precisely the particular character of economic systems makes it possible for economic knowledge to define itself as the basis of other forms of knowledge: “Political economy, which appeared to concern only material goods, has turned out to embrace the social system as a whole; [it] is related to everything in society.”[19] For the various liberalisms of the 20th century, and especially for that which since the mid-20th century goes by the name of neoliberalism, the market and its laws are no longer merely a subsystem of society that operates alongside other subsystems—politics, law, art, etc. The liberal / neoliberal program rather consists in the extension of the laws of the market over all domains of society; and the underlying assumption is that this extension guarantees an optimal governability. As Foucault remarked, the different liberalisms can be understood as an art of government that does not directly take hold of the individual, but produces environments in which older forms of subjection and discipline become obsolete. Where disciplinary power installed a series of micro-courts all through society, liberalism and neoliberalism advance a form of power that scatters micro-markets everywhere in the social field.[20] Economic governance sees man as an eminently governable being, aiming at his efficient and durable self-employment in a field where competition in all its forms untangles and pervades the clutter of social relations. This marks a twofold transformation of *homo economicus*. On the one hand, he is de-anthropologized, thrown out of his anthropological composure – which still defined his being in the 18th and 19th centuries. Recent economic theory no longer sees *homo economicus* as a malleable figure with desires, interests and inclinations, but as an abstraction, fiction or model employed to explain certain problems and situations. *Homo economicus* becomes a theoretical probe, a device to test the functionality of institutions, organizations, and forms of communication. From a more or less real being he has become a heuristic figure, a construct with which situation-dependent decision making processes can be analyzed case by case. On the other hand, however, an uneconomic human residue, a ‘complete human being’ appears on the scene as a new factor of productivity. Recent innovations have exposed untapped resources and expect the new economy to transcend the boundaries of the economical, revealing the assets hidden in everyday life, the Lebenswelt, the world of social relations. Economy must become a ‘Vitalpolitik’[21] that accounts for individuals in the fullness of their being, by day and night, as family members and reproduction facilities, as loving, dreaming, healthy and sick beings. The economy, or better: capitalism must constantly be realized anew, and becomes in a certain way empathic; in any case, it no longer allows itself to be confused with a rational calculation of profit. The notion of
‘human capital’ that appeared in the 1960s is motivated by this expansion of the economic field, by this desire to capture and capitalize on all aspects of human material: from genetic composition to acquired skills or competencies, from health risks to relational capital, from secret propensities to creative capacities. Economists and nobel prize winners like Gary S. Becker have appealed to an “economic imperialism” that grounds its efficiency in a decrease of functional differentiation.[22] The social is the economical. Households are seen as small factories, individuals as micro-enterprises, and a neoliberal art of government unfolds itself there where economic actors are no longer merely addressed as working, trading, producing and consuming beings, but as blueprints of a ‘complete human being’, with all his skills, proficiencies, imaginations and desires.

All this is connected to a new type of management, based on the weakening or liquidation of older symbolic boundaries. Organizational structures liquefy, work relations are remodeled after the principle of an “any time / any place economy”, and the professional individual becomes a working nomad in a twilight zone between home and office, privacy and work, personal and professional relations.[23] The buzz words of management and economics represent the different ways in which reality can be programmed, that is, realized: lifelong learning, flexibility and the hegemony of short term commitments require the dissolution of stable identities and reserve the future for a cloudy, ever-changing I. Self-help books for wage workers speak of the end of professional routines, predictable lives and careers. The older assignment to see careers as processes of becoming oneself gives way to a new task: to accommodate oneself with an art of becoming-other.[24] The compulsion of identity has become a compulsion for the non-identical.

The production of these so-called patchwork identities has become an economic program; a program that gives birth to subjects with a soft core and fuzzy edges. They find their footing neither in business nor in life, but in the new market of fictions. This may be the hour of literature, which has alway understood itself as a playful laboratory of socialization. But above all, it is the era of fantasy. Recent manuals about work and corporate culture leave us with little doubt: the neoliberal economy depends on both water-soluble subjects and mythical models – models that guarantee the actor’s readiness to act by prompting him with esoteric missions. Already in the 1980s, Alfred Herrhausen and Gertrud Höhler prescribed certain group-dynamical models of identification for bankers; and where older models are no longer effective, they recommend archaic types that now begin to populate the world of business: a warrior or knight that moves from adventure to adventure; a shaman working wonders; a savior intervening in emergency situations; a wizard always ready with wise advice, etc. While the new economy advocates an empowerment of the individual, these avatars from the fantasy industry compensate for the commercial debilitation of the I with the transformation of the old self-made-man into a new man-made-self.[25] This seems to be the latest instantiation of homo economicus—one that goes hand in hand with a new mode of subjectivation. However this plays out in the office: the management of the social evidently evokes esoteric fantasies in which lives as well as that which was once called society enchant themselves. This characterizes the contemporary aesthetics of existence – an aesthetics that goes by the name of self-fashioning. In this context, archaisms acquire an updated functionality. The laws of fantasy have assumed the design of the subject and its various guises.

The concept of a ‘new economy’ marks a limit or threshold here. Where homo economicus was once the medium that realized civil society and its differentiations, his latest mutations bring this society to an end. The new specimen only functions economically insofar as he neglects the delineation of the economical and positions himself as an agency of implosion: at the point where love and passion, science and law, health and taste are no longer simply capital assets. Perhaps the technical side of this mutation consists in the shift from the super-code of money to the hyper-code of digital data. On markets we still pay with money, but money is always already paid for with information. This information system does not only confront the economy with its outermost, as yet uncrossable limits; it also invokes a being called human capital. With this figure, the history of homo economicus comes to an end; he makes way for a new type of man: a type that operates economically precisely by producing itself, its own subjectivity and spirituality.
REFERENCES

[1] “Der ökonomische Mensch” literally means “the economic human”, but as this sounds somewhat awkward I have chosen to translate it as “economic man” – foregrounding a dimension of gender less evident in the original text – translator’s note.


