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TRANSFORMING *HOMO ECONOMICUS*

转变经济人模型

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The gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening. A very small group has privileged access to vital resources while a growing number of people find themselves totally left behind. If we refer to the “wealth-gap” between top and bottom of the economic “pyramid” we usually focus on the disparity in access to financial resources. Those who seem locked in a vicious circle of poverty, violence and denial of rights quite often do not have proper access to education and adequate professional training. Hong Kong’s wealth gap, for example, has widened to a historic high, with the richest households now earning about 44 times what the poorest families scrape together, in spite of government efforts to alleviate poverty.

There is no point in denying that an exclusive focus on economic efficiency and how to achieve it has largely replaced previous approaches—spiritual, religious, philosophical and traditional—to life and how to live it well. Politicians may tout the economic and financial efficiency of their policies in order to win the approval of a majority of voters. Nevertheless, mainstream economists relying on the same paradigm were unable to foresee the unprecedented collapse of the financial system ten years ago. Simplified versions of *homo economicus* may have encouraged naïve and boundless faith in the supposedly flawless functioning of financial markets while vastly underestimating their lack of predictability and vulnerability to disruption. Such misplaced faith in the global economic system, as Pope Francis pointed out, in the extreme case is responsible for the suffering and death of too many people locked in an economy of exclusion: “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shall not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, sec. 53). This type of exclusion results from a biased and disingenuous interpretation of *homo economicus*: human beings are exclusively defined by their “cash value,” rewarded for their ability to increase profits and cut costs, while at the same time they are completely ignored and risk being marginalised, if they fail to measure up to

the relentless demands for increased productivity.

While the valuable insights of the *homo economicus* model have had a decisive impact in focusing our attention on how to make efficient use of limited resources, nevertheless, it needs a second look. What is required is a fresh and ethical approach that values the unique dignity, trustworthiness and integrity of each human being, showing how and why these values are the indispensable basis for a sound and sustainable economic system. Human beings just cannot be discarded as consumer goods, or even abused and oppressed. Nevertheless, even courses on business ethics sometimes have served as a kind of fig leaf covering the business schools’ overall obsession with money and profit maximization, ignoring any real concern for the dignity of the person, all-too-often rendering their students insensitive to ecological catastrophe and indifferent to the needs of the larger society. But now may be a great time for a paradigm shift in what is taught in business schools, one that would focus their expertise in managing organizations and analysing complex social situations in order to empower people to contribute to the benefit of the larger society.

This second issue of the Macau Ricci Institute Journal attempts to bring together different perspectives challenging simplistic and dehumanizing views of what it means to be human. Our survey starts and ends with personal experiences and journeys. Helen Xu offers a case study on what students in China must face in attempting to finance their university education. Predators, often motivated by a desire for more than economic gain, have exploited innovative digital technologies designed to facilitate peer-to-peer borrowing and lending. Her story, however, offers hope that such abuses can be overcome, if people find ways to resist effectively.

Resources for such resistance can be found in many unlikely places. Liu Guangming’s concern over sweatshop conditions in Guangdong Province, and the assaults on human dignity suffered by migrant workers there, leads him to a creative reading of the Harvard philosopher, John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*. Henri-Claude de Bettignies, following up on his study on “Responsible Leadership” in the first issue of this

journal, takes us into China's business schools, in search of ways in which businesses can go beyond mere compliance with the law to become a "force for good" in our society. Laszlo Zsolnai and Eleanor O'Higgins report on their study of progressive businesses, actively engaged in making innovation work for all their stakeholders, thus moving beyond the constraints imposed by conventional views of *homo economicus*. This issue's interview is with Johnny Hon, a very successful Hong Kong entrepreneur, whose extraordinary commitment to philanthropy, gives us hope that it is still possible to do well while doing good.

lives. David Urrows explores how a book of hymns were part of the 'cultural baggage' that August von Hallerstein SJ, 刘松岭 (Liu Songling) carried with him from his native Slovenia. Hallerstein's hymnal, printed in Graz in 1729 and brought to China in 1736, stands as a strong symbol of values and the force of conviction that kept resonating in the life of a Jesuit who held an important position in Beijing as an astronomer. Urrows, exploring Hallerstein's hymnal and other artefacts, shows how our common humanity is expressed through the 'cultural baggage' we carry, resonating as it must through our encounters with other cultures.

