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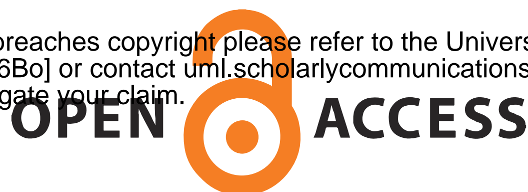

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Books should not be judged by their cover. Yet, this collection of essays edited by Till Düppe and Ivan Boldyrev warrants an exception. Besides representing a marked departure from the sober monochromes to which readers of *History of Political Economy* annual supplements are accustomed, this cover also provides a foil to identify and discuss the volume's most laudable features. The cover reproduces a 1949 poster by Soviet artist Viktor Govorkov, entitled 'To trade in a civilised manner is honourable work!'. It depicts a grocer in a shop. What does this have to do with the 'economic knowledge' at the centre of the volume? The essays do not discuss how shopkeepers (or peasants, or industrial workers) made sense of the economic world. The focus is still on 'professional economists' (a fluid category, as some of the essays make clear), with eight chapters on the Soviet Union, two on Hungary, one on Czechoslovakia, and one on Yugoslavia (but as part of a larger transnational history).

Yet the cover is meaningful, and the emphasis on 'economic knowledge' justified, because the essays simultaneously broaden and de-centre the focus of the literature on economics under socialism. Most of the protagonists of the canonical historiography on socialist economics, like Leonid Kantorovich and Oskar Lange, abandon the centre stage. When they are the main characters, they appear in novel and surprising ways, like Janos Kornai in György Péteri's contribution. By reconstructing the networks and system of patronage within which Kornai's career in Hungary unfolded, this essay complements (and partly subverts) Kornai's self-portrait in the memoir *By Force of Thought* (Kornai 2006), and rescues from oblivion characters like István Friss, neglected by historians but arguably 'the most important patron in the high echelons of the party-state hierarchy in the 1950s and 1960s' (p. 31). Through an alternative reconstruction of the context in which Kornai operated, and an analysis of Kornai's deliberate choice to erase Friss' important role from the account of his life and career, the essay raises important questions on the economist as creator of historical narratives. Many of the contributions focus on economists who, for a wide range of reasons, failed to capture the attention of the top levels of planning, administration or policy-making. Alternatively,

economists are presented as public intellectuals (Mata and Medema 2013) rather than simply as social scientists, and their work inscribed within a broader 'public sphere', with its own mutable political messages and implications. This is the approach taken by Vítězslav Sommer in his insightful study of 1960s Czechoslovakia. His analysis of the monthly *Ekonomická revue*, in which economists popularised their work and disseminated reformist ideas among the general public, is a strong reminder that economic knowledge is more than the 'mirror image' of academic theories and concepts; rather it involves a process of 'translation' in which concepts acquire new political life and meanings (p. 52).

However, the editors' and contributors' emphasis on 'economic knowledge' (rather than simply on economics) is not just a commitment to inscribe the work of economists within broader political and ideological constellations. As remarked by the editors, '"economics" refers not only to ideas but also to a disciplinary form of economic knowledge that did not exist to the same extent in the socialist context' (p. 2). Several of the essays explore these aspects by uncovering the interdisciplinary interactions underpinning the consolidation of economic expertise, and by shedding light on the diverse realms of public life to which economic concepts and categories were applied. Eglė Rindzevičiūtė's paper focuses on systems analysis, and how this informed debates on the nature and impact of infrastructures (or rather, as they were called in the Soviet Union, 'material and technical base', p. 206). In a case of 'engineering as economics' (rather than 'economics as engineering', p. 180; see also the essays in Garcia Duarte and Giraud 2020), Olessia Kirtchik presents the intellectual trajectory of Emmanuil Braverman. His background in automated engineering, and his pioneer work on artificial intelligence and on algorithmic methodologies for cancer treatment, deeply shaped Braverman's understanding of the Soviet economy 'not as a computer calculating an optimal plan but as a giant learning network' (p. 198).

Staring at a red scale decorated with the unmistakable hammer and sickle, the shopkeeper is weighing some dried goods, and inserting them into a paper bag with a trowel. This seemingly mundane action raises questions about the heuristic tools with which the socialist economy was 'weighted', measured, made operational and assessed. 'Weighing' and 'weighting' are central in one of my favourite contributions to the volume, Martha Lampland's essay on the debates on calories, labour power and productivity in 1940s and 1950s Hungary. This paper is, simultaneously, a stylised conceptual history of 'labour' (and how Marx came to understand it), a sociological analysis of competing forms of quantification, and a historical

ethnography of ‘biopolitics in high gear’ (p. 7), and for these reasons it exemplifies the volume’s interdisciplinary spirit and aspirations.

