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From History of Economic Thought to Intellectual History of Economics

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Since the first edition of *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, written by Mark Blaug and published in 1962, the dichotomy between 'rational reconstruction' and 'historical reconstruction' has been a central theme of theoretical and methodological debate within the field of the History of Economic Thought (HET). This paper aims to examine these debates and the theoretical challenges that have arisen from them, with the goal of resolving the dichotomy and thereby opening the possibility for HET to engage with the broader field of the intellectual history of economics.

JEL Codes: B00; B20; B31; B41

1. Introduction

For a long time, most articles written about the state of the History of Economic Thought (henceforth HET) began with the idea that the field was marginalized from the overall discussion about the progress of the economics discipline. Steven Kates (2015) explained he had to write *Defending the History of Economic Thought (2013)* due to various institutions in Australia and Europe threatening to eliminate the study of HET from the economics curriculum and place it under the umbrella of the History and the Philosophy of Science. This defensive attitude seems to permeate a large part of the literature on the topic. Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine (2014) hint that it goes beyond institutional problems, constituting a true "identity problem".

Similar concerns about how HET relates to a broader historiographical approach have shaped the field since its beginnings. In this sense, the issue of how to designate the field, its relationship to other disciplines, the appropriate methodological tools, and the question of identity are, in essence, intertwined into a single challenge. This identity problem seems to be built on the dichotomy between two major attitudes, one of them leading towards a purely economic discussion, ultimately indistinguishable from economic theory, and the other towards research that is only useful for gaining knowledge about the past. On one side, we find economists with little interest in historiographical and antiquarian questions, and on the other, historians with little concern for solving the economic problems of the present.

The main objective of this article is to argue that, by revisiting some of the arguments and advances in intellectual history related to the linguistic turn, the dichotomy between the work of the economist and that of the historian can be shown to be ultimately misleading. In essence, history can be another tool in the study of economics, just like mathematics: "History is not economics: but neither are mathematics, statistics and political theory, which like history are free-standing inquiry" (Waterman 2008, 108). To achieve this, however, it is essential to give due consideration to the theoretical and methodological assumptions that have been put forth in the field of intellectual history following the linguistic turn.

To arrive at this point, we need to begin with a short summary of some of the most relevant discussions about this dichotomy and its nuances so that we can finally show the existence of a large quantity of work that can be labeled as "intellectual history of economics". This will permit us to see much more creativity and a capacity for hybrid thinking using these two sides of the dichotomy, preserving the space of history while also making useful contributions to our understanding of the present. Ultimately, our intention in reviewing this journey is not to dismiss these discussions as irrelevant,

but to organize them as a pertinent path of debates about the limits and methods of the field itself, within which we may discover new and interesting avenues to explore.

2. From historiographic problems in philosophy to historiographic problems in economics

The two most important concepts bearing on this dichotomy were summarized by Mark Blaug (1927–2011) in "On the Historiography of Economics" using the labels "rational reconstruction" and "historical reconstruction" (Blaug 1990).[1] These are less extreme versions of what Blaug referred to, during the 1960s, as 'absolutist' and 'relativist' positions, within the context of debates in the philosophy of science shaped by the writings of Thomas Kuhn (1962) and the critical developments of Karl Popper's ideas by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (1970). When Blaug was just 35 years old, he wrote in the first edition of *Economic Theory in Retrospect* that he had taken these two categories from his "little training in German philosophy" (Blaug 1962, 2–3). This small clue left by the author, as well as the footnote with a quote from Werner Stark's *The Sociology of Knowledge* (1958), leads us to suppose that the Dutch scholar was thinking about the distinction within German Sociology of Knowledge (*Wissenssoziologie*) between the intrinsic study (*Innenbetrachtung*) and the extrinsic study (*Ausseribetrachtung*) of ideas (Becker and Dahlke 1942). This means that "a determined product of the mind" can be approached in two ways: either by examining its internal structure and logic or by considering it as a reflection of broader social and historical contexts. During this period, Blaug's position was closely aligned with the absolutist stance of Popper and Lakatos, in opposition to Kuhn, though his perspective would gradually become more balanced over time.

This change was accompanied by a reconfiguration of the dichotomy in other terms. In his pivotal 1990 text, Blaug no longer presented the issue as a problem of 'absolutism' or 'relativism' of ideas concerning their internal logic or social context. Instead, he emphasizes the relationship of ideas with the present and the past. Blaug then reconsidered how to understand the issue by following the argument of philosopher Richard Rorty, author of *The Linguistic Turn* (1967), which laid out the existence of "four genres" in the history of philosophy (Rorty 1984).[2] These were *Geistesgeschichten*, historical reconstruction, rational reconstruction, and doxography, which Blaug used as references and influences for debates within his own discipline. Blaug's reading of Rorty allowed him to reevaluate the same issue, now properly framed

[1] For a general analysis of the influence of Mark Blaug in HET, see Backhouse (2001).

[2] The title itself is a clear reference to Rorty's essay "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres" (1984).

as a historiographical rather than a sociological problem. 'Rational reconstructions'—previously considered an absolutist position—are now seen as firmly anchored in contemporary issues, while 'historical reconstructions'—formerly relativist—are understood as striving to recover the "true historical meaning" of texts as they were originally conceived in the past.[3]

First, those who adhered to historical reconstructions aimed to understand economists and historical texts in the context of the time in which they either lived or were written, so that the ideas would be disconnected from the present and fully understood as the people of the time would have understood them. The objective of this reconstruction was to show how the ideas of the past were molded by specific circumstances that can only be understood against the background of what had existed before. The most obvious example within this genre was, for Rorty, Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978). In an essay written by Rorty in 1984, he criticized the various ways in which philosophers had written about the history of philosophy by examining the strengths and weaknesses of each genre and their implications for philosophy in general. Rorty's primary goal was to question the whole idea that there existed only one correct method of writing the history of philosophy. This pluralistic vision, as we will see in other examples, has survived as a way of furthering discussions about the methodology of the history of economic thought.