Renewed awareness of the profound

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The possibilities for addressing the challenge of climate change are explored in three interrelated pieces, reflecting on Pope Francis' personal campaign for environmental responsibility. Dennis McCann prefaces the case studies reported by Franz Gassner and Mark Pufpaff, with a review of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, his 2015 encyclical letter on "Care for our Common Home." Gassner and Pufpaff focus on concrete responses to Pope Francis' teaching, the one rethinking waste management practices globally as well as locally, the other showing how Francis' appeal for change has met with significant responses from ordinary people (celebrated in the Philippines as "*Karaniwang Tao*"). *Homo economicus* must not only be re-examined for the sake of humanity, but also changed, if people refuse to accept the role assigned to them as commodities, to be bought and sold in the marketplace.

Restoring a sense of humanity in *homo economicus* requires not only new forms of social engagement, but also a retrieval of our personal histories. Exploring such roots inevitably connects us to core values that continue to resonate in our

affective resonance that carrying such baggage brings with it may lay the groundwork for developing an alternative interpretation of *homo economicus*. It need no longer be identified with narrow self-interest and greed but may be enlarged through a deepening awareness of humanity's spiritual nature. After all, what does a "rational" approach to economics really mean, if it consistently ignores the spiritual dimension of being human? "Spirituality," to be sure, needs to be understood in its reference to commonly recognised values of honesty, trustworthiness, integrity and the ability to communicate and interact with each other in a fair and decent way. However, these values are nurtured in wisdom traditions in which spirituality is cultivated. While they remain vulnerable to destruction in the hurly-burly of modern life, they may yet have a decisive impact on human behaviour, even and especially economic behaviour.

Does the drive for short-term profit necessarily crowd out any attempt to stick to one's values? Empirical evidence, for example, of exposure programs with university students keeps surprising us. I remember how deeply inspiring

it was for me to be with students from Germany and Switzerland, challenging themselves to live in one of the poorest rural settings in Northern India and sharing in the community's manual tasks, temporarily separated from cell phones, make-up kits, air conditioning and mirrors—the 'cultural baggage' that resonates with the comforts of home. Students asked, how can I survive without my things? In today's world, it is certainly a privilege to be pushed out of one's own comfort zone in order to gain hands-on experience of building up something literally from scratch. The whole process had a profound impact on the way the students might make their decisions in life. For many of the participants in the exposure program a fresh concern for the benefit of the larger society came to override their previous priority focused only on getting a high salary. Usually students coming from privileged social groups are unaware of situations of slavery and exploitation in today's world. But how can any viable alternative economic model emerge if tomorrow's social innovators never have personal experience of situations of struggling humanity?

We must critically challenge inherited wisdom traditions to determine whether they may grow beyond the forms of social and economic inequality all too often accepted in the past as natural or as God's will. We may easily forget that all wisdom traditions are vulnerable and prone to fall apart, when they lose touch with the disturbing realities of exclusion, exploitation and abject poverty. The pressing question for China's wisdom traditions, especially related to their contribution to education is: Can these traditions—Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity—in any way contribute to reshaping a concept of rational behaviour that encourages, rather than distracts from, making decisions which will benefit the common good? What is the meaning of moral leadership in a context where success, ironically enough, goes to those most willing to abandon basic human values?

We cannot avoid questioning the rise of populist leaders who, despite their shrewd coerciveness and blatantly repeated lies, seem to meet broad acceptance and approval even from

religiously inspired circles, which appear ever ready to sell out their core values for a perceived gain in their social status. Such leaders are also challenging the dominant paradigm of *homo economicus*, taking advantage of the resentments of people convinced that the economic system is rigged against them. But what have they to offer beyond their success in mobilising anger, in support of a politics based on a wilful disregard of the rule of law and basic ethical principles?

In the midst of the general lack of courage to stand up against abusive leaders, we welcome the emergence of the "Me-Too" movement driven by Hollywood stars in the entertainment industry. It has the potential to become a watershed moment in a process of change from a culture of rampant abuse towards a culture respecting the dignity of each individual. The activist "Me-Too" women should be saluted for their leadership in social innovation to advance the cause of ethical behaviour.

How should social innovation be conceived in a rational approach that once again takes the normative aspect of values into account? How can the values of honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, and reliability, in short, become the drivers of social innovations that may benefit broader layers of society? As our contributors to this second issue of the MRI Journal suggest in various ways, a whole new outlook on the term "rational behaviour" is needed to bring about a shift from a narrow-minded and even dangerous economic model focused exclusively on self-interest towards a model which respects the dignity of each individual—especially the most vulnerable—for the benefit of society as a whole.

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