Measurement did not take place in a discursive vacuum: it was intrinsically linked with a dialectical process of ‘othering’ and rapprochement through which economists tried to make sense of socialist economies on their own terms, vis-à-vis the capitalist West, and as part of more global contexts. Exploring these paths has led the contributors to zoom into previously neglected concepts, or to offer radical reappraisals of abused ones. An example of the former is Chris Miller’s essay on the notion of ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’. Miller explains the shift from enthusiasm to disillusionment in Soviet perceptions of the political maturity and revolutionary potential of the ‘Third World’ between the 1960s and the 1980s. Treating bureaucracy as a class in itself, the concept of ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ informed the Soviet view of postcolonial governments’ corruption and inefficiency, and contributed to build an argument for the quasi-impossibility of socialism in the developing world. Essays dealing with concepts that, through constant repetition and appropriation, thinned and flattened the links with their contexts of inception and mobilisation include Johanna Bockman’s on ‘structural adjustment’ and Joachim Zweynert’s on ‘convergence’. Partly delinked from the governance of international financial institutions and from the semantic sphere of ‘neoliberism’, Bockam’s genealogy of ‘structural adjustment’ unfolds across 1920s debates at the Kiel Institute for World Economy, ‘where the term *structural change* was first used systematically’ (p. 256), and takes us on a fascinating journey that culminates in the debates among Yugoslav economists during the Cold War, and UNCTAD’s dream of a New International Economic Order. The conceptual history of ‘structural adjustment’ rescues an important chapter of the history of how socialism was imagined through neoclassical tools, but also invites us to move beyond the dichotomy between ‘states’ and ‘markets’ in political imagination. Zweynert’s focus on ‘convergence’ offers an interesting entry point to reappraise Perestroika, and the process of dissemination and affirmation of the economic ideas underpinning it. The essay is simultaneously an exploration of how the Soviet Union defined itself vis-à-vis the West since the 1960s, an interesting account of the Soviet reception of John Kenneth Galbraith and, more importantly, an account of the relationship between ideas and policy spaces. The most interesting aspect of this story is that ‘convergence’ was at the same time a conceptual pillar of Perestroika, and yet something hidden from view in policy discourse. This, in turn, raises interesting questions on the ambivalent continuities between the ‘reformers’ that dismantled the planned economy and the reformist visions of the 1960s. Nor was ‘convergence’ limited to

a new ‘middle position between market and central plan’ (p. 281); it could also encompass varieties of consumerism.

Indeed, the shop in which the grocer stands is stocked up with boxes, jars and tins of branded products. As suggested in the short stories in Francis Spufford’s *Red Plenty* (Spufford 2010), and in several of the essays under review, the articulation of these dreams of prosperity and material abundance was inseparable from forceful attempts to reimagine the role of science and economic knowledge in guiding society’s march towards utopia. As noted by Oleg Ananyin and Denis Melnik in their essay on commodity production, temporality was an important discursive sphere in socialist political economy, but the ways in which it was expressed varied significantly over the course of Soviet history. While 1920s debates on the transition to socialism emphasised the coexistence of ‘old’ and ‘new’, the post-Stalin era saw the consolidation of two complementary traditions. The first, closely associated with the ‘political economy of socialism’ was long-term in orientation, and ‘focused on interpretation and development of the Marxian ideas about future society’ (p. 78). The second, ‘predominantly pragmatic and short-term’ (p. 78), sought to learn concrete lessons from specific policies. Economic theory maintained its central role in shaping socialist ‘horizons of expectations’ even when this coincided with their foreclosure. Adam Leeds’ essay on Yurii Yaremenko is a remarkable example of this. Since the 1960s, Yaremenko saw the Soviet Union headed ‘on a disastrous, even tragic, path’ (p. 144). Even though it appeared as an analysis of the internal development of the Soviet economy, Yaremenko’s work pointed to the limits of treating the Soviet Union as an ‘economy’ in the first place. According to Yaremenko, the obsession with ‘economic determinism’ precluded the possibility of seeing and diagnosing correctly the extra-economic nature of the crisis that would eventually make the system collapse. From this point of view, Leeds’ essay raises the fundamental question of how the boundaries of ‘the economic’ are drawn in a given time and place, and what this tells us about the epistemic and political work done by the conceptualisation of ‘crisis’ (Roitman 2013).

