Economic Expertise in Postcapitalist Democratic Economic Planning

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Abstract
Postcapitalist Democratic Economic Planning (DEP) seeks to democratize economic decision-making. In response to the failures of central planning, DEP is vigilant lest the emergence of some new elite subvert its democratic and egalitarian aspirations. This article considers the possibility that economic expertise intended to support DEP may be means through which new elites are covertly encouraged. DEP advocates seek to safeguard DEP processes from elite control by proposing institutional oversight structures combined with enhanced subjective oversight capacities. In the case of economic expertise, we contend that these responses mitigate the possibility that economists' analyses will have preferential implications but do not resolve this antidemocratic possibility. Economic expertise poses a problem of democratic accountability because its technical opacity impedes democratic oversight, thus enabling the covert design of economic analysis in ways that favour some groups over others. We conclude by arguing that reconsidering economic expertise in postcapitalism can attenuate this tension.

Keywords
Political economy, expertise, economic planning, democracy, postcapitalism.

Introduction

Interest in postcapitalist political economy[1] has flourished in the last decade.[2] Since 2022 alone, five academic journals (Science & Society, Review of Evolutionary Political Economy, Studies in Political Economy, Competition & Change, Monthly Review) featured special issues on aspects of postcapitalism. This article addresses one of the economic alternatives encompassed within postcapitalist political economy: democratic economic planning (DEP). By supplanting markets as adjudicators of economic allocation, postcapitalist DEP seeks to subordinate the economy to democratic decision-making. In addition to the democratizing benefits of superseding markets as economic arbiters, DEP may also support broader transformative economic struggles related to property ownership, workplace organization, economic inequality (and its intersectional implications), climate change and other oppressive aspects of contemporary capitalism.

While DEP advocates emphasize how its economic planning processes can be designed and implemented to fulfils its democratic and egalitarian aspirations, this article considers one potential threat to these aspirations: the possibility that the advisory role of economic analysis in DEP may offer covert opportunities to subvert the democratic and egalitarian

character of DEP. While the analysis below focuses on DEP, it is germaine to the broader postcapitalist scholarship in that similar subversive impacts may thwart any transformative economic alternative in which economists provide analytic guidance.

Like all efforts to analyze postcapitalist possibilities, this assessment of DEP is necessarily future-oriented and therefore speculative. We anticipate enormous and diverse challenges as DEP manages the inherent complexity of economic planning. This complexity is likely to be compounded as DEP responds to social and environmental considerations neglected within capitalism (Planning for Entropy, 2022), such as "…caregiving, non-domination, democratic self-governance, and ecological sustainability" (Sorg, 2023: 476). Economists' guidance is likely to be helpful in managing the complexities of economic decision making within DEP. Unlike highly specific fields of policy expertise (say, agricultural expertise assessing food supply issues), economic expertise is likely to be relevant in economic planning across all policy fields. Because of its broad applicability, economic analysis poses a particular threat to DEP should it encourage antidemocratic and inegalitarian economic outcomes. Our particular concern is that economic analysis may be a source of covert advocacy that encourages the emergence of some new elite in contravention of DEPs egalitarian and democratic commitments.

Since the 1970s, the possible emergence of antidemocratic elites has preoccupied DEP scholarship as it responded to critiques of both 20th century Eastern Bloc central planning and capitalism. Central planners purported to reject the hierarchies generated within capitalism, yet those occupying influential roles in a *gosplan* or *politburo* promoted economic decisions that reinforced their privilege. DEP scholars address this threat by proposing mechanisms of institutional oversight that leave decision-making power within democratic structures. This oversight is enhanced as DEP participants are encouraged to develop the critical capacities to scrutinize economic decisions for these objectionable characteristics. We contend that the possibility of covert advocacy by economists implies that institutional oversight structures combined with enhanced critical capacities deter the preferential manipulation of economic analysis, but do not eliminate this possibility. Unlike overt partisan advocacy (which DEP oversight processes may be better or worse at detecting), covert advocacy within economic analysis appears to conform to the requisites of democratic accountability and professional excellence, thereby legitimating economic planning decision that furtively confer advantages that promote the emergence of new elites.

