

BOOK REVIEW

Lampland, M.: *The Value of Labor: The Science of Commodification in Hungary, 1920–1956*. Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press, 2016. 368 p.

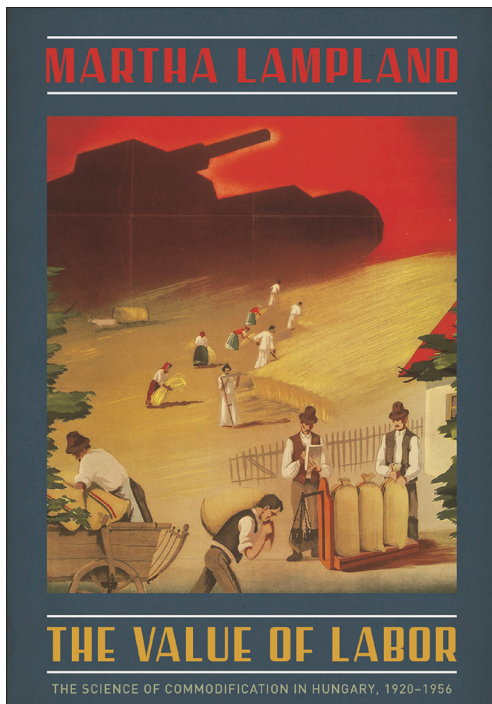
Martha LAMPLAND has been conducting research on Hungarian agriculture since the early 1980s. Her latest book, *The Value of Labor* is a summary of research about how scientists and the state bureaucracy worked in Hungary on determining the value of agricultural labour in a scientific and rational way. The author conceives of *The Value of Labor* as a prequel to *The Object of Labor* (LAMPLAND, M. 1995), in which she summarised her ethnographic work in the village and agricultural cooperative of Sárosd, Hungary, in the 1980s.

Although at the first sight *The Value of Labor* might be read as an intellectual history of how the value of agricultural labour was measured (and remunerated) in the interwar period and during early socialism in Hungary, the book offers in fact a broader social history of agriculture in the country. Therefore, it has conceptual and methodological lessons for both an audience outside Hungary and outside the discipline of anthropology.

The book consists of two parts which are divided into four chapters each, framed by the 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion'. The orientation of the reader within the book is eased by a list of abbreviations (in case of Hungarian institutions meanings are given in both Hungarian and English), a glossary of all Hungarian terms used in the book, a detailed bibliography and references to archival sources, as well as a handy index. The first part covers the material between 1920 and 1945, whereas the second part analyses the era between 1945 and 1956.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by looking at scientific debates in the interwar period on how to modernise Hungarian agriculture, including questions of economies of scale or how to calibrate wages of agricultural workers. Chapter 2 discusses the infrastructure of such a modernisation: agricultural work science studying "what farmers were actually doing and with what effects" (p. 10), formal institutions such as higher education in business management, as well as accounting as business practice, and shows why this professionalization failed or succeeded only partially. Calculating wages is the topic of Chapter 3, where the author outlines standardisation measures and research calculations of agricultural work science (i.e. how scientists tried to 'objectively' quantify a standard worker's daily achievement in terms of output), including discussions about commensuration. Chapter 4 elaborates the latter issue in detail and shows in a longer historical account why the monetary wage form (instead of in-kind payments or sharecropping) could not find an easy way into remunerating agricultural labour.

Part Two in Chapter 5 starts with discussing infrastructural limits to changing state administration by the Communist Party in 1948. The next chapter analyses the way agricultural wage policy was crafted after the change, which led to the introduction of the work unit system in collective farms in 1949. Mastering collectivisation with the use of coercion and class warfare, thus, disciplining workers through propaganda and labour competitions, as well as expropriation of private farmers is the topic of Chapter 7. The last chapter discusses the period between 1953 and 1956, the eve of the Hungarian revolution, when the new government in the post-Stalin era aimed at mediating conflicts of the work unit system and tensions around the dismantling of collective farms. As the book shows, although administrative infrastructures had already been stabilised by then, inherent conflicts over defining the value of labour could not be solved.



One important claim of the book is the intellectual continuity of scientific practices and institutions in the case of valuing agricultural labour in Hungary. The author shows how for example German business management was influencing Hungarian agricultural work science in the interwar period, which formed the basis for introducing the work unit system as quantifying outputs of human labour in the newly established collective farms after 1948. In this way, the book questions the common assumption about a “swift and comprehensive” (p. 5) Stalinist transition in Hungary, under the rubric of Sovietisation. The author’s approach would also help rethink some accounts of the intellectual history of Hungarian and Eastern European human geography after World War II, which concentrate more on ruptures than on contingencies (see for example GYURIS, F. and GYÖRI, R. 2013).

