

Devouring Mainstream Economics: Oskar Lange’s War Strategy to (Def)eat Bourgeois Political Economy

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Abstract: Oskar Lange aimed to conquer, subjugate, and absorb bourgeois political economy into a Marxist basis. By trying to devour non-Marxian economics, he proposed a challenging strategy to fight against capitalist ideology in economic science, which resembles the indigenous ritual of anthropophagy: a war scheme of eating the enemy in order to capture its strengths. This article presents what we call “Langean Anthropophagy,” and argues that, despite serious contradictions and difficulties, Lange’s unfinished masterpiece *Political Economy* is framed by a creative method to engage critically with bourgeois economic thought after the marginalist revolution that has not yet been fully appreciated.

Key words: Oskar Lange; history of economic thought; Marxism

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1. Introduction

Oskar Lange (1904–1965) was one of the most influential economists of the 20th century. He contributed to and participated in virtually all relevant debates

preceding the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s. However, the understanding of Lange's methodology is still caricatured (Lampa 2014a). At times, he is portrayed as a heretical Marxist who agreed with the analysis of the marginalists. At other times, he is simply described as someone who blended various sources into an eclectic system without planning or logic. Above all, his scientific project is said to have failed.

There are two main reasons for this prejudiced and harsh judgment. First, Lange is indeed presented in the literature as someone who is simultaneously an intellectual and a political figure; however, these two parts of his life are not firmly connected. Second, and most significantly, critical evaluations of Lange's work persist in applying a static aesthetic criterion to assess a body of work that is fundamentally a dynamic and evolving entity *that is struggling against something*.

To tackle these two issues, this article portrays Lange as an activist-thinker whose lifelong endeavor was to assimilate non-Marxist economics, digesting it to expel the capitalist ideology it harbors. We argue that his methodology for challenging capitalist ideology within official economic science not only aligns closely with the approaches of Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg in engaging with 19th-century bourgeois political economy but also remains inadequately explored, particularly in light of the pressing need to revolutionize 21st-century economics.

Specifically, this article seeks to go beyond Lampa's contribution (2014a, 2025), which has demonstrated how Lange's works relate to each other, revealing a coherent and organized scientific project. Inspired by Toporowski (2022) reminding us that Lange's work is an ongoing construction rooted in a clear positioning in the reality of class struggle, we explain that "Lange's most ambitious scientific undertaking" (Kowalik 1964, 11) is not only coherent with Marx, but it also contains a punctual novelty that is crucial for strengthening the class struggle against vulgar economics today, both from right and left.¹

The key point is that while Marx dealt with bourgeois political economy before the marginalist revolution of the 1870s, Lange dealt with it after marginalism spread and dominated the field.

To properly assess Lange's approach, it is necessary not only to critique and transcend bourgeois economic thought dialectically, following the Hegel–Marx framework that underpins Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy. This is because Lange no longer treats capitalist ideology as a declining stream of economic ideas losing influence in the 19th century, as Marx did, but as a renewed body of theories that has remained part of what is considered scientific political economy in the West during the 20th century. The communist-economists cannot merely transcend capitalist economic thought, as if bourgeois economists remained fossilized in the past. After the marginalist revolution, the communist-economists

must compete with capitalist-economists face-to-face for control of economic science, which shapes the real economic system. They must recognize themselves reciprocally as rivals or, considering class antagonism, as enemies. This concrete, unidealized environment of battle between communist and capitalist ideologies for dominance over scientific political economy forms the basis of Lange's thought. Inserting *the figure of the enemy* into the picture requires a scheme for dealing with bourgeois ideology that more strongly emphasizes the reality of confrontation, power relations, and, ultimately, war.

Therefore, we argue that Lange's methodology is of an anthropophagical nature (Camarinha Lopes and Marin 2023). It is an expansive and rugged movement, akin to politics itself, and paradoxical in the sense of Castro (2009). Lange's theoretical system has a unique way of revering the enemy. By nature, it is open and contradictory, never neatly closed. It pursues victory through a turbulent process, both assimilating and subjugating its opposition.

The article is organized into four sections following this introduction. Section 2 presents the concept of anthropophagy and its relevance to interpreting Lange. Section 3 outlines Lange's unified intellectual and political engagement with the enemy, focusing on the decisive period which resulted in the protocol behind what we call Langean Anthropophagy. Section 4 provides a brief overview of Lange's unfinished treatise. Finally, section 5 concludes by elaborating on class struggle and economic science, before and after the marginalist revolution.

2. Anthropophagy as a Strategy of War

The word anthropophagy comes from the union of two Greek terms: *ἄνθρωπος* (*anthropos* = man) and *φαγεῖν* (*phagein* = to eat). It came into use during the European conquest of the territories around the globe, as the "sophisticated," "technical" counterpart to the "ugly" term cannibalism. Both words literally mean one human eating another. The colonizers used these terms to ideologically depict the rituals of various indigenous peoples throughout the world, in which they symbolically absorbed the strength and wisdom of the dead (Arens 1979; Gutiérrez 2019). In fact, the consumption of human flesh is less about "barbaric" dietary practices and more about its cultural dimension, especially regarding warfare matters (Neubauer and Kim 2022, 195).

In the 16th century eastern coast of Brazil, for example, the Tupinambá lived as sedentary agriculturalists and had a complex set of rituals regulating their relations with alien menaces. During wartime, captured warriors would undergo a series of activities within the Tupinambá, eventually leading to their killing and subsequent symbolic eating of their bodies (Fernandes [1952] 1970; Cunha and Castro 1986).