How might a post-capitalist economic analysis conceal attributes that serve the interests of emerging elites? Any economic analysis requires countless large and small analytic decisions that may seem innocuous, but these choices offer opportunities to subtly engineer the technicalities of economic analyses to favor preferred policy agendas. The highly technical presentation of economic analysis implies that these opaque choices, and their analytic consequences, are exceedingly difficult to detect for those without specialist economic training and knowledge. Efforts to surveil this covert advocacy are arduous, and expose DEP to an ongoing "cat and mouse" dynamic in which those at a disadvantage in discerning economic analyses' subversive possibilities are obliged to

monitor economists who are best equipped to conceal them. This covert advocacy is perhaps more persuasive than overt partisanship because its technical presentation encourages the presumption that it is objectively neutral, and thus plays an influential role in legitimating preferential decisions as being rigorously "evidence-based". This presents DEP with an ongoing tension between the need for economic analysis to navigate economic planning, and its possible antidemocratic and inegalitarian attributes.

This tension is not easily resolved by requirements of transparency in economic analysis in combination with oversight of this analysis by DEP processes that vet expert analysis and proposals. Economists that are highly motivated to conceal partisan bias may appear to meet transparency requirements yet integrate these biases into the very granular level of economic analysis in ways that appear to be unobjectionable. Where this covert advocacy has the appearance of scientific neutrality, rigorous institutional oversight mechanisms and enhanced critical capacities of overseers are helpful but insufficient to safeguard democratic accountability and egalitarianism. If one assumes that disciplinary transformation in a postcapitalist context will cleanse economics of potential bias, the peril of covert advocacy by economists need not be entertained. We contend that even an economics purged of its capitalist inclinations does not imply that economics will refrain from supporting any form of social privilege and marginalization. It is a persistent possibility that economic analysis can endorse certain interests over others, yet conceal this advocacy within technically opaque and seemingly unbiased argumentation. While economic expertise poses a continued threat to democratic accountability and egalitarianism, of particular concern to DEP advocates is the possibility that this partisan use of economic analysis will contribute to the formation of a new elite.

This analysis of the tension between economic expertise and democratic accountability and egalitarianism begins by examining selected characteristics of DEP models to illustrate how they envision both democratic oversight and expertise. The second section considers the salience and quantification decisions required in technical economic analysis that enable the construction of economic arguments favouring preferential economic conclusions while appearing to be objectively neutral. The third section presents the concept of 'efficiency' as an illustration of how the opaque details of formal economic analysis generate preferential conclusions. The conclusion offers a reconceptualization of economic analysis in hopes of assisting postcapitalist DEP – or other postcapitalist economic alternatives - in managing its problematic limitations.

DEP Models and the problem of technocrats

Because DEP seeks to replace markets as allocative mechanisms, this provokes the question of how these decisions will be made. The USSR's *nomenklatura,* for example, claimed that Party elites could furnish a correct understanding of scientific Soviet Marxism-Leninism to guide decision-making (Sandle, 2017: 60*)*. Technocrats emerged to advise planning processes thanks to their party credentials, and they could deploy their privileged access to sources of information, analysis and other institutional capacities to wield this power to advance their preferred policies. In reaction to the USSR's experience, DEP scholars seek to prevent technocrats from wielding enormous influence.

This article will focus mostly on three "classic" models of DEP[3] (Devine, 1988; Albert and Hahnel, 1991; Cockshott and Cottrell 1993).

The danger posed by the concentration of power in technocrats, managers, and coordinators not only afflicted centralized planning in the USSR; it is also characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Many analysts have assessed the influence of the "professional-managerial class" (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979; Ikeler and Limonic, 2018) within capitalism. For example, this elite may deter the transition towards postcapitalism, as is illustrated in research on service and care workers (Winant, 2021; Ikeler, 2024) whose emancipatory potential is deterred, in part, by the "thoroughly hierarchical" (Ikeler, 2024: 24) organizations employing them. Thus, whether postcapitalist scholars and activists seek to overcome the antidemocratic implications of central planning experiences or existing capitalist arrangements, they must confront the difficulties entailed by supplanting hierarchical decision-making structures imposed by the professional-managerial class.

Democratized decision-making processes can only generate an indication of democratic will; they cannot arrive at some permanent and unassailable criteria to determine how economic planning should conform to democratic dictates in every conceivable circumstance. However clearly articulated democratic priorities may be, how should they be translated into a form that can structure economic planning in each specific and evolving context? To ascertain that the public prioritizes environmental sustainability does not specify exactly what would constitute environmental sustainability, and what measures would be deemed sufficient to attain it. Some form of translation is required to mediate between the generality of democratic directives and the specificity of policy details, and expert advice is typically viewed as supportive of this mediation. In particular, economists may furnish specialised knowledge and analysis to enable economic planning decisions to reflect these democratic priorities. Thus, DEP proposals seek to ensure a close alignment between democratically derived priorities, and the subsequent operationalization of these priorities within economic policies.

