

# “Commodity Sui Generis”: The Discourses of Soviet Political Economy of Socialism

Oleg Ananyin and Denis Melnik

The phenomenon of Soviet political economy of socialism is still a puzzle. Seen through the lens of Western, mainstream economics, it looks to be of little interest, since it does not deal with alternative uses of scarce resources, as one famous twentieth-century definition of economic knowledge required. This seemingly dogmatic genre of economic writing was often interpreted as an indicator of the changing political intentions of Soviet leaders. In the following, we treat the political economy of socialism as a form of economic knowledge in its own right.

An attempt to make sense of the official Soviet discourse was undertaken by Alexey Yurchak (2005), who challenged a binary “black and white” picture of the Soviet system. Yurchak showed how, in the post-Stalin period, Soviet citizens engaged with official texts and how these communications were insufficient for understanding what people really meant. According to Yurchak, Joseph Stalin’s death left vacant the role of a supreme arbiter capable of reconciling “authoritative discourse” with changing reality and political agenda, but did not undermine this discourse itself.<sup>1</sup> Yurchak argued that the post-Stalin “transformation of the

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1. Yurchak borrowed the term *authoritative discourse* from the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote in the 1930s on the heterogeneity of language in literary texts and distinguished between “authoritarian/ authoritative discourse” (*slovo*, or “word”), which requires full and unconditional recognition, on the one hand, and “internally persuasive discourse” (*slovo*), on the other (Bakhtin [1934–35] 1975, 154–57).

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discursive regime eventually led to a profound shift within Soviet culture during the late period, opening up spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings in the context of strictly formulaic ideological forms, rituals, and organizations. . . . during late socialism the newly normalized Soviet ideological discourse no longer functioned at the level of meaning as a kind of ideology in the usual sense of the word” (Yurchak 2005, 14–15).

Yurchak’s analysis focused on the attitudes of a rank-and-file citizen. How this regime was organized and governed remained beyond his scope. The present article is an attempt to fill this gap by looking closer at the evolution of the political economy of socialism as an “authoritative discourse.” Unlike young Soviet people described in Yurchak’s book, for whom official discourse was a “given” of their social life, Soviet political economists were agents, promoters, and even coauthors of its formulas. Leaders of the professional community of political economy of socialism felt responsibility for this Soviet life script, seeking ways to overcome the gap between official ideology and mass consciousness by making authoritative discourse politically more relevant and ideologically appealing. We examine these efforts through a case study in political economy of socialism: the debates around commodity-money relations under socialism—that is, nothing less than the central theoretical topic of political economy of socialism.

The discursive structure underlying these debates can be traced back to the first Soviet textbook on political economy, written under Stalin’s direct supervision. Our focus is not, however, on the history of the textbook as such (Openkin 1991; Pollock 2001, 2006, chap.7). The purpose is to assess the impact of the textbook on subsequent discussions of the role of commodity production and market exchanges in a socialist economy. This story suggests that Soviet official discourse was neither homogeneous nor stable. Rather, it consisted of several subdiscourses of different levels of authoritativeness allowing for a certain stable core as an attribute of any authoritative discourse, as well as for more flexible elements that adjusted the structure to new political and ideological challenges.

At least three levels of authoritative discourse can be distinguished. The first was *ideological* in nature. The statements of this level were to outline the general path of development toward communism in conformity with principles outlined in Karl Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* and the works of Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. This level was fixed in party programs and regularly reproduced in other official

documents, implying that (1) the path from capitalism to communism should include a “transition period” to socialism as the initial phase of communism and then the transition from socialism to communism proper; (2) socialism alters capitalism by replacing private property and market anarchy with social ownership and consciously planned economy; (3) the political regime of the first transition should be that of the dictatorship of the proletariat; (4) socialism differs from communism by its principle of income distribution: according to labor input under socialism, and according to wants under communism.

The second level of authoritative discourse was *programmatic* specifications of the achieved stages of development along the prescribed path to communism, such as Stalin’s declaration of the completion of the transition period in 1936, or Leonid Brezhnev’s pronouncement of “developed,” or “mature,” socialism in 1971. Unlike the ideological principles, these formulas relied on the authority of current political leaders and the changing political hierarchies. The case of Nikita Khrushchev’s removal, soon followed by the replacement of the formula of “direct transformation of socialism into communism” with that of “mature socialism,” illustrates this point.

The third level of authoritative discourse was *interpretive* in nature and consisted of personal public interventions of high-ranking party or state functionaries. Formally, they did not differ in status from academic publications, but in fact they represented and promoted the positions of respective official institutions, often reflecting interdepartmental controversies within the ruling apparatus. The authoritative power of such texts was based on and limited by the political “weight” of the respective speaker. In relation to the first two components of authoritative discourse, these “soft-core” interventions served as official interpretations of “hard-core” principles adapted to current political needs.<sup>2</sup>

Academic discourses entered the game by adding to, and interacting with, the lower levels of authoritative discourse. To be sure, most rank-and-file economists behaved in a way similar to the ordinary citizens described in Yurchak’s book. They either took official discourse for granted, confining themselves to illustrations and specifications of the above given formulas, or looked for ways to avoid confrontation with official discourse by using noneconomic languages to discuss prospective

2. Compare with similar, but not identical, use of Lakatosian terms in Zweynert 2018, 21–40.

economic reforms, such as mathematical modeling or managerial expertise. The latter tactics could be effective for organizing *local* discourse communities and facilitating exchange of ideas, but not, however, for the implementation of new ideas into practice. In such cases they had to be translated back into language compatible with official discourse.

