

Economics—and History—as Communicative Action

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For the first time in 2008, the *New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* included an entry on the “history of economic thought.” Its author was, fittingly, the most accomplished entrepreneur in our field in the past half-century, whose achievements as editor, community builder, fundraiser, and trendsetter are familiar to all readers of this journal. Craufurd Goodwin (2008) told a story of the changing “locations and styles” of historical writing about economics. In his account, we discover the history of economics to be a subject as old as economics, in its heyday a privileged idiom to survey scholarship, and a prized heuristic for economic inquiry. A decade on, Goodwin’s essay stands alone. It is remarkable that there are no competing accounts of similar breadth and ambition (the closest is the earlier Backhouse 2004). As befits a *Dictionary of Economics*, at the heart of Goodwin’s essay was the evolving relationship between historians and the economics discipline. The concerns for purpose and disciplinary standing are fundamental for the day-to-day life “among the econs,” but I contend that they have narrowed our historical outlook. We are in danger of not noticing how our writing is being moved by forces other than our struggle for resources and recognition within faculties of economics. To establish this claim, in this brief essay I will remark on how contemporary writings in the history of economics have aligned themselves with approaches from the history of science. I have a further ambition. I argue that we stand to gain a deeper understanding of “knowledge in action” (Latour 1987) by nurturing these developments and specifically by attending to the media that connects economists to their publics.

The history of economics and the history of science have never been as close as they are today. More historians of science are writing about economics (Fontaine 2016) and historians of economics have returned the courtesy by borrowing concepts from historians and by addressing audiences of historians. An emblem of this convergence has

been the study “practice” (Maas, Mata, and Davis 2011); Stapleford 2017). We have learned to trace economic knowledge through the proliferation of formulas, diagrams, graphs, indicators, and rules of action. We examine how facts about the economy, global weather or architectural design “travel well” with integrity and fruitfully, that is, as mutable that are stable in form and function at the start and end of their journey (Howlett and Morgan 2011). We pay special attention to models as constructs, craftily assembled and disassembled, bought and sold and freighted, reinterpreted and misunderstood (see Halmayer this volume). Our narratives are increasingly *material* because focused on artefacts, *situated* because aware of the specific conditions of their social existence, and *dynamic* because we record them exchanging hands and places.

Through the lens of practice we are revealing how economists know what they know. We have thus been far more interested, borrowing Mary Morgan’s (2011) phrase, in “the world in the model” than in the model in the world. We have trained our attention to the local, to the micro historical and synchronous, and at this we have been extremely successful. Our achievement has its limitations. We understand in exquisite detail the arcana of the history of the Cowles Commission, but we do not ask how personnel and tools circulated between the offices of the Commission and its business and government associates (Bjerkolt 2015; Düppe and Weintraub 2014; Mirowski 2002). We can distinguish with proud precision varieties of doctrine, Marshallian or Walrasian, the salinity of water, the vintages of Keynesianism, but ask how macroeconomics conquered governments and we return anecdotes about a handful of eloquent men (Colander and Landreth 1996).

By studying “economists in action” we have unlocked a sophisticated appreciation for how knowledge is a social achievement, but we are unsteady on how to record away from the university departments “economics in action.”. The distinction I am signaling is not a peculiarity of our historiography, although the paucity of historiographical self-examination within our ranks has made us peculiarly blind to the issue. James Secord famously posed the problem in a 2004 lecture. Secord proposed to reframe our interpretation of scientific practice as acts of communication studying “every text, image, action, and object as the trace of an act of communication, with receivers, producers, and

modes and conventions of transmission” (2004, 661). Secord’s proposal is most appealing for those, like me, who examine the traffic between credentialed and “popular” science and that need to be attentive to the encounters of knowledge and polity. We often note how scholars and their research programs joust for credibility and power, how they draw boundaries over what is and is not science (Gieryn 1999; Bourdieu 1988). These programmatic contests tell us much about scholars’ ideals for the political uses of science (Mata 2009) but are insufficient to describe “economics in action,” economics in the wild. To reach beyond the micropolitics of meaning and to study the traffic of economists’ doings in culture, politics, and business, we must attend to the material conditions of circulation. We must study media. To spell out the implications of this outlook I want to mention books.

I choose books because historians of economics are book authors, editors, and translators. We know and we cherish books. Our field has been responsible for major initiatives in the preservation of the heritage of political economy, re-editions, archival collections, and currently those efforts have taken a digital turn (see Collier, this volume). Historians of economics have produced learned re-editions of the canon, such as the Royal Economic Society’s sponsored collections of the papers of David Ricardo, Thomas Robert Malthus, William Stanley Jevons, François Quesnay, Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes, the work of Other Canon Foundation, or the recent work of Marco Guidi and the E-ET project, to name only a few. The past comes to us through these old books, rare and fragile that we scan, retype, and print with shiny plastic binding. We know these books have had a rich social life on their way to us, handed down from private collectors, libraries, or offices, oftentimes annotated, clipped, mended, treasured as companions. Yet, we often elect to delete those traces to look past the book to its author, and past that author to the author’s mind and ideas.

What is it then to examine books as objects in circulation? A first answer to this question was classically given by Robert Darnton who described the social history of a book as running “from the author to the publisher . . . the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader.” The reader who formally stands at the end point and as the purpose of all texts, turns out to be less definable and less definitive than commonly assumed. Authors

are readers that “associat[e] with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts. . . . A writer . . . addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers.” (Darnton 1982, 67). Darnton alerts us to the fuzzy, circuitous, and multi-agential process of creating a book. A second answer to my question is to study the marks on those resilient books as clues, as sediments of their social lives. Books are imprints of ink and of use. We must learn to follow print as it enters society and participates in the making of culture. We must look for how books leave traces in catalogues, in newsprint, in personal diaries, in sermons and speeches, in memes, and everyday language.

Secord’s audacity in his 2004 lecture was justified by his achievement in *Victorian Sensation* (2000), an acclaimed study of the social life of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a scandalous bestseller of 1844 that introduced Britain to ideas of evolution. But we need not call upon the history of science for examples on how books and publishing become actors in the development of political economy. Sophus Reinert’s (2011) *Translating Empire* is a study of the translations of John Cary’s 1695 “Essay on the State of England.” In one stroke it is a history of book publishing, of aspirations for national progress and of words that gained unexpected force and direction as the book was handled and rewritten across borders. Keith Tribe’s latest (2015) collection of essays, *The Economy of the Word*, is exemplary of a philological approach to the history of economic ideas that records the ripples of economists’ ontological work in the modern political lexicon. The resources to write histories like these are abundant. We need only look at the “librarian science/librarianship” sections of our university libraries to find numerous histories of bookselling and publishing (e.g., for Britain, Feather 1996 and Raven 2007; for the United States, Tebbel 1972–81).

To conclude, I return to my opening remarks about historiographical agendas. What would the history of our field look like from the perspective of knowledge in circulation? My essay is a plea to train our eye on the encounter between the history of economics and the history of science and to see from that engagement the prospect for studies of economics in transit. In addition to expanding the corpus of historical scholarship to monitor, the conception of scholarship as communication calls for a reflexive reframing of

how we think about our writing. Like scientists, like economists, our writing travels as books, pamphlets, documentaries shaped by us but also by editors, publishers, directors, funders, and various audiences. I believe that insight would serve as a tonic to our anxieties over recognition from our peers in economics. It would draw before us a wide landscape within which histories have lived full lives. This perspective calls us to ask how our histories can participate in the making of public culture.

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