

Economic Knowledge in Socialism, 1945–89: Editors' Introduction

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One of the strategies of the secret police in the Eastern bloc states, when dealing with ideas deemed potentially dangerous for the power of the Communist Party, was to create division and polarize debates (a strategy natural to any police). By picking out single individuals and publicly punishing them for whatever counterrevolutionary cause—be it petit bourgeois intellectualism, Trotskyism, revisionism, Titoism, and whatnot—the police could deter and shut off those who were really critical, and put potential deviators back in line. The result was self-censorship, socialist jargon, intellectual mediocrity, and professional frustration.

This is what many readers would expect to read about economists in socialist regimes. But saying so is to acknowledge that the distinctions that suggest themselves for the historiography under socialism—dogma versus reason, knowledge versus ideology, universal ideas versus Marxist stubbornness, and so on—are rather the *result* of the historical processes that bring about ideas, much as they are their presupposition. Moreover, if in the standard historiography of economics, most of the works discussed in this supplement have not yet played a role, this, too, is the result of the politics that left them to us. What is historically interesting is thus the events accompanying the emergence and reproduction of these distinctions. With

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a closer look at individual economists, or groups, it is indeed often impossible to assign unambiguous labels such as dogmatists, ideologues, reformers, rebels, or victims. This is what the contributions to this volume do: historicizing our preconceived notion of socialism being an oppressive system in which everything that could emerge as economic knowledge was overdetermined by the political pre-script. As in every other historical context, so did socialism both limit *and* enable the forces that bring about economic ideas. Hence, instead of blaming the dogmatists and ideologues, celebrating the reformers and rebels, and bemoaning the victims, we suggest trying to understand the world that brought about such personae of the socialist economist.

Some notes about the title. Why “economic knowledge” instead of “economics” or “economic thought”? It is not that we think of economics as a specific kind of knowledge codified in the Western Hemisphere and bearing no relation to the ideas that circulated in socialist countries. In fact, most of the work discussed in this volume could be readily included in the category of economics, even if the market concept, central for most of standard twentieth-century economics, is expressly not the organizing principle. Marxian political economy, linear programming, input-output analysis, theories of institutional change, all of that belongs to the canon in the history of economic thought. However, “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. Since economic knowledge was—notoriously and explicitly—politicized, since economic writers had to muddle through the landscapes of multiple governmental organizations, master ideological debates, and often go beyond their models in addressing specific policy challenges, and since, finally, Marxism itself was supposed to be the universal foundation of *all* sciences, the hard disciplinary distinctions were never holding up. The actors of economic knowledge in socialism, rather than neatly squeezed in economics departments, are thus all over the place. In fact, despite the centralized organization of science, one could observe a fundamental in-transparency of all sorts of economic research agendas spread out in various institutions hosting small collectives and clusters of economists that often did not communicate or feel themselves belonging to a single community. This dispersion of economic knowledge and fuzzy identities of the actors contributed to the inherent methodological pluralism thriving, ironically, amid a dim atmosphere of intellectual intolerance and political oppression.

Since the disciplinary form is different in a socialist context, it is not surprising that the contributors to this volume also come from various disciplines and fields: anthropology (Martha Lampland, Adam Leeds), contemporary history (György Péteri, Vítězslav Sommer), historical sociology (Johanna Bockman, Olessia Kirtchik), political history (Yakov Feygin, Chris Miller), science and technology studies (Egle Rindzevičiūtė), and economics (Oleg Ananyin, Richard Ericson, Denis Melnik, Joachim Zweynert). Three decades have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and scholars everywhere have benefited from the newly open archives of socialist countries for that period, from a more open environment for the sharing of memories and reminiscences, and from new approaches to intellectual history. It is this new wave of research on the social sciences in late twentieth-century socialist regimes, notably by young scholars, that gave occasion to this *HOPE* supplement. It is a serendipitous occasion for the history of political economy to be a host for scholars from such different backgrounds.

Rather than create artificial unity to these different ways of narrating the stories of economists in socialism, we trust that the historical context itself provides sufficient cohesion to this volume. Thus our editorial choice was to delineate “socialism” historically and limit it to the late and post-Stalinist period in the Eastern bloc (USSR and Eastern Europe). In some contributions, the perspective on other periods before or after plays a role, but we have not included the analyses of other socialist regimes prior to the Soviet Union, or of those in Asia, South America, or Africa. This, of course, does not make these areas and periods less important or relevant for the study of economic knowledge in socialism. Rather, this volume could prompt, and invites, others to examine these other cases. But even within this period and local context, this volume is far from comprehensive. Gaps are only seen when something is already in place: just think of Oskar Lange or Leonid Kantorovich, of growth theory, of the most important textbook culture, or of several countries such as Estonia and Poland that are little discussed in this volume. Instead, we wished to provide a platform for new historiographical approaches and aim at opening up a new research perspective, with these and other subjects being as prominent as they deserve.

Another editorial choice to mention that distinguishes this volume from some other works on economic ideas in socialism is to avoid the “view from the West” and slipping into a comparative tone. Much of the existing

research on economic knowledge is biased toward questions relevant for the history of Western economics only: how did mathematization in the Soviet Union take place, what was the relationship between expertise and political discourse, how did one deal with problems of allocation, and what was the communication and mutual influence between the two poles of the political spectrum? Instead, we wished to adopt a perspective from within the socialist state in order to open the black box of how it was to be an economist there. What were the questions that economists in socialist regimes considered important and why? How did economic knowledge emerge, how was it disseminated, and how were particular forms of knowledge institutionalized?

However isolated economists in Eastern bloc states might have been, their experiences are nevertheless telling about the meaning of economic knowledge during the Cold War—hence the addition 1945–89. A large part of the twentieth-century history of Western economics is related to the notion of promoting scientific rationality in economic and political institutions. It was hoped that scientific rationality might be better nurtured in the socialist context of a planned economy: that hope had its peak during the post-Stalinist decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The “beeps” of Sputnik in space, the education videos of what to do in a nuclear attack, Yuri Gagarin’s smile, and other images nourished the belief in the West that socialism spontaneously unites science, planning, and prosperity in realizing the dream of a modern society, as described, for example, in Francis Spufford’s *Red Plenty*. During this period, economists and other intellectuals and scientists debated publicly their visions of what economic knowledge should be, and negotiated their roles as agents of economic planning and makers of economic growth. During the 1970s, we observe a continued effort in promoting ideas for further economic reforms, but in a political context that increasingly was burdened by bureaucracy, military interests, and public debt. Hardly anyone was prepared for an abrupt demise of the party-governed state, such that these ideas are still held today with a certain melancholy. The contributions that follow explore this historical momentum of the rise and fall of scientific optimism in economic reasoning developed during the short-lived experiments of socialist governance during the Cold War.

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