The discursive position of leading Soviet economists was in between the third, interpretive level, and the academic sphere. For them, academic discourses were the arena for interpretation of official texts and the channel to influence “soft” components of official discourse. No less important was economists’ direct engagement in different ad hoc expert groups in party and state institutions, as well as promotion of their followers into governing bodies proper.

The very opportunity for interpretations within academic discourses relied on changing reality. In the 1920s the transition to socialism was considered a period of the coexistence of “old” (inherited from capitalism, such as private enterprises and market exchanges) and “new” elements of socioeconomic relations conceived as “sprouts” of the emerging social system. The latter were recognized as a legitimate source of inspiration for economic theorizing about socialism, on par with classical Marxist ideas. Yet it was far from clear which elements of the transitional mixture were just temporary phenomena and which would serve as building blocks of the future society. This ambiguity allowed schools of economic thought to extend their own interpretations of official “high-level” discourse. A parallel situation arose in the post-Stalin era, during which the removal of the dictator as an authoritative “editor” of discourse allowed schools of economic thought to play up the ambiguities in definitions of current stages of the transit from socialism to communism.

As a result, there emerged two interlaced academic discourses. The first, associated with the political economy of socialism, focused on interpretation and development of the Marxian ideas about future society. It was *long-term* in its political implications guarding “the general line” toward implementation of Marx’s communist project. The second was predominantly pragmatic and *short-term*. It was based on the lessons derived from practical economic experiences and tended either to avoid ideologically laden topics rhetorically or to interpret them in a way less restrictive for current policymaking.

Each discourse had its own logic and purpose, and at the same time both sought to be mutually compatible, which was hardly possible without a high level of rhetorical sophistication. While carefully following the

established rhetorical canon, Soviet political economists were able to convey both theoretical and practical messages. But to grasp their meaning, such messages need *deciphering*. This discursive sphere within which the political economy of socialism was practiced has so far not been addressed by historians of Soviet economic thought. The question of the existence and operation of commodity-money relations under socialism forms a case study for understanding its history.

### **The Puzzle of Commodity Production (1917–28)**

The October revolution presented the Bolsheviks with a set of paradoxical challenges, carefully concealed by the post hoc narrative that implicitly shaped many currents and undercurrents of Soviet intellectual debates for decades to come. The Bolsheviks believed in the cause of the revolution in Russia and elsewhere, yet never expected the abrupt end of czarism as early as 1917. They acted as if they had a theory, yet any coherent and comprehensive vision of a future socialist society was simply absent.

Hence, after the revolution, theoretical work became of primary political and ideological importance. Most economic writings in the months and years after 1917 were penned by those who belonged to the Bolshevik leadership. Lenin was the unquestionable authority, but he never made any significant contribution after the revolution. His remarks and notes reflected his often-changing positions and were subject to various, often conflicting interpretations. With the publications of his last lifetime notes in 1923 and amid the growing uncertainty over the course that economic policy had taken, economic studies became the arena of fierce clashes among the contenders for political leadership. Thus the period between Lenin’s illness and Stalin’s ascension to power, roughly between 1922 and 1928, was unique in Soviet history: the authoritative discourse of economic ideas was delivered in absence of an actual authority.

During this period, Bolsheviks largely denied the existence of “commodities” in socialism. For Marx, the “commodity” is the primitive economic “cell-form” of bourgeois society. In terms of plain logic, this would mean that the negation of such a society implies the negation of the commodity. Since the beginning of the civil war in early 1918, this was the point of unity in Bolshevik theory and practice. The standard postrevolutionary image of the future socialist economy was a nation as a single factory. In *The ABC of Communism*, leading Bolshevik theoreticians Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky (1922, 70) portrayed it as follows:

“Society will be transformed into a huge working organization for cooperative production. There will then be neither disintegration of production, nor anarchy of production. . . . No longer will one enterprise compete with another; the factories, workshops, mines, and other productive institutions will all be subdivisions, as it were, of one vast people’s workshop, which will embrace the entire national economy of production.”

Before 1921 Bolshevik leaders seemed to consider the transition to socialism to be rather short term. Military methods employed to cope with economic disruption during the civil war (so-called war communism) were interpreted as steps forward to a postmarket economy. The political crisis of 1921 made the Bolshevik government not only discard the policy of “war communism” but reassess the strategy of socialist construction. The crucial lesson was that an unorganized market appeared capable of surviving and flourishing even under highly unfavorable conditions of “war communism.” Neither administrative nor military methods were sufficient to overcome the spontaneity of commodity exchanges.

Awareness of this lesson led to the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), whose aim was no longer to suppress commodity production and market exchanges but to organize sustainable interaction of the new socialist sector with other economic sectors. Political power and “commanding heights” in the economy—banks, most of industry, key infrastructure—remained under the control of the Soviet government. Nevertheless, most state enterprises adapted their activities to the rigors of the market environment. In his last publications, Lenin pronounced his plan for the step-by-step, cooperative socialization of small agricultural producers, as well as cultural revolution, to be prerequisites of socialist construction, thus granting much longer perspective for the coexistence of a socialist and a market sector. Already in May 1921 Lenin ([1921] 1965, 383) attempted to approach this new situation theoretically: “The manufactured goods made by socialist factories and exchanged for the foodstuffs produced by the peasants are not commodities in the politico-economic sense of the word; at any rate, they are not only commodities, they are no longer commodities, they are ceasing to be commodities.”