No DEP publication directly investigates the role of expertise, and economic expertise receives even less attention. However, DEP's concern with the disproportionate influence of technocrats offers relevant insights. By virtue of their technical expertise, access to specialized knowledge and influential position in planning structures, technocrats within central planning were able to exploit their privileged role to enact forms of favouritism advantageous to themselves or their preferred group. DEP seeks to prevent this by ensuring that planning decision are taken democratically, and they endeavour to safeguard this democratic control by proposing institutional structures to preserve democratic control over economic decision-making and confine experts to an advisory role. Complementing these institutional proposals (but less extensively discussed) is the possibility that postcapitalist circumstances encourage subjective transformation enabling the public to effectively scrutinize the advice received from experts. The institutional and

subjective transformation explored within DEP proposals are intended to work together to protect DEP's democratically derived priorities from technocratic influences.

Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel (1978, 1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1991)[4] propose a "participatory economics" model that avoids the centralizing and undemocratic tendencies in both "actually existing" socialist central planning and capitalism. In the USSR, "managers, planners, party leaders, and other experts [are] in a position to administer society's welfare and appropriate its surplus in their own "rational" way" (Albert and Hahnel, 1979: 267). Albert and Hahnel envision self-managed workplaces that move decision-making from bosses and technocrats to the workers, alongside an "Iteration Facilitation Board" (IFB) that performs the "perfunctory function" of translating democratic decisions of worker and consumer councils into the price movements required to enact these decisions (Hahnel, 2021: 93). In this institutional proposal, economists may advise IFB's price adjustments, and they may also advise worker or consumer federations and help build their long-term development plans (Hahnel, 2021: 268–84), but their role is limited to suggesting competing options that are decided by referendum. In this way, participatory economics seeks to "confin[e] experts to their proper role and preventing them from usurping a role that it is neither fair, democratic, nor efficient for them to play." (Hahnel, 2021: 107).

Daniel Saros offers an alternative perspective, largely inspired by the model developed by Albert and Hahnel, to restrict the decision-making influence of economic advisors. His model proposes a "general catalogue," that matches consumer preferences and worker council's productive capacities to generate signals to guide economic planning. Saros initially maintains that his model avoids the creation of even a small bureaucracy, but then concedes that the a "Council of Scientists" would remain to decide on maximum resource consumption limits (Saros, 2014: 220). Evgeny Morozov's enthusiastic review of the model argues that "system administrators" would also be required to enable the general catalogue to function, but they would be confined to support roles that have no significant decision-making power. (Morozov, 2019: 65)

Computer scientist Paul Cockshott and economist Allin Cottrell combine interests in computing software and ancient Athenian democracy to conceptualize a centralized technological planning apparatus to function in conjunction with a political system enabling citizens to directly take democratic decisions and govern enterprises (called "projects") (Cockshott and Cottrell, 1993). They see economic experts as facilitating decisions by "draw[ing] up alternative plans to put before a planning jury which would then choose between them" (Cockshott and Cottrell, 1993: 165). The population would vote on broad guidelines (investments in health and education, level of taxation, etc.). Cockshott and Cottrell acknowledge that successful experts in any field, including economists, would "gain in prestige and garner the admiration of their peers". Yet they contend that their egalitarian institutional structure implies that none would become wealthier or more powerful than other citizens because of their expertise (Cockshott and Cottrell, 1993: 92),

Some DEP models seek to mitigate the remaining challenges that expert advice poses to democratic accountability by emphasising the importance of postcapitalist subjective transformation. Pat Devine contends that critical capacities will be developed through long-term education and participation in democratic decision-making processes where expertise is routinely evaluated. He anticipates that postcapitalist workplaces will expose workers to diverse skills and work tasks over a rotation of the type of task everyone does throughout a lifetime, thus enhancing critical capacities and experiential knowledge[5] (Devine, 1988: 171). His "negotiated coordination" model envisions that participants who have acquired these critical capacities can effectively evaluate the options presented by experts (Devine, 1988: 181). Albert and Hahnel also rely on the enhanced critical capacities of DEP to preserve democratic accountability. By organizing labour "to distribute and combine tasks in ways that make jobs more "balanced" with regard to empowerment and desirability" (Hahnel, 2021: 90), workers could gain a more diversified spectrum of expertise. "Experts" themselves would also have more diversified work experience, which would make them less isolated from other disciplines and therefore more accessible.

