

PREFACE

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During a period around 1900, five books came out, each of them offering a radically new perspective on the modern economic system that was then given a name, “capitalism.” They were V. I. Lenin’s *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), which is still the best available account of capitalist development in backward areas; Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which launched the study of consumption and institutional economics; Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), which has a claim to being the most profound meditation on the topic since Karl Marx; Werner Sombart’s *Der Moderner Kapitalismus* (1902), which is the original source for the name of our economic system; and Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), which is possibly the most famous essay in sociology ever written.

All of these were in some kind of dialogue with Karl Marx’s work that was published in the mid-nineteenth century. This was also a time when the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, and cubism were being formed. Not much later the Federal Reserve and the first fully-automated production line saw daylight in 1913, and twentieth-century capitalism was born.

Noam Yuran’s book is likewise in dialogue with Marx, and it draws heavily on Veblen and Weber, but only indirectly or not at all on the others. We are living through a watershed in world economic history when the doctrines of orthodox economics have been discredited by financial crisis. It ought to be a time of intellectual renewal and discovery, but the contours of such change are not yet obvious. By revisiting that epoch just over a century ago and, especially, through his interpretation of Marx’s theory and method, Yuran may well have produced a classic of our era. His argument is by no means solely an exercise in intellectual archaeology, nor is it an explanation

of the current historical transition. It is steeped in a contemporary critique of the consumer economy of our day, which he analyzes through vivid anecdotes of brand names, celebrities, television, and advertising with which we are all familiar.

What Money Wants is in truth a work of economic philosophy whose aim is to develop a toolkit and a strategy for understanding the modern economy that differ radically from those of orthodox economics. As a startlingly new version of heterodox economics, it aims to challenge the mainstream discipline from the inside, not through some external perspective drawn from sociology, psychology, or anthropology.

Yuran's approach has two anchors, each a dialectical negation of the twin foundations of orthodox economics: its utilitarian focus on individual subjectivity and its ahistorical method. His topic is the impersonal economy that is foreign to the subject's point of view and often invisible to him or her; he aims to reveal the historicity of economic action by showing how the past persists in economic objects. For Yuran the essence of history is story (indeed, for the Greeks they were the same word), and this takes him into an intense engagement with the philosophy of history through the three principal authors examined here.

How else to address questions of this magnitude than through money? Economists are notoriously weak when it comes to studying money. They can tell us what it does, but not what it is or why it occupies its dominant place in our lives. For economists money is mainly a means of satisfying consumer utilities through the purchase of commodities. No one ever asks what rich men want money for; to accumulate thousands of pairs of shoes is pathological, but to keep on accumulating money is unremarkable. Yuran argues that money is the economic object par excellence. It represents the impersonal, historical economy that lies beyond our comprehension or reach and is marked by lack or absence. The word "want" means both something missing and the desire for it. Hence Yuran emphasizes money as an object of desire. The Germanic "want" retains a dialectic that is missing from the Latinate "desire."

Yuran writes with a logical clarity that is enlivened by his ability to find unexpected meaning in familiar cultural artifacts and by a well-founded belief that works of literature are better suited to his subject matter than the pseudo-scientific style of contemporary economics. Charles Dickens features prominently as a source that duly complements Marx's writing of the same period.

Indeed, an idea is gaining acceptance that Marx had to be a great novelist to succeed in his critique of the political economy (the discipline).

Yuran's juxtaposition of Dickens with Adam Smith is particularly revealing. (Smith taught rhetoric and belles lettres for fifteen years before eventually using them to write *The Wealth of Nations*.) In today's supersaturated world of telecommunications, Yuran provides interpretations of car commercials and reality TV that are at once a revelation and hilarious. But this cannot disguise the difficulty most readers will have in trying to digest his unfamiliar ideas. For orthodox economics is not just a specialist academic discipline; it is a cultural expression of the Anglophone societies that did most to pioneer capitalism as well as thinking about it. Most of us have to dismantle deep-seated sources of cultural resistance to his message to receive even part of it.

If there is a contemporary link to Yuran's highly original approach, it is Slavoj Žižek's reading of Marx through Jacques Lacan, generously acknowledged here. I can't begin to summarize that link beyond pointing to its significance in the text. Less obvious—and more immediately accessible—is Yuran's use of Max Weber to provide a satisfying illustration of his core argument concerning money. Usually, aficionados of Marx consign Weber permanently to the opposition camp. Yuran begins unpromisingly by claiming that Weber's thesis on the significance of religious ideas for the origins of capitalist economy has a uni-directional causal logic: the austere imperatives of a salvationist ideology made entrenchment of a rationalist economic ethos possible.

