

## Joachim Zweynert

**Olessia Kirtchik. *Economic Knowledge in Crisis: Economists and the State in the Late Soviet Union*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN 9783031721410.**

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This book is the result of almost two decades of historical-sociological research into how Soviet/Russian economists worked in the final years of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet period and how they shaped economic policy during a time of profound political, institutional, and intellectual transformation. Drawing on extensive archival material, interviews, and secondary sources, Olessia Kirtchik reconstructs the professional environment of Soviet and Russian economists and situates their activities within the broader social structures of state socialism and its aftermath.

Kirtchik's book contributes to existing scholarship in two important ways. First, it challenges the prevailing view that emphasizes the decisive role of international, especially Western, ideas in shaping Russian economic thought since the late 1980s. She counters this diffusionist narrative with the hypothesis that "the impulse to overhaul the old system and the intellectual resources to do so . . . came primarily from the dynamics at work within the political and economic system at the end of the Soviet era" (p. 8). In other words, rather than attributing reformist ideas to imported neoliberal doctrines, Kirtchik argues that the seeds of change were sown within the Soviet intellectual and bureaucratic order itself. To substantiate this claim, she meticulously reconstructs how the institutional environment of the late Soviet state both constrained and enabled specific forms of economic expertise.

Secondly, the book is a decidedly sociological study, not a conventional history of economic ideas. Its central concern is the relationship between economists as a professional group and a state that had elevated an economic doctrine—Marxism-Leninism—to the status of quasi-religious orthodoxy. Kirtchik convincingly shows that economic policy expertise in the Soviet Union was highly specific: Economists advising on policy were closely intertwined with the state apparatus or even formally integrated into it. Within this context of interdependence between state and economists, the question of the autonomy of economic science becomes a leitmotif of her study. This perspective leads to two related issues: the role of economists and their ideas in the transition from state socialism to capitalism, and the implications this transition had for the economic profession itself. Kirtchik's analysis suggests that the careers of Soviet-trained economists after 1991 cannot be understood simply as a story of adaptation to a market environment but must be seen as a continuation of older institutional patterns of expertise, authority, and proximity to power.

This sociological perspective is a major strength of the book, as it takes seriously the institutional characteristics of the production and circulation of economic knowledge in the Soviet Union. The five main chapters—"In the Service of the State," "Academic-Bureaucratic Nexus," "Economists and Politics," "Economists in Govern-

ment,” and “Economists in Transition”—demonstrate how this approach deepens our understanding of the political constraints within which economists developed their ideas and how policy consulting functioned in practice. Particularly enlightening is the empirical reconstruction of the “academic-bureaucratic nexus,” which reveals how think tanks, research institutes, and planning organs operated as hybrid institutions at the intersection of science and governance.

It is to Kirtchik’s credit that she avoids a purely chronological structure. Though this results in some redundancies, her thematic organization highlights the continuities and recurring patterns that characterized Soviet and post-Soviet economic expertise. This approach allows readers to grasp the underlying social mechanisms rather than simply follow a linear historical narrative. However, the thematic structure can at times make it difficult to situate specific episodes in time, which may challenge readers less familiar with Soviet institutional history.

Every scholarly approach has its advantages and limitations. For all the merits of the sociological-institutional perspective, there are moments where, in my view, a stronger engagement with theoretical economic ideas would have been desirable. In particular, the discussion of the debates on the “economic mechanism” during the Brezhnev era would have benefited from a deeper exploration of the theoretical dimension of reform discourse. This could have clarified where the boundaries of political possibility lay—and how these boundaries shaped economists’ conceptual frameworks. Similarly, a fuller treatment of the economic theories considered “taboo” or ideologically suspect might have revealed the intellectual costs of the Soviet system’s rigid ideological controls.

Another aspect that might have been developed further is the transnational dimension—not to reintroduce the diffusionist model that Kirtchik rightly criticizes but to explore how Soviet economists selectively appropriated and domesticated foreign concepts. Even if the primary impulse for reform came from within, late Soviet economic discourse was not hermetically sealed. A more explicit discussion of how global economic ideas were translated and reinterpreted in the Soviet/post-Soviet context could have further enriched the sociological analysis.

Some of the book’s evaluative statements would also have benefited from greater conceptual clarity. It would have helped if Kirtchik had made her value judgments explicit at the outset, which would make certain later formulations easier to interpret. For instance, when she writes that with the elections to the first Congress of People’s Deputies in May 1989 “the technocratic predictability and rationality of a *well-functioning* [?!] administrative mechanism was replaced by the uncertainty, conflict, and passion of parliamentary politics” (p. 163; emphasis added), the reader is left wondering what is meant by “rationality.” The term seems to carry a normative connotation, as if the bureaucratic apparatus of late socialism possessed a form of instrumental rationality superior to the democratic turbulence that followed. Such an interpretation would require careful justification, especially given the dysfunctions and inefficiencies of the late Soviet administrative economy.

A similar issue arises with the statement that “the demand for a transition to the ‘market’ was essentially political and moral rather than stemming from economic

rationality" (p. 173). Again, it is unclear what Kirtchik means by "economic rationality" here. If (and I can only guess) she implies that the transition was "irrational" in the sense of not objectively justified, that claim would require substantial empirical support. If, instead, it is a normative judgment, it should have been explicitly acknowledged as such. According to the book's own blurb, it aims to "shed new light on the puzzle of the late Soviet conversion to the 'market' and capitalism by revisiting the history of Soviet reform economics." Given this stated ambition, the sentence in question is central to the argument of the book. If a key statement addressing the main research question of a study remains unclear, this, in my view, is very unfortunate indeed.

Nevertheless, such criticisms should not overshadow the book's central achievement: to demonstrate how the peculiar institutional structure of Soviet economic science—its dependence on state patronage, hierarchical organization, and ideological constraints—shaped the formation of expert knowledge. Kirtchik's analysis of the "academic-bureaucratic nexus" is especially illuminating in showing that Soviet economists were neither free intellectuals nor mere technocrats, but hybrid figures navigating between loyalty to the state, the pursuit of professional legitimacy, and the desire to improve living conditions in their society.

Moreover, the book enhances our understanding of the specific style of post-Soviet economic policy. Kirtchik demonstrates how former Soviet economists adapted to the new political and institutional environment of the 1990s. Many of the same actors who had advised on socialist planning became key figures in designing market reforms. Rather than viewing this as a simple ideological conversion, she interprets it as the continuation of a technocratic ethos—the belief that economic expertise should guide political decision-making, regardless of ideological orientation. This continuity helps explain why the Russian reform process of the 1990s, despite its ostensibly liberal economic agenda, often displayed authoritarian and top-down characteristics.

All in all, this book represents a major scholarly achievement that significantly advances our understanding of the role of economists and economic ideas in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. It will be of great value not only to historians of economics and sociologists of knowledge but also to scholars interested in the comparative study of expertise, state power, and institutional change. It is a must-read for anyone interested in perestroika and post-Soviet transformation, and it has every chance of becoming a classic in its field.