
While the 1990s transition to capitalism has sprouted an impressive amount of literature, from buoyant transitologies to more sober analyses, very few scholars of Central and Eastern Europe have dared to zoom in on an equally significant transition: the one from capitalism to socialism in the immediate postwar period. In an ironic twist, it seems the claims of post-1945 communist leaders have surreptitiously seeped into the academic literature, being taken for granted: the advent of socialism has been customarily described by scholars as a moment of powerful rupture, of total discontinuity, a new era in stark contrast with the interwar years.

Framed within an elegant conceptual structure, Martha Lampland’s *The Value of Labor* brings an important corrective to this narrative. The work traces the diverse technologies and practices used in Hungary to evaluate agricultural labor before and after World War II. This seemingly unassuming topic allows her to pose crucial questions, however. The book offers an inquiry into how the history of the region may be integrated into a larger analysis of commodification as a global process, a process marked by local contingencies and discontinuities, but also molded by global structural constraints and international networks of expertise. Similarly, the book touches upon the crucial issue of how an analysis of state socialisms could enter into dialogue with the history of capitalism, catering in this way to a varied readership, from labor historians and STS scholars to social anthropologists.

The volume is a prequel to Lampland’s previous work, *The Object of Labor* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), an ethnographic foray into the labor practices structuring the agricultural cooperatives of state socialist Hungary. A central, unavoidable reference for (post)socialist anthropology, the 1996 study was a daring attempt to historicize and put to work, through meticulous fieldwork, Moishe Postone’s reconceptualization of commodification and labor value. It highlighted an apparent paradox: that the commodification of labor could thrive in conditions which, at face value, would seem inimical to such developments, a collectivized agriculture where market institutions were fairly rare. Lampland’s earlier book also posed a chronological challenge. It traced a direct continuity between the pre-socialist conceptions of labor and the ones
emerging after collectivization, and it emphasized the centrality of work in determining social value at large.

The current volume picks up this insight into the relevance of labor in creating and establishing social worth, thus continuing to draw on Postone’s notions, but it develops it further through the instruments of an STS scholarship sensitive to the importance of formalizing practices and knowledge technologies. The main question concerns how labor as such was valued, assessed, and formalized and what types of technologies were used in this process. The answer provided by Martha Lampland moves from work science experts in interwar Hungary and their focus on agrarian labor to the first collectivization attempts and wage formulas developed by the communist authorities. Underpinning her narrative is an attempt to avoid a rather common pitfall of commodification debates: the excessive focus on markets which, according to her, has prevented us from analyzing other means of assessing and evaluating labor. This dangerous market-bias has obscured the gigantic infrastructure necessary to make labor “commodifisable” in various historical contexts.

This infrastructure includes the complex formalizing techniques needed to standardize labor practices across local variations. The development of work sciences at the end of the nineteenth century and their global spread gave rise to different forms of expertise, harnessed in order to streamline and frame the rich variety of labor forms. For the Hungarian case, it was German business economics and scientific work management, from Taylorism to work psychology, that provided the novel instruments and new formulas that were used to regulate and evaluate labor power. Through a permanent dialogue with the local manorial traditions of labor administration, these developments spurred the emergence of original wage schemes and accounting techniques. At least as importantly, however, these kinds of formalizing practices required a complex infrastructure, straddling the boundaries between academia, state institutions, and the private economy: research centers, new university departments, statistical offices, bureaucratic experts, etc. And throughout the interwar period, Hungarian work scientists were at pains to find the resources necessary to establish and maintain such a complex infrastructure of expertise. Analyzing both the formalizing technologies developed by the Hungarian labor experts (new wage schemes, new accounting methods) and the infrastructure of knowledge they relied on, the first part of the volume draws a fascinating portrait of Hungary’s agricultural modernizers: work scientists, accounting experts, agricultural economists, etc.
This portrait is framed by a specific ambiguity regarding capitalism and market institutions. Although they were generally market enthusiasts, Hungarian modernizers devised formal tools and evaluation instruments which could be impervious to the vagaries of a market shaken by constant economic crises, from the Great Depression to waves of postwar inflation. Thus, the way in which they conceived of rural labor was somewhat outside market constraints or at least indifferent to them. For this reason, adopting and making use of their technologies became an easy job for a communist regime keen on scraping off market institutions. As Lampland shows in the second part of the book, communist agricultural modernization was not so much a revolution from abroad as a process underpinned by techno-political devices developed locally throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The end result was an original synthesis which can hardly fit a specific label. It was neither a Soviet import nor simply a local offshoot. A case in point is the history of the work units, a complex hybrid between Soviet collectivization practices (trudnoi), interwar work science, and manorial practices, each of which was constantly changed by the social violence of the immediate postwar years.

Commodification appears throughout the volume as a complex bundle of practices and technologies that can hardly be confined to market mechanisms. This has the heuristic advantage of problematizing the relationship between capitalism and socialism. Following the archival trail, one can trace these technologies across economic systems and construct a more inclusive historiography in which the relationship between state socialism and postwar capitalism is one of constant dialogue and interaction. The book leaves untouched, however, a more extensive discussion on the relationship between market mechanisms and the technologies of commodification it analyzes. We do not find out, for instance, exactly how the formalizing practices developed by Hungarian work scientists might have interacted with agricultural labor markets. More generally, we do not know too much about pre-1945 labor markets as such or the way they functioned (in conjunction with other commodification mechanisms or not). This is far more than a mere empirical addendum, as it raises an important theoretical question that should interest economic anthropologists and social historians alike. And the period analyzed by Martha Lampland, marked as it was by extensive economic experiments, might provide one of the best empirical terrains for research going in this direction. Similarly, it would be important to see how essential shifts in managing economic life, such as the Great Depression or the war economy, might have influenced the management and evaluation of
labor and the formalizing practices developed by work scientists before and after 1945.

It is of course one of the chief ironies of the book that the techno-political dreams of the advocates of capitalism, the work scientists of interwar Hungary, could take shape only under the auspices of communism. It is, however, precisely these kinds of ironic insights, born out of an acrimonious attention to technical detail that may help scholars reconnect the history of capitalism with the study of state socialism, building up a more inclusive global historiography. An understanding of commodification as a complex bundle of practices and technologies, which can easily circulate and be adapted to local conditions, might offer a more nuanced grasp of the economic history of the twentieth century.

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