The relationships established with captives while alive were deep, involved various aspects and could last years (Neubauer and Kim 2022). The idea behind such a process was that the victors would entirely possess the defeated, capturing for themselves all power from the enemy. To reverse the other in this way was a code of honor. The Tupinambá recognized their enemies as valued warriors, whose strength, intelligence, and knowledge should not be discarded, but incorporated into their own society. As Castro (2009) points out, this generates the intriguing paradox of reciprocal self-determination from the point of view of the stranger. The distinction between good and bad, typical of a religious imperialist cosmological worldview, vanishes, because one side admits it is a foe to the other, and so equality between the antagonists is explicitly validated.

At the end of the 1920s, a group of Brazilian intellectuals drew inspiration from this Tupinambá ritual and interpreted the term anthropophagy strictly in cultural terms (Garcia 2020). The idea was that, much like indigenous peoples defended their own values while also assimilating the energy of the invaders, peripheral artists could “cannibalize” other cultures, particularly that of the colonizers, to achieve novelty in creation. This is the sense behind the motto “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question” (from the initial syllables of Tupinambá, which pronounces similar to Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be ...”), one of the most iconic lines of the “Manifesto Antropófago” (Cannibalist Manifesto) by the poet Oswald de Andrade (Andrade 1928; Andrade and Bary 1991), which resonated for decades in Brazilian modernist artistic production, most notably in the music of the 1960s with Tropicália.

So, in a broad sense, anthropophagy can be thought of as a strategy of war. It implies that the enemy is transformed into food, and accordingly consumed in a simultaneous process of destruction and creation. The energy of the alien entity is appropriated in a magical sense.

By applying this idea to the arena of ideological battle in political economy, Lange’s method can be characterized as a longstanding cannibalistic move toward “official scientific economics,” devouring all non-Marxist economic theory it encounters. Instead of maintaining distance, preserving what would be a “pure-blood” Marxian approach, Lange’s system absorbs his opponents and undergoes transformation.²

Marx demonstrated the class component behind the economic thinking of modernity, discarded what was wrong, and adopted what was right from the Smithian system, the intellectual result of a development spanning from the 16th to the 19th century. Similarly, Lange believed it was possible to eradicate the bourgeois component embedded in economic theory, which had developed independently of the Marxist tradition since the second half of the 19th century, and worked throughout his life to systematize it.

3. Lange on the Battlefield of Theory and Politics between 1935 and 1945

Lange's biography can be divided into three phases: the formative years (1904–1934), the years as a first-class mainstream economist and political operator (1935–1945) and the period as a citizen of the Polish People's Republic (1946–1965).³ The second phase, the period between 1935 and 1945, is the most significant for the organization of his scientific project (Lampa 2011) and arguably the most intense in terms of political struggle. During this decade, Lange actively participated in shaping the configuration for a free Poland and published a series of works culminating in the 1945 article “The Scope and Method of Economics.” This article is the seed of the general thesis that would be meticulously developed in his final work, *Political Economy*, in 1959.

In 1934, Lange had difficulties ascending to an academic position in Poland, due to his socialist militancy (Bollard 2023) and seized the opportunity of a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study for two years in the United States. This moment was critical to initiate an organization on the relationship between the realms of marginalism and Marxist political economy, because up until then, “Lange was simultaneously a marginalist economist and a Marxian political economist” (Lampa 2011, 558), with a slight tendency toward the latter.

The first work in that direction is an article titled “Marxian Economics and Modern Economic Theory” (Lange 1935). Lange argued, as a reaction to Professor Shibata, that the superiority of Marxist economics over neoclassical economics does not lie in the analytical aspect. In other words, the strength of Marxist economics is not in isolated concepts (such as the labor theory of value or the notion of surplus value) but rather in indicating the historical or institutional specificities that distinguish the capitalist mode of production from any commodity-producing economy. Thus, Lange repels Shibata's (1933) attack on the Lausanne School in a rather peculiar manner.

Lange's (1935) main point is that, despite being inferior in fundamental aspects, Walras, Pareto, and other neoclassical theorists possess specific qualities that are highly relevant for addressing certain problems beyond the scope of the tools provided by Marx's *Capital*. For Lange, the equilibrium model can significantly benefit the economist who also relies on the arsenal of Marxist political economy. This is because these two toolboxes are complementary. The *raison d'être* of “modern economic theory” would be to map the frenetic price changes, enabling the handling of the cause-and-effect chain between macro and microeconomic variables with confidence. From there, for example, the possibility of altering target indicators through concrete economic policies would emerge. Such precision in the management of the central bank or in predicting the impact of

tariffs would be extremely useful in guiding the economic system toward socialism.

Lange acknowledges a rationality within neoclassical theory, which, despite its bourgeois origins, holds certain aspects of “universal significance” (Lange 1935, 191, footnote 1). Once the ideological defense of capitalism is removed from “modern economic theory,” it becomes possible to discern genuine contributions to economic science that could serve the socialist cause. Instead of disdainfully dismissing “un-Marxist approaches” with arrogance and detachment, Lange proposes a form of struggle that demands intimacy with the enemy. Lange sees bourgeois economics’ vulgarity not as a target for scorn, but as an ailment requiring treatment.

