

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Value of Labor: The Science of Commodification in Hungary, 1920-1956*, by Martha Lampland, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 368 pages**

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Following on the path of questioning that Lampland laid out in *The Object of Labor* (1995), *The Value of Labor* delves deeper into the technopolitical history of the commodification of agrarian labour in Hungary. Previously, Lampland has maintained that the individualized concepts of time, money, and labour imposed by socialist collectivization bore continuity with pre-socialist agrarian modernization, and were instrumental to the transition to capitalism. In *The Value of Labor*, she follows expert and policy debates in 1930s work science, and points out their continuities with the institutionalization of the work unit in the Stalinist phase of collectivization. Such continuities contradict the Cold War concept of Stalinist modernization as Soviet models imposed from scratch. Targeting debates in the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS), history of economics, and Cold War history, Lampland draws three interconnected conclusions: 1) an emphasis on the role of markets in determining the value of labour obscures the historical construction of the knowledge, policy, and material infrastructures that perform its commodification; 2) performativity of economics should also be understood through the history of the material infrastructures of scientific intervention; and 3) the Cold War periodization that separates socialist and capitalist modernization does not stand in face of the historical continuity between pre-socialist and socialist infrastructures of labour commodification.

While Lampland's conclusions primarily address debates within the above fields, her findings are interesting and relevant contributions to other fields too, where many of her conclusions are shared. In the field of debate on the interconnected historical development of capitalism, especially in the tradition

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and debates around the world-systems approach, semi-peripheral modernization is analysed as a process of integration into capitalism as a global system (Wallerstein, 1974). In the context of that socio-historical process, the commodification of agricultural labour in Hungary that Lampland traces can be seen as part of a long-term social transformation structured by penetrating global forces of capitalist development. The social positions of the actors whose debates Lampland analyses can be identified within that larger process. Lampland's remarks on structural continuities between the interwar period and Stalinism, as well as her descriptions of various ideological and moral standpoints within agrarian debates, resonate well with a world-system perspective on the structural process of capitalist integration (Frank, 1977). Just like Lampland's conclusion on continuity, this perspective also contradicts the Cold War paradigm of treating socialist and capitalist modernization as separated entities. In what follows, we bring several examples where we think the resonance between the two perspectives opens promising possibilities for understanding long-term local social transformation across political systems.

### **Large estates and the question of the land reform**

From the perspective of world-economic integration, the structural rigidity of large-scale farming in Hungary is rooted in the country's integration as a satellite agro-supplier to industrializing core countries at the early stage of capitalist development (Pach, 1963). As this type of semi-peripheral integration in the international division of labour favoured large-sale farming for export, it engendered a concentration of land in the hands of a few powerful manorial landowners, and the corresponding growth of a class of landless agriculture labourers.

One notable example of political clashes that Lampland mentions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the one between large landowners with rising manorial economies and the middle segments of the land-holder nobility. The latter's estates were not large enough to compete in the world market, they were undercapitalized and therefore unable to modernize their estates, and their production depended on coercive forms of labour control and market protection. As such, they were interested in the formation of the coerced cash-crop labour force that Engels (1882) called the second serfdom in the Prussian context, so as to stay competitive on the agrarian market. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political debates fuelled by these class dynamics among land-holders focused on issues like the juridical status of the serfs, and the role of the credit system in a predominantly feudal legislation, in a situation where the commercialization of land had become essential. One of the famous advocates of the abolition of

serfdom and the commercialization of manorial lands to improve financial credibility was István Széchenyi, one of the biggest land-holders of the time. As one characteristic point in the debate around agrarian modernization, Lampland mentions Széchenyi's stance for the commodification of labour (the liberation of the serfs) and the commercialization of land (the expansion of the credit system) as an early example for technocratic modernization (Lampland, 2016). Viewed from the perspective of the historical dynamics of capitalist integration, that stance stood in line with the economic position of large landholders exposed to pressures from the world market. It was their interest to create a labour market based less on coercion and more on the wage form of labour control, and to gain access to financial instruments such as state bonds or private capital. Széchenyi's stance was heavily opposed by his fellow contemporaries with smaller land holdings that were not in the position to implement competitive innovations, and feared losing their manpower together with their own social position after the abolition of serfdom. On the other hand, Széchenyi firmly opposed land reform. If manorial land had been distributed amongst the agrarian workforce simultaneously with the abolition of serfdom, the emergence of the wage form would have been impeded, as workers would not be free in the double sense of Marx's term. This would have harmed the large estates' interests that pointed towards the commercialization of land and the commodification of labour.