The ability of these institutional and subjective capacities to detect objectional elements of expertise depends in part on how problematic expertise may be. To the extent that DEP literature adopts a latent assumption that a postcapitalist society will transcend or render unproblematic various social divisions, this assumption makes it unnecessary to scrutinize expertise as a site of social struggle. DEP models do foresee continued disagreements in postcapitalist society, such as the divergence between individual or collective consumption preferences as well as various political disagreements. These are generally depicted as manageable differences rather than deep social conflict (Hahnel, 2022: 123–7; Cockshott and Cottrell, 1993: 65–6). In the rare moments when models acknowledge more profound social conflict (Devine, 1988: 172–3), they do not study its impacts on democratized planning in detail (or its impact on the expertise that supports DEP processes).

Yet the broader field of postcapitalist political economy offers some acknowledgement of the persistence of social conflict after capitalism is overcome. For example, Lenin recognized the persistence of a class divide in the transitional phase away from capitalism (Lenin, 2003). From another perspective, Claude Lefort questioned whether "originary division in the social body" (2012: 454) would encourage the concentration of power and bureaucratic and totalitarian inclinations as "grandees" sought to imprint their social agendas on "the people" (Lefort 2012: 139). In DEP specifically, recent publications underline the lack of attention to the question of conflicts (Mandarini and Toscano 2020; Arboleda 2021).

The analysis below is predicated on the assumption that social conflicts of various ideological and material types will persist in postcapitalism, thus creating incentives for groups to attempt to influence planning decisions to support their preferred agenda. We regard this as a broadly salutary assumption, in that we embrace democratic deliberation as means of acknowledging and accommodating difference rather than rendering it irrelevant. Thus, we take seriously the proposition that democratic debate is compromised

to the extent that advocacy remains covert rather than an explicit feature of DEP processes.

Economic Analysis and Covert Influence

To examine the tension between economic expertise and DEP's democratic and egalitarian aspirations, we focus on the types of economic analyses typically furnished to evaluate economic priorities, devise policies in conformity with chosen priorities, and assess the consequences of policy interventions. We do not address the totality of economic thought (and its characteristics and internal debates under capitalism and postcapitalism), but rather the calculative "toolkit" of technical methods (such as econometrics and economic modelling) that economists are likely to use to inform policy decisions within economic planning. Even assuming a highly favourable postcapitalist transformation of economics as a discipline, we contend that the technical characteristics of calculative economic analysis will continue to challenge democratic oversight. This is not only a cautionary problem for DEP. Other proposed interventions examined within postcapitalist political economy also face these challenges if they rely on economists' guidance, or on the guidance of other calculative processes (such as the cost/benefit analysis).

Specialized economic analysis poses and antidemocratic threat because the mathematical sophistication that confers the authoritative prestige of objective "science" also implies that these economic analyses are so technically opaque that they are difficult for noneconomists to critically scrutinize. Because DEP is reliant on economic expertise that is inherently resistant to critical oversight by those without economic expertise, professional economic analysis poses a problem of "epistemic dependence" (Hardwig, 1985) for DEP. Those relying on expertise that they cannot independently evaluate are exposed to the persistent possibility that technical attributes of economic analysis can be covertly designed to favour particular conclusions in ways that are illegible to nonspecialists. Where these preferential inclinations can be buried within technical analytic tools to evade accountability, economic analysis poses the continued threat of intentionally (or even unintentionally) framing economic decisions in ways that covertly favour the interests of emerging elites while appearing to conform the requisites of rigorously unbiased scientific analysis that serves democratic and egalitarian goals.

In a postcapitalist context, the re-evaluation of economists' "tool kits" will presumably address their pro-capitalist inclinations. This re-evaluation will dilute some of the concerns discussed below. But so long as economists implement highly mathematicised tools that are inaccessible to nonspecialists, the problem of epistemic dependence remains a threat to democratic accountability. An analysis seeking to favour some social group or issue, region or industry might embed or exclude certain variables, or assess these variables in particular ways, in order to generate preferred analytic conclusions. Even without deliberate and covert partisan manipulation, merely replicating sanctioned calculative routines can perpetuate any remaining objectionable characteristics embedded in these disciplinary tools. So long as the inherent opacity of systematic quantitative economic analysis poses a problem of epistemic dependence, the tension between economic expertise and democratic accountability will persist.

