

Shestidesyatniki Economics, the Idea of Convergence, and *Perestroika*

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Abstract

The paper analyses the reception of the idea of convergence in Soviet economics from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. It is predominantly concerned with convergence theory as a policy idea that inspired *perestroika*. The paper is related to the literature on ideas and institutional change as pioneered by Peter A. Hall and Mark Blyth. Its central question is: How could, under the conditions of an authoritarian regime, an imported policy idea that bluntly contradicted official ideology, reach a degree of dissemination and (among a specific stratum of the elite) popularity that would later turn it into a central pillar of reform policy? An important finding is that the idea of convergence united the Soviet “people of the sixties” and some Western “progressive” intellectuals who together formed a transregional epistemic community that only for a short period of time, at the end of the 1980s, gained political influence.

1. Introduction

In a polemical article “Now who ruined Soviet power” that was published in the journal *Sotsium*¹ in 1992, Igor Raufovich Ashurbeyli² wrote about convergence theory:

Convergence was an idiotic idea, that’s true. There never was any convergence of social, and even less so of economic systems. But the psychological convergence of Soviet and Western scientists was more than real. It was the only reality in Soviet ideology.

The history of the idea of convergence can indeed be told as a story of intellectual convergence of the “people of the sixties” on both sides of the iron curtain united by the idea that the liberal market economy was a thing that belonged to the past³ and by their hope to prevent a military confrontation between the two superpowers. *Perestroika* marks both the

¹ *Sotsium* is a political general interest journal that was founded and is sponsored by Igor Raufovich Ashurbeyli.

² Ashurbeyli (born 1963) is a Russian entrepreneur and public intellectual of Azerbaijan descent.

³ Howard Brick’s book *Transcending Capitalism. Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (2006) gives a good introduction into the intellectual background of convergence theory.

peak of the practical influence of the idea of convergence and the starting point of its quick decay: It is a remarkable historical coincidence that the idea of convergence became effective in the Soviet Union at a time at which in the Western world neo-liberalism had just begun its triumph. More than that, as a result of its disastrous failure, *perestroika* even contributed to the worldwide delegitimization of third way ideas convergence theory was part of.

This paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, the existing works on the Soviet reception of convergence theory date from the first half of the 1970s (Kelly 1973, Olsenkiewicz 1974, Hajenko 1974) and thus only deal with a part of the Brezhnev period and do not deal with *perestroika*. In contrast, this paper mainly looks at convergence as a policy idea that in the second half of the 1980s had a major influence on the course of historical events. Taking up the idea of institutional amphibiousness that was developed by X.L. Ding (1994) in the context of Chinese reforms and applied to the case of Soviet *perestroika* by Archie Brown (2007, chap. 6), I argue that the idea of convergence was a central inspiration for “within-system reformers” (Brown 2007, 161). As Brown shows, a number of research institutes, namely the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System, the Institute of Economics and Organizational Production of the Novosibirsk branch of the Academy of Sciences, the Central Mathematical-Economic Institute, the Institute for the United States of America and Canada and last but not least the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations (in the following: IMEMO), were the decisive niches for these intellectuals who were at the same time members of the nomenklatura and (to various degrees) convinced of the necessity of far-reaching social and political reforms. In the case of convergence theory, IMEMO played the decisive role in the dissemination of an idea that would later decisively shape economic reforms under Gorbachev. If told from the endpoint of *perestroika*, the history of the Soviet reception of convergence theory is a story of women and men, who, usually under the disguise of a critique of bourgeois economic thought, from the late 1960s on smuggled in and then kept alive an idea through the Brezhnev years. When this idea, which corresponded to the dreams of the generation of the Soviet “people of the 60s” was finally practically applied, it all too soon turned out to be already out of touch with the demands of reality. The second main contribution of this paper is that though I will partly also deal with the transregional aspects of the story, my main interest is to put the Soviet debate on convergence into the historical context of the Brezhnev period. More systematically than the existing works I will try to work out the place of the concept of convergence in the worldviews of the Soviet people of the sixties. Regarding this aspect, my thesis is that the concept of convergence also played an important role in bridging the gap between dissidents,

who were much influenced by Pitirim Sorokin's and Andrei Sakharov's ideas on convergence, and reformist *shestidesyatniki* economists who were mainly referring to the works of Rostow, Tinbergen and in particular Galbraith, who was probably the politically most influential Western economists in the Soviet Union.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: In the next section I will give a brief introduction into two strands of convergence theory, the mainly normative and political version of Pitirim Sorokin and Andrei Sakharov and the economic one as developed by Walt Rostow, Jan Tinbergen and John Kenneth Galbraith.⁴ The third section offers a brief introduction into the worldview of the Soviet *shestidesyatniki* (= people of the sixties) and discusses the question how the reform-minded Soviet economists of the 1970s and -80s related to this movement. The fourth and longest section follows the Soviet reception of convergence theory, looking at the second half of the 1960s (4.1), the 1970s and early -80s (4.2) and finally at the years of *perestroika* (4.3). The fifth section concludes.

