Fabricating a Perpetual Economic Thought

BY JÁNOS MÁTYÁS KOVÁCS

In 2014, a large group of economists and historians in eight countries of Eastern Europe and China decided to write a comparative history of economic thought under communism. Strangely enough, such a work is still lacking—a quarter of a century after 1989. The research program was conceived at the IWM, and the scholars came together in April to discuss their pilot studies.

The roads Boris Bruskić, Oskar Lange or Tibor Liska today? The Russian scholar gave the first in-depth diagnosis of the impossibility of rational planning in a really-existing communist economy as early as 1921. The Polish economist re-fused Bruskić’s thesis of impossibility in 1936, and constructed a model of “market socialism” to re-place the command economy with-out returning to capitalism. Finally, the Hungarian reformer invented the utopia of “entrepreneurial socialism” in 1945 combining laissez-faire with a kind of basic income scheme and collective ownership. The three experts gave a large impetus to re-search on welfare economics, public choice, the economics of informa-tion, etc., but above all on rival eco-nomic systems in the East and the West. Whilst their ideas continue to influence many scholars and politi-cians, their names have been forgot-ten. Bruskić’ work has remained a mainstay of the economic critique of communism; the Lange para-digm of market socialism, especial-ly its ex-Yugoslav version of work-er’s self-management, has always attracted social movements all over the world; and Liska’s quest for entre-preneurial cooperation found its way throughout Eastern Europe and China during the past three decades.

Yet, the scientific discoveries of these scholars, as well as those of many dozens of their contempo-raries and liberals have entered the courtroom. Professional ethics in legal expertise have thus become a burning question.


2 After 2014 the Ministry of Justice was granted the right to identify foreign agents following its own internal procedure, without appeal to the court.

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The research program “Between Bukharin and Balcerowicz: A Comparative History of Economic Thought under Communism” (Triple B) launched by the IWM in 2014 seeks to fill this lacuna. Its title indicates the timeframe of research. Prior to the October Revolution, the Russian thinker Nikolai Bukharin turned his back on his professor, Eugen Böhm-Bawerk in Vienna, which marked the beginning of what proved to be a long detour from the history of Western economic thought. The end of the digression can be represented by the name of the Polish economist Lech Balcerowicz who converted to neoclassical economics at the end of the 1980s. The program revivifies economic thought in eight countries of ex-communist Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, GDR, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia) and in China. In each country prominent economists and their research teams prepare valuable national monographs and take part in producing a comparative analysis. They concentrate on the evolution of economic ideas but do not tear them out of their contexts in economic, political and social/cultural history; and examine how the East-West dialogue affected economic thinking under communism while not overlooking the East-East exchange of ideas.

Besides the “high culture” of economic thought, including eminent scholars and their findings, the "mass culture” of economic knowledge (e.g., university textbooks, articles in economic newspapers, etc.) are also examined. The Triple B monographs will not only include a thorough analysis of the major themes of communist political economy (ranging from state ownership and mathematization to decommodification, price controls, etc.). The comparison will provide a detailed typology of the evolution of economic thought in the selected countries as well as tackle some fundamental methodological issues (e.g., periodization, origins and diffusion patterns of economic knowledge, local traditions and original discoveries, etc.). The comparison will be complemented with an anthology of “hidden treasures” of economic scholarship under communism. The research results will be published in the Lexington Books series of the renowned publishing house Rowman and Littlefield. (For more information on the program, see triple-b-project.net)

Triple B has just passed its first, experimental phase. The national teams have completed large pilot studies covering five crucial fields of economic thought: change in concepts of ownership, scenarios of market reform, the breakthrough of mathematical economics, comparison of political economy textbooks, and the relationship between sociology and economics. The participants of the April workshop of the program (see box) discussed the results of their research phase, and—based on the high quality of the pilot studies—decided to publish two comparative volumes on ownership and mathematicalization respectively. The former will trace the twists and turns of the road leading from the idealization of public ownership to a reluctant rediscovery of private property rights while the latter will show how the monopoly of verbal analysis in communist political economy was broken by the influx of mathematical models from the West without resulting in a radical turn to neoclassical economics.

While preparing these two volumes, the national teams continue library research and interviewing...