How might an economic analysis enact covert favoritism despite its unbiased appearance? Any technical calculative exercise must operationalize many small and large decisions to generate a coherent analysis. These decisions are guided by economic definitions and assumptions, theoretical and methodological principles, standards of measurement and statistical inference etc. that have been litigated over time within the discipline. Seemingly innocuous analytic decisions can incline the analytic outcome towards some preferred conclusion. In capitalism, these disciplinary matters have been resolved in ways that generate a more harmonious and benign portrayal of capitalism (while elements in the disciplinary tradition suggesting alternative interpretations have been marginalized). A technical toolkit was thereby consolidated that reflected systemically confirming attributes. Economists within capitalism may profess scrupulous neutrality (and may believe these claims) while applying tools inclined to generate systemically-confirming results. So long as economists are regarded as apolitical practitioners of "neutral" or "scientific" technical computation serving the public good, this presumed objectivity and public service commitment enables the imprimatur of economic expertise to legitimate policy decisions.

To understand how technical tools can embed persuasive influences, it is important to acknowledge that no economic analysis can cover "everything". Economic processes are complex and dynamic over time; (functionally) endless considerations might be included. Because economic analysis cannot generate a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of the full interacting complexity of economic totality from every conceivable perspective and time horizon, any feasible and coherent economic analysis is always partial in two respects: 1) economic analysis must determine what subset of all potential considerations are deemed to be salient for inclusion in the analysis and which factors are defensibly excluded, and 2) economic analysis is also partial in the sense that whatever is deemed salient will be measured and assessed in ways that are informed by normative assumptions, standards for accessing and assembling empirical evidence, processes of statistical inference, and so on. These decisions about what to include/exclude, and the myriad judgements that facilitate the analysis of factors that are deemed salient, can incline the analysis towards some conclusions over others. Both determinations of salience, and the attributes of the analytic process applied to factors selected as salient, will combine to enable certain analytic possibilities and deter others.

Salience decisions about what is included and excluded are inevitable. Coherent, timely economic analysis requires some manageable number of considerations, and some criteria for salience must guide these inclusionary determinations. The more expansive the approach to analytic inclusions, the less feasible and expeditious the resulting economic analysis. Whether these criteria are established by the judgement exercised by economists alone, and/or in consultation with other experts, and/or guided by participatory and consultative democratic processes, and/or determined by some algorithmic procedure (whose architects have in turn exercised judgement in its design), any means of establishing salience criteria imply that alternative criteria have been rejected. In addition, all sorts of contestable boundary cases, data anomalies, unforeseen definitional ambiguities and even trade-offs among democratic priorities will entail

further judgements as salience criteria are operationalized *in situ.* Inclusionary judgements are inherently debatable, and judgements determining salience criteria can influence analytic outcomes in ways that have immense political consequences. Salience decisions are so numerous and detailed that full transparency about these vast number of considerations is both very onerous and unlikely to communicate to nonspecialists the full analytic consequences of each decision (as well as the interactive consequences of the ensemble of all decisions).

Once inclusionary/exclusionary judgements are made, the factors deemed salient must be rendered into a form that is amenable to calculative processes. This too entails judgements on the part of the analyst. What is the relative "worth" of, say, cleaner air or greater gender equity? What is the full environmental and social cost of a cubic meter of concrete? If calculative processes require that incommensurable considerations must be converted into some quantitative form (a points system, an accounting of quantities of time expended, a price denominated in currency etc.), some means of doing this must be devised. Certainly democratic deliberation will guide these determinations, but the translation of this guidance into the requisites of economic analysis entails the further exercise of analytic judgement that offers opportunities to bias economic calculations. A small "tweak" in the coefficient applied to some seemingly peripheral variable in an equation may make an important difference in the analytic outcome, and the combination of many small "tweaks" can have great impact. Yet because these judgements appear as seemingly innocuous details buried within an array of technical considerations, it is difficult to detect their ultimate consequences.

Determinations of salience, and the subsequent analytical procedures that characterize and quantify elements deemed salient, will continue to be necessary in any calculative processes required to guide economic decision-making in a post-capitalist context. DEP seeks to oversee the conduct of this analysis to ensure that no surreptitiously incorporated influences sway economic decision-making. Presumably a postcapitalist transformation of economics will resolve some egregious possibilities (such as including/weighing more heavily factors beneficial to capitalists than those benefiting workers). Yet the determination of salience criteria, and the subsequent treatment of elements deemed salient, are imbedded in the granular level of technical economic analysis in ways that are exceedingly difficult for nonspecialists to detect via oversight processes. The extensive use of mathematics within routinized calculative processes, computational software that reduces transparency for those unable to decipher questionable details of coding, and citation practices that invoke preestablished disciplinary precedents without accessible explanation combine to deter those without specialized knowledge from detecting the exclusions and biases that enable the routine implementation of technically sophisticated economic analysis. One tangentially noted assumption or obscure decision to curate anomalous data points in some particular manner can predetermine the conclusions of an analysis in ways that are exceedingly difficult to detect -even by those with considerable competence in economic analysis.