Another example of Oskar Lange’s unique approach can be observed in his participation in the famous debate on socialist economic calculation. Lange’s response to von Mises’s challenge ([1920] 1935), an article called “On the Economic Theory of Socialism” (Lange 1936a, 1937), was first drafted during his stay in the United States (Desai 2014, 154).⁴ The basic strategy of Lange’s intervention in this controversy was to demonstrate the feasibility of rational resource allocation in socialism using the entire framework accepted by the Western economic community. His work had a tremendous impact and contributed decisively to the recognition, at least between the 1940s and 1970s, that a socialist economic system was not only possible but also potentially superior to the capitalist system in various comparative aspects. In this sense, the consolidation of the Austrian School as a heterodox autonomous current becomes understandable. It was expelled from the neoclassical mainstream as one of the results of Lange’s use of orthodox tools against the more apologetic authors infesting official economic science (Camarinha Lopes 2021b).

A third work from this period during his time in the United States is “The Place of Interest in the Theory of Production,” also published in 1936. As is known, the theory of interest had abandoned the physical approach of the physiocrats to seek a psychological-temporal foundation for the phenomenon of value increment. The theory of value could then be entirely detached from the sphere of production. This was part of the marginalist revolution and had already been denounced by Marx himself as a phenomenon of the formation of vulgar economics. In line with Marx’s critique, Lange (1936b) constructs an argument to invalidate the thesis that interest is purely a temporal phenomenon. However, he does not do this by invoking the concept of surplus or labor value explicitly as an alternative. He leads the reader along the guidelines of “conventional” economics, showing that interest (surplus) can be understood not as a result of the passage of time but as a means-ends relationship that links intermediate goods to final goods. The passage of time can be abstracted so that it is indicated that interest (surplus) needs to have

a material basis that does not depend exactly on time but rather on a process of material transformation that happens to require the passage of time. Here we see how the struggle to expand the presence of Marxist economics in the official territory does not rely on a direct clash but rather on a tortuous process in which different currents belonging to the same stream are thrown against each other. In this case, Wicksell is opposed to Pareto so that Lange can conclude that the origin of interest (surplus) lies in the scarcity of capital, not in the time variable.

At the end of the Rockefeller scholarship contract, Oskar Lange returned to Poland in 1937 as a university professor in the Department of Statistics at Jagiellonian University. During this period, the Free Polish University, a non-governmental organization considered progressive in Poland, offered him an opportunity to teach political economy at its Łódź headquarters (Kowalik 1964, 3). However, again, due to political reasons, Lange was prevented from teaching the subject and moved permanently to the United States (Kowalik 1990).

After teaching for a short period at the University of California, Lange was appointed assistant professor of economics and statistics at the University of Chicago in 1938, where he became a full professor in 1943 (Fisher 1966). During World War II, Lange dedicated himself to investigating capitalism in its concrete geopolitical context, always attentive to capturing alien elements in relation to Marxist economic theory. It is against this backdrop that we need to understand his involvement in the reception of John Maynard Keynes's work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*.

Lange is, along with Hicks (1937), responsible for the Keynesian–neoclassical synthesis (Rubin 2016). In “The Rate of Interest and the Optimum Propensity to Consume,” Lange (1938) begins by thanking Keynes for the contribution of presenting a toolkit capable of dealing with problems that had troubled economists of underconsumption since the time of Malthus and Sismondi, namely, the concept of liquidity preference.⁵ However, Lange argues that both traditional equilibrium economics and Keynesian economics were special cases of an even more general theory.

As accurately detailed by Assous and Lampa (2014), Lange's 1938 model is not simply a reaction to Keynes's works but a part of his own project to build a universal economic theory that separates the implicit assumptions of a capitalist economy present in the neoclassical code (Lampa 2014b). Consequently, instead of heading toward a world parallel to the neoclassical mainstream, as the post-Keynesians will do, Lange continually strives not to diverge from it. He integrates various competing ideas and adapts them into his own system, encompassing everything and attempting to secure the position of the most general system in relation to the others.

Between 1939 and 1943, Lange's scientific production clearly expresses this confluence between Marxist, neoclassical, and Keynesian theories. The articles

“The Foundations of Welfare Economics” (Lange 1942a), “Say’s Law: A Restatement and Criticism” (Lange 1942b), and “The Theory of the Multiplier” (Lange 1943) are followed by a longer and more technical work, a booklet titled *Price Flexibility and Employment* (Lange 1944).

In this book, Lange attacked the thesis that price rigidity was one of the main causes of unemployment. As noted by Kowalik (1964, 4), the idea that price adjustment friction was responsible for systematic unemployment had already been challenged by other economists such as Kalecki and Keynes himself. However, the methodological toolkit used by them was still criticized by neoclassical economists. Lange’s intention was to avoid this kind of criticism by neutralizing the attack while developing the reasoning of equilibrium below full employment with the neoclassical toolkit.

Lange’s conclusions converge toward the view of unemployment as a permanent phenomenon, with the peculiarity that this is done within the neoclassical framework itself, not outside it, as Keynes attempted to do. At the end of the book, he concludes that the hypothesis of achieving full employment by relaxing wages was an extremely improbable contingency: the probability of a fully flexible system of all prices, including those in the labor market, generating equilibrium in this socially desirable state would be equivalent to the probability of a chimpanzee typing the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica* by hitting the keys of a typewriter (Kowalik 2018, 7585).

Although this explanation may sound reasonable for post-Keynesians, it cannot be said that Lange’s strategy succeeded in this case. Due to the complexity of arriving at the same conclusions as Keynes using the hermetic language of the neoclassical framework, the book had no impact beyond the academic world and remained in the shadow of major figures after Keynes. Nonetheless, it was praised by authors whose position rivaled Keynes’s, such as Milton Friedman (1946), who considered Lange a first-rate theorist.

