Book Review

Heinz D. Kurz

***Economic Thought: A Brief History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 208 pp.: 9780231172592**

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The history of economic thought is a complex and substantial body of learning ranging over temporal, lingual and philosophical boundaries. It is an area of scholarship that, in itself, has a very long history—a history every bit as complex and contested as the practice of economics itself.

Kurz has a strong reputation as a result of his important contribution to the area of History of Economic Thought and here he brings together his experience to present an important addition to the genre. Indeed, in this volume, Kurz applies his considerable capacity and scholarship to the examination of European History of Economic Thought in a manageable and readable way while maintaining a brevity and focus that allows the reader to follow the complex trail in what is, really, a brief read.

Arguably, History of Economic Thought ranges over every aspect of economics including in relation to the philosophical arguments associated with the theorising and practice of economics, the description of the lives of economists who have made contributions to the discipline in an historical and an ahistorical framework, the description of the impacts of economic policy implementation, and the analysis of attribution of key tenets and thought.

Here, Kurz presents a cogent and sweeping description of the key contributors to economic thought following the threads of the development of economic thinking in terms of the major theories and counter theories developed over time, the interplay of the actors in relation to the various contentions, and he also adds to the narrative by including brief considerations of counter-factual ideas while reserving his own opinion to a very few short statements.

Originally written in German, the English translation has been, by Kurz's own account (page vii), modified from the original Central European focus to become more focused on the USA while the discussion pertaining to central European ideas and debates (primarily those undertaken in German) have suffered by being reduced in consequence. This is a shame as much economic history in its broadest sense could be argued to be developed and considered from an Anglophone perspective which has a narrowing tendency. Further, the Central European contribution to economic thinking has been substantial (think of Schumpeter, von Mises and von Hayek to name but three globally significant contributors). However, in physical terms, the discussion is not easily separated along national or linguistic lines as many of Central Europe's 20th century contributors to economic thinking wound up in the United States or the United Kingdom in any case as a result of crisis and shared interests—they then impacting economic thinking in the destination country and them in turn being impacted by their new homes and languages.

This work has navigated these complexities by presenting the History of Western Economic Thought—the philosophy itself—emphasising the chronology, arguments, contributions and methodologies of economists without rehearsing the stories of life history, the many animosities and enmities built up during the various methodological and philosophical debates (the often more scintillating aspects of History of Economic Thought!), broader political history or other “extraneous” issues. These are dealt with comprehensively in other places. Rather, Kurz focuses on the “raw”

History of Economic Thought, bringing in a minimum of extraneous issues only where they demonstrate the point or explicate the rationale.

Commencing with a scene setting first chapter, the author describes the economic thought of the “ancients” and the mercantilists, describing the former as operating in the years between 1100 and 1600 and the latter between 1600 and 1800. Of course, the strict application of dates and the choice of the commencement date itself will raise the ire of some—the delineation of epochs always being grounds for contest amongst historians of all types. However, the book is less about dates and more about the description of the trajectory of the development of economic thought. Chapter 1 neatly introduces the topic and lays the scene for an examination of Adam Smith and David Ricardo generally representing the classical economists in chapter 2.

Chapter 3 examines Marx and the development of socialism while chapter 4 goes on to consider the development of thinking relating to marginalism. Chapter 5 considers the rise of marginalism while chapter 6 focuses on Marshall and the development of the theory of partial equilibrium. Readers of this review will be starting to get a sense of the trajectory of this book—it follows economists and themes in order to build a picture of the development of the differing sects of Western economic thought via the contributions of those individuals.

It is not my intention here to rehearse the content of each chapter as I think that it superfluous to the reader’s needs. Suffice to say, as the book develops, the pace increases as more characters and more ideas—expanding concepts and competing with each other—begin to fill the ether. The nuances of differing thought streams are also documented to an extent, although it must be said—and for practical reasons it must be accepted—that the narrative does follow the trajectory of the major debates via the major players with limited reference of minor contentions, theories or historical nuances. Leaving an opportunity for further self-study with the reader.

The book completes the survey by examining a number of selected topic areas that have seen the broadening of economic thought into fields beyond those strictly delineated by the primary thinkers. These areas include game theory, behavioural economics and development economics.

Overall, this is a very readable, comprehensive and well-structured volume. It is a very good place to start for those interested in gaining an overview of the trajectory of the development of economic thought while it would also be of great value to those who may have deeper research interests by necessity in a narrower sub-sector of the discipline but who would value an appreciation of the sweep of development over, particularly, the 20th century. It provides this narrative with very little digression into other areas which allows the story of the development of economic thought to take centre stage. A well-crafted and thoughtful volume that is easy to read but comprehensive. Well worth the read.