To some extent, DEP models mitigate the preferential biases that may be implicit in technical economic analysis. Institutional structures may have considerable impact in

compelling economists to reflect democratic priorities within their analytic judgements. The acquisition of critical skills will mitigate these oversight problems as DEP participants become more sophisticated in the detection and assessment of subtle analytic judgements. Yet acquiring skills sufficient to detect objectionable judgements buried in the most nuanced features of economic analysis requires the expenditure time and instructional resources roughly equivalent to the commitment required to become an expert economist oneself. Non-expert overseers could require debate among economists with divergent views as a means of surfacing whatever objectionable attributes may remain undetected by nonspecialists, but this too is not a guaranteed corrective to covert advocacy. Whatever economic analysis "wins" such a debate may have prevailed only because it is more sophisticated in concealing its problematic aspects. Debate among differing economic analyses will need to be adjudicated in some way, and whatever criteria are employed in this adjudication may have preferential aspects. Even in instances in which intra-economist debate surfaces a broad disciplinary consensus regarding salience determinations and the means of analyzing salient factors, this does not eliminate potentially preferential dynamics. Disciplinary processes (such as peer review as a means of reproducing prevailing disciplinary standards) tend to narrow the scope of expert opinion (Russell, 2023), in part because many important (and possibly problematic) analytic features have been adopted as a form of "intellectual path dependency" (Yalcintas, 2016).. In this scenario, even debates among economists do not reveal problematic aspects if the discipline itself has been predicated on them.

Even if we assume that democratic oversight could overcome these obstacles, external scrutiny is always at a disadvantage because the authors of an analysis are best positioned to obfuscate its potentially objectionable characteristics. Just as the pirate burying treasure is better able to subsequently locate it than some uninformed treasure-hunter, DEP oversight is at a structural disadvantage in detecting how economic analysts may "bury" analytic attributes that skew its conclusions. If transparency standards are created with the intention of preventing these manipulations, those intent on subverting democratic directives will design subsequent manipulations to conform to these standards while achieving the intended impact some other way that evades detection. Even if extraordinarily vigilant institutional oversight processes are composed of overseers with exceptional detective abilities, the immense time and resources required to accomplish this monitoring would virtually nullify the benefit derived by consulting specialist advice to expedite and enhance economic planning decisions.

Postcapitalist Economic Expertise and covert influence: the example of "efficiency"
In capitalism, economic expertise routinely forecloses political choices by depicting democratic and egalitarian options as economically impractical or objectionable via mathematical argumentation that conceals hegemonic agendas as apolitical scientific authority. This section addresses the concept of "efficiency" as an example of a concept that is frequently invoked to justify the optimality of economic arrangements, yet the use of this concept also offers many opportunities for covert advocacy. Economists must make salience decisions while employing this concept, and must operationalize these decisions to facilitate analytic feasibility and coherence. Reconstructing the concept of efficiency, or replacing it with some more serviceable postcapitalist alternative, would

mitigate some of these politically objectionable aspects. But we contend that these concerns will persist however laudable the postcapitalist transformation of economics may be because of the necessary yet inherently political requirement of establishing salience criteria and quantifications of elements deemed salient.

Within the discipline of economics, the analysis of efficiency reflects an understandable desire to optimally allocate resources rather than "waste" resources on endeavours not valued by society. If we minimize resources required for any given purpose, resources will be freed up for other important pursuits. Whether it is a called "efficiency" or some other postcapitalist terminology, there will be some economic concept employed to ascertain whether resources are deployed to their maximum advantage. Ascertaining the "best" use of resources (and what counts as "waste") are political decisions reflecting all sorts of potential environmental and social priorities, and we presume DEP will democratically debate and refine these goals over time in order to direct economists to implement them. But no guideline can cover every eventuality, and even good-faith application of these guidelines will face ambiguities that oblige economists to interpret these guidelines to generate feasible and policy-relevant economic analysis.

