Journal of the History of Economic Thought,
Volume 28, Number 1, March 2006

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON CLARIFYING THE IDEA OF DISSENT: THE RUSSIAN AND SOVIET EXPERIENCE

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In his *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* article, "A Suggestion for Clarifying the Study of Dissent in Economics," Roger Backhouse usefully proposed some terminological clarifications with respect to studying the ideas of disagreement, controversy, and dissent in (Western) economic discourse, heterodoxy being defined as a more narrow category than dissent.[1] Backhouse also wrote that "the ideas on which Marxist, Radical, and Post Keynesian economics are based were arguably never widely held" (Backhouse 2004, p. 265).

There was, of course, until recently a very prominent national exception to this rule—the USSR—a country that, on the face of it at least, was based entirely on Marxian principles, and where Marxist economics, or at least one specific interpretation of it, was overwhelmingly the dominant ideological force in both academic and government circles. Examining dissent within this very different context might help to throw additional light onto the general topic, given the dramatic reversal of doctrinal orthodoxy that had occurred. Moreover, Backhouse did not fully emphasize the importance of historical context in establishing the meaning of the various types of dissent, or of comprehending the relativity of oppositional approaches in general. In order to further clarify these aspects of the topic, a short overview of dissent in Russian and Soviet economics is provided here, as a (counter) point of comparison for Backhouse's account of dissent in Western economics. A discussion of a few additional related issues such as the psychology of dissent, is also included for good measure.

I. MARXIST ECONOMICS AS REVOLUTIONARY DISSENT

A dictionary definition of dissent stated that it was the refusal to conform to the authority of an established church. It might also be seen to imply or involve a challenge to

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[1] I am grateful for the especially relevant comments and suggestions provided by a helpful referee on the first draft of this paper.

ISSN 1042-7716 print; ISSN 1469-9656 online/06/010111-8 © 2006 The History of Economics Society
DOI: 10.1080/10427710500509672

the existing political, social and/or economic system of power, although this might not necessarily be the case. Hence, purely doctrinal dissent could be distinguished from radical revolutionary dissent, even though both types might sometimes occur together.

Marxist economics began in Russia in the 1870s and 1880s as a dissenting current or movement in intellectual circles, explicitly defining itself as being in fundamental disagreement with the foundations of existing mainstream political economy. The mainstream, however, was not really classical (or even neoclassical) in nature in Russia at this time, but was more weighted towards historical political economy, at least in academic circles, and hence was a little more heterodox than the mainstream in the West (see Barnett, 2004d). Moreover, not only did Marxist economics disagree with the content of much academic economic discourse, it also saw itself as the theoretical expression of a revolutionary social movement, its aim being the overthrow of the existing political and economic order in Tsarist Russia and indeed across the entire globe.

This type of radical revolutionary dissent existed in the West also at this time, but because of the nature of Tsarist society, it was perhaps more dangerous to expound such views in Russia than it was, say, in England. But on the other hand, because of the fact that historical economics was more prevalent in Russia than it was in, say, the UK, it was less a purely doctrinal dissonance in Russia than it was in the West. Context makes the mountain peak more or less accessible, the mainstream more heterodox, or the dissent less dissonant.

A good example of the influence of historical school ideas in Russia before 1917 was the inventor of the periodic table, Dmitri I. Mendeleev and his work on the 1891 tariff. Mendeleev justified the large increases in customs duties accomplished through the 1891 tariff by reference to the work of Friedrich List, and the Russian government employed Mendeleev directly to design this customs reform in detail (see Barnett, 2004a). Hence, should historical school ideas be seen as dissent or strict orthodoxy in the Russian context? Perhaps neither, as sometimes the Russian government employed directly contradictory ideas to those of the historical school—Adam Smith for example—and, hence, the dynamics of any particular situation need to be fully considered when accurately characterizing the influence of oppositional currents. It might be useful to consider a particular type of variable orthodoxy to encompass this phenomenon.

II. MARXIST ECONOMICS AS OFFICIAL ORTHODOXY

After 1917, the official status of Marxist economics in Russia changed dramatically. It went from being revolutionary dissent to quickly becoming official orthodoxy. However, the precise content of "Marxist economics" also changed in this process. From being a doctrine focused mainly on proving the alleged irrationality and exploitation of capitalism—Nikolai Bukharin on imperialism, for example—it became a set of ideas that justified the particular form of planning that was being implemented in the USSR—Bukharin on the peasantry "growing into" socialism. In relation to Marxism's new status as official orthodoxy, fresh dissenting ideas began to appear in the USSR in opposition to Marxist economics. This dissent took various forms in the 1920s, including a neoclassical strand (Leonid N. Yurovsky, a money, banking, and finance specialist); a rural strand (Alexander V. Chayanov, a theorist of

family-centered peasant economy); and a leftist current (Evgeny A. Preobrazhensky, before 1921 the theorist of non-monetary war economy type planning, after 1921 the inventor of the idea of primitive socialist accumulation). The 1920s were the heterodox decade *par excellence* in the USSR with respect to the range of different currents that were represented, with only the Gorbachev disintegration period coming close.