2. Two Concepts of Convergence

For the purpose of this paper it is helpful to distinguish between two versions of the theory of convergence, a normative/political and an economic one. However, the differences should not be overridden, as the adherents of economic convergence theory, and especially Galbraith, also did have a normative agenda. The political/normative version was created by the Russia-born Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, whose main argument in favour of convergence was that both capitalism and socialism “are very defective and cannot meet the needs of a good and creative life of mankind of the future” (Sorokin 1960, 143). In my works on the history of Russian economic ideas (Zweynert 2002; Zweynert 2017) I argue that the call for a “holistic society” represents a characteristic feature of the romantic current of Russian economic and socio-philosophical thought. Very much in line with this tradition, Sorokin expressed the hope that convergence would lead to an “integral order” which would also breed an “integral type of personality”. Possibly, not only the highly emotional tone of Sorokin's text (convergence should be “welcomed by all who really care about man, culture and all immortal values created by man on this planet”) but also the fact that he appealed to patterns of thought that had deep roots in Russian social philosophy made his ideas highly compatible with the thinking and wishing of the Russian *shestidesyatniki* (on this term see below). Although Andrei Sakharov (1968) discussed convergence mainly in the context of the political

⁴ I will not deal with sociological convergence theory the most important representative of which was Raymond Aron.

problems of the arms race and exhaustive resources and augmented it with a good dose of scientism, it definitely owed more to Sorokin's normative concept than to economic convergence theory.

Economic convergence theory had two main roots. First, it can be traced back to the rather abstract "end of capitalism" debate of the 1920s and -30s which had been conducted with particular intensity in Germany.⁵ On the other, it took up a central thesis of the "managerial revolution" discourse: Based on their analysis of the structure of modern corporations, authors like Adolf Augustus Berle, Gardiner Means and Peter F. Drucker had provided concrete arguments why capitalism was to enter or had already entered a new stage: Mainly due to the increasing complexity of industrial production, managers could increasingly free themselves from the control of owners and would thus become the new ruling class of industrial capitalism.⁶ From here, it was only a small step to convergence theory: If it was true that more than everything else "the imperatives of technology and organization" (Galbraith [1972] 1991, 26) determined the institutional structure of industrial societies this indeed would lead to the expectation of capitalist and socialist industrial societies becoming increasingly similar. Whereas the convergence theorists believed that in Western capitalist society a tendency towards more centralised decision-making (and indeed planning) and towards a closer alliance between state and the corporate sector could be observed, the ever louder demand for decentralisation and more autonomy for the enterprises in the socialist societies seemed to suggest that capitalist and socialist societies converged towards a middle position between the market and the central plan. In his autobiography, John K. Galbraith (1981, 367) reports how the impressions of his first trip to the Soviet Union in the spring of 1959 were a main source of inspiration for his thoughts on convergence. In view of the central role this institute was later to play in the dissemination of his ideas it shall be noted that IMEMO economist Stanislav Menshikov (who later co-authored a book with Galbraith) remembers in his memoirs, how he "in the early sixties"⁷ invited Galbraith to the institute to discuss the nature of the Soviet enterprise (Menshikov 2007).⁸

⁵ Sombart and Schumpeter are important figures in this context, and in the 1940s, Talcott Parsons played an important role in disseminating their ideas.

⁶ An important forerunner of these ideas was Thorstein Bunde Veblen who had developed a similar argument to argue that the engineers would form the new ruling class of capitalism. Galbraith's term "technostructure" possibly echoes Veblen's idea.

⁷ Galbraith's biographer Richard Parker (2005, 621) dates this to 1964.

⁸ In his autobiography Galbraith (1981, 427) mentions a rather funny exchange between Brezhnev and himself. As Galbraith reports, at a meeting in 1961 Brezhnev said to him that he had heard that Galbraith was considered to be a man of the left in his country and added: "I invite you to visit the Soviet Union so you will have the experience of being a reactionary."

3. The Soviet *shestidesyatniki* and Convergence

The key economic advisors to Gorbachev, Leonid Abalkin (1930-2011), Nikolai Petrakov (1937-2014) and Abel Aganbegyan (born 1932) (for an introduction into their economic thought see Aslund 2013) all belong or belonged to the generation of *shestidesyatniki* or “children of the 20th party congress” as they are sometimes referred to (see e.g. Kozlov and Gilburd (eds) 2013). Born between 1925 and 1945, this generation of intellectuals had collectively suffered from the tension between their own (or their parents’) firm believe in Soviet socialism and the reality of Stalinism. Kruchshchev’s speech at the 20th party congress (1956) released this tension and set free the accrued political and artistic energy of a highly idealistic generation of Soviet intellectuals. The idealism of the *shestidesyatniki* was directed at political and economic reforms within the existing socialist order to create “socialism with a human face”. But besides improving political and economic life in the Soviet Union, the “people of the sixties” also hoped to overcome their cultural isolation: Ernest Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque as well as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones typically belonged to the heroes of this generation of Soviet people. The idea of convergence was a leitmotif in the thinking and wishing of this generation. For example, in Alexander Oleinikov’s (2013) poem “The the People of the sixties” we read:

„My prizyvali k konvergentsii,
kleimya partorga-podletsa
Prostim tebya, intelligentsiya –
Vechno zabludshaya ovtsa.“

It is out of question that the ideas of the *shestidesyatniki* (including that of convergence), formed the intellectual background to *perestroika*. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Gorbachev’s key economic advisors all belonged to this generation. But these men had made their distinguished careers in the most politicized of all Soviet sciences in the Brezhnev years, in which most people of the sixties had retreated into resignation – and a small minority had turned into open oppositionists. So how did Abalkin, Petrakov and Aganbegian relate to their peer generation? In an autobiographical sketch Leonid Abalkin, among the above mentioned economic advisors of Mikhail Gorbachev the politically most influential figure, clearly identifies himself as a person of the sixties:

Let us remember the September Plenum 1953 – that was the most radical turning point in all sorts of notions – about the economic model, about the situation of the farmers, finally on the necessity to break with the attempts to support the economy and to live on the deprivation and the

strangling of the farmers... It was a gulp of fresh air. Moreover these were not only words – things really began to change... There also began colossal changes in intellectual life, when there could appear and publish not dissidents, but Voznesenskii and Evtushenko... (Abalkin 1997, quoted after Kuznetsova 2000, 9, Fn.)