What constitutes "efficiency" is contested, even within contemporary pro-capitalist economics (Sickles and Zelenyuk, 2019). For illustrative purposes we discuss a typical microeconomic view that capitalist firms are efficient if they minimize the costs of inputs for a given level of output. Yet what appears as a politically benign process counting inputs and recording their prices to arrive at the total costs of production conceals all sorts of politically-charged determinations. The mainstream economic concept of efficiency has evolved to "see" considerations relevant to the employer's profitability but to prevent "seeing" the wider social impacts of employer profitability. To assess efficiency by this standard, the economist must establish what is deemed to be a salient input. This assessment is guided by disciplinary precedent: inputs paid for by the capitalist are salient, inputs whose cost are borne elsewhere are not. (Even devotees of this perspective acknowledge that the existence of externalities renders this portrayal of efficiency highly questionable, but in practice this accounting framework is regarded as sufficient for routine and policy-relevant purposes.) Thus, the cost of wages "matters" while the costs associated with domestic labour or preserving climate stability are irrelevant, despite the fact that the performance of labour is impossible without a livable climate and the capacity to accomplish the daily tasks of social reproduction. Based on this pro-capitalist understanding of efficiency, a firm's efficiency is increased if it can reduce the number of employees (or depress existing employees' wages) for a given level of production. Whatever social consequences ensue from these employer actions is also deemed irrelevant to assessments of a firm's efficiency. If a firm is made more "efficient" (by this standard) in ways that compromise worker mental health, these consequences disappear in this pro-capitalist rendering of efficiency.

Not only is the question of "what counts" politicized, so to is the question of "how to count" what is determined to be salient. A perspective on efficiency that is committed to free market capitalism need only consult the market price of the inputs purchased by the employer to generate a quantitative indication of the total cost of production. Any

consideration that has no evident price tag is irrelevant. DEP models reject market adjudication of these relative prices, but the various alternatives they propose must struggle with the fundamental difficulty of attaching some numerical value to incommensurable inputs. How should the "cost" of good worker mental health be quantified in a way that enables it to be added to the "cost" of concrete to calculate the costs of production? What sort of assumptions and compromises are required to establish proxies that suffice to enable this calculation? This quantification problem is only compounded as the number and diversity of inputs deemed relevant increases, thus obliging economists to assign some imputed value to, say, solidaristic and discrimination-free workplaces. However technically sophisticated our algorithmic capacities or consultative practices may become, numerical indications of value require judgements that will pose problems for overseers to surveil.

In a postcapitalist context, the considerations deemed germaine to the concept and measurement of efficiency (or its successor concept) will be reconsidered. Whether some new conceptual term emerges in the attempt to avoid the wasteful allocation of resources, or the existing concept of efficiency is adapted, criteria for what considerations are germaine (and how to measure them) must be devised. DEP processes must debate the broad intentions of these criteria in an effort to require economic analysis to conform to democratic objectives. Yet every analytic decision (including decisions intended to reflect democratically derived priorities) entails still more decisions. If DEP processes were to determine that, say, we collectively prioritize the elimination of gender inequality as a means for enhancing (a newly-conceived understanding of) efficiency, this introduces a myriad of issues about what constitutes gender inequity and what remediates/exacerbates it (as well as how measurement difficulties are provoked by these determinations). Subsequent iterations of the political process may clarify some of these ambiguities, but these revisions will only provoke further debates as refinements introduce further analytic considerations and decision. At each step in this iterative processes, seemingly benign decisions may have consequences that favour certain groups over others.

It is a perpetual and mammoth undertaking to evaluate the enormous number of decisions entailed in choosing what "counts" in an analysis, and how to "count" it. A comprehensive approache to promoting transparency might compel economists to assess the analytic consequences of various discretionary judgements, but this would require a sequence of comparative scenarios contingent on various salience assumptions and measurement protocols. Who is to say what number of analytic scenarios is sufficient to expose the problematic implications of how these analytic judgements? Where these scenario-generating processes are expedited by algorithmic or other computational aids, a further layer of scrutiny would be required to ensure that the architecture of these aids does not enact biases. It is exceedingly difficult to envision that oversight processes can scrutinize every conceivable inclusion/exclusion and quantification issue for every planning decision, and continuously adjust these assessments as circumstances evolve. Especially when urgent and highly consequential decisions must be made quickly in evolving – and quite possibly historically unprecedented - postcapitalist economic circumstances, analytic judgement calls are required despite our limited capacities to

foresee their consequences. The benefit of consulting economists is presumably that they can expedite these analytic processes to enable prompt policy action, but this reliance on economists constitutes an outsources of democratic accountability in ways that make DEP vulnerable to covert advocacy.

In our view, DEP models' reliance on institutional oversight structures together with improved subjective capacities to critique expert advice mitigate but do not eliminate the possibility that the advisory role of economic expertise can subvert democratic decision-making and propel inegalitarian hierarchies. The problem of epistemic dependence implies a structural asymmetry in which oversight capacities will always be at a disadvantage in detecting the possibility that economists will design their analyses to adhere to these standards while biases in more covert ways. Since the potential to embed covert advocacy within of economic analysis cannot be abolished, it must be vigilantly navigated to contain this persistent threat to democratic egalitarianism.