However, the situation changed dramatically again after 1929, with Joseph Stalin's ascent to power. In the 1930s some controversies appeared in the Soviet press on concrete topics such as the precise role of peasant markets, but dissent itself in economic theory was dealt with so harshly by execution or imprisonment that it ceased to exist beyond 1930. Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that public expression of dissent was stamped out after 1930, as it was still possible to feel dissent internally, or even to express it among trusted associates in strict privacy. Hence, true dissent was driven deep underground in the planning era, if not completely abolished, while disagreements still occurred quite often over particular planning targets or investment goals.

III. ORTHODOX ECONOMICS AS DISSENT

In response to the Bolshevik assumption of power in 1917, many of the specific ideas associated with "bourgeois" economics were soon deemed reactionary and off limits to Marxist thinkers. For example, the idea of the margin (e.g., marginal cost) and of an economic optimum were deemed particularly offensive, an expression of the "subjectivist decadence" of capitalist society, and anyone who advocated them were labeled as counter-revolutionary. However, this state of affairs did not last through ten years of experience of imperative planning, when in 1939 Leonid V. Kantorovich reintroduced the notion of optimality in his proposals for creating an optimal plan. Kantorovich was careful to preface his work with attention to Marx, Lenin and Stalin, before going on to propose the application of economic accounting to Soviet planning techniques. What had been hitherto orthodox dissent became mainstream, although this did not happen overnight.

It is worth highlighting the genealogy of these particular expressions of dissent in more detail. In fact, in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx himself had implicitly utilized proto-marginal concepts without taking much exception to them when he discussed differential rent and varying soil fertility (Marx 1981, pp. 788–806). Mikhail I. Tugan-Baranovsky had advocated using marginalist ideas in the planning process as early as 1917, but his suggestion had been simply ignored by Bolshevik planners. Hence, a few more open-minded Marxists at least had not seen such ideas as contrary to their socialistic principles. Lenin disagreed. What is and what is not defined as dissent at any given time is thus in part a political question.

IV. CONTROVERSY BECOMES DISSENT

As a particular example of the relativity of the creation of dissent, the case of Yurovsky is worth considering in more detail. Before 1917, Yurovsky worked on

price theory from a neoclassical perspective (see Barnett 1994a). This was still a little controversial in Russia at this time, as neoclassical economics had not won the decisive victory that it had in the West. Hence, Yurovsky was engaged in controversy in Backhouse's sense, although he was not involved in the type of revolutionary dissent being conducted by many Marxists. However after 1917, Yurovsky's own approach to economic theory did not change at all, but the tectonic plates around him moved in a dramatic fashion, transforming his previously controversial work into true dissent, while at the same time transmuting the revolutionary dissent of Marxists into official orthodoxy. Sometimes the mountain moves around Mohammed.

But even more astonishingly, the Soviet authorities—knowing full well that Yurovsky's economic theory clashed fundamentally with Marxism—then employed Yurovsky to mastermind the 1922–24 monetary reform, which successfully introduced a new stable currency called the *chervonets* (see Barnett 1994b). This suggests that, sometimes at least, the importance of dissent on theoretical matters is put to one side when urgent practical matters require it. But in gratitude for Yurovsky's efforts, he was arrested in 1930. Throughout the 1920s in general, directly opposing currents in economics coexisted in Bolshevik Russia, with an official (if uneasy) truce operating at government level. Policy advice from all currents was at least sought and considered initially, if not actually implemented, with no fixed doctrinal exclusions in operation. This truce collapsed dramatically in 1929.

V. FIELDS OUTSIDE OF SOVIET ECONOMICS

Backhouse identified fields outside of economics as one possible area for the expression of disagreement with mainstream currents. In the USSR, such fields might possibly be identified as statistics, mathematics, and perhaps even philosophy. The example of E. E. Slutsky's move from economics back to statistics after 1930 is well known, but Slutsky's work in economics was rather eclectic and is not a good example of a dissenter in Backhouse's sense (see Barnett 2004b). Kantorovich's idea of an optimal plan had originated from the mathematics arena, a well-known locale for those who wanted space to breathe outside of Marxian constraints.