Second, for Blaug, "rational reconstruction", which happened to be the most common approach among economists, was a way of contextualizing the ideas of the past with ideas from the present. This led to treating thinkers of the past as if they were contemporary colleagues with whom one could debate and discuss. Work along these lines tended to show that the ideas of the past could be reformulated or even improved upon using modern criteria of logic and clarity. A notorious example in the history of economic thought was the work of Paul Samuelson (1974) on the polemics surrounding the interpretation of Karl Marx (Baumol 1974; Hollander 1980; Kurdas 1988). Blaug's intention was to find a middle ground and rebalance the results of these polemics laid out by Samuelson following his strong vindication of Whig historiography during his address to the History of Economics Society (Samuelson 1987). It became a textbook example of the conflict between "historical reconstruction" and "rational

[3] *Geistesgeschichten*, for Rorty, were accounts that traced the evolution of a specific ethos or worldview across different historical eras and thinkers. These accounts placed greater emphasis on cultural and intellectual traditions than on logical arguments. A paradigmatic example is Hegel's *History of Philosophy*. Ultimately, Rorty himself rejected the legitimacy of "doxographies" as a method of historical inquiry. These are lists of opinions held by various philosophers on specific topics, lacking in both analysis and evaluation. Fortunately, such lists are no longer common in academic discourse.

reconstruction". Although Blaug kept changing the nomenclature with which he described this argument, at this moment he found both positions acceptable, depending on the question to be addressed: discovering what truth exists in the thinkers of the past, or understanding why they wrote what they wrote. "It is easy to show that historical reconstructions are literally impossible," Blaug (1997, 6–7) explained, "while rational reconstructions are invariably anachronistic."

Blaug (2001) continued this discussion, but introduced an important change in opinion with respect to work done prior to 1997.[4] He had now changed his mind about advocating for an intermediate position – tending towards absolutism – and instead decided to align himself with historical reconstruction: "Although I have been guilty myself of the very sin I have just deplored, I have come to the conclusion that the only approach to the history of economic thought that respects the unique nature of the subject material, rather than just turning it into grist for the use of modern analytical techniques, is to labor at historical reconstructions, however difficult they are" (Blaug 2001, 151).[5] Blaug was then 74 years old and seemed to have come to the conclusion that historical reconstruction was the only way to properly understand and further the discipline of the history of economic thought.

To support this claim, Blaug cited the numerous and persistent misunderstandings about what Adam Smith meant by the "invisible hand" as an example of the lack of attention of economists to specific knowledge in the history of economic thought (Rothschild 1994; Grampp 2000). Another classic example were the errors in the use of historical illustrations by Robert Lucas in his Nobel acceptance speech (Lucas 1996). Following in the footsteps of Milton Friedman, Lucas acknowledged David Hume as the first formulator of the quantity theory of money. He pointed out that Hume could not explain why money had real short-term effects, attributing this difficulty to the lack of a formal model that incorporated the expectations of economic agents and monetary surprises – Lucas himself contributing to the development of such a model.

Blaug argued that Lucas was deeply mistaken in claiming that Hume advocated for long-term monetary neutrality. A rigorous contextual reconstruction allowed us to understand that Hume emphasized, in fact, the real effects of money in the short term and recommended an expansionary monetary policy to stimulate economic activity. According to Blaug, Lucas could not understand Hume's reasoning because it was based on an implicit assumption of disequilibrium typical of his historical moment,

[4] He also directly addressed this issue in an earlier article on Sraffa's interpretation of classical political economy (Blaug 1999).

[5] It is relevant to add that this recognizes the use of the expression "reconstruction" as a deliberate tribute to the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault & Jacques Derrida (Blaug 2001, 151).

while Lucas only focused on long-term equilibria. The interpretation of Hume that Lucas offered was a projection of the "rational expectations revolution" of the 1970s: "Lucas simply cannot interpret a text that departs from his own theoretical framework according to which the only concern of an economist is the properties of long-run equilibria" (Blaug 2001, 155).

3. Blurring the dichotomy

In 2003, we can observe an interesting development in these debates following a critique of Blaug's central notions by Italian economic historian Rodolfo Signorino (2003). While this argument must be situated within the broader context of debates between Sraffian heterodox and mainstream economics, such conflicts have often served as a worthwhile incentive to refine compelling argumentative strategies. Signorino argued that Blaug's distinction between "rationalists" and "historicists" had ended up fueling a series of controversies that, from his point of view, were clearly unproductive. For Signorino, Blaug's legitimate objective was to dismantle the so-called Whig historiography of Samuelson, but his lack of philosophical finesse led him to dismiss the legitimate work of the "rationalists" in the process. Blaug was thus charged with conflating two different things: "rational reconstructions" and "Whig historiography".[6]

For Signorino, historical reconstruction is not only a practical problem but also a theoretical one, with both epistemological and hermeneutic aspects. On one hand, there is an epistemological view of interpretation that, especially in its objectivist or essentialist variant, considers the author, the text, and the interpreter as three separate entities. Keeping these three elements distinct allows rationalists to move between and analyze each of them independently. On the other hand, the hermeneutic approach to interpretation emphasizes the role played by the historically determined context and the interpretative community in defining the norms for each interpretation. There is no possible interpretation of the text without its context, as each gives "meaning" to the other. The text and the interpreter ultimately form a dynamic whole, and interpretation is a "fusion of horizons" between the two — in Gadamerian terms.[7] From this hermeneutic perspective, the conflict between different interpretations of the same text arises from the fact that a text can have multiple potential and plausible meanings depending

[6] The term "Whig historiography" was coined to describe the teleological bias of the historiography of the English Liberal Party (Butterfield 1965). It is now used as a general label for historiography that presents narratives of the past based on the assumption of cumulative and linear progress, and as a foretaste of the present.