I always thought that Weber harnessed Goethe's idea of "elective affinity" to a probabilistic approach so that two correlated things may be said to reinforce each other in selective ways without one causing the other. Fortunately, Yuran's alternative also shows how religion and economy were intertwined in this case. At first, the overt religious doctrine made its economic corollary invisible. Later, when capitalism had turned society itself into a profit-making machine, religion passed from view. But there was always an economic aspect to religion, and there is now a religious dimension of the economy. Yuran provides a powerful demonstration of this vision of history through his analysis of money.

If orthodox economics is the villain in this story, Marx is undoubtedly its hero. There are two types of intellectuals, which I prefer to identify as intellectuals of structure and intellectuals of transition. The first reveals the logic of a persistent form, and the second addresses the movement from one form

to another. For all his credentials as the founder of a revolutionary movement, Marx belongs in the first category. He really nailed Victorian capitalism as a system. Lenin devoted himself much more effectively to the second question. But Marx (and let us not forget Engels, whose empirical knowledge of industrial capitalism was crucial to their early partnership) went further. He claimed that what they were witnessing in one particular place would change the whole world irreversibly. And it did. How did he do that? He developed a method of structuralist (or, perhaps, I should now say “ontological”) history of which Yuran’s book is the best contemporary example I have encountered. This is not history of the kind I alluded to in the opening paragraph of this Preface, an attempt to situate linked social phenomena in a pattern of movement such as our own historical crisis.

One of the most strikingly original features of this book is its engagement with the narrative aspects of history. If the past is approached in terms specific to itself, there is nothing uniquely historical about the method. It is rather an exercise in economics, sociology, or anthropology using facts gathered from the past. Yuran insists that historical method must acknowledge the dialectical relationship of the past to the present when constructing a story and for many this implies the dreaded threat of “teleology.” The way he develops and applies his own approach to this problem is extremely subtle; it offers an incisive guide to Marx (whose own historical method is still poorly understood), and it does illuminate how we might think about economy currently and in world history over the last few centuries. The key to the method is the substance of Yuran’s take on money, and I balk at trying to summarize that here.

Yuran has little to say about the modifications of capitalism that occurred in the twentieth century or are occurring now: welfare states, transnational corporations, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS), the return of rentier finance. Nor does he offer any vision of what might replace it. He obviously believes that Western capitalism over the last three centuries or so is one thing, more than any of its historical variations. He acknowledges that, in some ways, the emphasis has shifted from production to consumption and this contrast underpins his desire to bring Marx up to date by integrating the two sides more explicitly than his great predecessor did. He therefore cuts through the debate about the respective role of states and markets as sources for money and argues for a view of money as defined by its relationship to the circuit of commodities. I think he succeeds in this brilliantly. But his argu-

ment for the singularity of our world closes off perspectives that would rather emphasize its diversity and movement.

The hero has a sidekick in this story. The prophet of the consumer economy was Veblen, and Yuran enlists the ideas of Veblen's most famous book for the task of updating Marx as a critical guide for our times. Veblen, in turn, is shown to be much more compatible with a Marxist approach than its adherents would normally imagine. This hinges on demonstrating that his alleged evolutionism is in fact better understood as a form of historicism in Yuran's terms. On the other hand, the orthodox economists of our day are more faithful to a sterile version of evolutionism, which only highlights their inability to make sense of the history residing in economic objects. Both Veblen and Marx were highly satirical of their own society and especially of their opponents. Taken together they inform Yuran's unique intellectual style, which both is open to literature and aspires to being scientific, as they were. The flipside of scientism is a fear of fiction. We may be entering a phase when they can become more comfortable bedfellows again.

I have spent the last several decades studying and writing about money. I first encountered this book as a precocious PhD thesis three years ago. I am still learning from it. I appear in the present text on three occasions. On the first, my book is dismissed as missing the point: I identify money with memory, whereas Yuran identifies it with oblivion. On the second, we agree about the unity of the two sides of money: heads and tails, states and markets. On the third, he takes issue with one of my stories about prostitution in an engagingly different way. We are obviously contrasting intellectual personalities. When I read this book, I am alternately thrilled and enlightened, confused and frustrated. So will you be. I hope that some of you will stay the course, as I have. You just might be reading one of the formative tracts of our time.

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