Parallel to the theoretical battles, Lange was also active in the political arena. The key point, as demonstrated below, is this: just as Lange used rival theories in his favor to disperse the camp of bourgeois mainstream economics, he also strategically engaged with some factions of his political enemies to isolate others. His aim was to weaken the opposing ideological camp in general by forging strategic alliances. The notion of struggle, of fight, of warfare, and consequently, of strategy, is intrinsic to him.

As the outcome of World War II was unfolding, Lange gained a prominent position among Poles exiled in Western countries and eventually became one of the main intermediaries between Roosevelt and Stalin to define Poland’s position on the geopolitical chessboard of the Cold War (Szymczak 1995a; Bollard 2023).

In the first half of the 1940s, three groups of Polish exiles formed in the United States. Each one of them had a specific position regarding the Polish Government in Exile in London and the Soviet Union.⁶

The first, in the center and the largest, was based in the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Roman Catholic Union in the city of Chicago (Szymczak 1995a). This group believed in Sikorski, the leader of the Polish Government in Exile in London. The “Chicago Poles” endeavored to establish harmonious relations with Moscow to reach an agreement on the eastern borders. It was ideologically aligned with capitalist powers. A second group, on the right, also supported the Polish Government in Exile in London, but held more radical views. Mainly residing in New York, these Polish-Americans believed Sikorski was too weak to ensure the return of Polish territories from the Soviet Union. Despite being smaller, the ultra-nationalism, anti-communism, and lack of tact of this group regarding the real conditions of the geopolitical dispute threatened the relations between Poland and the Soviet Union. Their focus on conflict and disagreement ultimately harmed the first group. A third group, on the left, relatively small and based in Detroit, openly opposed the Polish Government in Exile and sympathized with the Soviet Union. Similar to the first group, they were realistic but ideologically aligned with the emerging force of the socialist world.

The Soviet intelligence service had noticed Lange’s decisive presence in this third group, and his name eventually reached Stalin’s office (Cienciala 1996). Stalin was fortunate to find a Marxist activist with roots in the Polish working-class organization who, in addition to being a US citizen, was already a respected intellectual in Western academia. Lange’s name was suggested as one of the very few Polish-Americans who would have the conditions to be heard by all involved in the geopolitical dispute around Poland: Roosevelt, Stalin, and those open to negotiation from the Polish Government in Exile in Churchill’s England, especially Prime Minister Mikołajczyk, who had succeeded Sikorski, killed in a plane crash in July 1943. According to Szymczak (1995a), Lange’s authority as an economics professor largely guaranteed him power as an interlocutor between forces in growing tension.

Until October 1943, the Soviet intelligence service still believed that Lange was not a communist (Szymczak 1995a). However, his stance was so convergent with Soviet foreign policy that an approach had to take place. On January 7, 1944, Lange received in Chicago from an envoy of the Soviet Consul in New York, E. Kiselev, an invitation to participate in a special commission for the reconstruction of Poland. This commission was composed of eminent Polish exiles who would eventually be part of the new government, and Lange was asked to travel immediately to Moscow. Lange responded with enthusiasm to the initiative but stated that he could only accept if the US government gave its approval to avoid complications and accusations that he had always been a Soviet agent.⁷

From there, following a direct request from Stalin, Lange was authorized by the US government to undertake the trip to gather more information about the Polish issue and return to the United States. The US government was highly interested in reaching an agreement with the Soviet Union on the Polish matter. However, as Lange did not have any status as a diplomatic representative of either the Soviet Union, Poland, or the United States, the US government took precautions, stating that Lange would travel as a private citizen and act as an informal intermediary between Roosevelt and Stalin in case the information leaked (Szymczak 1995a; Cienciala 1996).

In May 1944, Lange flew to Alaska in a US military plane and was then transported to Moscow by the Soviet Air Force (Cienciala 1996). Throughout a month-long visit to the Soviet Union and his subsequent meetings with authorities and political leaders, Lange aimed to build an environment of joint support from the superpowers for the new Polish government, including England and its sheltered leaders from the defunct Second Polish Republic (1918–1939).⁸ Thus, Lange was assertive in proposing the inclusion of Polish exiles who were not part of his own, more left-leaning, group. He believed that without this minimally symmetrical support from the antagonistic forces of the emerging Cold War, there would be no genuine Poland.

Similarly, Lange asked Stalin to leave the city of Lwów outside the territory of the Soviet Union, something explicitly desired by Western forces. If not done, it could complicate the internal political issue of the Polish Government by generating anti-Soviet sentiment in Poland. While Stalin eventually incorporated Lange's first suggestion, the second was met with lukewarm enthusiasm, with the response that this problem (the city of Lwów) would need to be studied more thoroughly (Szymczak 1995a, 21; Stalin, Lange, and Molotov 1944).

Lange understood that forming a strategic alliance with unfriendly forces was a pragmatic task aimed at achieving tangible progress within the existing situation. However, he was not naive enough to believe that this alliance was simply a harmonious union of differing factions on equal terms. By strategically supporting selected elements from the opposing camp and fostering divisions among the supporters of the Polish Government in Exile in London, Lange effectively bolstered the influence of the left-wing over the center. This is why he became a subject of public criticism among the Polish exiled population, particularly those from non-working-class backgrounds. Therefore, rather than being a neutral arbitrator mediating between conflicting forces, Lange was actively pursuing realistic solutions advantageous to his own side, seizing upon every historical opportunity that presented itself.