[7] The concept of "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) was developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960). It refers to a dialogical process in which the interpreter's perspective and the historical context of the text interact and mutually influence each other, creating a dynamic understanding that transcends a mere reconstruction of the author's original meaning.

on the relationship among the three variables mentioned above. Each interpretation explicitly brings out only one of these meanings, leading to the multiplicity of possible interpretations. The present context of the researcher (interpreter) cannot disappear when approaching any text from the past, as it determines the sense that can be grasped from the text itself. In other words, a rational reconstruction becomes anachronistic only if it disregards the role of the present context in its interpretation; otherwise, it is simply one possible interpretation, analytically as valid as those emerging from its original context.

In his brief response, Blaug (2003) barely addressed Signorino's most relevant points and insisted that the danger of "rational reconstructions" was rendering the study of the past irrelevant, merely demonstrating that we now know more than before. Blaug focused on highlighting the underlying motives behind Signorino's critique: specifically, Blaug's criticism of the Sraffian reconstruction of Ricardo's 'corn-model' in his early theory of profits (Blaug 1999). Blaug directly attacked Sraffa and his interpretation of Ricardo as a prime example of "rational reconstruction" in the sense of Whig historiography: "My principal complaint of the Sraffian interpretation of classical economics has been that Sraffians simply are not interested in the history of ideas but rather in demonstrating the truth of Sraffian economics by displaying its impressive pedigree in the writings of Ricardo and Marx (and here and there in the writings of Adam Smith)" (Blaug 2003, 608).

Signorino's use of the work of Ercüment Galip Aksoy (1988) on the acceptability of different interpretative traditions of Ricardo as an example of his hermeneutic stance seems to confirm Blaug's observations regarding Signorino's true intentions. Aksoy demonstrates how different interpretations are grounded not only in Ricardo's occasionally ambiguous literary style but also in the biases and concerns of his most prominent interpreters at various times. Sraffa himself had addressed these methodological issues in the history of economic thought in the preparatory documents for his Cambridge lectures from 1928 to 1931. It appears that Sraffa held positions very similar to Signorino's, rejecting the Whig reconstruction of history but advocating for reflection based on contemporary economic debates. Theories from the past should be understood as solutions to contextual problems. When they are detached from their original context and seek universality, they appear to be scientific theories. However, it is necessary to re-examine them when they face different problems and contexts (Trezzini 2018, 196–97).

A few years later, Maria Cristina Marcuzzo (2008) addressed this methodological question in her "Is History of Economic Thought a 'Serious' Subject?" In contrast to Blaug and Signorino, Marcuzzo does not engage in a theoretical discussion, but rather

an empirical analysis of what historians of economic thought have done in their work. Marcuzzo shows the existence of four principal strategies: textual exegesis, rational reconstruction, contextual analysis, and narrative history. Each of them brings new nuances to our discussion thus far.

Textual exegesis, or the work of interpreting texts based on their internal structure, "is the technique *par excellence* for doing HET" (Marcuzzo 2008, 108). Drawing on the work of Stigler (1965), this approach requires the capacity to reconstruct the main thesis of an author's work in a way that is compatible with contemporary economic theory, allowing the researcher to engage with the text on its own term. It is the scientific community who ultimately determines if any interpretation is correct. The "rational reconstruction" technique was more popular during the 1980s and 1990s. It moves beyond textual exegesis by reformulating arguments from the past into formal terms using contemporary theoretical frameworks. This approach translates non-mathematical or discursive arguments into formal models, often employing mathematical language to align them with modern economic theory. While "textual exegesis" seeks to understand the original meaning of the texts, "rational reconstruction" prioritizes translating these ideas into mathematical or theoretical models to make them relevant to current academic discussions.

Marcuzzo's argument is largely aligned with the criticism leveled by Signorino against Blaug. On one hand, exegesis corresponds to what Signorino understands as "Whig history", an approach where modern economic theory is used to interpret and judge the validity of arguments made by past authors. On the other hand, "rational reconstruction" looks for a lost alternative past as a resolution to the problems of the present. If Signorino's intention in separating the two categories was to protect Sraffa's work from criticism, in Marcuzzo's case the goal is to rescue the work of Luigi Pasinetti. Formalizing the theories of Ricardo in a mathematical form and unifying them with those of Malthus and Keynes, Pasinetti (1974) used this type of historical investigation to elaborate a criticism of dominant neoclassical models about economic growth and the distribution of profits. However, according to Signorino and Marcuzzo, and likely Sraffa himself, neither Pasinetti nor Sraffa engages in Whig historiography; instead, they use the past to demystify the present, rather than using the present to reinterpret the past.

According to Marcuzzo, "rational reconstruction" likewise began to fall out of favor when "contextual analysis" started to gain ground.[8] This shift allowed for the emergence of an autonomous space for historians of economic thought but, as a logical

[8] Blaug's change of mind, noted in the previous section, can be placed in this transition.

consequence, it also led to a greater distancing from economics. Historians of economic thought would no longer allow their discipline to be used merely as introductory folklore in discussions of economic theory. This new technique required, in addition to knowledge of economics, a properly historiographical ability to reconstruct historical contexts, beyond just understanding the texts themselves, thus returning the history of economic thought to its past. Marcuzzo also broadens the scope of her analysis by presenting two types of historical reconstruction: "contextual analysis" and the new category of "historical narrative".