Consequently, the book opens up comparative work not only across time (LAMPLAND outlines striking parallels between agricultural transition in the early 1990s, when she started reading materials for this book, and the Stalinist agricultural transition she was reading about), but also geographically and across production systems. Her conclusion is that “[i]ncorporating the role of interwar work science and agricultural economics into the history of collectivization also allows us to compare a phenomenon usually limited to the history of socialist states with other schemes for modernizing agriculture at the time, such as colonial plantations and capitalist *latifundia*” (p. 268). Therefore, the book is also at the forefront of global labour history’s intellectual inquiry (VAN DER LINDEN, M. 2008; see also the book review of GAGYL, Á. and GERŐCS, T. 2017), and extends recent geographical literature on policy mobilities (*cf.* PECK, J. 2011), which until now has mostly built on contemporary case studies of ‘neoliberal capitalism’.

LAMPLAND’S rich empirical analysis might be linked to debates about labour geography and geographies of marketization. The term ‘geography of labour’ emerged in the Hungarian economic geography literature in the interwar period, although in a slightly different context to what the book analyses. Agricultural economists and work scientists were struggling with how to measure agricultural labour and how these calculations might be incorporated into the accounting practices of agricultural firms, which represented ‘modern’ scientific considerations. At the same time, geographers were looking at Hungarian agricultural labour as investment into the ‘national landscape’ which labour supposedly resulted in revisionist property claims with regard to territories outside of the borders of Hungary, defined by the Treaties of Paris (PRINZ, G. and TELEKI, P. 1936; for a discussion see CZIRFUSZ, M. 2015). Scientific exchange of ideas about labour in Hungary is a research field in the literature yet to be explored, at least in geography.

Social relations of labour, property and landscape have been in the core of labour geography since it has radically been reconceptualised in the Anglophone geographical tradition since the 1980s (HEROD, A. 1997). In this vein, and following the former thoughts on comparative studies, it might also be interesting to read the formation of capitalist agriculture in the interwar period in Hungary in LAMPLAND’S account against classic studies of MITCHELL, D. (1996, 2013) in California. Whereas MITCHELL’S political-economic agenda, and that of mainstream labour geography research as well, are about how cheap agricultural labour was established and kept in the normalised wage relation, LAMPLAND’S Hungarian case study unfolds a story about dead-ends of the commodification of labour as well. One aspect of this is the use of the work unit (i.e. “discrete units of activity of a specific duration performed by specific categories of social actors with certain skills or physical attributes” – p. 135) as a commensurable measure of labour value. For scientists in the interwar period, as well as the state during the collectivisation of agriculture after 1947, work unit was meant to be part and parcel of how workers would be rewarded. There had been considerable debate about lacking infrastructure of putting work unit into practice (such as lack of expertise about the new system at the local level), which could not be solved easily. Furthermore, as Chapter 4 shows, work unit also substituted for the monetary value of labour. In the interwar period (and as the book shows, since the mid-19th century modernisation of Hungary) money was regarded by the general public as inappropriate remuneration because of periods of rapid inflation, several changes of the official currency, or a supposed result in ‘dehumanising’ social relations between farm owners and labourers.

Commodification of labour, as the author concludes, might take place without the capitalist wage relation and without ‘proper’ labour markets. This tenet is an important contribution even against the backdrop of recent discussions on diverse economies within economic geography, especially with empirical work on post-socialist countries. The diverse economies research strand (GIBSON-GRAHAM, J.K. 1996) argues that the concept of economy has to be extended in order to include non-capitalist and alternative capitalist forms of labour. GRITZAS, G. and KAVOULAKOS, K.I. (2016) confirm with a review of recent articles that this understanding deepened analyses of economic transformations in post-socialist countries. ‘The Value of Labor’ directs our attention to the fact that the normalcy of wage labour has never been fix, and that there have been continuous struggles around defining, measuring and establishing infrastructures of the ‘capitalist’ labour form.