Back in the United States on June 7, 1944, Lange sent a report of his meetings and activities to the US government and was received at the White House by

President Roosevelt's team. The response that Stalin sent to Roosevelt through Lange was that "the door to an understanding with the Polish Government in London is never closed" (Cienciala 1996, 120). More explicitly, he, Stalin, would accept as members of a new Polish government those London Poles who recognized the Curzon Line as the border between Poland and the Soviet Union. This was, in turn, the message that Roosevelt had sent to Stalin through the "unofficial" emissary Lange: that the United States wanted to settle the Polish issue with the Soviet Union, also somehow accommodating the Polish Government in Exile in London.

"Was Lange simply an articulate Soviet stooge, a dupe of Moscow, as he was frequently called by Polish-Americans who opposed his views?" asks Szymczak (1995b, 154), rhetorically. Szymczak argues that it is difficult to believe that someone with Lange's education in the best Western tradition and fluency in six languages could be diminished in this way: "Certainly, it must be assumed that Lange could think for himself and knew precisely what he was doing" (Szymczak 1995b, 154). In this sense, Lange "seems to have played the role of intermediary between Washington and Moscow in accordance with his personal goal, i.e., the establishment of a socialist, democratic Poland allied with the USSR" (Cienciala 1996, 133). What interested him at the time was that the Soviet Union would provide the necessary military support to reverse the country's military occupation and ensure its independence (Stalin, Lange, and Molotov 1944, 44). Whether this later translated into sovereignty was another issue. In that sense, "the professor was neither a Kremlin agent nor Stalin's puppet" (Cienciala 1996, 133). Therefore, it is necessary to conclude that he was not a pawn in the hands of either Roosevelt or Stalin but a political actor who promoted the agenda of the working class in Poland, as he himself understood it.

Reflecting this intense political mobilization that placed him in the circuit of the most powerful world leaders, Lange's last academic production from this period is a prelude to his future book *Political Economy*: the article "The Scope and Method of Economics" (Lange 1945a).⁹ In it, Lange presents the fundamental elements guiding the subordinate integration of non-Marxist economics into his Marxist system. This intricate piece poses various challenges due to the absence of detailed bibliographical references and its discourse, entirely framed by the vocabulary of mainstream Western economics. However, it is evident that Lange is expressing outwardly with alien terms what is, internally, completely familiar to him. The appearance is bourgeois neoclassical, but the essence is Marx's key notion that capitalism is a specific kind of economic organization among many others.

According to Lange, "Economics is the science of administration of scarce resources in human society" (Lange 1945a, 19). It is a subcategory of social science in the sense that this administration is not universal: it depends on the institutions of society, which vary in time and space. Resources serve to satisfy human

Table 1. “Ideal Types” of Economic Organization

<i>“Ideal types” of economic system</i>	<i>Time/local context</i>	<i>Unit of economic decision with production responsibility</i>	<i>Aim of the unit</i>
domestic	“Older times”	households	private (satisfaction of several wants)
capitalist	“At present”	firms or business enterprises	private (money profit)
socialist	social and political movements in Europe, the Soviet Union	public services (from centralized to decentralized schemes of governance)	public (satisfaction of the wants of the whole community and not merely of members of the unit)

wants, and there are various ways to organize their production and distribution. In spite of that, there seems to exist a force homogenizing economic actions when it comes to the management of resources that are scarce. This is so because when there is no abundance, there must be a selection as to which needs will go unsatisfied, both at the individual and the social level. Lange argues that the process of establishing the hierarchy of all these needs derives logically from the definition of the aim of economic actors or agents. Lange refers to these actors or agents as “units of economic decision” and explains that “The totality of interdependent units of economic decision is called an *economy* or an *economic system*” (25; italics in the original).

Lange’s main point is that every real-world economic system is a mixed economy, as the criterion for classification is based on a quantitative metric: it depends on the extent to which each of the three conceptual units controls the production process. This leads to the notion of an underlying theory capable of explaining not only each economic system in isolation, but also the “general” or “overall” economic system, of which each of these idealized types is merely a particular case (Table 1).

The common ground is that the logic of firms can be applied to both households and public services by changing the content of their objective function to be maximized. For households, it would be individual utility, while for public services, it would be total social utility or social welfare. This shared identity underpins the postulate of rationality:

the assumption that all units of economic decision act rationally. This assumption provides us with a most powerful tool for simplification of theoretical analysis. For, if a unit of decision acts rationally, its decisions in any given situation can be predicted by mere application of the rules of logic (and of mathematics). (Lange 1945a, 30)

Apparently, this is what Lange saw as the essential insight of neoclassical mainstream economics that needed to be incorporated.

Clearly, the attempt to absorb neoclassical mainstream economics, and in fact, non-Marxist political economy as a whole, is a very complex endeavor. Would Lange be able to accomplish it? And once this integration is achieved, would it be sustainable? After all, despite the birth of a new socialist Poland being interpreted as a successful mediation between different forces, this experience did not endure: the People's Republic of Poland ended in 1989.

4. *Political Economy: The Book of His Life*

By the end of the 1940s, Lange already had in mind a broad idea of how to integrate the entire universe of marginalist economic theory into Marx's political economy. However, he only began to effectively write a systematic treatise at the beginning of 1957 (Lange [1959] 1963, xi). The work was supposed to consist of three books, but only the first was published during his lifetime, in 1959 in Polish.¹⁰ Oskar Lange passed away in London on October 2, 1965, due to complications from surgery on his thigh.

Lange's treatise devotes numerous pages to delineating the position of political economy within the broader scientific landscape, rather than focusing solely on economics. In contrast to that previous article, Lange's book *Political Economy* ([1959] 1963, especially the schema on page 33) now employs a wide range of terms that are compatible with both neoclassical discourse as well as with the Marxist jargon.