In the Soviet case the existence of emigré economists as extra-national carriers of dissent was an important factor, with individuals such as Boris Brutzkus, Sergei N. Prokopovich and Peter B. Struve being good examples of those who continued working on economics topics after they had finally left Russia. Prokopovich expressed his dissent by publishing empirical analysis of the current position of the Soviet economy, which often clashed with the official Soviet account issued to the general public, rather than by developing an alternative economic theory. Hence empirical dissent expressed by economists might differ from theoretical dissent. Brutzkus on the other hand expressed his disagreement by associating with a dissenting group in the West that could be seen as a polar opposite of Marxism—Austrian economists such as F. A. Hayek—and also by providing a fundamental critique of the idea of central planning itself. Access to the works of such emigré economists was of course highly restricted in the USSR.

VI. LIP SERVICE, ORTHODOXY AND DISSENT

An additional question worth considering is when the social context is such that paying lip service to either orthodoxy or even dissent becomes a common feature of scientific discourse. In the USSR in the 1920s, there is no doubt that the vast majority of what was written by economic thinkers from many different currents was indeed genuine, i.e., it was what each individual actually believed. After 1929, however, the social and political context in the USSR was so oppressive that the tendency to pay lip service to established orthodoxy, no matter how much this orthodoxy was patently absurd or easily disputed, was a powerful factor at work. Thus much Soviet economic discourse was couched in standard coded phrases, or was introduced with exaggerated respect for canonical writings, such that the text assumed a partly or even an entirely functional role, i.e., it proved the ideological credentials of the writer, rather than making any genuinely new contribution to economic analysis.

The same factor might also be seen at work in orthodox and dissenting currents in economics in general, although certainly not in the same degree of extremity. In such cases, in order for new or even some weaker but already established members of a group to fully align themselves with the powers that be within any particular orthodoxy or dissenting current, ideological dues have to be paid in order to gain acceptance as a true believer. In some cases, an upstart member may already see through the established doctrines of (for example) a dissenting group in some areas, but might be concerned to downplay any differences at first, in order that their position can be firmly established. Only after this has been accomplished might the true depth of any genuine differences be revealed. There is likely both a conscious and unconscious element to this factor.

VII. DISSENT IN POST-SOVIET ECONOMICS

In the USSR after 1985, a process of radical intellectual transformation began in which what was previously considered bourgeois economics, and hence completely unacceptable, became at first acceptable only as dissent, then encouraged as controversy, before finally becoming enshrined as mainstream orthodoxy. Within this process some dissenters from the old Soviet era, Boris Kagarlitsky for example, the author of numerous books that were critical of both the old Soviet system and also of Western capitalism (see Kagarlitsky 1995), still remained dissenters in the new atmosphere, while some dissent was re-absorbed into new forms of controversy, and still others faded into oblivion altogether, thrown into the dustbin of history.

It is well remembered that in the very late 1980s and very early 1990s, when proposals like the "500 days" plan for transition to a market economy first appeared in the USSR, they had the aura of being semi-underground developments, although this status very quickly changed. The context altered so fast that even Gorbachev himself was left high and dry by Boris Yeltsin's more radical maneuvres. In fact it might be more accurate to say that theoretical questions in general trailed far behind actual developments in Russia at this time, which paid little regard to keeping in line with either official or counter-official economic doctrines.

VIII. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DISSENT

Another angle worth considering is the psychology of dissenting or heterodox groups, in relation to the psychology of the mainstream. William Coleman has argued that some elements of the work of some proponents of what he called anti-economics (i.e., dissenting currents such as Marxism and Institutionalism) could in part be explained by means of "psychological inadequacy" or even madness, examples being given as List and T. E. Cliffe Leslie (Coleman 2002, pp. 228–30). Coleman suggested that there was an unusual tendency to mental ill-health amongst anti-economists, as opposed to the more normal mental health of true economists, although Marx's famous carbuncles cannot seriously be given as evidence of this.

However, given that psychological distress is often experienced by very creative personalities across a number of fields—John Nash and Vincent Van Gogh being two well-known examples, Nash himself being in no sense a political radical—it is too simplistic to associate ideological dissonance only with psychological inadequacy. Modern accounts of abnormal psychology stress a combination of genetic and environmental causes of both neuroses and psychoses, with negative emotional states producing biased information-processing in the mind (Williams and Hargreaves 1994, p. 876). There is no reason to believe that economists, dissenting or otherwise, should be excluded from suffering from this melancholic affliction in the same frequency as everyone else. Instead, the particular psychology of deviant groups might have various explanations, such as continued exclusion from access to resources or even purely intellectual roots. The causal nexus needs to be considered at this point; in other words, do individuals become dissenters because of a particular psychological make-up that is fixed from birth, or is a "deviant" psychology the outcome of a life experience of many years of social exclusion, or simply the result of a genuine scholarly search for understanding?