Lenin was not the only one tackling the notion of commodity under the new historical condition. Another way to look at the plan-market relationship in a transition economy was proposed by Preobrazhensky ([1926] 1965) in his theory of two regulators. He argued that there are two main sectors in the Soviet economy that function according to different and conflicting laws, both in terms of mechanisms (plan and the market) and

outcomes, that is, volumes and composition of social product. As such, this approach formally followed the multisectoral model of the Soviet economy during the transition to socialism, supported by the authority of Lenin. However, Preobrazhensky argued that the market system, or commodity production, in the transition period had the same nature as in capitalism, and that the construction of socialism should signify, among other changes, its overall abolition. Otherwise, it would constitute the ever-present nucleus of capitalism, hence the political danger. That is, according to Preobrazhensky, commodity in the Soviet system was *commodity per se*, or a phenomenon inherited from capitalism and remaining essentially the same under the new political regime. It indicated a stage in the transition period in which the Soviet state reigned politically rather than economically. Lenin’s formula of commodities as “not only commodities,” rather, focused on the dialectics of form and content and suggested a possibility of *commodity sui generis*. While the external form may be commodity production, it concealed a new content of social relationships among economic agents.

Both attempts to conceive the relationship between the planned socialist sector and the nonsocialist market sector exerted considerable impact on later debates over commodity-money relations (CMR) in Soviet political economy, despite the fact that soon after publication of the first volume of Preobrazhensky’s ([1926] 1965) magnum opus, he was accused of anti-party activity as an accomplice of the Trotskyist opposition. Preobrazhensky was executed during Stalin’s Great Terror and for several decades could not be explicitly referred to in literature.

Besides different interpretations of commodities under socialism, the 1920s were formative of the discursive sphere of the political economy of socialism through the discussion between the so-called mechanists and idealists, implying two different approaches to the problem of commodity production. These debates were concerned with the interpretation of Marx and looked quite abstract and hardly relevant to the problems of building socialism in Russia. But they made clear that any interpretation of Marx could not be “politically neutral” and that different notions of the nature of value, hence “economic laws,” did matter in pragmatic terms.

The mechanist approach indicated that value is based on inputs of “abstract labor” understood in terms of physiological energy. Even if value is defined as a specific form of expression to those inputs under specific institutional conditions (bourgeois society), the law of proportionality based on labor inputs holds for every mode of production, implying that

political economy is a science applicable also to socialism. This path was associated with Alexander Bogdanov and Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov, who published the first volume of their highly influential Marxist *Course of Political Economy* already before the revolution, in 1910. For a long time, it was the primary source to support the “expanded definition of political economy.”

The idealist approach that became associated with Isaak Rubin was based on the thesis that abstract labor is an expression for exchange as the process that unites autonomous producers into a specific social unity, and that value is the form of exchange possible under the monetary economy only. This approach provided a peculiar insight into the presence of CMR in the Soviet economy. The pragmatic implications to that, as it happened, would depend on the definition of commodity one might adhere to—“per se” or “sui generis.”

### **Stalin’s First Interventions (1929–30)**

The immediate political significance of the debates between mechanists and idealists (or Rubinists) was that they set the stage for Stalin to enter the economic profession, providing him a ready-made pattern for his favorite method of marginalizing opponents. During the 1920s, he was not considered an authority in theoretical economics, but he clearly wanted to undermine those in the party leadership who were, above all Bukharin (see Openkin 1991, 113–14). By the end of 1929, Stalin seized on the opportunity, intervening in discussion.

To understand his intervention, it is worthwhile to remember that more than a year before, in September 1928, Bukharin had used his position as the editor of *Pravda*, the main party newspaper, to publish his “Notes of an Economist,” where he implicitly criticized Stalin’s position on planning and industrialization. This was perhaps the last criticism of Stalin published in the party press until 1956. In December 1929 Stalin masterfully avoided direct confrontation with Bukharin. Instead, he invoked authority by quoting Lenin’s marginalia on the pages of Bukharin’s book of 1920, aptly published precisely in 1929. Stalin argued that “Lenin was a thousand times right when, in his notes on Bukharin’s *Economics of the Transition Period*, he referred to the ‘commodity-capitalist tendency of the peasantry’ in contrast to the ‘socialist tendency of the proletariat.’ It is this that explains why ‘small production engenders capitalism and the bourgeoisie continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale’” (Stalin [1929] 1954, 154).



Hence followed that the idea of a “spontaneous” peaceful transition based on the convergence of commodity production in the agricultural sector and socialist production in the industrial sector was a “rotten,” “anti-Marxist,” “anti-Leninist” theory (154). Thus Stalin criticized Bukharin’s tendency to count on “economic laws”—citing Lenin’s reaction to Bukharin’s work of the period of war communism, when Bukharin adhered to the “restrictive definition of political economy” and denied the very existence of such laws under socialism. This was a masterful exercise in political rhetoric.

It might seem that Stalin should have taken the leftist positions himself—after all, quite a natural assumption amid the frenetic atmosphere of “big push” industrialization and forced collectivization. His was, however, the position to confront and marginalize different approaches and to control the discourse. And in February 1930 Stalin elaborated on the policy implications of his December 1929 speech:

The sentence in my speech at the conference of Marxist students of agrarian questions should be understood as meaning that we shall “get rid of NEP” when we are no longer under the necessity of permitting a certain freedom for private trade, when permitting it would yield only adverse results, and when we are in a position to establish economic relations between town and country through our own trading organisations, without private trade with its private turnover and tolerance of a certain revival of capitalism. (Stalin [1930] 1954, 192–93)