It departs from an abstract definition of humans working in society to satisfy their needs, closely related to the traditional mainstream view of resource allocation. Then it quickly proceeds to an extensive development and interpretation of the relationship between economic base and superstructure, as presented initially by Marx ([1859] 1977) in the "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*." It is evident that for Lange the historical specificity of capitalism is the most distinctive contribution of Marx, and that there is indeed the possibility of a general economic theory, of which Marx's theory of capitalism is a specific case.

This duality is key throughout Lange's book. On one side, we have a general view of the economic process, common to all modes of production throughout the entire history of humankind. On the other side, we have a more focused perspective on a more concretely defined economy in time and space. Accordingly, there are two different kinds of economic phenomena in Lange's treatise.

The first kind is the one related to the relationship between humans as animals and the external world. All requirements of material maintenance regarding this natural dimension can be thought of as general economic laws.¹¹ This means that,

regardless of what kind of social relations human beings develop among themselves, these laws must be the same. For example, a certain amount of bread can only feed a certain number of humans during a certain period. This constraint is the same as long as the nutrition requirements remain constant for that biological system. Given that the evolutionary change of humans is much slower than the pace of change in the social relations of production and distribution, one can assert that every conceivable mode of production must obey these constraints imposed by the laws of energetic renewal of some human society.

The second kind of economic phenomenon is the one related to the relationship between humans, as they need to collectively organize social labor so as to reproduce themselves materially through time. The regularities of these economic phenomena generate specific laws, which are valid only within a much narrower scope. This leads to the specification of a socio-economic system (or mode of production). Marx's *Capital* was dedicated to investigating the specific economic laws of a historically specified mode of production: capitalism. The continuation of Marx's and Engels's work as a whole aimed at investigating the process through which one mode of production is transformed into another. Lange's main assertion is that in order to consciously shape our mode of production, which means to transform capitalism into socialism and communism, it is necessary to understand not only how capitalism works, but also how the economy in general works.

Here we come to the fundamental issue about the incorporation of neoclassical political economy into Marx's critique of (classical) political economy.

The crux of the problem is that the pretension of discovering universal, ahistorical laws of the economy was properly an endeavor of bourgeois economists (which was reinforced by the formalist trend of the triad Menger–Jevons–Walras). According to Lange, this pretension is valid. However, the result of such endeavor fails, unless a new synthesis of economic science is built. Such a synthesis, in his opinion, "is possible only on the basis of the Marxian conception of political economy as a science which studies the processes of economic development in a broad framework of historically shaped social conditions" (Lange [1959] 1963, xiii). It is not sufficient to simply rely on the historical approach of the German Historical School, for example. The entire edifice of bourgeois economic thinking, which aims at deciphering and unveiling general economic laws present in all of human history, in all conceivable socioeconomic formations, must operate upon Marx's singular contribution of demonstrating the historical specificity of each one of them. We can say that such an absorption is a fundamental aspect of Lange's incisive and extensive development of the relationship between political economy and historical materialism.¹²

Bourgeois economic theory conflates these two different kinds of economic laws, negating that division. By doing so, it naturalizes the relations of production

of capitalism. This leads to the notion that it is impossible to purposefully design social change. Lange's intent is to demonstrate that, despite this fundamental error, extensively analyzed by Marx, bourgeois economic theory is right in trying to identify absolute, ahistorical patterns of human behavior that guarantee material reproduction.

According to Lange, "the Marxist trend is not the only one in modern political economy. Other approaches exist alongside; these may be classified as variations of two main trends: the subjectivist and the historical" (Lange [1959] 1963, 227). Each one of them, however, is methodologically deficient. The subjectivist trend, which is more closely connected with Marx's concept of "vulgar economy" and with the fundamentals of the marginalist approach to economics, studies only the relation between an abstract, isolated human, and the exterior world. The historical trend, in its turn, only describes systemic temporal changes in real existing socio-economic systems, failing to provide any logical reasoning as to how these changes occur. It seems that, for Lange, only a dialectical combination of both the logical and the historical perspectives, the opposing sides in the *Methodenstreit*, is able to convert bourgeois political economy into what are Marx's and Engels's initial steps for developing the materialist conception of history.¹³

We see that Lange is not directly imposing on the reader Marx's work, but is struggling to demonstrate that the scientific advancement of political economy requires that all non-Marxist economic thinking after the 1870s be integrated into Marx's fundamental system.

The connection between the logical and historical methodologies is key. Understanding the modification of one mode of production into another requires understanding not only how each mode of production functions in isolation, but also how they share some common ground as to the human economic system in general. Economics should not be the science of investigating capitalism, but the science of studying all kinds of economic systems, including pre-capitalist formations and those that should be built as a means to surpass capitalism. The problem is that this science, economics, developed from within capitalism itself, causing the mentioned conflation in the heads of economists of the modern, bourgeois era.

Lange was fully aware that this was the great problem with all non-Marxist currents. In spite of that, he was of the opinion that such a deficiency is not an impediment to punctual innovations that need to be absorbed into Marx's system. In that sense, while acknowledging that these streams of economic thought are expressions of the enemy, the capitalist class, against the economic ideas based on the interests of the working class, Lange also believed that they could serve the proletarian cause, once they have been adequately mastered and subjugated through a complex process of ingestion.