"Contextual analysis" probably corresponds to "historical reconstruction" in Blaug's terminology. To make any significant contribution, it always requires proper archival research, such as the analysis of correspondence or other unpublished materials not directly related to the original object of study. The personal, social and intellectual lives of the historical characters that we study indicate the importance of fully analyzing all aspects of a person's life if we want to truly understand the past on its own terms. Marcuzzo (2008, 112) describes this type of analysis as a way to understand the "motivations behind the choices of a particular set of questions, assumptions or tools."[9]

Finally, we have the label "historical narrative", used here in a somewhat unconventional manner. Marcuzzo employs this label to indicate works that, within rational reconstruction, have begun to diverge from major theoretical issues, focusing instead on "minor" authors, the reconstruction of intellectual networks and circles, or "maps and territories". In other words, a shift from the study of problems more closely related to theoretical and economic analysis to broader questions concerning the intellectual life of economists. In 2008, Marcuzzo was also seeing a series of interesting tendencies within the field of the history of economic thought: the feminist perspective and the role of gender in the past; as well as expanding the attention to larger geographical areas. For the Italian historian, the main reason for preferring historical, or more specifically contextual, reconstructions is a matter of delimitating the field of study. Leaving behind purely textual reconstructions signified, for Marcuzzo, an acceptance of methodological pluralism as a valid form of diversity in practice. In a more recent piece, Marcuzzo and Zacchia (2016) update and quantitatively analyze the mapping previously done in 2008. This confirmed a few trends that had been identified

[9] The use of the word "motivations" recalls the notion of "intentions" in the work of the historian Quentin Skinner, better known as the head of the historiographical school known as "contextualism" (Skinner 1969; 1972). We will later return to this point.

in relation to the category of "narrative history", which essentially represents an extension into classical problems of intellectual history.[10]

This same year, Pedro Garcia Duarte and Yann Giraud (2016) published a survey of the HET literature that focused more deeply on the necessity for autonomy in the field of investigation. For our purposes, their fundamental conclusion is that, while Blaug's theoretical separation between "rational reconstructions" and "historical reconstructions" is often evoked by those who question the methodologies used in the history of economic thought, in practice it is very difficult to classify the research analyzed into these two groups: "Rather than using a distinctive and consistent methodology, the contributions we surveyed use a number of methods and adopt certain narrative styles" (Duarte and Giraud 2016, 444). The concept of "narrative style" is introduced as "the existence of some recurring types of discourses or arguments involving the history of economics: these are the uses economists and historians make of the past of their discipline when they publish a paper in a major economics journal" (ibid.).[11] The authors thus identify eight narrative styles that somehow illustrate Blaug's categories, but also allow them to be presented not as watertight compartments, but as the two extremes of an arc along which the different styles are distributed.

The first narrative style is "evaluation", close to a pure rational reconstruction in the terms of Signorino or Sraffa. This style implies a dialogue between the past and the present in both directions. The ideas and methods of the past are used to evaluate and improve the current understanding of economic phenomena, and the tools and perspectives of the present are used to critically reassess past economic theories. The second style, called "foundation", is similar to the "Whig historiography" of Signorino.[12] It implies finding the origins of certain ideas and people from the past by connecting them with a narrative that culminates in the present understanding of the economy. A good example of this approach is the work of Roger Myerson on game theory. Myerson (1999) reconstructs an economic and mathematical tradition of Nash's equilibrium theory, tracing it from Pareto and Walras to developments after the Second World War, and attempts to link it to the evolution of modern economic analysis. We can say this is a "Whig" narrative because it analyzes history – events, people and texts – to see how much they have impacted the present or not.

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[10] Although there is no specific consensus on how far intellectual history proper goes, we could say it comprises the whole field whose movement is recounted by François Dosse in *La marche des idées* (2012).

[11] Note how the concept of "narrative" is used very differently in Duarte and Giraud than in Marcuzzo.

[12] Once again, the terminology can be confusing. Although Samuelson claims to be a Whig, Signorino's distinction between rational reconstruction and Whig historiography would leave Samuelson in the first group, described by Duarte and Giraud as "evaluation".

A third style is "deconstruction", nearly the polar opposite of "foundation". This is an attempt to deconstruct the interpretations of canonical literature so they can be returned to the past and the context from which they emerged. An example of this approach is the work of Robert Ekelund and Robert Hebert (2002). In this article, the authors deconstruct the legend that neoclassical economics began in the 1870s with the parallel and disconnected contributions of Carl Menger, Léon Walras, and William Stanley Jevons. The legend culminates with Alfred Marshall unifying the three theories in his *Principles of Economics* (1890). The process of deconstructing the legend permeates an incorporation of antecedents from the "classical" and "neoclassical" periods by breaking the progressive narrative that attempted to see economic history in a linear way. A fourth style is "prospective speculation", which explores trends within a field and how they manifest during specific anniversaries and celebrations. An example of this approach is Marcuzzo's work from 2008, where historical reflection is used to anticipate the future directions of the history of economic thought. The other three styles include the "literature review", which provides an overview of past contributions without critically assessing or evaluating them; the "anecdote", which focuses on minor or peripheral aspects in the lives of historical figures; and the "testimony", which consists of personal accounts by economists reflecting on key moments in the discipline's evolution. These forms are more literary than historical in their treatment of the past and, as such, do not raise specific methodological arguments, unlike the previous styles. According to Rorty's classification mentioned earlier, they could be considered "doxographies", as they recount ideas without engaging in critical analysis.