Stalin indicated to the students the rules of “dialectical” argument: the fact that commodity production “engenders” capitalism did not mean that NEP (which at that period stood for CMR) ought to be immediately curtailed; at the same time, the preservation of NEP by no means signified that CMR was “normal.” An immediate shift, from theoretical propositions to policy proposals, was the vice that would lead to deviations either on the right or on the left. It was for the party authority to choose the appropriate moments for this or that policy measure. As for the situation in economic theory, Stalin’s words were brisk and harsh:

It seems to me that in the disputes among the economists there is much that is scholastic and far-fetched. . . . The main errors of the contending sides are the following: a) neither side has proved capable of properly applying the method of fighting on two fronts: both against “Rubinism” and against “mechanism”; b) both sides have been diverted from the basic questions of Soviet economy and world imperialism into the

realm of talmudic abstractions, thus wasting two years of effort on abstract themes—to the satisfaction and advantage, of course, of our enemies. (196)

It was the political statement in theoretical issues. By 1930 the Soviet political economy was effectively embedded in the emerged power structure. But the CMR puzzle remained unresolved.

### **Making a Canon (1941–56)**

In 1929, Stalin ([1929] 1954, 178) addressed the economic profession: “It would be a good thing if our Marxist economists were to appoint a special group to examine the problems of the economy of the transition period in the new way in which they are presented at the present stage of development.”

Textbooks and instruction materials on the political economy of the first postrevolutionary decade mainly provided extended commentaries to Marx’s *Capital*. The pragmatic element in economic curricula was provided by courses in the theory of the transition economy (later, the theory of Soviet economy). This subject meant a corroborating description of the postrevolutionary developments. Its theoretical framework was set by the multisectoral model described above, which defined the postrevolutionary economy as a set of heterogeneous sectors (precapitalist, protocapitalist, cooperative, socialist) to be superseded by a homogeneous socialist system by the end of the transition period (see, e.g., Lapidus and Ostrovitianov 1930).

The consolidation of Stalin’s regime obviously increased attention to the indoctrination of university students—the would-be Soviet elite. Stalin uncovered his motivation some later:

The first, older generation of Bolsheviks was well grounded. We memorized *Capital*, summarized, argued and tested one another. This was our strength. This helped us a lot. The second generation was less prepared. People were busy with practical work and construction. They studied Marxism through brochures. The third generation has been raised on pamphlets and newspaper articles. They don’t have a deep understanding of Marxism. They must be given food that is easily digestible. The majority of them were raised on quotations, not the study of Marx and Lenin. If things continue this way, people might degenerate. People may decide they don’t need *Capital* when we are

building socialism. This threatens degradation. This will mean death. In order to avoid this even in part, it is necessary to raise the level of economic understanding. (quoted in Pollock 2001, 35)

The long carving of the cornerstone in the edifice to provide that “economic understanding” in digestible form—the first official textbook on political economy approved by the Central Committee—was initiated in the late 1930s. The development of the Soviet university system and changes in social structure in general made the problem of teaching social disciplines especially urgent. Since the early 1920s there were no systematic efforts to prepare the cadres of economists in the general system of university education.<sup>3</sup> The end of the decade saw the rapid expansion of the university system, but it was subordinated to the task of industrialization, with a focus on technical and engineering programs. In 1936–38 the trend radically shifted. Special attention was paid to the “unsatisfactory” situation in the teaching of social sciences, political economy in particular. This was declared the result of “wreckage” of “enemies of the people” among the authorities overseeing universities. The course of political economy was introduced as obligatory for all disciplines, and by the end of the decade, faculties of economics began to be founded in all major Soviet universities.

The writing of the first Soviet official textbook of political economy lasted almost two decades, it was closely monitored by Stalin, and it left a considerable archival trail.<sup>4</sup> We shall rely on available sources to highlight a specific theoretical obstacle in writing the textbook—the uncertainty over the nature of CMR in Soviet economy and the evolution in attempts to resolve this conundrum. It began in 1937, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union commissioned two textbooks on political economy: for the introductory level in the question-answer format

3. There was, however, a demand for teachers of Marxist political economy, which had to be ensured by the system of party institutions set up in the early 1920s, first of all, by the Institute of Red Professors.

4. The first study of the process was published in Russian (Openkin 1991). The next important step was made by Ethan Pollock (2001), who published the translation of transcripts of several meetings Stalin (2012) had with economists engaged in writing the textbook. In 2006 Pollock published his monograph on Stalin’s involvement in scholarly issues with a thorough chapter on the political economy. A firsthand account of the process, not devoid of the usual shortcomings of the memoir literature though, is provided by Dmitry T. Shepilov (2001). A reconstruction of the historical background behind Stalin’s (1952) public contribution to the process is presented in Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2004, 145–48. All translations from Russian are by the authors.

(from Lev Leontyev), and for the advanced level (from Konstantin Ostrovityanov). While other authors would join the process, these two scholars remained closely associated with the textbook until its publication in 1954. The choice was not arbitrary. Already in 1924 Leontyev published a popular exposition of political economy. In 1932–35, his *Introductory Course of Political Economy* sustained four editions. In 1928 Ostrovityanov, with his coauthor Iosif Lapidus, published the first edition of *Political Economy in Its Relation to the Theory of Soviet Economy*—a widely circulated textbook that sustained eight editions until 1934.

