Introduction: Roads to Economic Knowledge: The Epistemic Virtues of Travel across the History of Thought

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In order to examine the historical relations between travel and economic knowledge, we, as editors of this special issue, decided in 2019 to organize a conference at the University of Lausanne to contribute to a growing literature in the history and philosophy of economics that examines the manifold relations between economists, their travels, and the development of the economic discipline.[1] A master course on the international diffusion of economic ideas at the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Lausanne, for which Harro Maas consulted Mauro Boianovsky and some of the contributors to this special issue, was the direct impetus for a dedicated conference. We could not have known, of course, that the still ongoing pandemic gave a different urgency to the topic and caused a

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1. See, for example, Boianovsky 2018; Cooper, forthcoming; Düppe 2016; Serra 2018; Brisset and Fèvre 2021; Weber and Semieniuk 2019; Chiang 2001; Caldwell and Montes 2015; Farrant 2020.

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different dynamic of the conference, and altered the consequences of this special issue. The conference, generously sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation, was scheduled for the first half of June 2020.[2] By then transnational travel was seriously inhibited or even impossible and academics all over the world had started to become acquainted with the new tools of communication we now use on a daily basis—Teams, Zoom, or otherwise. We decided to reschedule our conference as an online event, over four days instead of two, to enable participants from five time zones to participate. The sessions were recorded and minutes were taken to help us all to keep track of and deepen our discussions. It may have been the novelty or the intensity of this format that made one of the participants exclaim in the chat that "we were better than ordinary conferences," because the new technology enabled an experience that held the middle between in-person referee reports on journal submissions and the ordinary Q & A experience of in-person conferences.

We leave it to the readers to judge if the essays that follow deliver on that claim, but it surely is the case that, locked in our homely cubicles, we had to rely on new technologies to make our papers and conversations travel. When airports closed in spring 2020 because of the pandemic, when colleagues lamented that this was inhibiting their research and obstructing the exchange of ideas we had come to take for granted at our yearly conferences and workshops held all over the world, we held our little online conference investigating travel as a condition for knowledge formation and exchange. By happenstance the pandemic came to highlight the importance of sociotechnical infrastructures that support the travel of persons, things, or a combination of both in science.

In retrospect, this was of course nothing new. In the history and sociology of science, it is almost a truism to say that something has to travel to acquire any knowledge at all. Not incidentally, a vessel crossing the two pillars of Hercules figures as the frontispiece of Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis*, one of the founding texts of the scientific revolution. To acquire new knowledge, to find things out, things and people have to travel around. Bacon's House of Solomon could only become a house of knowledge because of its collection of information from far away on the basis of networks of ambassadors and spies. Carolus Linnaeus could never have made his binomial classification of the natural world in Uppsala if it were not for

2. SNSF grant nos. IZSEZ0_191188 and IZSEZ0_191190, none of which had to be used for this online conference.

his extended network of informants (Müller-Wille 2003; Koerner 2009). Without their scientific expeditions, Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin, two scientific giants in traveling, could never have come to their scientific insights.[3] A network of travelers to different parts of the globe was an inherent part of John Herschel's measurement of the transit of Venus (Naylor and Schaffer 2019).

These examples rely as much on persons as on paper that can be carried around as a third space between observer and observed. Humboldt could never have corrected the claims of his humanist contemporaries about the exquisite provenance of the marble of the Laocoön group, perhaps the most famous sculpture of ancient Greece, during his half-year visit to Rome, if he had not been able to compare the small specimen present in the Vatican Museum with the notes he took on his visits to the marble quarries in Crete (Bourguet 2010, 2017). In *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, one of the foundational texts of contemporary history and sociology of science, Steve Shapin and Simon Schaffer lay out how reviews and books became necessary proxies for experimental results that could not travel on their own because they were bound to their sites of production, the emerging scientific laboratories (Shapin and Schaffer 2011). In many cases, it was not people but paper that traveled, linked to scientific missions with commercial goals—as in the case of the Dutch East India Company (Cook 2007). From the fifteenth to the end the eighteenth century, the Republic of Letters became a virtual community in which knowledge was shared through such venues as *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (van Miert 2019). Such examples that cross boundaries between the natural sciences, the humanities, and economic interests gave birth to a whole industry of reflections on the socio-epistemic importance of "traveling around and finding things out" for the formation of knowledge, as witnessed in a rich literature on "(im-)mutable mobiles," "boundary objects," "knowledge in transit," and the "imperial gaze." No historian of science will nowadays question the importance of reliable facts to travel to claim reliable knowledge.[4]

In contrast with historians and sociologists of science, economists and their historians have proved quite resilient to adjudicate the importance of travel for the knowledge they claim (Boianovsky 2018). This goes back at

