

Erste Hinweise über den Zustand des Konsums dürften am Donnerstag die Details zum deutschen Bruttoinlandsprodukt aus dem Frühjahrsquartal geben. Bei der Veröffentlichung der ersten Schätzung in der vergangenen Woche hatten die Statistiker von einer Schwäche der Inlandsnachfrage berichtet. Spannend ist nun, wie schwach der Privatverbrauch dabei tatsächlich war.

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TOP PANEL (from left to right)

Revolutionaries among the economists

George Akerlof

At this year's annual meeting of the American Economic Association, the Nobel prize winner gave an address in which he stated that human beings do not only maximize a narrowly defined gain, but that their actions are also strongly influenced by social norms. Mainstream economists were appalled.

Edmund Phelps

The scholar used the speech he delivered at the award ceremony of the Nobel prize last December to criticize the assumptions made by today's mainstream economists about individuals' rationality. The speech was recently published in the renowned professional journal *American Economic Review*.

Dennis Snower

In Germany, the president of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy is among the leading economists who regard with skepticism the image of man as *homo economicus*. In June, he organized a conference that looked at the consequences that deviations from standard assumptions would bring for the labour market.

Roman Frydman

A few days ago, this New York economist's latest book was published. Together with his colleague Michael Goldberg, he argues that the world is far too complex and changes are far too unpredictable for individuals to be able to accurately forecast price and rate development.

A phenomenon economists have hardly been able to explain: fluctuations like those of the **Dax** share index last week.

CAPTION: New Release

Book *Imperfect Knowledge Economics: Exchange Rates and Risk* by Roman Frydman and Michael D. Goldberg, with a foreword by Edmund S. Phelps, was released last week by Princeton University Press.

Attack on the Rationality Myth

SEBASTIAN DULLIEN, BERLIN

As panic-selling depresses prices on the stock-market, the assumption of cool and rationally calculated investors comes under fire. Among those at the forefront of the criticism: Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps

According to established economic textbook models, the recent downturn in the market could never have happened. In economists' standard model, individuals

are not only rational; they also have precise knowledge of economic conditions and can thus assess which long-term path exchange rates, prices, and unemployment will take. According to these models, people run their lives and decide if they want to work, what they consume, and how they invest their money based on this information – and follow their path rather like a ballistic missile, making only the occasional course correction.

A sudden drop in the market without an external catalyst doesn't fit the picture, and neither do the large exchange-rate movements that can be regularly observed between the dollar, euro and yen. "There are often large deviations in economic events that cannot be explained using popular models based on rational expectations," says Nobel prize winner Edmund Phelps, whose Nobel lecture last year addressed this topic.

Phelps is not alone in his unease. Economists of all kinds are increasingly calling into question the picture of an individual as a coldly rational, pinpoint-controlled robot – as a *homo economicus*. Similarly, US Nobel prize winner George Akerlof's "presidential address" at this year's annual conference of the renowned American Economic Association addressed the theme of the extent to which social norms influence people's behavior – for many economists an absurd idea. According to Akerlof, this is a significantly better explanation of empirically observed work and consumer or investment habits than the standard theory offers. This explains, for example, a sense of fairness, and why, in reality, there are hardly any nominal wage decreases in certain situations, although, according to the textbook, this would be expected.

According to Phelps, this perspective cannot be neglected when economists portray how individuals make decisions. "An individual is rational only when he or she observes his or her social context," he says.

Alternative models are also increasingly being resorted to in banking, when attempting to predict markets. Thus, fund managers and traders now often refer to the teachings of economists who have incorporated insights gained from the world of behavioral research into their models. Using this approach, panic selling such as that of the last few days is easily explained – but hardly so using textbook wisdom. "Economists can learn a lot from psychologists and sociologists," says Dennis Snower, president of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

Snower, for example, arranged a high-ranking conference for around 100 economists from around the world at the beginning of June, at which he sounded out the limitations of the textbook model for explaining unemployment.

It is most likely a coincidence that, just as we are in the midst of a large market deviation, a new book is released opening yet another line of criticism against the image of the rational individual within a smooth-running economic process: *Imperfect Knowledge Economics* by the US economists Roman Frydman and Michael Goldberg. The two argue that the world is far too complex and insecure for individuals to be able to make precise predictions into the distant future and adjust their behavior accordingly.

So, for example, it is impossible to determine in advance the probability of the appearance of important economic innovations such as the Internet. However, such innovations alter the fundamental structure of the economy, which makes a precise prediction of prices or exchange rates impossible. Individuals can attempt to adapt to the constantly changing economy solely by trial and error. Most of the time, such behavior lies far removed from that predicted by the textbooks. The consequence: there are long periods of exaggerated swings around exchange rates, and also around share prices.

However, even if the number of critics is growing, the economic mainstream has not yet begun to doubt the leading model. Akerlof's lecture was criticized by US economist Mark Gertler, who said that the Nobel laureate was "out of line." It is difficult to get ideas that depart from the mainstream published in high-ranking academic journals, admits Frydman.

Thus, Phelps is skeptical as to whether the heretics can bring about a new revolution among economists. He estimates the proportion of critics of current practice at "perhaps one per cent." Snower is more confident: "I would estimate the proportion at well under ten per cent – but that will change," says the economist.