Given these already existing models, one might expect two textbooks with the imprimatur of the Central Committee to be ready for publication soon—indeed, the authors had been required to provide their versions in just two months (Openkin 1991, 115). Both authors delivered their drafts by that date. As is indicated in a list of works in his papers, Ostrovityanov, in 1937, prepared a manuscript of the textbook in coauthorship with Elizaveta Khmel'nitskaya.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear why this draft was withdrawn from further deliberations at the Central Committee. The next stage in writing was connected with Leontyev's draft. Upon presenting his first version, he was required, among other issues, to get rid of the question-and-answer form and to follow the pattern set by Bogdanov's *Concise Course of the Economic Science*.<sup>6</sup> After several iterations, parallel work with different authors, and subsequent mergers of the versions, in January 1941 Stalin (2012), flanked by several senior members of the leadership, met with the group of economists involved in the project.

It was at this point that he clearly expressed to the authors his concerns on their theoretical statements about, among other things, CMR under socialism. Stalin dismissed the statement in the draft that “the law of value has been overcome” (quoted in Pollock 2001, 17). It would have meant the total control over prices by the state, and the real situation, according to Stalin, was far from that: “To be in control of prices you need tremendous reserves, an abundance of goods, and only then can we dictate our prices. But as of now there still is an illegal market, a kolkhoz

5. Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ARAS), f. 411. Op. 3 D. 287. L. 19. isaran.ru/?q=ru/person&guid=BD0DD67D-2BE2-7340-8AB7-1DFDA6F17C18.

6. Alexander Bogdanov, who died in 1928, was the author of didactic economic texts in the Bolshevik literature before and immediately after 1917. Apart from the already cited *Course of Political Economy*, he authored two widely circulated didactic texts: *A Short Course* was first published in 1897 (15th ed. in 1924); *Introductory Course of Political Economy* (originally, *Introduction into Political Economy*) was first published in 1914 (11th ed. in 1924). The latter was written in the question-and-answer form.

market, and there still exist market prices. . . . No, we are far from able to dictate the price of every commodity. In order to do that we need to produce a lot. Much more than now” (17).

Still, no theoretical substantiation would follow. The need to count on CMR in running the Soviet economy was framed into pragmatic discourse. There thus emerged a trap: theory development depended on economists’ initiative, while economists were already accustomed to following the lead from above.

The war that started just a few months after the 1941 meeting understandably distracted Stalin’s attention from the textbook. However, already in 1943, the major Marxist journal, *Under the Banner of Marxism*, published an article on problems in teaching political economy (see Editorial 1943 and “Teaching . . .” 1944). That at the height of World War II the journal bothered with such an issue was surprising, but most surprising was that the article was published without any indication of authorship. In the Soviet academic hierarchy this meant the highest distinction of an authoritative statement before personal contributions of party leaders. A comparison between the minutes of the 1941 meeting and the article reveals that it closely followed Stalin’s statements and elaborated on them.<sup>7</sup> The article addressed the problems of Soviet university courses on political economy.<sup>8</sup> It authoritatively introduced the “historic principle” as the methodological beacon in teaching, implying that commodity production could not be reduced to capitalism only.

As for teaching the political economy of socialism, the article introduced “the law of value” as a feature of the Soviet economy. This was not a new thesis. Circulated in the Soviet economic literature since 1920s, it had different meanings. For some, it could stand for just a method of accounting; for others it could be a synonym of market mechanism. However, given the rank of the journal, the thesis was now elevated as an authoritative statement. But its substance was still far from clear. To justify the presence of CMR, the article offered a heterogeneous series of

7. The oral history of Soviet political economy attributed the authorship of the article to Lev Leontyev, which is supported by the evidence from his archival papers. Soviet scholars regularly provided lists of their published and unpublished works for various forms of evaluation of their scientific activity. In one such list Leontyev explicitly indicated the article among his published works (ARAS. F. 1723. Op. 1. L. 4, isaran.ru/?q=ru/person&guid=5E11F9DF-32C3-E5DA-962C-FC85AC2115B2).

8. The significance of the contribution was promptly appreciated in the West: translations and responses appeared in the *New York Times*, *American Economic Review*, and *Science and Society*.

arguments originating in the pragmatic discourse, such as the need for labor accounting under conditions of labor inequalities (“Teaching . . .” 1944, 522) and requirements of cost accounting (*khozraschot*) method in enterprise management presupposing “reduction of both expenses and results of production to a single denominator” (524). Perhaps the most remarkable among the arguments stated that

in the Soviet economy there exist in fact two markets and two kinds of prices. . . . A struggle goes on between the organized market, which is in the hands of the Soviet state, and the elemental forces of the unregulated market. In order to be the complete master over the market and to be able completely to dictate market prices, the Soviet state would have to have at its disposal enormous masses of commodities, enormous reserves of all sorts of goods. (523–24)

To reconcile pragmatic evidence with the rigors of ideological discourse, the article stated that the law of value “functions under socialism but it functions in a transformed manner,” which was explained with reference to the dominance of socialist ownership, the political leverage of the state, as well as to the noncommodity nature of labor, land, and principal means of production (525–27).

The next stage of the project started after the war, in 1946, when a limited number of copies of *Political Economy: A Short Course* were printed (more than forty were sent to various economists for reviews). A new round of rewriting, with several drafts, ensued (Pollock 2006, 178–83; Openkin 1991, 116). Finally, in April 1950, a group of scholars (some of whom had already been involved in the project since its inception) were given one year to provide a definitive version of what was conceived now as the basic university textbook. In early November 1951 almost 250 individuals who were given the prepared draft were invited for its discussion. “By late November, when the meeting was supposed to have ended, some participants appeared almost embarrassed by the repetitiveness of their talks” (Pollock 2006, 194). But Stalin, who was then at a Georgian resort, continued to monitor summaries of the session, which he received nightly (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2004, 145). Only when he got enough materials for his “editorial” work was the discussion over, more than a month after its start. In February 1952 Stalin circulated his *Notes* to the materials of discussion first among Politburo members and then among the participants of the discussion. In October the *Notes*, along with three of Stalin’s (1952) responses to letters from economists he received since February, were published.