To an extent, the conclusions of Duarte and Giraud can be considered antithetical to Marcuzzo (Marcuzzo 2008; Marcuzzo and Zacchia 2016).[13] They argue that those advocating for a closer relationship between historians of economic thought and economists are underestimating the degree to which economists have become impervious to the consensuses and findings of the history of economic thought:

> historians should stop trying to figure out what are the economists' preferences in order to undertake research accordingly. Instead, they would better do their job by sharpening their tools—be it, among other things, an ever-increasing use of the concepts brought by the larger history and sociology of science or a more systematic

[13] This discussion can probably be traced back to the annual conference hosted by the journal *History of Political Economy* (HOPE) at Duke University, North Carolina, in April 2001. Marcuzzo's position was a response to Weintraub (2002), who expressed concern about the use of the history of political economy (HPE) as a Whig history legitimizing various paradigms. According to Weintraub, this undermined the standards of quality and the ability of the field to stand on its own; therefore, he thought it preferable for the field to remain entirely separate.

> recourse to quantitative and bibliometric methods found in the "new economics of science literature"—to produce expert knowledge at the sub disciplinary level. (Duarte and Giraud 2016, 458)

4. The tools of intellectual history after the linguistic turn

In the text mentioned above, which served as the basis for Blaug's work, Rorty (1994) argued the best way to combine the different alternatives he identified into a common approach was through "intellectual history":

> "I should like to use the term 'intellectual history' for a much richer and more diffuse genre—one which falls outside this triad. In my sense, intellectual history consists of descriptions of what the intellectuals were up to at a given time, and of their interaction with the rest of society—descriptions which, for the most part, bracket the question of what activities the intellectuals were conducting." (Rorty 1984, 68)

From the perspective of the history of the social sciences, "intellectual history" has also been considered the label that promotes the integration of disciplinary histories into a common framework (Collini 1988).

As mentioned earlier, the debate on situating HET within a broader historiographical framework has shaped the field's development since its inception (Edwards et al. 2024, 2). In 1969, following a symposium on the history of economic thought held in Durham, North Carolina, the specialized journal *History of Political Economy* (HOPE) was established. A few years later, in 1974, the History of Economics Society (HES) was formally created, following exploratory meetings in 1973. The initial meetings of the society featured sessions on the methods of intellectual history and the teaching of economic history. During these sessions, Warren J. Samuels, one of the society's founding members, emphasized that the history of economic thought should be considered a branch of intellectual history and that adopting this perspective would enhance the quality of research in the field and ensure a more promising future for all involved (Samuels 1974, 305). Samuels argued that this approach would open new research avenues and methodologies, similar to those employed in the broader history of ideas.

We can define the intellectual history of economics as the branch of intellectual history that studies the evolution of economic ideas by analyzing the cultural, political, and social contexts in which these ideas arise and develop. It examines concepts, languages, narratives, and metaphors, as well as their interaction with other fields of

knowledge. In this way, the intellectual history of economics can also be understood as a way of looking at the past that helps contemporary economists uncover underlying assumptions, biases, and dogmas by exposing them to languages and perspectives they might not otherwise encounter. It incorporates some of the fundamental issues from the linguistic turn that are now part of the body of knowledge in historiography. Moreover, it encourages moving away from an exclusive focus on 'economic analysis' or 'doctrinal histories' toward a broader range of reasoning styles, speech acts, languages, narratives, and economic metaphors—not exclusively centered on figures labeled as 'economists'—including their tensions and diverse meanings through time and space.

There is one central figure who established clear connections between intellectual history and HET: Donald Winch (1935–2017). In his influential article "What Price the History of Economic Thought?" (1962), Winch already addressed some of the arguments discussed in this essay. Concerned with economists' lack of interest in the history of economic thought, he did not regard subordinating the field to the priorities of economics as the solution. Instead, he advocated for greater independence through an association with economic and intellectual history, leading the field to develop "a respectable core and interest of its own" (Winch 1962, 198). Only by following this path would HET be able to "negotiate from a position of strength which it does not at present possess" (204).

Winch followed this path himself, moving closer to intellectual history and collaborating with historians like Quentin Skinner. This relationship was fundamental to the development of his work *Adam Smith: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (1978).[14] During a conference held at the École Normale Supérieure in France on December 21, 2006, Winch attempted to portray the complex and delicate relationship between HET and intellectual history through his own experience: "We shared a basic concern with the historicity of the texts that interested us, and their substantive work on key figures and episodes in the history of political argumentation had scholarly qualities I would have been pleased to match" (Winch 2017, 11). As Winch noted, his work aligned more closely with the community of historians of political thought than with the HET community because the former had established clearer distinctions between political theory and political science. This allowed historians of political thought to engage more effectively with the historiographical innovations brought about by the "linguistic turn" and to consider a broader range of interpretative principles applicable to their texts. His

[14] Skinner was also an editor for his other books, such as *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (1996).

work also sought to demonstrate how the theoretical and methodological advances of intellectual history could be leveraged to address and clarify certain theoretical issues within HET—beyond the dichotomy between rational and historical reconstructions—while simultaneously broadening the scope of research to include more specific objects of study.

These theoretical and methodological advances of intellectual history, prominently represented by the Cambridge School and its leading figures like Quentin Skinner, have often been used as a benchmark for "historical reconstructions". Although it is often pointed out that this school simply urges us to place more emphasis on context to understand an idea, this does not fully reflect the actual assumptions of the "linguistic turn" that Skinner incorporated into his proposal. By "linguistic turn", we mean the shift in focus from abstract ideas to the language and speech acts that shape and convey these ideas (Winch 2017, 10–11). The fundamental element of theoretical rupture introduced by Skinner with respect to historiographical tradition – dominated until the 1960s by the so-called "history of ideas", embodied in the work of Arthur Lovejoy – lies in a change in the object of study: from Lovejoy's "unit-ideas" to the "speech acts" associated with the pragmatic linguistics of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin (Skinner 1969). Let us examine this in more detail.

