

Rebecca E. Karl: *The Magic of Concepts. History and the Economic in Twentieth-century China*. Durham: 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6321-7; 216 S.

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In this collection of five essays, Rebecca Karl, who serves as professor of history at New York University, explores how a selected number of economic models were discussed and disseminated by Chinese intelligentsia and utilized in the historiography of China worldwide. Among the concepts discussed are the Asiatic mode of production (AMP), semi-colonialism, semi-feudalism, and the methodological individualism of the Austrian School. With this book, Karl continues the legacy of her late mentor Arif Dirlik, whose work on economic historiography was widely influential in the field. In tradition with Dirlik, self-ascribed „professor [...] and activist“ (p. ix) Karl does not disguise her goals as limited to the academic, but openly outlines her agenda to critique „antidemocratic, retrograde culturalist, politically oppressive, and unjust economic principles“ (p. ix).

For the author, the concepts discussed are „magical“ as they (pre-)condition the perception of economic history and reality, obfuscate non-economic values and desires through endless repetition, and, in the case of neoliberal capitalism, begin to exist on their own ‘objective’ terms without an option for academic scrutinization, thereby becoming „pure ideology“ in the Žižekian sense. The title-giving „magic of concepts“ is not Karl’s own invention but goes back to the critique of Marxist (though not communist) economic philosopher Wang Ya’nan (1901–1969), who is the central figure of the book. Wang made his name as a translator of Adam Smith and others, but as an analyst, remained an uneasy outsider. His views have since stayed off the economic mainstream, though he has not been forgotten in the humanities (maybe thanks to his acquaintanceship with larger-than-life sinologist Joseph Needham). Wang analyzed the Austrian School as being „dangerous because most commonsensical,“ (p. 2) a standpoint in clear alignment to Karl’s argument. While Karl adheres to a theoretical line

of argumentation with little emphasis on historical description or ‘facts,’ one of her common threads is an alleged link of economic historiography between the „Imperialist Capitalist“ 1930s and the post-reform 1990s, only intermitted by a Maoist rupture that has since been discarded.

In the first essay, Karl attacks the emerging field of world history as it has emerged in the US. While in this tradition, world history makes room for cultural diversity, it nevertheless renders economic developments as universally similar, depoliticized and normative truths (p. 20). Concerned with both the implicit Eurocentricism of world history and with the implications of exceptionalism within the China-centered approach, popular in 1980s sinology, Karl criticizes the limited objectivity in these fields and argues that instead of simply adding non-European geographies into a teleological global narrative, historians should take China and capitalism as analytics which are dynamically related to and producing one another (p. 27).

The utilizations of Marx’s concept of an „Asiatic Mode of Production“ (AMP) are the concern of the second essay. Karl launches her argument by citing Wang Ya’nan, who had criticized the AMP for its potential of cultural essentialism. She does not indulge in a historical analysis of AMP and clarifies that the model „should remain dead.“ (p. 42) Instead, Karl’s emphasis lies in the historiographical deployment of the term. She argues that, at least for selected Chinese historians, the concept reemerged in the late 1980s to legitimize the post-reform mode of production and to permit „China to claim both continuity and transition in one breath“ (p. 70).

The third essay concerns the Chinese reception of the individualist Austrian School and the neoliberal economist Friedrich August Hayek (1899–1992). The author recapitulates and supports Wang Ya’nan’s critique of the Austrian school as an ahistorical, naturalized understanding of consumption and desire. The school’s „magical“ confluence of economics and market (and arguably capitalism) informed reform era economists in China, just as it conditioned economic debates in Chinese history. The historiographical confluence of ‘the economic’ with liberal pre-

sumptions of market economy was criticized by Wang in the 1930s. For Karl, this ideological „transhistoricity“ continues to inform the comparative economic debates of Euro-American sinology, which exhibit a naturalized state combined with a predetermined focus on circulation and consumption.

The „two semis“, that is semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism, are the topic of the fourth essay. Just as with the AMP, the author does not aim at reviving them as analytics but tries to demonstrate the historiographical „magic“ of the concepts. Karl argues that for China, semi-colonialism once acted as a name for „imperialist capitalism“ or „colonial modernity“ (p. 114) and, in the reform era, became pure ideology legitimizing the idea of Chinese exceptionalism: the restored historical teleology of today's PRC (resembling „the actual Soviet state under Stalin“, p. 132) aims at the accumulation of capital, not at the overcoming of social inequality.

The fifth essay takes the insights of the previous essays and applies them on an analysis of two different films. Following the idea of conceptual linkage between pre-communist and post-communist economic historiography, the films selected are the civil war era movie *Crows and Sparrows* (dir. Zheng Junli, 1949) and the post-reform title *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai* (dir. Peng Xiaolian, 1998). Both films are set in Shanghai during the last years of Nationalist rule, and the latter cites the former extensively. This is not a full-fledged film analysis, as except for one shot in *Crows*, Karl focuses on the narratology and treats cinematography very lightly. Karl identifies the two films as „polar opposites“ (p. 145), arguing that while *Crows* depicts an ongoing semi-colonial reality of co-existing economies, *Shanghai's* distance of time allows for a retrospective teleological evaluation of semi-coloniality that finds its continuity in commodity-driven 'Chinese modernity.'

The book is, in a way, a collection of five attempts to prove the same argument: that through repetition, reoccurring concepts have turned „magical,“ helped naturalizing market ideologies and clouded economic historiography. While the reiterations of arguments should not be to the author's disadvantage, as the essays need to both stand on their own

and be embedded and connected, the reader may hence discover tiresome notions of (entirely non-Marxist) 'repetition.' Another issue is authorship. Throughout the book, Karl utilizes Marxist economist Wang Ya'nán as a form of rhetorical proxy. While her sympathy for Wang is clear, it is not always obvious where a faithful rendition of Wang's analysis ends, and where the author's words and views take over. Similar can be observed in other parts, e. g. when Karl's film interpretation seamlessly leads to a normative paragraph on the public property of medicine (p. 154). Further, for an author who is so concerned with the „dialectic of practice and concept,“ (p. 15) the number of philosophers discussed or, more often, mentioned in passing is conspicuous and the benefit not always apparent. Excursions like the one to Heidegger's concept of existence (*dasein*), which the author misspells and vaguely translates/describes as „discussion of being and time“ (p. 94) are too brief to add considerable substance to her argument.

Karl's book – or collection of essays – is an important contribution to the fields of Chinese, global, and economic history. She utilizes China as a method to deliver a wider critique of economic historiography, and while sinological knowledge will very much bolster comprehension, it is not essential. Her argument challenges us to ever more carefully observe our perspective and level of analysis, deconstruct our models and tools of research, and realize the „magic“ of the concepts we utilize and repeat. In this respect, Karl's intellectually stimulating quotations of economist Wang Ya'nán beg for a systematic translation of his work in the English language. Karl's study transforms the emerging field of the „history of capitalism“ into a history of economic concepts, and while she does not explicitly deliver a solution to the problems posed, expecting one would have been naïve.

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