During the 1951 discussion, “paradoxically, the textbook’s emphasis on the existence of a ‘transformed’ law of value under socialism, a thesis the authors had received directly from Stalin in 1941, became the most controversial subject in the discussion” (Pollock 2006, 188). That undoubtedly caught Stalin’s attention. He reacted with a change in theoretical formulation allowing, at most, that “the sphere of action of this or that economic law may be restricted” (Stalin 1952, 9). The prior position was rejected: “Although the formula that economic laws can be transformed has already been current in our country for a long time, it must be abandoned for the sake of accuracy.” At his meeting with a group of economists in February 1952, Stalin (2012, 23–28) explained the restricted sphere of action of the law of value by standard reference to the absence of private property and a noncommodity character of labor.

One of the most significant theoretical innovations made known to participants in the 1951 discussion from Stalin’s *Notes* was the formulation of the reason for commodity production to exist under socialism. Stalin in his usual manner posed two “extremes.” First: “It is said that commodity production must lead, is bound to lead, to capitalism all the same, under all conditions. That is not true. . . . Commodity production must not be identified with capitalist production” (Stalin 2012, 17). Second: “It is said that, since the domination of social ownership of the means of production has been established in our country, and the system of wage labour and exploitation has been abolished, commodity production has lost all meaning and should therefore be done away with. That is also untrue” (19). “Wrong” statements were followed with theoretical formulation:

Today there are two basic forms of socialist production in our county: state, or publicly-owned production and collective-farm [*kolkhoz*] production, which cannot be said to be publicly owned. . . . The effect of this is that the state disposes only of the product of the state enterprises, while the product of the collective farms, being their property, is disposed of only by them. But the collective farms are unwilling to alienate the products except in the form of commodities. . . . At present the collective farms will not recognize any other economic relation with the town except the commodity relation—exchange through purchase and sale. (19–20)

With this, the theoretical foundations for the textbook’s section on political economy of socialism was finally laid: the key to CMR under socialism was found. Stalin had many reasons to be satisfied. On his account, “the things in economy went not bad,” and the textbook was to provide a concise didactic explication of the system he built and supervised for almost three

decades. He died in March 1953. But the team of authors continued to be the executors of his will. Not only did they publish the textbook in 1954, they almost literally reproduced there his words and his vision. It was as if he still spoke from his sarcophagus. The textbook truly became his last word.

### Post-Stalin Debates

When *Political Economy: The Textbook* came out in print in 1954, political changes were already under way, and the intellectual “thaw” was forthcoming. In 1956 the foundation on which the textbook was built, Stalin’s authority, had collapsed with the Twentieth Party Congress. The textbook ceased to be sacred, and its authors had to defend their creation to escape compromising their own status, while opponents gained the opportunity to criticize it and even propose alternatives.

CMR and the law of value were once again at the center of debates. The textbook’s explanation of CMR, referring to exchanges between enterprises belonging to different ownership sectors, state and cooperative, followed a legal logic, and as such was ideologically acceptable. But its descriptive value was not high. Relations between agricultural collective farms (*kolkhozes*) and state enterprises interpreted as the cause of “commodity production” were not much different from inter-enterprise relations inside the state sector, which were the prevailing type of economic relations in the country. In both cases, supplies of raw materials, component parts, final products, or services were intermediated with money transfers and documented in respective balance sheets of each enterprise. Nevertheless, the textbook insisted that “the means of production manufactured by State enterprises and distributed within the State sector are essentially not commodities. . . . [But] the means of production, which circulate inside the State sector . . . , are expressed in the money form of value, which is necessary for the realization of economic accounting, stock-taking and calculation” (Economics Institute [1954] 1957, 442).

This looked utterly artificial to the reader during the Krushchev’s Thaw. Already the first wave of debates around CMR in the late 1950s made the authors abandon Stalin’s explanation.<sup>9</sup> The third edition of 1960 retreated

9. Major discussions were organized at the Institute of Economics of the Academy of Sciences (May 1957) and Moscow State University (January 1958). Contributions of the participants were published in 1959 in two volumes, respectively: Kronrod 1959 and Tsagolov 1959.



to the position reminiscent of the 1943 article, referring to a heterogeneous list of factors, including intersectoral exchanges as but one of them. It was a compromise indicating that no satisfactory solution was found. What did survive of the textbook’s conception of CMR was its rhetorical formula: “commodity production *sui generis* [of special kind].” It declaratively claimed a qualitative difference between commodity production under capitalism and under socialism, and was loose enough to be reconciled with all current discourses.

The first half of the 1960s was marked with political changes reflected in the *programmatic* discourse. The new party program of 1961 announced “the building of a communist society” becoming “an immediate practical task of the Soviet people” (*Programme* 1961, 59). The new strategy directed attention to how to overcome “rudiments of the past,” with CMR being among the primary candidates for this role. This trend was, however, counterweighted by debates around the projects of economic reforms within the pragmatic discourse. Launched by Evsei Liberman’s famous article in *Pravda* in 1962 under Khrushchev, discussions continued and culminated in Alexei Kosygin’s economic reform of 1965. The reformist agenda implied the growing role of the profit motive and decentralized decision-making, commonly associated with CMR. Both uneasily reconcilable trends had powerful political support and found expression in many official texts. It was a challenge for political economists: the two imperatives were to be made compatible.