Yet, no matter how firm and determined the gaze of our shopkeeper, many of the essays in this volume tell a story of roads not taken. Dissecting carefully the making of research programmes that did not have a significant impact on policy making or did not leave a visible trace on the most influential currents in socialist economics is not a mere exercise in gap-filling. Rather, it illuminates a panoply of reformist agendas, and their intellectual and epistemic ramifications. Through the lens of the life and career of Yakov Kronrod, Yakov Feygin shows the limits of narratives juxtaposing ‘orthodox’ and ‘reformists’ in Soviet economics. The

intellectual landscape of the late 1950s included at least three strands of reformist economic 'schools', which differed widely in their assumptions on the relationship between prices and value and in their methodological stances (p.113). By subverting the dichotomy of input-output modelling at the Scientific Research Economic Mathematical Institute of the State Planning Committee and optimisation theory at the Central Economic Mathematical Institute (pp. 130-131), the volume enriches our understanding of the role played by mathematical tools and methods in changing socialist economics from within. Richard Ericson, for example, complicates the standard narrative of the place of cybernetics in Soviet economic debates by recounting the trajectory of the System for Optimal Functioning of the Economy (SOFE). Even though, according to Ericson, SOFE represented the 'most systematic reform program' of the Soviet planning apparatus, it was built on what in hindsight appears as a radical dream: 'decentralize the planning process and plan implementation without sacrificing the state-centred and -driven economy based on central political control over production, allocation', and distribution' (p. 176). At a more general level, the richness of these essays subverts the linear character of many historical narratives on socialist economic thought written since the 1990s. A succession of neatly demarked 'paradigm shifts' or self-contained iconic episodes is replaced by glimpses of messier, more unstable and less visible constellations.

The volume is structured in four sections of three papers each, dealing respectively with 'discourses', 'doctrines', 'tools' and 'the international'. Yet, Lampland's essay on nutrition is as much about tools as it is about 'discourses' (where it has been placed); the essays in the 'tools' section are fundamentally about the articulation of reformist 'doctrines'; the contributions to 'the international' section are fascinating case studies of 'discourses' and their mobilisation, and so on. Perhaps, in the editors' intentions, this was precisely the point: to benefit from the neatness of these demarcations to structure the volume, while implicitly acknowledging their arbitrary nature. Or to remind us that the relation between discourses, doctrines and tools is one of porous boundaries and mutual construction. Nonetheless, and even agreeing with the editors' choice to avoid imposing too rigid a framework, I would still maintain that the volume would have benefited from a longer editorial introduction, or a postscript. Since many of the characters and institutions mentioned will not be familiar to most historians of economics, some additional pointers on the historical context and key actors could have been helpful. Secondly, and going beyond the academic discussion of socialism, precisely because 'discourses', 'doctrines' and 'tools' have such rich literatures spanning across disciplines and methodological traditions, the editors could have explicitly sketched some

historiographical ‘reading paths’. This could have been done while still avoiding one of the editors’ main worries: the creation of an ‘artificial unity’ (p. 3) undermining the richness and sheer diversity of the case studies included.

But let us go back, one last time, to the cover with Govorkov’s poster: the key to identify the volume’s most impressive overall contribution lies in a small detail. Behind the grocer’s head lies a pack of spaghetti; it looks as if the spaghetti box is coming out of the shopkeeper’s ears. Significantly, the Russian expression ‘to put noodles on the ears’ means to deceive or distract someone by intentionally talking nonsense.[1] This is not important because it gestures at a fundamental ontological distinction between ‘nonsense’ (or propaganda, or ideology, or…) and ‘truth’. Instead, in a fittingly oblique way, it invokes these essays’ striking capacity to read between the lines (to ‘decipher’, to use Ananyin’s and Melnik’s expression, p. 79), and capture economists’ ‘hidden agency’ (D’Onofrio and Serra 2020) in surprising ways. In some cases, like in Ananyin’s and Melnik’s paper, the different layers of authoritative economic discourse, and their political constraints and opportunities, are at the centre of the analysis. In others, important questions arise from specific details. For example, Miller suggests that Burlatsky’s books on the shortcomings of Maoism were an allegory of Stalinism (p. 241). Rindzevičiūtė’s paper documents how the discourse on systems analysis offered a language to articulate subtle critiques of Stalinist governance. The list could go on. Drawing on different disciplinary and methodological traditions (spanning from Mikhail Bakhtin to science and technology studies), virtually all the essays in the volume have something important to say about the relationship between intellectual production and political context. Significantly, this is done in a way that is not ‘overdetermined by the political pre-script’ (p. 2). Instead, and while still taking power relations seriously, these essays emphasise the creative, open-ended, and contingent nature of the production of economic knowledge in socialism.

In conclusion, these essays will be strongly appreciated by scholars interested in the history of Marxian and socialist economics, modelling, and planning, and by historians of socialist regimes more generally. However, this volume’s most remarkable contribution lies elsewhere: in its catalogue of interdisciplinary ways of historicising what economists *actually* did, and in a series of productive avenues to analyse the embeddedness of economic knowledge in political cultures.

[1] Thanks to Ivan Boldyrev for making me aware of this in occasion of the volume’s launch, and for further explanations in private conversation.

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