A similarly dynamic social fragmentation happened among the peasantry. Their number had been on a steady decline for centuries, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, semi-proletarian agricultural labourers outnumbered peasants by a great margin (Gunst, 1998). However, a thin stratum of the peasantry managed to acquire land either by purchase or lease in order to produce for the local markets. Due to that process, enormous estates and middle-sized farms coexisted in the rural agricultural landscape in the interwar period. Landless villagers were hired not only by landlords, but also by land-bearing peasants. In the interwar period, Hungarian narodnik intellectuals heroized land-bearing peasants in their political agenda for land reform. Their social status was universalized in an ideal of a Hungarian third way agrarian development (neither capitalist, nor socialist), which they sometimes referred to as the garden economy (Németh, 1943). The term of peasant embourgeoisement (cf. Erdei, 1973) was created to describe the possibility of universal social flourishing in Garden Hungary. This was an idealization with a narrow focus on one particular class within a process pointing towards the concentration of land and the formation of agrarian wage labour. It is this ideological moment Lampland identifies as (left) political alternatives being articulated for a land reform that would have benefited a free-holder peasantry in the 1930s. After the devastation of the war, the political agenda of the narodniks was strong and popular, and helped to restore the rural

social order. The land reform they initiated, which enjoyed the backing of the post-war coalition, including the communists, targeted large estates. However, the social transformation which the Moscow-backed communist party had envisioned and later applied was not peasant embourgeoisment, but the Stalinist model of industrialization, for which they needed a completely different approach to agriculture.

Lampland emphasizes that rather than a genuinely ‘Socialist’ turn, Stalinist collectivization featured a strong continuity with previous structures of estates and agrarian labour. Indeed, the structural push for large-scale, increasingly technological agriculture remained in place, while the increased productivity of agriculture was used for a next phase of structural integration in the world capitalist economy: the effort to catch up with the industrialization of core countries. The ‘free’ agricultural work of interwar estates, in fact coupled with repressive forms of labour control, including slavery, coerced cash-crop labour or semi-wage forms depending on patronal ties, found its continuation in a proletarianization process which, however forceful, did not manage to fully penetrate the wage form into the peasant class, and coupled brutal exploitation of the agrarian sector for the sake of industry with pushing individual producers to complement their livelihood with farming small plots. This semi-proletarian type of agrarian labour has been described as a lasting characteristic of semi-peripheries across cycles of world-economic integration (Dunaway, 2012). That debates over the measurement of labour value or assessing conditions of migrant workers were similar in geographically distant locations, as Lampland notes e.g. between Hungary and Mexico (Lampland, 2016:94), follows from typical tensions of the integration process in similar world-market positions. The continuity of that process implies a localized story of uneven development, bridging early forms of the second serfdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, manorial serfdom in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the forceful exploitation of peasants by state-socialist cooperatives in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From a world-economic point of view, the continuous sweep of modernization Lampland points out coalesced with global trends, as former agrarian social structures were replaced by industrialization, urbanization and proletarianization – although amongst different institutional settings. The transformation Lampland follows in the commodification of agricultural labour in the 1930s and 1940-50s in Hungary appears as an element of a shift in integration characteristic to semi-peripheral positions across the globe: industrial development based on domestic exploitation of agriculture. Her focus on the technopolitical implementation of that integration carries a relevance to that scale of comparison.

### **Morals, technopolitics, and expert interests**

Some differences in assessment follow from the difference between an STS-based focus on contingent histories of knowledge production, and a focus on the world-economic conditions of the same institutional process. What a focus on global integration would link to positions of speakers in the interest structure of agricultural transformation – as in the case of Széchenyi's relation to money in agriculture, or in the case of villagers' positions on collectivization (Lampland, 2016) – Lampland lays out as differences of moral imperatives and principles of social cohabitation (Lampland, 2016).