Crucial controversies developed around the question of whether the law of value based on the interaction of supply and demand, that is, market mechanism, has any active role in a socialist economy. The conventional academic answer was negative. Under conditions of all-embracing planning, possible imbalances between supply and demand were to be foreseen and incorporated into plans. This attitude was common to those who did not recognize the very existence of commodity production under socialism (Ivan Malyshev, Valerian Sobol), and to the academic majority that accepted its existence, specifying its *sui generis* nature with the attributes “socialist,” “planned,” “immanent,” and so forth (such as Genrikh Kozlov, Anatoly Pashkov, and others). Ideologically this latter position could be based either on the identification of value relations with a universal imperative of proportionality of interrelated economic activities (reminiscent of the ideas of the mechanists from 1920s) or on the assumption that commodity production is restricted in scope (since labor, land, etc. were not commodities anymore) and put under control of planning author-

ities. Pragmatically this “commodity without market” approach indicated a rejection of earlier beliefs in in-kind planning in favor of value-based calculations, providing a theoretical framework for intensive discussions on principles of pricing at the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s (Bornstein 1964). Most of the Soviet mathematical economists, engaged in debates on pricing formulas, such as Vasily Nemchinov, Leonid Kantorovich, Alexander Lurie, and others, worked within this framework. The idea was to calculate and implement prices that would create an environment stimulating enterprises to make rational decisions.

There was no direct correlation between ideological attitudes for or against CMR, and pragmatic attitudes to the scope of necessary reforms. Thus a leading representative of the position denying existence CMR in the Soviet economy, Malyshev (1960), promoted the rather radical project of price reform to be based on the law of value and the pragmatic price formula of “prices of production,” implying distribution of profits in proportion to costs. On the other hand, a well-known Soviet price expert, Shamay Turetsky (1959), who took for granted existence of commodity production under socialism, expounded a kind of “muddling through” approach focusing on the reasons supporting the status quo, rather than leading to a more rational price system.

On the opposite side of the intellectual spectrum, which emerged on the wave of economic reform, there was but a small group of economists promoting the idea that market self-regulation should be a guiding principle of socialist economy. The economic journalist Gennady Lisichkin was their best-known representative. In a widely discussed newspaper article from 1966, he had challenged the then-canonical idea that law of value does not regulate production, claiming that “the plan has necessarily to take into account the sales conditions of the social product, conjuncture, and market volume” (Lisichkin 1966). Within pragmatic discourse of the time, Lisichkin’s article was not much different from many others, but careful readers identified in his text an ideological claim elevating “Market” to the height equal to “Plan.” Together with some other publications, this case caused sharp clashes at the level of the Central Committee. The polemical exchanges between party ideologists can be illustrated with two fragments. In an anonymous letter that circulated in the CC and unleashed the polemics, there was a phrase “the attempt is made to evaluate efficiency of [economic] measures primarily by their reliance on *‘all-round development of commodity-money relations.’*” In a secret response letter, the editor in chief of *Pravda* replied with the strongest trump—a citation from Brezhnev’s report: “The state . . . will stimulate [free purchases of

agricultural products] with stable prices, will support *all-round development of commodity relations*” (*Pressa* . . . 2000; emphasis added).

The lessons of the Prague Spring of 1968 greatly tempered the reformist agenda, and the programmatic authoritative discourse under Brezhnev became less ambitious. Khrushchev’s formula of “immediate transition to communism” was replaced with the doctrine of “mature socialism.” The discursive framework for assessing the CMR narrowed: the idea of “market socialism” was sharply criticized, but the imperative of “overcoming CMR” was no longer on the agenda. Most sophisticated political economists with ambitions to influence policymaking (through the soft-core belt of authoritative statements) sought a middle way to reconcile the academic discourse of the political economy of socialism with programmatic discourse of the day. These were headed by Yakov Kronrod from the academic Institute of Economics and Nikolai Tsagolov from the economic department of Moscow State University.

Reacting to the introduction of the notion of “mature,” or “developed,” socialism at the party congress in 1971, Kronrod (1971, 84) proposed a revision of the official chronology by introducing the new concept of “communist era” to include an “infinite chain . . . of communist modes of production.” Socialism was conceived as a “historically independent mode of production” developing through several phases and having “its own internal regularities and essential features,” with commodity production among them (97). It was an argument aimed at a more radical removal of the idea of the transition from socialism to communism, away from the actual political agenda, than the official formula implied.

His opponents, to the contrary, insisted that “developed socialism is an economically advanced system of production relations of socialism that directly outgrows into the system of production relations of communism” (Tsagolov 1979, 301). Explaining his position, Tsagolov (1981, 355) wrote: “It is one thing to consider socialism a phase of communism, then simple logic of the system requires revealing . . . production relations, common for both phases . . . ; another thing . . . is to claim that the two phases have no common relations and laws, which is in fact the same as taking socialism and communism to be different modes of production.” This counter-attack was accompanied by a political campaign aimed at undermining Kronrod’s administrative position in the Institute of Economics (Popov 2004; Feygin, this volume).<sup>10</sup>

10. To be sure, Kronrod himself did not fail to take part in a similar campaign on the side of Gosplan against mathematical economists from the Central Economics and Mathematics Institute (see Kronrod 1973; Glagolev 2005).

