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Book reviews

Statistics and the German State, 1900–1945: the making of modern economic knowledge

J. Adam Tooze; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, £40.00, ISBN 0-521-80318-7

Statistics and the German State, a much revised LSE Ph.D. thesis, now published as part of the Cambridge Studies in Modern Economic History series, makes an important contribution to two literatures: German political economy in the first half of the 20th century and debates about the production and use of economic knowledge during a critical stage in the development of modern economics and economic management. Hitherto, the history of economic statistics has been a neglected area, one essentially the preserve of historians of economic thought. However, even within that community the production of economic knowledge has been undervalued relative to the history of economic ideas and economic theory. By contrast, operating from the premise that historical statistics should not be relegated to footnotes, but should instead be treated like any other cultural artefact, Tooze here proclaims that statistics ‘should be placed at the very heart of our understanding of modernity’ (p. 291).

The modernity in question, of course, is probably the most contested terrain in 20th-century history, and Tooze is explicit and straightforward about where he stands in the major historiographical debates about the Nazis and the divided Germany that then ensued. On the former, Tooze emphasises not the conflict between Nazi ideology and modernity, but the necessary complicity between them, with of course his economist-statisticians occupying a vital technocratic role in generating state capacity and thus the economic potential to wage effective war. Tooze shows convincingly that official statisticians were not victims of the Nazis, but active participants in the factional politics that tore the German state apart in the late 1930s. However, although it is but a short step from accounts of wartime complicity by the technocracy to arguments about the failure of West Germany to master its Nazi past, Tooze is careful to reject the continuity strand of the German historiography. In particular, he very effectively demolishes Aly and Roth’s earlier history of German official statistics which, in failing to capture the historical specificity of Nazi ideology, misidentifies an illiberal technocratic bias at the heart of Germany’s bureaucracy.

Along the way he is largely convincing about the innovativeness of German economists and statisticians between the wars, and quite rightly affirms the work of others who have concluded that the Keynesian revolution in macroeconomic theory

and policy was the least revolutionary of the range of possibilities on offer from Eastern and Western Europe. As a historian of British economic thought and policy, I have reservations somewhat about the claims made for what was new and what was effective in Germany in relation to the undoubted success of the Anglo-American economic organisation of war, but these are mild criticisms in the face of my admiration for a very impressive first book. We look forward to his second, an economic history of the Third Reich.

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La miglior legge del regno. Consuetudine, diritto naturale e contratto nel pensiero e nell'epoca di John Selden (1584–1654)

Sergio Caruso; Giuffrè Editore, Milan, 2001, 2 vols., xl + introduction, pp. 3–1023, price 130.000 Lire/67.14 Euros, ISBN 88-14-08354-1

Sergio Caruso assures his readers that he intends to present ‘a proper study of Selden’, or at least to give a ‘useful’ one. He also aims to fill a gap within the scholarly mainstream—particularly on the Continent—which has neglected to accord due importance to an author ‘more often cited in a conventional way rather than studied in a deep one’. However, Caruso also reminds us of the lack of scholarly studies dedicated specifically to Selden even in the English-speaking academic world, where only 6–7 scholars can be considered to have worked on the man and his thought in any detail.

Caruso points out how Selden’s works have often been valued from completely different points of view, and how this tendency has sometimes led to misinterpretations of them. Selden has mainly been considered on the basis of some of his more peculiar texts, and never from a complete and exhaustive perspective. Some scholars have emphasised his standing as a lay-gentleman; others have chosen to focus on him as a lawyer; others have portrayed him as merely an antiquary, and yet others as a purely religious writer. This tendency to associate Selden with amply different backgrounds and sets of ideas only ever displays ‘a part of the truth’ as it is presented by each of these various interpretations. Furthermore, Caruso underlines the fact that Selden’s theories have determined a great deal of conflicting opinions on the part of his interpreters, particularly regarding his politics: a great many opposing assertions have been made ‘in the name of Selden’. Caruso notes how some interpreters (Bershadsky, Berkowitz, Christianson) have chosen to deal with