By incorporating the principles of Wittgensteinian linguistics, Skinner focuses his research object on a specific aspect: it is no longer a matter of "ideas" throughout history, studied from a temporal paradigm inherited from Newtonian physics, but rather of concrete speech acts that gain meaning exclusively within their context. To adequately understand the significance of a text from the past, Skinner argues it is essential to grasp what the author was doing when publishing or writing it, which involves considering its pragmatic dimension. This means that a text should not be seen solely as a statement that communicates information, but as an action with a specific effect. According to Skinner, understanding an author's intentions while participating in a particular "language game"—a specific form of linguistic activity within a community of speakers—is the only way to fully comprehend the historical meaning and significance of a text.

This approach has been termed "contextualism", but it does not only refer to a historical or social context; rather, it addresses the context of the text's production within a historically specific linguistic system. Methodologically, this implies dedicating time and effort to reconstructing the debates and languages in which the author's intervention was situated and attempting to denote its specific intentions within that context. This is much more specific. According to Skinner, this method of approaching texts is the only one that allows us to avoid falling into certain "mythologies" and

anachronisms. In other words, it is the only philosophically coherent way to escape various forms of "rational reconstructionism" or "Whig history". Although it has been subject to criticism from different historiographical perspectives (Tully 1988), this approach clearly distinguishes between Whig history—the mythologies—and historical reconstruction—linguistic contextualism—and provides a coherent historiographical method.

However, there is a second fundamental current in intellectual history – a somewhat less prominent intellectual tradition within the Anglophone world – developed by Reinhardt Koselleck, known as *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history (Brunner et al. 1972; Koselleck 1993). Unlike the Cambridge approach, this current is based on Gadamerian hermeneutics and revolutionized the way of thinking about and writing the history of political concepts in the last quarter of the past century. Like Skinner, Koselleck reacted to the complacent and unreflective manner in which many historians fell into the temptation of anachronism, believing that concepts had a meaning independent of the historical moment and semantic field in which they were formulated, and that they could remain identical across space and time. Nevertheless, while the Cambridge School is associated with a contextual understanding of the texts written by certain prominent thinkers—such as Hobbes, Locke, or Harrington—the followers of *Begriffsgeschichte* focus on variations in the meaning of fundamental concepts—such as state, democracy, or nation—and the changes in their semantic field throughout history. German conceptual history has had a long, fruitful, and diverse trajectory, based on the consolidation of certain categories from Koselleck's thought that have enabled the exploration of innovative and rigorous forms of research in intellectual history. Among these categories are the distinction between "word" and "concept", the notion of the transitional period (*Sattelzeit*), the relationship between the space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*), as well as the metaphor of the strata of time (*Zeitschichten*). These categories have become widely accepted concepts for intellectual historians of politics (Steinmetz 2006).

A third relevant current in the renewal of intellectual history is the French epistemological tradition, which has its roots in the historical epistemology developed by thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) and Georges Canguilhem (1904–1995) – besides Michel Foucault, through the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist linguistics. This tradition provides a clear link between the concerns of the history of science and the methodological sensitivities associated with the linguistic turn. While the history of science has traditionally focused on the internal validation of theories within scientific disciplines, emphasizing empirical or experimental evidence, historical epistemology broadens this approach by analyzing the discursive practices

and historical contexts that shape the production of knowledge.[15] Its distinctive focus includes the conditions of possibility for the production of knowledge, genealogical histories anchored in contemporary problems, and the analysis of the construction of discursive practices within specific historical systems (Stapleford 2017). The notion of "styles of reasoning" – historically situated ways of thinking and structuring knowledge which evolve over time and shape both the methods and the content of scientific and intellectual inquiry – developed by historians like Ian Hacking (1982) or Lorraine Daston (Daston and Galison 2007), also forms part of this tradition. In line with this approach, the historian's objective is to examine and demonstrate the historical and local variability of the methods and forms of validation of scientific knowledge. These three traditions—conceptual history, Cambridge contextualism, and French historical epistemology—are foundational pillars that have significantly contributed to the renewal of intellectual history. As will be explored through the examples below, this renewal has had a profound influence on HET.

Otto Brunner (1898–1982), one of the founders of conceptual history alongside Reinhart Koselleck, focused early on the historical role of the concept of *oikonomía* as a precursor to the development of modern political concepts such as sovereignty, people, democracy, nation, state, progress, and history. His work *Das 'Ganze Haus' und die altereuropäische 'Ökonomik'* (1968) focused on the ethical and social dimensions of the ancient understanding of economy, emphasizing how the notion of *oikonomía* related to broader societal and familial structures in pre-modern Europe. Keith Tribe's work on the concept of "economy" in *The Economy of the Word: Language, History, and Economics* (2015) further exemplifies the effectiveness of the Kosseleckian approach. Tribe, who is also a translator with a deep knowledge of the historiographical work of Koselleck (Tribe 2004), reconstructs the semantic and etymological development of "economy", noting how its meaning has remained largely detached from contemporary connotations throughout most of history: "On a historical scale, modern usage is quite possibly as ephemeral as the mayfly" (Tribe 2015, 2). Thanks to this distance, Tribe points out that the current meaning of "economy" as an autonomous field separate from politics and the household developed only around mid-twentieth century or even later, in a process that increasingly identified it with specific indicators such as GDP. While attempting to trace the history of a complex and constantly changing semantic system, Tribe employs tools and techniques from literary analysis, philology, and linguistics, which enable him to examine how the dominant textual genres at each moment (books, academic

[15] E. Roy Weintraub likewise seems to acknowledge this shift in his transition towards more 'constructivist' or 'postmodern' stances, in his attempt in the late eighties to align the journal *History of Political Economy* with positions similar at this moment to those of journals like *Isis* or *Science in Context* (Giraud 2022).

manuals, or articles) influence the meaning of the concept of "economy" over time, up to the present day. The recent work of Luigi Alonzi, *'Economy' in European History: Words, Contexts and Change Over Time* (2022), can likewise be considered a deepening and updating of this specific approach and tradition.