3. On the impact of Humboldt's travel reports on classical economics see Boianovsky 2013.

4. From an overwhelming literature, let us mention Pratt 2007; Raj 2000b, 2011, 2000a, 2003, 2016, 2007; Latour 1986; 1987; Howlett and Morgan 2011; Star and Griesemer 1989; Cook 2012; Dimand 2004; James 1966; White 1982; Hulme and Youngs 2002; Speake 2003.

least to the days of James Mill and Richard Whately in the nineteenth century. In heated debates with his contemporaries about the proper method of political economy, deductive or inductive, first Drummond professor in political economy in Oxford and later archbishop of Dublin, Whately argued that travelers inevitably highlight what they perceive as special about a different place, thus ignoring the obvious and the normal. Instead Whately favored a deductive approach that concentrated on the resolution of the theoretical paradoxes of economic theory of which the unintended convergence of individual actions in the marketplace took center stage (Whately 1831; Waterman 1983; Corsi 1987; Maas 2008, 2011). In his *History of India*, James Mill expressed his disdain for an economist's travels when he claimed that a "duly qualified" person could "obtain more knowledge of India" from his "closet" in England, than from using his "eyes and his ears in India" (quoted by Maria Bach, this issue). Mill thus not only gave a perfect impression of what nowadays is criticized as the "imperial gaze," but just like Whately defended a position that put theory over facts and the economist's windowless cubicle over a direct engagement with the world outside. It was a point of view that not even in Mill's own days went uncontested, as witnessed from Charles Babbage's complaint that political economists remained in their closets because they were unable to confront their ideas with the world.

Babbage tested his own ideas about industrial progress by touring factories through Europe with questionnaires and observations on technological innovations, which he published in his *Machinery and Manufactures* of 1832 that proved to be an important resource for Karl Marx's theory of capital. In contrast, secretary of the Anti-Corn Law League, William Cooke Taylor, strengthened the bad reputation of economists' travel by evoking the rhetoric of the quintessential travel format of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Grand Tour*, in a series of letters addressed to Richard Whately on his firsthand observations on the factory system in Lancashire. Cooke Taylor used his eyewitness account of the developing industrial landscape in Lancashire for an abrasive defense of its virtuous effects on the morals of the working class. Putting any blame for workers' hardships on the interventions of the British government in the marketplace, he thus drove home the very point of his travels: the need to abolish the Corn Laws and to support free trade for the benefit of industry (Babbage 1832; Schaffer 1994; Taylor 1842).

These examples show the close correspondence that exists between an evaluation of the value and use of travel for economists with questions about the subject's methodology, and the tensioned relations between ideology, theory, and facts. It was perhaps to evade such tensions that Herbert Simon and George Stigler echoed Whately's claims when they argued that an economist did not need to travel because he or she could more easily, and better, acquire knowledge of places far away by visiting the public library around the corner (Boianovsky 2018).

Twentieth-century economists never felt comfortable invoking their personal experiences and preferred to take data as given, and their own stance as detached. In an interesting blog post referred to during our conference, Branko Milanovic (2019) wonders how much wisdom is to be expected from economists with CVs that are limited to Ivy League universities and who only speak one language to conclude that one can rather expect good social science from scientists who live nonexemplary lives (think of David Graeber). Even Stigler and Simon's rejection of the need for experiential knowledge accepts implicitly that economists have to rely on infrastructures that enable information to travel reliably to the public library's desk. Someone has to enable the traveling to inform someone else about the creditworthiness of information far away. Stigler and Simon simply introduce via the back door what they attempted to suppress via the front door; the importance of travel for the formation of reliable economic knowledge. This was even implicitly acknowledged by James Mill when he made the proviso that his "duly qualified person" had to rely on "every thing of importance" to be expressed "in writing" (quoted by Maria Bach in this issue). In short, however you put it, as in any other branch of knowledge, economic knowledge depends on persons or things to travel. Once this is acknowledged, experience in the field takes center stage. The focus of the present special issue is temporary traveling, not permanent migration, which raises a distinct set of questions (Hagemann 2011).

The eight papers that compose this special issue address various aspects of this complex relation between travel and economic knowledge. They relocate methodological and epistemic questions about knowledge spatially and temporally. Instead of asking for the epistemic conditions for reliable knowledge, they ask for the conditions that enable persons, knowledge, and facts to travel reliably, or not. From a broader, comparative perspective, this relocation of epistemic questions into questions about the relation between travel and knowledge has been thoroughly explored in the edited volume by Peter Howlett and Mary S. Morgan, *How Well Do Facts Travel? The Dissemination of Reliable Knowledge* (2011), and some of the contributions to this special issue make explicit use of the conceptual framework developed therein. It was therefore natural to ask Mary Morgan to provide an overall reflection on the essays that will close this special issue and for us to provide a brief overview of the papers to prepare the reader for what to expect in and from this issue.