This self-identification, however, should be seen with some caution. First, it is interesting how strongly Abalkin in 1997, when this text was published, still emphasized the difference between dissidents on the one and *shestidesyatniki* on the other hand.⁹ Secondly: Whether one has to go so far as to speak of an “adverse selection” (Sutela and Mau 1998, 37) or not: To study political economy was definitely not the first choice of persons at odds with official ideology. Thirdly, neither of these “*shestidesyatniki* economists” participated in the economic reform debates that in the second half of the 1960s took place on the pages of *Novyi Mir*, the “central organ” of the *shestidesyatniki* discourse. These debates (see for an overview Zweynert 2017, chap. 3), were dominated by economic journalist and free thinkers, not by academic economists. By calling for a “socialist market”, they had partly questioned the fundamentals of the Soviet economic order. After the Prague spring, these discussions were put paid to. At his speech at the 24th party congress in 1971, Brezhnev (Materialy 1971) only seemingly made concessions to the demands of the reform debates of the 1960s. In fact, the party enhanced the space for reformist debates only as long as they avoided touching upon the questions that really mattered, e.g. the priority of central planning or “democratic centralism”. This is the environment in which Abalkin, Petrakov and Aganbegian made their careers.

Having said all this, I still agree with Archie Brown and others that the differences between oppositional *shestidesyatniki* and “liberal conformists” (Cherkasov 2004, 356) should not be overstated (which is not to say that they did not exist). The main reason for this is that the women and men who worked within the apparat, however loyal to state and party they might have been, were not entirely isolated from the society they lived in and were, as the Abalkin quote illustrates, influenced by the shared experiences and hopes of their generation. Secondly, as can be shown by the story told in this paper, it was only their positions within the system that enabled them to express views that were at the borders of the politically permissible but which gradually changed the way the leadership of the country perceived social reality.

⁹ In this context, his reference to Andrei Voznesenskii und Y evgenii Evtushenko is particularly telling. For these were maybe the most “official” poets among the *shestidesyatniki* – men who were, like himself, very good at keeping the balance between maintaining a “progressive” reputation and keeping within the limits of the politically tolerable.

4. Soviet Discussions on Convergence

4.1 Up to 1970

As already mentioned in the introduction, the discussion on the need of decentralization that was going on in the Eastern block clearly was an important source of inspiration for convergence theory. In this context, it should not be forgotten that the reform debate took place not only in *Novyi mir* but also on the pages of *Pravda*, where the reform-minded Gennadii Lisichkin headed the economics section (Sutela and Mau 1998, 49-50). In the literature it is sometimes claimed that Aleksei Kosygin secretly sympathized with convergence theory (Laskov 2006), but to my knowledge sound evidence is missing. In his biography of his father, Sergei Khrushchev (2000) tells the fascinating story of how in 1963 John F. Kennedy urged John Kenneth Galbraith to become US-Ambassador in Moscow in order to support the economic reforms. Though Galbraith, according to Sergei Khrushchev, was anything but fond of the idea, no final decision had been made when Kennedy was murdered. Yet again: As intriguing this story is, Khrushchev Jr. never provided evidence (in his book he wrote that Galbraith had told him the story “in the middle of the 1990s”), and Galbraith never mentioned or confirmed it.

Nevertheless: Even in an environment of relative de-ideologization, it was crystal clear from the beginning that convergence theory represented a major challenge to the Soviet rulers. The earliest Soviet reaction to convergence theory was an article “The pseudoscientific theory of the similarity of the two systems” published in June 1963 in *Voprosy ekonomiki*, the leading Soviet/Russian economics journal.¹⁰ The author, Seva Khavina (born 1924), did her best to come up to the task to pull the “defamatory fantasies” [*klevecheskie izmyshleniya*] of Western “right socialist theoreticians” to pieces. Khavina saw the main theoretical shortcoming of convergence theory in the equation of “state-capitalist property and collective forms of capitalist property (property of joint-stock companies, capitalist corporations) on the one hand and social [*obshchestvennyi*] socialist on the other” (Khavina 1963, 77). This became a canonical point of criticism in the Soviet discussion on convergence theory and was echoed by a number of authors (e.g. Kozlova 1968, Menshikov 1969). An even clearer attempt to delegitimize convergence theory as “a new ideological weapon” was Gennadii Khromushin’s “The anti-Soviet character of the theory of ‘growing similarity’” that was published in *Kommunist* in November 1965. The final sentence gives a good idea of style and content of this article: “Anti-communist propaganda becomes ever more sophisticated. But no

¹⁰ The article dealt mainly the today largely forgotten book *The Poverty of Nations* by Gilbert Goodman and with some articles by Jan Tinbergen.

disguise for objectivity will be able to breathe new life into the reactionary ideology of imperialism” (Khromushin 1965, 10).