Another recent example, which truly takes advantage of the categories set forth by Koselleck and other historians of the Cambridge School such as J.G.A Pocock, is Stefan Eich's *The Currency of Politics* (2022). This research could be termed a conceptual history of money and its various strata of meaning, spanning from Aristotle to cryptocurrencies. Eich approaches this from the perspective of political theory and the history of political thought—his field of training—precisely due to the gap that HET has left in refining the theoretical and methodological tools for certain objects of study. These tools allow Eich to go beyond the dichotomy between orthodox commodity money theories and heterodox credit money theories, advancing towards an understanding of the history of money as a stratified genealogy of linguistic conflicts over its attributions: "Money is not reducible then to either trade or taxes. Instead, it is an ambivalent political project suspended between trust and violence" (Eich 2022, 4).[16] The work thus highlights the vicissitudes of the "history" contained within our current concept of money. Another recent work clearly inspired by the critique of what Skinner called historical "mythologies" is *Welfare for Markets* (2023), by Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas, an intellectual history of the idea of Basic Universal Income as a key proposal for the cultural transition towards a preference for welfare systems more centered on money than in-kind benefit.

In this same rubric, linguistic investigation can be nourished by the analysis of metaphors and narratives deriving from "literary studies", especially those inspired by the work of Hayden White (1980; 2014), another influential historian in the field of intellectual history after the linguistic turn. A classic study along these lines was Deirdre McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985), which approached economics from the perspective of persuasion and the rhetoric of science. The lack of success of economics as a "predictive" discipline, imposed according to McCloskey by politics and journalism, contrasts with its success as social history: "Economics, like geology or evolutionary biology or history itself, is a historical rather than a predictive science" (McCloskey 1998, xx–xxi). In other words, the categories used by economics, understood as linguistic expressions constructed in the present to interpret the past, are much more fruitful for offering explanations of events that have already occurred than for predicting the future.

[16] Rockoff (2020) provides a recent example of the history of money told according to these two visions.

McCloskey's main point is that economics should embrace its literary and rhetorical side to truly sustain itself as a scientific discipline. To this end, she develops a method for analyzing "scientific" economic texts from a literary perspective, viewing them as argumentative and persuasive texts. McCloskey dedicates the entire first chapter to explaining literary techniques from a methodological perspective, and providing examples of how to approach texts from this standpoint. The vitality of the path opened by McCloskey can be seen in more recent work such as Robert J. Shiller's 2017 presidential address to the American Economic Association, entitled "Narrative Economics", which explores how different narratives about economic facts can be important for decision-making (Shiller 2017).[17]

Mary Morgan's *The World in the Model: How Economists Work and Think* (2012) can also be read within the framework of French historical epistemology. It investigates some of the most influential mathematical models in economics over the past 200 years and how these models gradually replaced approaches based on laws and theories. Morgan examines various types of models and the metaphorical roles they have played in different historical contexts. She highlights the persistent confusion among modelers regarding whether their research explores situations within the models themselves or else reflects what happens in the real world. Morgan identifies the late 19th century as a transitional period towards a "style of reasoning" characterized by mathematical demonstrations and postulations, alongside the modeling method, which had previously been marginal.[18] Like Hacking's and Daston's work on scientific practices, Morgan shows how these models function as manipulable objects, fostering a style of reasoning that shifts economic inquiry from theoretical postulation to practical experimentation.

Finally, it seems appropriate to conclude this discussion with one of the most well-known followers of Koselleck and the hermeneutic tradition in historiography, Hans Blumenberg, who expanded the field of *Begriffsgeschichte* towards what is called Metaphorology. Central to his proposition was the idea of focusing research on metaphors through history as guiding threads for forming concepts and interpreting the world. This approach enables researchers to engage with more fundamental principles of historical thought—principles about how history should be understood and constructed—across various domains, including scientific theories. It is precisely this premise that underpins the work *Metaphors in the History of Economic Thought:*

[17] For a comprehensive analysis of the possibility and various perspectives of this "narrative turn", see Sacco (2020) and Morgan and Stapleford (2023).

[18] The tension between the use of models and "reality" in economics raises the same discussion about the relationship between the history of concepts and social history that is central to Koselleck's intellectual development.

Crises, Business Cycles, and Equilibrium (2022). This collective volume highlights the most recent advancements that, since at least the 1980s, have integrated Metaphorology into the history of economic thought to explore the formulation of theories and models (Fiori 2024). In this same vein, we can place the work of Alberto Fragio and his exploration of the capacity of metaphorology to investigate the limits and potential of ecological economics and, more generally, the epistemological functions of metaphors in scientific culture (Fragio 2021; 2022). Fragio's work demonstrates more specifically how the notion of "styles of reasoning" makes it possible to classify and explain the lack of dialogue between conflicting schools of thought within economic science.[19] This could represent a viable solution to study the development of these thought communities over time, in the same sense that Pocock and the Cambridge School used "political languages" as alternatives to categories such as "tradition", "doctrines" or "school of thought".