A difference regarding the significance of technopolitical structures also follows from the difference of perspectives. At certain points Lampland seems to associate technopolitical structures with a responsibility over distortions of the local modernization process. For example, following the narratives of a specific strain of literature on historical context (Berend and Ránki, 1958; Borhi, 2004; Pető and Szakács, 1985; Valuch, 1996, etc.), she portrays the history of Stalinist economic policies as a struggle between rational expertise and ideological industrialist politics, like in the case of István Friss and the Institute of Economics (KTI) under the reformist government of Imre Nagy (Lampland, 2016). Viewed from the perspective of world economic integration, this interpretation seems to take sides between the contradictory effects of one and the same modernizing effort. From the latter perspective, the contradiction between these two standpoints does not follow from a difference between ideological and rational thought, but from two different rationalities connected to the internal contradictions of the socialist catching-up effort. State socialism, similar to other state-led industrial development projects in the global semi-peripheries in the post-war world economic cycle, involved a catching-up effort in a situation of relative lack of capital and technology vis-à-vis the centres of the world economy. A characteristic contradiction of such efforts is that they come under the simultaneous pressures to develop technology in order to improve their terms of trade on the long term, and to rely on existing levels of technology with immediate export possibilities to pay for technology imports (often provided by agriculture). The alternation between the two strategies, coupled with position struggles within the apparatus, is a long-standing characteristic of such efforts, as is the problem of external debt following from the failure to solve the contradiction between technology imports and export pressure. From this perspective, it is not specific policy schemes or technopolitical agents who are responsible for the 'distortions' of the modernization process, but the uneven nature of capitalist development globally, which systematically locks semi-peripheral catching-up efforts in the contradictions represented in the struggles between those respective agents.

Finally, Lampland's demonstration that agricultural expert knowledge created and propagated before 1945 was finally implemented within the structures of the party state also opens the question of the position of experts within the material process of world economic integration. The story of the materialization of 1930s agricultural expert knowledge, and its intriguing transgression of the temporal and political borders of a Cold War framework, is coupled with a story of a professional class struggling for a new expert infrastructure, and later occupying positions within it. In the 1930s experts propagated modernization measures based on Western models in a situation where this knowledge was not yet required either by landlords or by the state. This might create the impression that ideas for agricultural modernization appeared as a bodyless technical knowledge, which appeared locally, struggled for self-implementation, and then got materialized in historical technostructures. Viewed from the perspective of class dynamics within world-economic integration, on the other hand, the historical 'body' of experts proposing modernization measures before being integrated into real relations of power seems to be a regular feature of East European professional classes. The historical phenomenon of local intellectuals stepping up as propagators and initiators of modernization projects has been linked to the limits of middle class development in a semi-peripheral position, where ambitions for middle class life standards on par with Western models are recurrently channelled towards political projects and state positions (Janos, 2000). In this sense, the 'cyclical movement of intellectuals in Eastern Europe' across positions like the *Bildungsbürgertum* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, vanguards of the communist modernization process, or the 'second *Bildungsbürgertum*' of the 1980s and 1990s (Szelényi and King, 2004) is tied to the historical dynamics of this specifically situated professional class, and its changing relations to the power structures that incorporate or exclude them. How expertise relates to geopolitical hierarchies and local development interests is a question entangled into complex layers of alliance and conflict within changing modes of world-economic integration. It is also a question that touches upon the generic issue of the social conditions of social knowledge, on which Lampland's case study offers a formidable window for reflection and comparison.

### **Technopolitics in global integration**

Lampland emphasizes that her research uncovers a contingent history of the material implementation of scientific knowledge, where contingency can explain why similar formalizing processes can lead to different outcomes, and thus serve as a historically and culturally sensitive base for comparison,

beyond Cold War frameworks. In this approach, it is historical contingencies of institutional constructs that create multiplicities in the global modernization process. Viewed as part of global integration, local institutional processes appear as contingent not only upon their own histories but also on conditions set by the interrelated and uneven process of global modernization. In the latter sense, deficiencies and contradictions of semi-peripheral modernization, debates on the role of large estates, the obligations of the peasantry, or the monetization of agricultural labour are not only locally conflictual practices or competing knowledges, but represent various conflictual interest positions within local constellations of the capitalist world economy. While it was not Lampland's aim to analyse the commodification of agricultural labour from the perspective of the global capitalist process, we think that connecting the debates and technopolitical processes she reconstructs to positions and tensions of global integration could powerfully contribute to the same aims she follows: to transcend the ideological periodization of the Cold War framework, and move towards globally comparative approaches that account for the materiality of the social process.

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