“Oskar Lange’s *Political Economy* is one of the most ambitious undertakings in the social sciences in this century” (Kowalik 1975, 303). Obviously, it faces serious contradictions and difficulties. For example, the idea of maximizing the behavior of households may lead to utilitarianism. Praxeology and the dynamics of capital social relations may be seen as the same thing, reinforcing the naturalization of this specific socioeconomic formation, as it occurs with the Austrian perspective, the most vulgar derivation of the subjectivist trend. Also, the obsession with that general approach may lead to extreme objectivism, and to the notion that the allocation of resources is a universal problem, regardless of time, place, and subjectivity of real humans. Because of all these unsettled issues, the academic community considers Lange’s project a failure, even though it recognizes that the book had an impact.¹⁴

Even though Lange did not live to complete his project, it is safe to say that he at least conceived and gestated a coherent approach referred to here as Langean Anthropophagy. It is in this context that we must grasp the creative, unfinished, and mutational character of his “last work, the book of his life, as he used to call it.”¹⁵

5. Class Struggle and Economic Science, before and after the Marginalist Revolution

The protocol leading to Lange’s books, *Political Economy* (vol. 1 and vol. 2), is clear: it involves the identification of elements foreign to the Marxist origin, assimilation, processing, and expulsion of that part that relates to the apologetic defense of the capitalist order. In other words, Lange’s theory is the result of an anthropophagic rite that should strengthen the Marxist trend of political economy against the imperialist and colonizing nature of bourgeois economics in all its variants.

Lange’s way of proceeding is strongly influenced by Rosa Luxemburg (Lampa 2014a). Indeed, what brings them together is not precisely the analytical aspect of their respective works but how they perceive the relationship between Marxist economics and bourgeois economics. It seems that Lange paid special attention to a specific hint left by the eminent leader of the Spartacus League: it is wrong to ignore bourgeois economics or deal with it with presumption. Marxist doctrine is like a child that killed its mother, bourgeois mentality, during birth, as she lectures in the first chapter of her book, “Introduction to Political Economy” (Luxemburg [1925] 1990). It follows that it is essential to develop a relation with bourgeois political economy that not only considers the time dimension in the change of things, but also the affective bonds and the tensions it engenders at the present time. In fact, class struggle is not only given by a chronological axis, as is the case with the conflict of generations, but also a war of contemporary entities.

And here is the decisive distinction contained in Lange's project.

When Marx engaged with political economy in the mid-19th century, there was an obvious movement of change in the realm of economic ideas. Socialism as an ideology was on the rise, and the belief in capitalism was rapidly fading due to the violent process of completion of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Marx criticized classical economic thinking based on the Hegelian movement of transcending dialectically the contradictions and paradoxes that could not be solved within the values of capitalist society. So, Marx's paradigm for developing his stance against bourgeois political economy is that of *the superiority of the new in relation to the old*. Of course, Marx's work is the result of a conscious move against one side and in defense of the other side in class struggle. However, given the context of the decaying status of classical political economy, there is no systematization of how to directly dispute the control of official economic thought with the enemy. It is as if every non-Marxist economic theory would be powerless, unscientific, and without any chance of defining the reality of the economic system.

Lange engages with political economy in another context. Socialism no longer means a projection into the future, but is now an enduring reality being systematically constructed in many parts of the world. However, various currents of non-Marxist economic theory continued to exist and to influence the policy agenda and economic teaching into the 20th century. Just like capitalism itself, bourgeois economic thought has not died: it has evolved and is strong in some aspects, even stronger than Marx's own theory in narrow, specific issues. Marx's work is characterized by an extremely pejorative tone toward bourgeois economic thought after Ricardo (in England) and Sismondi (in France), and his expression "vulgar economy" synthesizes this. Lange, in contrast, seems to acknowledge that there is a scientific political economy stemming from the ranks of the capitalist class. Even in the case of blatant pro-capitalist ideologues, he suspects that there can always be something useful hidden in their works. So, Lange's paradigm is that of *the equality between one side and the other, and thus of reciprocity between combatants*. Because of this, he is not simply repeating Marx's method of *Aufhebung*: he is developing it further. This new scenario of war requires a novel scheme for dealing with alien forces, which is provided by the notion of anthropophagy.

Lange was not a proponent of eclecticism, pluralism or even a mere process of synthesis, as if he had no side. Also, he did not present himself as superior to economists controlled by the capitalist class. By confronting the enemy face to face, he constantly transformed and enhanced his own system. His intention was to subjugate all economic currents and thus conquer hegemony. If this stance toward the other can be called totalizing or even totalitarian, then this only reinforces that his view of the ideological conflict around economic science is in total harmony with the reality of class struggle.

We conclude that, without considering the idiosyncrasies of Langean Anthropophagy, a proper judgment of Oskar Lange's project as a whole cannot be made. It is necessary to go beyond the timid recognition he already has in the debate on economic planning, which has regained prominence in recent years in association with 21st-century technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and advanced computing.¹⁶ Quickly dismissing Lange's method for combating bourgeois economic thought just because it seems exotic, strange and paradoxical is improper, given its transmutational character. In order to adequately analyze Lange's work, one needs to abandon the purity of classical aesthetic judgment, a byproduct of idealism, and familiarize oneself with the ugly reality of war and politics.