The articles by Alain Alcouffe and David Le Bris and Brian Cooper bring us back to the early nineteenth century and to different arenas in which individuals and states sought information on investment opportunities. Alcouffe and Le Bris discuss Jean-Baptiste Say and his daughter Andrienne's travels through the British Isles in the early nineteenth century. Historians of economics have concentrated their attention on Say's encounter with the philosophical radicals, Jeremy Bentham, David Ricardo, and James Mill, set up by Francis Place near the end of his sojourn. Alcouffe and Le Bris argue that this was only a minor and accidental element in Say's program that largely consisted of an extended stay in cultured London and a tour through the industrializing districts of the British North to inform the French government about the state of British industry. This travel of a French anglophile thus presents us with a mixture of a Grand Tour for his daughter, to acquaint her with British culture, and an informant's trip in the spirit of Francis Bacon that could teach the French government about the British and France's own future. Ironically, as Alcouffe and Le Bris show, the trip is probably more important for what Say did not see, because he failed to notice its encompassing novelty and promise for the future as he considered its innovations to compare bleakly with France's own industry. In contrast, Cooper examines three travelers to Chile whose observations served to inform investors about opportunities in Chile's mining business and would use different literary forms to convey credibility to their observations. In addition, Cooper explores the tensions between the armchair observations of British political economists back home with these carefully crafted field observations. Even though Say's report for the French government is lost, or perhaps even nonexistent, both papers remind us of the fact that neither the knowledge of local conditions nor of the local language is by itself sufficient to create credible facts.

Hannah Tyler and Federico D'Onofrio and Hsiang-Ke Chao further explore the "toolbox" elements of knowledge transmission, in their respective contributions on the extraordinary life of Wolf Ladejinsky—whose agricultural economic consulting relied on a portable, generic tool for policy interventions—and on a more or less successful mediation of generic knowledge with local circumstances. Chao provides us with an interesting discussion of how Western political economy was altered to fit and become useful to local circumstances during the Qing dynasty, and how such processes of adaptation changed over the course of Chinese history when the kinds of travelers changed from one-directional missionaries to Chinese scholars who traveled back and forth between China and the West—largely to American universities.

The one-directional aspect of knowledge travel is most visible in the discussions of Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Erwin Dekker of the economic consulting activities of "money doctor" Edwin W. Kemmerer and planning expert Jan Tinbergen. Though both economists can be seen as representatives of different geopolitical constellations in which colonial empires dissolved into independent nations that sought their own space in distinct periods of the twentieth century, they share an attitude that considers local knowledge of little avail in a search for optimal policy solutions, whether these are concerned with the choice of monetary or macroeconomic policy regimes.

The two last substantive essays by Maria Bach and by Mauro Boianovsky and Gerardo Serra deal with the expectations of the Indian political economist Romesh Chunder Dutt and the well-known British economist Joan Robinson that were challenged on their respective travels westward and eastward. Dutt traveled to the center of the British Empire to sit for the exams that would grant him access to the administrative functions to which he aspired. But his experiences in London and on his subsequent travels through Great Britain, Germany, and some other European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century made him disillusioned with Britain's wealth inequalities and led him to revise his perspective on the causes of India's poverty. Robinson—the only woman economist discussed in this special issue—traveled to China from the 1950s to the 1970s to study the Chinese socialist economy and signal her support for an economic regime that raised extensive controversy and criticism not only in Western states, but also among many of her economist colleagues and in the end also by herself. Both Dutt and Robinson paid attention to famine phenomena in nineteenth-century India and Maoist China, which led Dutt to extensive traveling to the Indian countryside and to Robinson's (not always successful) attempts to grasp Chinese agriculture production conditions. Bach and Boianovsky and Serra thus document how Dutt and Robinson dealt with their own utopian views of wealth and poverty (in late nineteenth-century Europe and Maoist China, respectively) in order to gradually approach a balanced perspective as influenced by their sense of self-awareness of their modest knowledge and limited access to socioeconomic conditions abroad.

Mary Morgan's closing reflections on the papers in this issue use the distinction between an insider's and an outsider's gaze to gain perspective on the epistemic meanings of travel for the work of an economist and its ramifications for our work as historians of economics. Instead of approaching the work of historical actors as finished business, as in the articles, reports, and books that come out of it might suggest, the focus on their travels forces us to zoom in on their doings. Morgan invites us to rethink economic knowledge as something that emerges from processes that percolate between different contexts and actors and is perhaps best approached from a comparative global perspective.

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