An alternative and perhaps more fruitful way of conceiving of this issue might be in terms of a sliding scale of dogmatism and skepticism. Individuals from both the far left and far right can sometimes be what might be called foaming-at-the-mouth advocates of their own particular views, i.e., the level of their fanaticism is extreme. It might be useful to contrast such people with supporters of both the left and the right who are far less dogmatic about their own particular views and who exhibit a much less rigid adherence to any overarching set of ideological beliefs. On this self-certainty scale, both supporters of orthodoxy and dissenters can be either dogmatic or skeptical, and the very different psychology of these groups might be what actually separates them, not their purely ideological differences. Because of this some dissenters might be closer to some mainstream thinkers rather than some other dissenters, at least in terms of the underlying psychological processes that are occurring in the either unyielding or relaxed propagation and reaffirmation of their particular belief systems.[2]

[2] True sceptics should suspend judgement on all beliefs, but the idea of scepticism is being used in a less extreme sense here, as some who, while favouring certain sets of beliefs over others, accepts that such beliefs are conditional, and is not implacably hostile to all aspects of all other currents.

Another possible distinction that might be applied to the orthodoxy/dissenter axis might be whether the specific tendency was integrating or disintegrating.[3] On one version of such a view, mainstream economics is integrating, is an ongoing (re)construction and amalgamation of heterogeneous materials from various sources back into the orthodox framework; dissenters on the other hand lack such a process for assimilation, being purely concerned with protecting and maintaining an existing body of fixed and revered ideas from outside assault. This categorization does have some relevance, but a few dissenting currents have undergone substantial development—Old Institutional economics against New Institutionalism, for example—and so this division is not absolute. Dissenting currents could in theory be both marginalized and integrating, although advocates of mainstream economics would likely claim that the explanatory power of orthodoxy forces dissenters into being permanent critics.

IX. CONVERSION

Finally, it is certainly worth considering the notion of conversion from one particular position or set of beliefs to another, that is, the process by which an individual dramatically changes their support for the orthodoxy or the heterodoxy or becomes a member of a dissenting group. In the case of economists, this can be a self-conversion process or a socially and educationally conditioned event, but are the factors at work psychological, social, institutional or purely philosophical, or (more likely) a combination of such elements? Do those with pre-existing political beliefs from a young age gravitate toward an economics that fits easily with such beliefs, or do economic beliefs discovered objectively then lead to political consequences?

In the case of the war in Vietnam, examples of U.S. economists who changed their economics because of their contextual study of Indo-China exist: Leonard Rapping, for example, who turned from new classical to more radical views (Klamer 1984, pp. 226–28). Others who converted from some variety of Keynesianism to Monetarism as a consequence of stagflation might be sited as politically the reverse. In the Russian context, Tugan-Baranovsky experienced a minor Gestalt switch in 1900 conditioned both by intellectual factors, including his dissatisfaction with deterministic Marxism, and more personal events, especially the death of his first wife, which led him to embrace an ethical conception of socialism rather than a class-based approach (Barnett 2004c, p. 81). Nikolai D. Kondratiev on the other hand moved decisively rightwards after the revolutionary events of 1917, turning away from advocating communal forms of peasant ownership of the land, to a more individualistic and stratified view of rural affairs (Barnett 1998, pp. 37–39).

So it appears that radical shifts in the belief system of an individual are often conditioned by dramatic life or contextual events that shake the previously held views off their mental pedestal, although why in one case doctrinal conversion is the outcome, but in another a strengthening of the existing view is the result, is something that

[3] The anonymous referee first suggested the application of this particular distinction, although not in the exact form used here.

deserves further study. In order to fully understand dissent, heterodoxy and orthodoxy in economics, the conversion process by which individuals become part of such groups intellectually, psychologically and also socially needs to be investigated. In some contexts, such as the USSR under Stalin, fear was an important factor in garnering theoretical support, and other non-intellectual factors such as group loyalty or family history may play an important role in conditioning the attitude of a person to the existing status quo.

X. CONCLUSION

The history of Russian and Soviet economic doctrine over the last 150 years has exhibited ideological and doctrinal shifts more extreme than those usually encountered in the West, and these help to illuminate the comparative nature of concepts such as dissent and heterodoxy. A fully relativistic approach to studying the history of economics would not privilege any one particular approach as being ultimately better than any other, but would certainly document the rise and fall of orthodoxies and heterodoxies as an ongoing and fully historicized process, a process that was inextricably bound by the social, institutional, and psychological context of the time.

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