Notes

1. For a presentation of the division of vulgar economics into a progressive and a reactionary strand, see Camarinha Lopes (2022).
2. For the distinction between "pure-blood" and "muggle" Marxian approaches, see Camarinha Lopes (2021a). The association we make between anthropophagy and Lange's approach is analytical-didactic. There is no evidence that Lange was inspired by the specific nomenclature of anthropophagy as it was put into use by European anthropologists, nor that he was influenced by the notion of cultural cannibalism as developed in Brazilian modernism. For a more detailed presentation of the concept of anthropophagy that we employ to characterize Oskar Lange's political economy, see Lima (2017).
3. For an overview of Lange's biography, see Kowalik (1964, 1990, 2018).
4. The published article (Lange 1937) is signed "London" by Lange, indicating that he revised it after drafting the text in the United States.
5. Keynes even acknowledged that Lange's interpretation of his general theory was close to his own line of thought (Keynes's words [Robertson and Keynes 1938, 321]). For more details on Lange's relationship with Keynes's theory, see the works of Toporowski (2012) and Assous and Lampa (2014).
6. With the occupation of Polish territory by the Nazi army in September 1939, members of the government took refuge in London, from where they continued to exert strong influence over the country's political fortunes throughout World War II. A few days later, in line with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet countries, the Soviet Union occupied territories in eastern Poland. Thus, the Polish Government in Exile opposed both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union occupation. The following account is presented in detail by Szymczak (1995a), Cienciala (1996) and Bollard (2023).
7. For more details, see Cienciala (1996, 98).
8. Lange met with Stalin on May 17, 1944. For more details, see Szymczak (1995a), Cienciala (1996), and the archives of this meeting with Stalin in Stalin, Lange, and Molotov (1944).
9. In the same year, he published "Marxian Economics in the Soviet Union," a commentary on the teaching of economic theory in the Soviet Union at that time. Despite recognizing the efforts made by Soviet economists to develop economic planning toward socialism based fundamentally on Marx's theory, Lange (1945b) points out that without the incorporation of marginalist analysis, they will not be able to manage the Soviet economy.

10. The English version was released in 1963, as reviewed by Yotopoulos (1964). The second book (Lange [1968] 1971), compiled posthumously from his unfinished manuscript, was published in Polish in 1968 and released in English in 1971. The third book was never published.
11. Lange uses the expression “economic laws” profusely (see the subject index in Lange [1959] 1963, 351) and presents an intricate classification of various types of these laws. We are proposing here a simplification for this classification, with only two categories. General economic laws would encompass “economic laws of human behaviour” (59, 60, 61–62, 66, 67), “technical and balance laws of production” (58–59, 61, 64–65), etc. Specific economic laws would encompass “economic laws of capitalism” (72–73, 75), “economic laws of socialism” (72–73), “economic laws specific to a given formation” (65–67, 73–74, 94), etc.
12. For an introductory view on the discussion about economic laws and historical materialism, see Lange’s (1954) review of Stalin’s ([1951] 2005) work *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*. Lange’s assessment of this influential booklet for the discussion of socialism and communism is extremely positive and filled with citations from Marx, Engels and Stalin, revealing an uncritical appraisal that has already been noted in the literature (Toporowski 2022). The novelty we highlight here is Lange’s proposal to connect the analysis of a certain socioeconomic formation with the entire history of the economy of humans. Such a connection is based on a special subjugation of bourgeois political economy by Marx’s political economy.
13. See also Lange (1936a, 55), where he, commenting on the *Methodenstreit*, acknowledges the Austrian perspective against the German Historical School and Marx regarding the emphasis on “the universal validity of the fundamental principles of economic theory.” As for Marx, Lange notices that this critique requires certain qualifications, which he does in the Appendix (Lange 1937, 136).
14. See Kowalik (1975) for a pioneering, profound analysis of Lange’s book. Kowalik (1975, 307) identifies Benedetto Croce as one of Lange’s inspirations for this idea about the double structure of economic science, and shows with sobriety that Lange could not close his project, leaving exploratory tracks in other works about econometrics, planning and cybernetics (Lange [1959] 1962, [1962] 1965, [1965] 1970) that did not quite fit together. In May 2004, the conference “What Is Political Economy Today” took place to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Oskar Lange’s birth and the 50th anniversary of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Warsaw. On this occasion, Hockuba and Brzezinski (2004) presented a paper that seeks to reconstruct Lange’s grand synthesis contained in *Political Economy* and analyze the impact of the work. They correctly pointed out that Lange progressed from a weak postulate of complementarity between Marxist and neoclassical economies in 1935 to a strong postulate of unitary integration in 1959. However, Hockuba and Brzezinski (2004) and Hockuba and Brzezinski (2005) argued that Lange’s movement was fruitless and advocated for maintaining the postulate that theories are merely complementary, as they believed in pluralism and denied theoretical monism in economics. In the view defended here, we believe that the pursuit of increasingly general syntheses is a difficult but necessary endeavor, so we disagree with Hockuba and Brzezinski’s negative assessment of the potential of Lange’s *Political Economy*. We thus distance ourselves from Lampa’s discouraging stance (2022) on this specific point, which emphasizes the enormous risks involved in balancing on a tightrope that intertwines “anti-bureaucratism” with “technocratic democratization.” Regarding Lange’s overall influence on economic thought, Ratajczak (2009) explains that Lange, along with Kalecki, remains one of the main names of Polish economists globally recognized, and that *Political Economy: Vol. I, General Problems* was intensely discussed and debated in Poland when it was published in 1959.

15. See <https://mss-cat.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/uv/view.php?n=Sraffa.C162#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=1&xywh=-69%2C1593%2C3478%2C1893>. Accessed June 22, 2022.
16. For a small selection of works on economic planning based on computation that refer, positively or negatively, to Lange's (1967) seminal article, "The Computer and the Market," see Hurwicz (1969), Prychitko (1988), Shapiro (1989), Lavoie (1990), Cockshott and Cottrell (1993), Bălăţescu and Prisecaru (2009), Jablonowski (2011), Wang and Li (2017), Bernes (2020), and Nieto (2021). All of this literature addresses the question of the centralization/decentralization paradigm in the process of overcoming the market, which remains latent in all real experiences of building socialism.

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