In the second half of the 1960s, the IMEMO journal *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (World Economy and international Relations, in the following: MEiMO) became the decisive outlet of dissemination of convergence theory in the Soviet Union. This was anything but coincidence: Established in 1956, during the Brezhnev years the institute provided a niche for scholars at odds with official Soviet ideology (on the history of IMEMO see Cherkasov 2004). The main task of the institute, to observe the economic development of the capitalist countries, offered an opportunity to deal with topics and literature that usually were strictly taboo. In two articles on “bourgeois” theories on the capitalist corporation that were published in MEiMO in 1965 and 1966, Sergei V. Dalin¹¹ further developed Khavina’s central objection: On the one hand, he supported the claim of convergence theory that “separation of capital as property from capital as function, or the dispersion of shares, has gone so far that modern monopolies have been transformed into a collective capitalist (1965, 52). On the other, he insisted that nevertheless the managerial class together with the owners still formed the financial oligarchy and thus the capitalist class. As a result, the latter firmly retained its power position and all talk that in modern industrial societies class contradictions started to disappear had to be referred to the realm of imagination. This “refutation” of one of the core points of convergence theory had the decisive advantage of distracting attention from the obvious question whether or not the Soviet bureaucracy also enjoyed some degree of freedom from the owners of socialist property which it could use for pursuing its own interests.¹²

In early 1968 first explicit reactions to John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The New Industrial State* were published. As Dmitrii Travin (2004) aptly remarked, it never happened before or after that a work of a major Western bourgeois economist appeared in the Soviet Union only two years after its first publication. If convergence theory “almost succeeded in convincing a generation of Soviet economists that the market economy belongs to the past” (Sutela and Mau 1998, 72) it was mainly the *New Industrial State* that did the job. Kama Borisovna Kozlova (1968, 142) indeed directly (and explicitly at the risk of “jumping ahead”) began her

¹¹ Dalin’s (1902-1985) biography illustrates the point how IMEMO became a refuge for social scientists who had suffered under Stalin. Originally an expert on China, in 1934 Dalin had received the academic title of *kandidat* (roughly an equivalent to a PhD) in political economy for a work on US American capitalism. After having taken the “wrong” side in a discussion about an Asian mode of production, he was arrested in 1936 and from 1940 to 1955 imprisoned in a labor camp in Siberia. Released and rehabilitated in 1955, in 1956 he took on work as an expert on the United States at IMEMO in 1956. Source: https://vostokoved.academic.ru/217/%d0%94%d0%90%d0%9b%d0%98%d0%9d_%d0%a1%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b5%d0%b9_%d0%90%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%ba%d1%81%d0%b5%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%b8%d1%87

¹² This parallel was drawn only in the samizdat literature, see Kelley 1973, 189.

detailed review by highlighting that according to Galbraith capitalism had entered “a qualitatively new stage” in which all “moving forces and principles” had been fundamentally altered. Besides that, she recommended the *New Industrial State* as one of the “few books on the basis of which one can form a judgement about the condition of modern bourgeois politico-economic and social-philosophical thought and its evolution” (Kozlova 1968, 142) and acknowledged the “progressive role” Galbraith played in the US-American debates on the Cold War and the arms race (ibid.). All in all, this article did, under the given political constraints, a surprisingly good job in providing the reader with a concise yet informative introduction into the book.

In the same number of the journal, Enokh Bregel (1903-1993)¹³ under the remarkably neutral title “The Theory of Convergence of the Two Systems” gave a rather detailed account of the evolution of convergence theory from Sorokin to Galbraith.¹⁴ Of course, Bregel did what he was supposed to do when he plainly refuted the main political implications of convergence theory. However, taking up Kozlova’s main point, he also criticized Soviet economists for basing their critique of Western capitalism on an image that had little to do with its current reality (Bregel 1968, 21). All in all, Bregel went clearly further than Kozlova in expressing his sympathy with Galbraith when he provided eleven (!) lines of verbal quotation of Galbraith’s key point about the increasing convergence of industrial societies without immediately “correcting” it, and when he again quoted and did *not* critically comment even on a statement on the increasing decentralization tendencies in the Eastern block (Bregel 1968, 18-9). Very much in this spirit, in an article on “The Theory of Convergence and Reality” that was published in *Voprosy ekonomiki* in February 1968, Viktor Cheprakov not only attested Galbraith a “fairly original” (Cheprakov 1968, 95) argumentation in his critique of socialism but also noted that “as far as his conclusion about the exclusivity of collective decisions [in socialism, J.Z.] under today’s conditions are concerned, they are quite interesting and are to be made subject of special research...”. More than that:

Nesomnenno, est’ mnogo obshchego v ekonomicheskom instrumentarii, i v oblasti mikroekonomiki (polzuyas terminologiei zarubezhnykh ekonomistov) nashemu khozyaistvu sleduet pozaimstvovat’ nekotorye metody u rukovoditelei krupnykh trestov, kontsernov, u ekonomistov, izuchayushikh organizatsiyu proizvodstvaosobbenno seichas, kogda nasha ekonomicheskaya reforma vpotnuyu podoshla k sosdaniyu trestov, k sochetaniyu v<sokoi stepeni organizatsii proizvodstva i materialnoi interesovannosti.“ (ibid., 94)

¹³ In 1973 Bregel emigrated to Israel which can with all caution interpreted as a sign of discontent with the Soviet order.