Despite differences in their respective methodological and ideological preferences expressed in sharp clashes between the two schools, their theoretical approaches had an important similarity. Both developed dual models of the socialist economy in which planning and market mechanisms had distinct, though interconnected, roles. Kronrod's conception was based on the dichotomy of two forms of economic ties: direct non-equivalent and indirect equivalent, or commodity, ties. The first stood for the centralized allocation of resources among and within the state enterprises. The second—commodity—form of economic ties stood for mutual exchanges between the state enterprises, as well as the entities of different forms of ownership (cooperatives, individuals). To stimulate agents' activity, these exchanges were to be equivalent, that is, compensate costs and provide opportunities for additional gains based on additional efforts. Kronrod (1966, 389) was very careful in his rhetoric, defining this "commodity form of production and circulation of the products of labor" as "an *additional* form of integration of individual and collective labor into social labor." But within this theoretical framework he could develop his practical agenda along the line of pro-market proposals, such as developing a system of wholesale trade for means of production instead of their administrative distribution (Kronrod 1970, 59–65).

The school of Moscow State University departed most radically from the textbook. According to Tsagolov and most of his colleagues, CMR under socialism retained their "own, i.e. pre-socialist, content," meaning that within the socialist economy there existed areas where enterprise behavior, at least partly, depended on market forces of demand and supply. The socialist economy was portrayed as a two-tier structure: at the national level it was a purely planned economy, while at the enterprise level it was a combination of planned and market systems. Thus Tsagolov (1972, 74) wrote that "to give birth to socialism as a social form of production, it is crucial not only to eliminate the commodity nature of labor power but also to wrest from the power of law of value the distribution of social means of production among the branches of activities." At the same time and in direct opposition to Kronrod, he claimed that the very fact of equivalent exchanges between enterprises "witness[es] but a form of commodity, not actual relations of commodity production. But if exchange proportions do have an impact on economic positions of the agents, do stimulate production of the exchanged products, and vice versa . . . , and the producers can react by altering the structure of their production, then commodity relations are real" (Tsagolov 1971, 98).

Though methodologically opposed, one could observe a convergence between MSU and the Central Economics and Mathematics Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.<sup>11</sup> Both assessed the interfirm relations within the planned economy in similar terms. Both schools developed the idea that the socialist planned economy should be opposed not only to a market economy but also to a widespread notion of an all-embracing enterprise, that is, a version of a command economy. Interfirm relations, thus conceived, are to be based neither on in-kind commands nor on post-factum signals about emerged disproportions but on value magnitudes guiding both centralized and decentralized decisions. It was a symptom of a shift away from the dichotomy “market versus plan” to the trichotomy of “in-kind—monetary market—planned” systems. As Vsevolod Kulikov (1972, 111) of MSU wrote, “The notion of central planning in all details has no grounds, . . . self-motivated activity (*samostoyatel'nost'*) of economic units is of more general nature, and it would be inevitably retained after CMR will die off.” In more concrete terms, this idea usually meant some sort of optimal planning framework. MSU political economists recognized the relevance of marginal principle in the calculation of planned prices (Tsagolov 1974, 304), while Soviet mathematical economists agreed that optimal prices, being useful for stimulating enterprise activities, are inappropriate in decision-making for large-scale structural economic decisions (Fedorenko 1980, 102; Ericson, this volume).

## Conclusion

The political economy of socialism as a discipline in Soviet academe was shaped under an intricate discursive regime. Its basic structure and content owed much to the first official textbook of political economy initiated by and elaborated under the direct control of Stalin. The textbook was to be fitted to several connected but far from identical discourses: long-term ideological discourse of making a communist society; programmatic discourse of current political imperatives; ad hoc statements of the Soviet leadership; pragmatic discourse of pertinent economic problems and policies; and academic discourse, implying logical coherence and empirical relevance of political economy of socialism. It was too tricky a task to be achieved, despite almost two decades of drafting.

11. A similar approach to Tsagolov's had been developed by Stanislav Shatalin and his coauthors (see Grebennikov, Pchelintsev, and Shatalin 1975, 46).

Yet many of the textbook's formulas survived into the post-Stalin decades and became part of the official language, as well as an obligatory tool in academic communication.

During the Stalin era, the political leader performed the role of the master in total control over the discourse. A few among the economic profession were his assistants, whose function was to provide him with "building blocks" available for further elaboration. He himself professed the major political statements and was the ghostwriter behind the major theoretical contributions. After 1953, various departments of the party apparatus and the government bodies alongside chosen institutions in academe became the collective ghostwriter for the main political speakers. Behind the veil of rhetorical unity and the "untouchable" ideological dogmas, they provided heterogeneous, often competing drafts to formulate the economic agenda.

The post-Stalin fission in the production and delivery of authoritative statements made room for a relative diversity in theoretical issues. In those few fields of research where it was possible to translate theoretical statements into political, theoretical debates, even if seemingly scholastic for outsiders, such statements could convey important pragmatic messages. The political economy of socialism was one such field.

The main cleavage was not between opponents and proponents of commodity-money relations under socialism—simply because this formula had a plethora of interpretations and was therefore close to meaningless. It was not between pro-socialist and pro-capitalist attitudes either, at least before the late perestroika period, but between the alternative visions of socialism. Well into the mid-1980s the overwhelming majority of Soviet economists did not conceive the socialist experiment as fundamentally wrong or doomed to failure. More than half a century of existence of the Soviet economy alone, in some periods quite successfully, rendered unverified the hypothesis of the practical impossibility of a planned economy. The ideological discourse manifesting the vision of the Soviet society and the desired long-term trends toward prosperity reigned not only due to the pressure from above; it was widely shared in the profession.

The collapse of the Soviet system crushed the Soviet economy as well as Soviet political economy. It suggested the belief in the end of ideology. This did not occur, however. People are and will be striving for a better world, and will try to guess its possible features. Understanding the history of political economy of socialism could be a source of instructive lessons in this search.

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