5. Conclusions: going beyond the dichotomy towards a new intellectual history of economics

In 1965, H.D. Dickinson wrote a summary for the first edition of Blaug's *Economic Theory in Retrospect*. In his discussion of 'relativists' and 'absolutists,' Dickinson observes that Blaug "shows a certain division within himself between head and heart. Intellectually, he is an absolutist; but in many passages his words suggest that, emotionally, he has a strong sympathy with the relativist position" (Dickinson 1965, 170). In this paper, while recovering a much broader historiographical debate in the field of HET, we have focused on developments and discussions that have progressively problematized this "division" within Blaug. In particular, we have highlighted arguments that sought to address the limitations of traditional dichotomies such as absolutism and relativism, the discipline's specific epistemological and methodological challenges, and the need to question its boundaries and relationships with other fields. We argue that the intellectual history of economics, particularly following the linguistic turn, not only offers a productive framework for navigating these tensions but also opens new, fruitful pathways for the future development of the field.

Blaug's (1976) initial defense of "absolutism" in his attempt to replace the Kuhnian paradigm with a Lakatosian framework for explaining the marginalist revolution was in line with his mentors and influences, such as George J. Stigler and especially Joseph Schumpeter. This approach aimed to delineate the strict autonomous nature of the history of economic thought, constructing it as a part of the history of science clearly

[19] In Morgan (2012), the "style of reasoning" is a way of understanding modelling within scientific thought.

separated from philosophy, as argued in the first chapters of Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954). Over time, influenced by Rorty, the tension in Blaug between these categories shifted from sociological to historiographical concerns, evolving into the dichotomy between 'rational reconstruction' and 'historical reconstruction". In this transition, the desire to make the field of HET methodologically more autonomous from economics led Blaug to a clear position in favor of "historical reconstructions". In 2003, the incisive Signorino, motivated by the defense of certain positions within Sraffian heterodoxy, criticized what he perceived as Blaug's excessive shift against "rational reconstructions". Beyond his underlying intention, this critique helped refine Blaug's categories by clearly differentiating the problematic concept of "Whig historiography" and emphasizing that "historical reconstructions" must engage with issues of hermeneutics and epistemology. Subsequently, the works of Marcuzzo (2008; 2016) and Duarte and Giraud (2016) empirically demonstrated the significant diversity of methodologies employed within the HET field. Among the analyses of Marcuzzo and Duarte and Giraud, two extremes can be observed regarding the issue of the field's autonomy: while Marcuzzo advocates for methodological pluralism as a means of remaining within the broader field of economics, Duarte and Giraud appear increasingly determined to establish a distinct and separate field capable of developing its own tools.

In fact, since the establishment of some of the most important institutions in the field of HET in the late 1960s, particularly following the work of Warren J. Samuels and Donald Winch, there has been a tension regarding the possibility of incorporating HET into the field of intellectual history, precisely at a time when the latter was undergoing profound renewal through various currents of the so-called "linguistic turn". As Stapleford (2017, 114) recently reminded us: "we don't actually study thoughts; we study texts [...] What we study, in fact, are the products of a broad collection of discursive practices." By shifting our object of study from the ambiguous concept of "thought", which anchors us directly to the internalism or externalism of ideas, to various objects emerging from linguistic reflection, we can transcend Blaug's division. The methodological option to focus on contemporary issues and, from there, to reconstruct the past diachronically is perfectly legitimate from a genealogical or hermeneutical perspective, which should not be confused with Whig historiography. On the other hand, the tools inherited from Austin and Wittgenstein allow us to concentrate on the purely contextual and synchronic dimension of speech acts. We can also reconstruct different layers of overlapping meanings, combining the synchronic and the diachronic, using the perspective inherited from Koselleck's conceptual history.

To transcend the dichotomy between absolutism and relativism while seeking specific methodologies, HET should more closely integrate with the broader field of intellectual history in the wake of the linguistic turn. Historians of science likely confronted the challenges posed by the social and linguistic turns earlier than general historians for similar reasons (Clark 2015). The discursive approach emerged early in the history of science to challenge the internalist framework and open new avenues of analysis regarding how scientific knowledge is constructed, not only through empirical evidence, but also through its interaction with social, cultural, and linguistic factors. In this way, the field would not simply be taking a stance in favor of "historical reconstructions" but rather adopting a methodologically self-aware approach to the diversity of pathways that historiography offers. Major advances in economic science have always been accompanied by an engagement with methodologies from other social science disciplines, without losing sight of their own concerns. Fully embracing advancements in the intellectual history of economics since the linguistic turn could open new avenues.

Recognizing that the historicization of concepts, languages, texts, and ideas holds intrinsic value for understanding both current economic phenomena and the field of economic science itself, as well as the need for philosophical and linguistic foundations to organize and systematize its study in historiographical terms, could ultimately strengthen the field's autonomy from its parent discipline and ensure its continued relevance. This openness could also be beneficial for the field of intellectual history, which generally tends to focus more on political or social issues than on economic ones. This shift could enhance our understanding of women's thought and gender histories in economics, which are often marginalized.[20] A professional trained in the intellectual history of economics could apply for jobs not only at economics departments, where they would bring a specific and enriching perspective, but also work in interdisciplinary groups with historians, linguists, and philosophers of science in the broad field of connections that exist between the humanities and social sciences.

These objects, as I hope to have demonstrated in this article, become evident when we examine the work of authors more closely aligned with contemporary traditions in intellectual history. By broadening and clarifying the object in linguistic terms, one can alter the type of questions that must be asked, clarify one's own tools and methodologies, and hopefully put your identity problem to rest knowing that you have the capacity to make specific contributions to knowledge about economics and the economy. Recent

[20] Edith Kuiper's (2022) recent work clearly demonstrates the need to focus on non-academic sources and to question what has been constructed as 'economics'.

advances in economics, particularly in relation to psychology and “behavior”, suggest that facilitating new hybridizations can lead to a deeper examination of economic issues while still preserving autonomy. We should move beyond the notion that historiography serves solely to understand the past and instead embrace it as a vital tool for enhancing our comprehension of the present and its historical complexity.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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