¹⁴ There is an interesting detail here: When referring to Galbraith, Bregel quotes Galbraith’s London lectures, so obviously *The New Industrial State* was not accessible to him.

Without a doubt, our economic instruments have much in common [with those used in the Western world, J.Z.] and in the field of microeconomics (to use the terminology of Western economists) our economy should take over some of the methods used in large trusts and corporations, and the economists studying the organization of production should now, as our economic reforms are firmly going into the direction of establishing trusts, should look for ways of balancing high degrees of the organization of production and material stimuli (ibid., 94).

Even if the author hastened to remark that all this did not mean that capitalism and socialism would become similar, it was more than obvious to everyone used to read between the lines that this was not what the author really thought.

However, there were other reactions as well. As early as in 1967 the “council for problems of international ideological currents at the presidency of the Russian Academy of Sciences” organized an all-Soviet conference on convergence theory. Its initiator was the philosopher Mark B. Mitin (1901-1987), who had made his storybook career under Stalin and in 1943 had been awarded the Stalin medal first class.¹⁵ In his own contribution he made the intention of the conference clear when he wrote that in the struggle against Western anti-communism “co-ordination” was urgently needed. The conference volume, which was published in 1970, indeed shows signs of co-ordination efforts. For example, many authors followed Mitin’s formula that convergence theory represented a distorted reflection of some real characteristics of “monopoly capitalism” and agreed that it was based on a “vulgar economism” according to which technological progress alone and automatically would lead to social changes (Semenov 1970, 27; Bregel 1970, 62). Nevertheless, Bregel and Cheprakov both contributed to this volume, and their chapters did not significantly deviate from their above mentioned articles¹⁶ and V.I. Mikheev (1970, 107) even explicitly appreciated convergence theory as “a step forward of bourgeois social thought”.

4.2 *The seventies*

The Prague spring was as an outcome of ideas closely related to convergence theory. In July 1968, the *New York Times* published Andrei Sakharov’s “Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom” (which in the Soviet Union circulated only in typewriter copies), in which he outlined a scenario of peaceful co-existence of the two

¹⁵ There is a good article on Mitin in the Russian Wikipedia:
https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD_%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BA_%D0%91%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87

¹⁶ Even if written earlier, it has to be taken into account that these chapters were published in this form in 1970.

political blocs at the end of which “socialist convergence will reduce differences in social structure, promote intellectual freedom, science, and economic progress, and lead to the creation of a world government and the smoothing of national contradictions (1980-2000).” To make things worse for the Soviet rulers, on 8 October 1969 the then famous physicist and member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences Piotr Kapitsa in a speech at the US-American Academy of Sciences explicitly expressed sympathy for Sakharov’s views. As the *New York Times* (1969) reported:

Dr. Sakharov realized that a scientific approach should help bring the two giants closer together, Dr. Kapitsa said. Concerning the convergence concept, he added: ‘I believe such bringing of the two systems together, as Sakharov says, is correct.’

The reaction to this challenge did not take long: Five days later, on 13 October, *Pravda* published an article “Current Questions in the Fight against Anti-Communism” by Aleksei M. Rumyantsev¹⁷ and Boris Mitin in which the authors made it unequivocally clear that

if the dialectical contradictions characteristic of imperialism are overlooked and the analysis in depth of the radically contradictory consequences of the modern scientific and technical revolution under capitalism and socialism replaced by a merely superficial recognition of outwardly similar features (e.g. the use of new techniques), the adoption of such an approach may well lead to the illusion of ‘radical similarity’ between capitalism and socialism and to the possibility of exploiting the illusion for reactionary class purposes.” (quoted after Hajenko 62).

A first journal article on convergence theory which reflected what was on the ideological agenda after the Prague Spring was tellingly published in the section “For university teachers [*prepodavатели*] in the Social Sciences” in the journal *Nauchnye doklady vysshei shkoly* [Scientific High School Lectures] in December 1969. Under the title “The Concept of ‘Convergence’ – a tool of Anti-Communism” and with direct reference to the “events in Czechoslovakia” the author Viktor F. Golosov¹⁸ (1969, 89) urgently warned against the attempts of “bourgeois propaganda” to export its ideas to the Eastern block and to restore the capitalist order under the disguise of “democratic socialism”. Another reaction to the Prague Spring was Viktoriia Tsaga’s article “Against ‘Technocracy’ and ‘Consumerist’ Conceptions” that was published in *Voprosy ekonomiki* in 1972. Tsaga, an expert on the critique of marginalist ideas, made a rather clumsy attempt to show that convergence theory was nothing more than a reformulation of utilitarian ideas so that it allegedly boiled down to “present the

¹⁷ In his “Biographical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Economics”, Robert W. Campbell (2012, 353) characterizes Rumyantsev (1905-1993) as follows: “It is quite unlikely that Rumyantsev ever did anything serious in economics, and has rather always been a sort of party controller of what the actual economists were up to.”