LAMPLAND’S discussions on how commodification takes place without markets and how markets as so-

cial relations advanced commodification of labour build on recent accounts of science studies and economic anthropology (for an overview of current debates see PELLANDINI-SIMÁNYI, L. 2016). This research programme also influenced economic geographers who directed the attention to the spatial and territorial character of markets, building mostly on assemblage and performativity theory within social studies of marketization (BERNDT, C. and BOECKLER, M. 2012). Within these studies in economic geography, however, as OUMA, S. (2015) points out, most research “have so far focused on so-called advanced capitalist economies” (p. 10). Martha LAMPLAND’s book offers an insightful case study from the European periphery and from two different eras. Agriculture (moreover, ‘productive’ agriculture) was at the forefront of 19th and 20th-century modernisation struggles, for agricultural exports were crucial in the international division of labour. How this integration into the world-economy might be achieved was contested throughout the timeframe of the book. Are family farms, large manorial estates or socialist agricultural collectives the most effective form of property to achieve this project? The author moves beyond the usual conceptual framework by looking at the infrastructure (the “institutional scaffold”) of commodification of labour and also at bottlenecks of commodification. In her analysis, infrastructure does not only mean material things, but includes human actors (scientists, bookkeepers, government officials, etc.) and a “variety of implements and practices” (p. 9) as well. Among others, the weekly newspaper *Köztelek* (*Commons*), which was widely read by landowners, research institutes and universities promoting new business practices in agriculture, manuals of the calculation of work units, party/state bureaucracy managing collectivisation after World War II were all elements of this infrastructure. Compared to Eastern European research on the role of technocrats in advocating for and conducting social change (see for example BOCKMAN, J. and EYAL, G. 2002 as well as GAGYI, Á. 2015) this book puts more emphasis on material devices and technologies of commodification.

A main methodological lesson to be learned for economic geographers after reading ‘The Value of Labor’ is taking an ethnographic method. Ethnographic work has been established lately within economic geography in general, and also within geographies of marketization and commodification (Cook, I. 2004; OUMA, S. 2012). LAMPLAND’s fieldwork is largely confined to archival sources and expert interviews. The main corpus of the first part of the book is constituted by published materials, namely newspapers, academic journals and books as well as some archive documents of public institutions. Public debates over commodification, and struggles for building the infrastructure for commodification are reconstructed

predominantly with the close reading of *Köztelek* and other public materials, which somewhat, as both the author and BALOGH, R. forthcoming argue, limits the scope of the analysis. The second part, dealing with the processes between 1945 and 1956, draws on archival sources, primarily on previously confidential party and government documents (pp. 19–22).

At this point it is important to mention from a geographical point of view how LAMPLAND constructs her narrative at different geographical scales from this material. The book, although never mentions it, follows to a large extent the method of global ethnography, which is interested in the global particular, the locally specific globalized socio-spatial relations (for an empirical study of different Hungarian cases see GILLE, Z. 2016). The author often refers to the global context in which the modernisation of agriculture has been a crucial motive for the commodification of labour, and draws short parallels with other countries. The importance of the national scale is self-evident as large part of the analysis deals with such institutions or regulations which had to be established at the national scale in order to make commodification of labour possible. As many accounts would claim, this project was swayed by the Sovietisation of Hungary. A main argument of the book is, however, that if we look at the local scale (county and district level, as well as the local councils and cooperatives), the power of the state to drive commodification of labour was simply missing. The three counties in which LAMPLAND looks at the functioning of lower level administration (Győr-Moson-Sopron, Hajdú-Bihar and Zala) represent different trajectories of socio-economic development throughout the capitalist modernisation of Hungarian agriculture. Therefore, the author is able to show how geographical location and local social histories matter (p. 189) in how the infrastructure of commodification was built, maintained or enforced. In both parts of the book, the firm (manors of the interwar period and agricultural collectives after World War II), the person (the agricultural worker or the landowner) and the household also represent important analytical scales.

Scientific management prevailed all over the world in the first decades of the 20th century, both geographically (in different places and spaces in the world) and in various facets of life (for example in the firm, in the world of labour, in the state administration or within the household). Yet, actual forms of modernist technological rationalisation were quite different in different countries and in different parts of the economy. ‘The Value of Labor’ covers one case study, namely commodifying agricultural work in Hungary between 1920 and 1956. LAMPLAND refers to connections with other forms of commodification, other forms of labour in Hungary and commodifications in other countries in several parts of the book. I can only wish that

studying these parallel stories in detail will also be taken up by economic geographers in Hungary, and comparatively, elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

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