Conclusion

The presumption that economic expertise can become apolitical makes plausible the proposition that economists and their specialist knowledge can be made unproblematically subservient to a democratic process as the transition away from capitalism cleanses expertise of its objectionable ideological implications. Or, if one assumes that some objectionable residue exists but is either inconsequential or detectable by institutional safeguards and/or critical scrutiny, the problem of the anti-democratic potential of expertise is feasibly monitored and contained. We reject the scientific pretensions of economics as a discipline that can be cleansed of its preferential aspects in a postcapitalist future. If the elimination of capitalism does not imply that economic expertise will emerge as unproblematic, and if the continued problem of epistemic dependence implies that these problematic aspects are either difficult or functionally impossible to detect without extensive time and resources invested in its surveillance, then the advisory guidance of economic expertise will pose antidemocratic challenges in postcapitalist DEP that are not entirely overcome by institutional constraints on the power of technocrats and supporting subjective transformation. We regard these antidemocratic and inegalitarian potentials as unresolvable – in the sense that they will not be abolished. But by acknowledging these potentials, there is the possibility of managing them.

As Benjamin Braun (2020) puts it, the tension between democracy and technocracy will be at the heart of any democratic socialist project. On one side of this tension, those who analyze the data see the macro questions and use science to make decisions; on the other, the priorities that emerge from the needs, desires and wills of everyday life in communities, workplaces and homes. Since economic analysis cannot be cleansed of any preferential attributes to furnish DEP with uncontestable conclusions about how economic affairs should be conducted, how might DEP manage this tension? In our view, steps towards managing the potential antidemocratic implications of economic expertise are encouraged when we reconsider our understanding of postcapitalist economic expertise itself. This enlarges the notion of subjective transformation referenced by Devine (1988: 180–3) to include an understanding of the limits of expert knowledge. We contend that economic analysis serves postcapitalist DEP to the extent that it is

understood to be conditional, limited and capable only of structuring economic arguments based on whatever (debatable) ensemble of influences have informed its creation. We hope that in postcapitalist DEP, and in any other proposed postcapitalist transformation, that any economic analysis that proclaims itself to be cleansed of political attributes and capable of offering some unassailable "truth" is understood to be complicit in concealing a political agenda. Following Castoriadis broader skepticism of "experts":

> There are not and cannot be "experts" on political affairs. […] The prevalent idea that there exist "experts" in politics, that is, specialists of the universal and technicians of the totality, makes a mockery of the idea of democracy. (Castoriadis, 1983: 99–100)

Economic experts in postcapitalism can be reconceptualized as contributing helpful skill and experience than may serve democratic decision-making, but these contributions always reflect some socially-situated point of view. An economist pretending to provide an analysis from the neutral perspective offered by "economics" should be discredited – if not unintelligible – in a postcapitalist society. By viewing economics as inevitably partial, contingent, and conjectural, we can address this body of thought as a site of struggle, rather than the negation of struggle. An economics shorn of its pretensions of disinterestedness becomes more amenable to democratic oversight in that it is acknowledged that the practice of professional economic analysis does not lie outside of politics.

If we understand expertise not as providing certainty (or optimality) but as the detailed assessment of possibilities and considerations that can always be reconfigured as new salience and measurement choices are introduced, then we can become accustomed to making political decisions without relying on expertise to truncate debate. When politicized and democratically attentive DEP processes understand experts as an element of the larger social conflict about what society should be and do, then genuinely diverse expertise can be debated as integral to democratic deliberation itself.

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Notes
[1] The forthcoming *Handbook on Postcapitalist Political Economy* (Akbulut et al. 2027) presents the rationale behind assembling these research programs into a common field and the borders of this field.
[2] For example, a lot of large audience books are now discussing postcaptialism casually: Rifkin, 2014; Mason, 2015; Bastani, 2019; Wark, 2019; Benanav, 2021; Clayton et al., 2021; Vettese & Pendergrass, 2022; Fishwick & Kiersey, 2022.

[3] For a brief general introduction to these three DEP models: Laurin-Lamothe, Legault and Tremblay-Pepin 2025.
[4] These proposals share some similarities with young Cornelius Castoriadis (1988) and Milovan Djilas (1983)
[5] "Only as everyone becomes an expert and develops the ability to form sensible judgements about areas in which they are not expert will the full potentialities of human beings for personal and collective self-development be realized." (Devine, 1988: 182).

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