¹⁸ As was explicitly mentioned, Golosov held the title of a kandidat (roughly a PhD) in economics.

satisfaction of the needs of the members of society as the goal of every modern developing economy, irrespective of the nature of the socioeconomic system” (Tsaga 1972, 96).¹⁹

However, even if around 1970 the tone of the discussion aggravated, moderate voices were still present. For example, in the August number of 1969 *Voprosy ekonomiki* published an article on “The Scientific-Technical Revolution and Bourgeois Economic Theories of Socialism” which praised the *New Industrial State* as the “most sophisticated bourgeois economic theory of socialism” (Dvorkin [1969] 1970, 67). With the beginning of détente these more moderate tones gained the upper hand again. A typical example is the detailed article “Has Galbraith crossed the Rubicon?” by IMEMO economist Abram G. Mileikovskii (1911-1995),²⁰ a reaction to a French review of *Economics and the Public Purpose* the author of which had claimed that Galbraith had finally turned into a socialist. In this article, as well as in his introduction (jointly written with IMEMO director Nikolai N. Inozemtsev (1921-1982)²¹ to the Russian translation of *Economics and the Public Purpose*, Mileikovskii conceded that Galbraith had at least come closer to the reality of monopoly capitalism than most neo-classical and Keynesian authors but yet was unable to overcome the ideological limitations of his bourgeois class-consciousness (Mileikovskii 1975, 80; similar Inozemtsev and Mileikovskii 1979, 7).

The 1970s also saw official or unofficial statements by two political actors who later would become key actors of *perestroika*. Most notable is the case of Alexander Chernyarev (1921-2017) who between 1986 and 1991 became Gorbachev’s closest foreign policy advisor. On the occasion of the signing of the SALT I contract, he, at that time already a high-ranked party official with particular good relations to Yurii Andropov (the then KGB director), wrote in his diary: “Whatever will happen: The Rubicon has been crossed, the Rubicon of world history. These weeks in May 1972 will mark the date of the beginning of convergence” (quoted after Yeliseev 2011). The second example of this is Aleksandr N. Yakovlev (1923-2005) who is widely regarded as the intellectual mastermind behind *perestroika*. In 1972, in the newspaper article “Against anti-historicism” that led to his “banishment” as Soviet ambassador in Canada, he still made short shrift of convergence theory:

¹⁹ It fully fits into the picture that in this article Neil J. Smelser figures as a “West German bourgeois ideologue” (p. 90) - as the list of references reveals, Tsaga worked with a German translation on one of Smelser’s works and obviously took it for the original.

²⁰ Mileikovskii was head of the division of general economic problems of developed capitalist countries and a close political ally of the reform-minded IMEMO director Nikolai N. Inozemtsev (Campbell 2012, 275).

²¹ Inozemtsev served as IMEMO director from 1961 until his death in 1982. Inozemtsev was a most typical example of a “liberal insider”. Shortly before his death, the IMEMO came under heavy ideological attack which might have caused the heart attack of which Inozemtsev died (Campbell 2012, 144).

Eventually, bourgeois theories actively speculate on new phenomena in the technical and economic life of the capitalist countries, which are observed in the conditions of the scientific and technological revolution. These speculations are aimed at disorienting the revolutionary movement. In the theories of the "single industrial society", "stages of growth", "post-industrial society" and the like, vulgar technologism most fully manifested itself, the hypertrophy of the significance of technical achievements and the diminution and even direct disregard of the role of the main productive force—a huge mass of workers.

In a *Pravda* interview of 1990, Yakovlev explicitly said that his views on convergence theory had changed:

About convergence. I have to acknowledge that since the 1960s my views in this regard have changed significantly. I think the process of convergence is an objective fact, it has been going on for a long time and its significance will grow.

Whether Yakovlev's views really changed or if he, as many other intellectuals of his generation already in the early 1970s secretly sympathized with the idea is difficult to decide. However, as Martin Malia reports, when in 1983 Yakovlev returned to Moscow and became director of the *Institute of the World Economy and International Relations* he “assigned to his researchers the work of John K. Galbraith on post-industrial societies, that of Wassily Leontiev (sic!) on growth, and that of Daniel Bell on the end of ideology as arguments that a mature Soviet society was ready for ‘konvergentsiya’” (Malia 1992, 105).

4.3 *The Perestroika years*

Most likely to emphasize that *perestroika* would not change the socialist nature of Soviet society, Mikhail Gorbachev did not use the term “convergence” in connection with his reform policy, and on one occasion, he explicitly distanced himself from the concept (Petrov 2013, 328).²² Looking back later, however, he conceded that Sakharov had anticipated *perestroika*:

And his considerations were true – about peaceful coexistence, about convergence, on democracy. These were thoughts that essentially preceded *perestroika*.

For many Soviet intellectuals the connection between convergence and *perestroika* was obvious. For example, in January 1989 Len Karpinskii (1929-1995), who two years later was to become chief editor of *Moskovskie Novosti*, opened up a special issue of the general-interest journal *Vek XX i mir* [Twentieth Century and Peace] on “convergence” with the remark that “*perestroika* is not only our internal process but also the process of convergence” (Karpinski 1989, 18).²³ Exactly at the same time, in January 1989, the journal *Rabochii klass i sovremennyi mir* published an extensive article “Perestroika and the Phantom of Convergence” by IMEMO economist Yurii Shishkov (1929-2013). Offering a detailed

²² At a reception in Washington DC at which Galbraith participated, he, however, said how impressed he had been with Galbraith's books (Taubman 1987).

²³ Unfortunately, only a German edition was available to me.

introduction into the genesis of convergence theory, it was obviously the author's intention to recall a theory which over the last years had not been overtly present in the scientific discourse but which now had gained political momentum. The article reads like a piece written by a 'progressive' *shestidesyatnik* in the late 1960s or in the 1970s vastly freed of censorship constraints. At the same time, it is interesting to see how carefully the author avoids the term "convergence" in the very part of the paper that contains its central message:

As economic interaction between East and West grows there is unquestionably a further increase in the *similarity and compatibility* of their organizational-technological relations, both as result of the reduction in the difference in levels of development of their productive forces ... and as a result of the borrowing of experience in the organization of production. Such *reduction of differences* is just as natural as technological progress itself. To reject this *increasing similarity*, which has been noted by Western economists, simply because some of them have used this as the basis for drawing incorrect, too far-reaching conclusions, is just as absurd as rejecting cybernetics or genetics because someone fancied that these sciences were based on idealism (Shishkov 1989, 21; italics mine).

The paper is also very typical for its time in that the author on the one hand emphasized that "growing similarity" would lead to restoring "in certain limits the unjustifiably ignored market mechanism", but hastened to remark that this would "not affect the social basis of our social system and its mode of appropriation."

All in all, the year 1989 marked the peak of the short-lived practical influence of the idea of convergence in the Soviet Union. In the economic reform discourse it found a clear expression in the idea of the socialist market (on this discussion see Zweynert 2017, chap. 4). In his article "The Market in a Socialist Economy" which was published in July 1989, Leonid Abalkin intoned the swan song of *perestroika* economics, when he still defended the idea that the introduction of market exchange would not alter the socialist nature of Soviet society and continued to dream (at a point of an already dramatically worsening economic situation) of a system that would combine

the highest effectiveness of production with the humanistic goals of its development; ... the rebirth of the co-operative system and the broad development of the public sector of the society; the formation of the socialist market; the intensification of its impact on production coupled with improvement of centralized planned management techniques (Abalkin 1989, 6-7).

Tellingly, this article contains a direct reference to John Kenneth Galbraith:

The scale of modern production, radical reform of its technical base, and the gigantic level of socialization in the national and world economy are altering the place and role of the market. J. Galbraith was probably right when he wrote that 'production costs and the associated risk can be greatly reduced if the state takes upon itself the financing of especially daring technical

projects or else guarantees a market for the output of technically progressive branches.’²⁴ The subsequent rejuvenation of monetarism does not negate or refute these conclusions. Many modern processes in Western countries by no means diminish the economic role of the state even though they substantially alter the forms and methods of state economic regulation.

Moreover, in an interview with the general-interest journal *Ogonyok* [little fire] which he gave in March 1988, Abalkin drew a direct line between convergence theory and *perestroika*: In his *The New Industrial State*, Galbraith had, Abalkin said,

rather convincingly showed that the market is only one of the sectors of the modern Western economy, that other ideas in this regard are nothing else but illusions... Therefore, to think of the market in terms of the classical model today is not correct, and to think of it as a general savior is simply naïve (Pleshakov 1989).

In a certain way, the circle comes to its close here, for we see how the “chief economist” of *perestroika* explicitly refers to the “take home message” of convergence theory for the Soviet *shestidesyatniki*, with which 20 years earlier Kama Kozlova had started her review of the *New Industrial State*. This interview is also interesting in a second regard: In it, Abalkin reports how at a recent meeting of leading Western Sovietologists and Soviet economists Ed A. Hewett (at that time Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution) had warned his Soviet colleagues of giving up central planning in places where it was indispensable.²⁵ He had, said Abalkin, reassured his colleague that there was no danger of this to happen. The conference Abalkin referred to had, under the title “The Western Community and the Gorbachev Challenge” taken place in December 1988 in Luxembourg (Clesse and Schelling (eds) 1989). No one but John Kenneth Galbraith had been invited to give the keynote address, and the conference finished with a panel discussion between Abalkin and Galbraith on “Capitalism and Socialism: Coexistence or Convergence?” that was broadcast on TV.²⁶

For a short time, something like an East-Western epistemic community²⁷ became visible which was united by its belief in convergence. Its informal leader was John Kenneth

²⁴ This is, as typical for the journal *Problems of Economics* a re-translation from the Russian edition of the *New Industrial State* (Abalkin refers to p. 40 of the translation from 1969). In the original the quote reads as follows: “The cost and associated risk can be greatly reduced if the state pays for more exalted technical development or guarantees a market for the technically advanced product.”

²⁵ Hewett had indeed warned against “the danger that Soviet economists will advocate a total rejection of central planning, even in areas where it would be used“. (Clesse and Schelling (eds) 1989, 141).

²⁶ In the mentioned interview, Abalkin boasted that the interview had been sent out to “40 million of television viewers” a number that does not really sound realistic.

²⁷ “An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area”, the members of which “have (1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members; (2) shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems ... (3) shared notions of validity (4) a common policy enterprise” (Haas 1992: 3).

Galbraith, who at the end of the 1980s became something like a star intellectual in the Soviet Union. In 1988 he made another trip to the Soviet Union in the course of which he was awarded a honorary doctor of Lomonosov University and gave an interview to *Kommunist* in which he politely stated that he “never thought that capitalism and socialism have exhausted the potential of their development” and that “in the foreseeable future” he did not see a fusion of capitalism and socialism. The occasion of his visit was the publication of the Russian edition of his joint book with Stanislav Menshikov *Capitalism, Communism and Coexistence. From the Bitter Past to a Better Prospect*. This book, based on ten days of conversation the two men had spent “in the late summer of 1987” at Galbraith’s summer house in Vermont, summarized the East-Western convergence consensus, an important part of which was a dismissive attitude towards neo-liberalism:

Galbraith: “I take it monetarism isn’t going to become a fad in the socialist world“.
Menshikov: “I don’t think it will” (Galbraith and Menshikov 1989, 99).

It is interesting to see how the idea of convergence reached its peak of influence in the Soviet Union at a time when the neo-liberal counter-revolution in the West had already assured itself. In the US, Galbraith was already a kind of “dinosaur” from a past epoch when he reached the zenith of his popularity in the Soviet Union. It is no less interesting to see that a part of the IMEMO, the institute that had done more than every other Soviet research institution to promote the idea of convergence, at this time had already left the idea behind and had taken course on capitalist transition. As early as in 1986 the journal *MEiMO* set off a discussion about the impact of the massive re-privatization that could be observed in the Western world (see on this discussion Zweynert 2017, chap. 4), a phenomenon which, as one of the participants of the discussions conceded, caused significant “theoretical discomfort” (Kapeliushnikov 1987, 71) to those who had believed in ever growing state-interference in the Western world.

The first frontal attack against this belief, and thus, also against convergence theory, had been launched in 1987 by Larissa Piiasheva (under the pseudonym Popkova) in a letter to the editor of *Novyi mir*:

I have a certain amount of experience studying the “third path” along which West European social democrats have tried to lead their countries in the post-war decades. The “social democratic decade” has most graphically confirmed Lenin’s conviction that there is no third path. One cannot be a little pregnant. Either the plan or the market, either the directive or competition (Popkova [1987]1988: 45).

Piiasheva's main point about the incompatibility of the plan and the market was quickly taken on by economic journalist and free thinkers (see e.g. Levikov 1988; Seliunin 1989; Seliunin 1990). IMEMO economists Viktor Sheinis and Yakov Pevzner then were the first academic economists who praised the market (notably without the previously obligatory adjective "socialist") as "one of the greatest achievements of human civilization" (Sheinis 1988, 16) and expressed the conviction "that not much time will pass until the necessity of the market mechanism will turn into a truism" (Pevzner 1988, 15). In a way, Aleksandr S. Tsipko's article "Restauration of capitalism or renewal of socialism?" that was published in *Voprosy ekonomiki* in December 1990 can be read as the final word in the Soviet discussion on convergence. By now, Tsipko (1990, 32) noted, it had become clear that a convergence of the systems was "impossible in principle" because it was "impossible to unite ice and fire". Therefore, he continued, it was high time to abandon the hopes of the generation of reformers that had been inspired by the ideals of the Prague spring: What was on the agenda was not a reform of socialism, but a restauration of capitalism. Indeed, the years from 1990 to 1992 were marked by an intense, albeit short-lived liberal heyday, and for a couple of years Friedman and Hayek became the leading authorities in the field of political economy.

5 Conclusion

In my view, the history of the Soviet reception of convergence theory in a number of ways contributes to a better understanding of the ideas behind *perestroika*. To begin with, the few historical accounts of *perestroika* that focus on ideas (Lewin 1988, English 2000, Brown 2007) do not systematically include economic ideas. This is the more astonishing, as four out of the five "heterodox" research institutes which provided the niche for "within-system-reformers" mentioned by Archie Brown were in the first order *economic* research institutes. Dealing with convergence theory as one of the fundamental policy ideas behind *perestroika* thus helps us to understand what where the concrete ideas that circulated in an environment of institutional amphibiousness. Secondly, the story told in this paper improves our understanding of the links between ideas circulating in intellectual circles of Soviet society and the ideas discussed and "distributed upwards" by reform-minded members of the nomenklatura. Economic convergence theory was extremely well suited to establish this connection, as it offered a scientific version of an idea which was, in its more normative/political version, a central element in the worldview of the *shestidesyatniki* generation and as such a central element of the *zeitgeist* of the years 1965-1985. Thirdly, the

history of convergence theory is the history of the practical impact of a transregional idea and as such a powerful reminder that even for the period of the Cold War the role of mutual ideational influences should not be underestimated. With a Soviet emigrant writing the article that opened up the debate on convergence, with Kenneth Galbraith having been strongly inspired by his trips to the Soviet Union in the 1950s and -60s and with Andrei Sakharov highlighting possible world political implications of the concept, it is indeed difficult to clearly identify the geographical origin of convergence theory. What can be said for sure is that the idea of convergence was a part of the worldview of left-wing intellectuals of the 1960s both in the Soviet Union and in the Western world. An interesting question that goes beyond the scope of this paper is whether the East-Western epistemic community that promoted the ideas of *perestroika* really only emerged at the end of the 1980s or whether it was at this point that an international epistemic community that had already formed in the Brezhnev period became *visible*. In order to answer this question, a more detailed analysis of the interaction between “progressive” Soviet economists and their Western counterparts would be needed.

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