

Institution:	Goldsmiths, University of London
Unit of Assessment:	29: English Language and Literature
Title of case study:	Red Plenty
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	

Francis Spufford’s book *Red Plenty* has been acclaimed as an ironic reflection on contemporary problems, despite being apparently devoted to the deadest of issues: central planning in the former USSR. The book has helped stimulate debate about alternative economic strategies, with the title becoming shorthand for non-market forms of organisation, and has contributed to rising interest in Soviet history. But besides achieving these topical resonances, it has been saluted for its innovative fusion of fiction and non-fiction, and its contribution to an ongoing erosion of literary boundaries. It has been released in eight languages and in the USA, with in excess of 25,000 copies sold to date; it has been shortlisted for several major book prizes. Spufford has engaged in extensive public discussion of the work, both at live events and in the broadcast media, and this has sparked voluminous on-line commentary from the wider public.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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Spufford was appointed to a Senior Lectureship at Goldsmiths in 2007 and has been in post continuously since then. From the time of his arrival until the autumn of 2009 he worked on a creative work that transgresses the traditional boundary between fiction and non-fiction, *Red Plenty*. As its title suggests, it is the story of economic optimism in the Soviet Union during the Sputnik era, when the centrally-planned communist economy appeared to be making a plausible challenge to the market economies of the West. It was published by Faber & Faber in August 2010.^[1a]

Although *Red Plenty* tells a story, it also depicts with great accuracy the real historical situation of the USSR from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Some characters are fictional (although still based on anecdotes and contemporary observations), while many are thoroughly-researched historical figures into whom Spufford breathes life by endowing them with imagined actions and words. The book has 53 pages of endnotes and an annotated list of characters which help the reader navigate the boundary between fiction and fact. It has been praised by economists, Russianists, computer scientists, and both cultural and economic historians for its plausibility and its detailed fidelity to the documented past. Tributes to its accuracy have come from witnesses who knew and worked with some of its characters.^[1b]

As well as relevant secondary literature on economics and Russian history, Spufford worked his way through translated primary sources, from Gosplan statistics to reports on the potato-optimising program of the Moscow Regional Planning Agency and the building plans for the Svetlogorsk Artificial Fibre Plant. *Red Plenty* also includes complex discussions of early computer architecture and of the molecular biology of lung cancer. This required three journeys to Russia, interviews with hardware designers, anthropologists and biologists, and the use of the specialised resources of the Marshall Economics Library in Cambridge, the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, and the library of the Society for Co-operation in Research in Soviet and Eastern European Studies.

Although the book is not intended to be a contribution to historical scholarship, this is used as its material. The original research represented by the book is practice-based: it lay in the devising of the book’s formal structure, and in the creation by Spufford – following on from his interest in economies as narratives – of the original perceptual tools required for a reader to experience intuitively the normally impalpable functioning of economic networks.

Spufford explained his ambitions for the book in an interview with the American literary magazine “A Public Space”: *‘I wanted a thick, immersive experience, in which all thoughts and feelings belonged to particular people; and I wanted attention to the idea [of central planning] as well... I wanted to bring to life the drag of a big piece of twentieth-century thinking as it furrowed and blundered its way through a big tract of experience...’*^[3]

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Evidence of the international calibre of the research is set out below.

1. Spufford, F. (2010) *Red Plenty*. London: Faber & Faber. ISBN: 9780571225231.

The book has been submitted as an output to the REF, and is thus available in REF 2b.

Attesting to the rigour of the historical research underpinning the book, Spufford has received numerous emails (available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office) from academic experts commenting on the accuracy of the information it presents. These include a USSR specialist in ethnic relations in Eastern Europe; a Professor of Russian at Oxford University who has published on Russian literature; a Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the LSE; a historian of Russia at the University of Chicago; and an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, USA.

It has been critically acclaimed, as evidenced by positive reviews in (for instance): the [Financial Times](#) (16/0810); The [Economist](#) (19/0810); The [Telegraph](#) (20/0810); The [Independent](#) (27/08/10); The [London Review of Books](#) (06/01/11); and The [Observer](#) (08/0810).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Red Plenty elicited great interest across the world, including in former Eastern-bloc countries. In the UK it has sold over 10,000 hardback and around 10,000 paperback copies; it has had a print-run of 5,500 in the USA and is now on its second print run in the Netherlands.^[1] Translations and editions have also been published in the USA, Russia, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Turkey, and Germany. It has attracted favourable reviews and online commentary in America and Europe, including a feature in Russian on the international radio station Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe (09/04/10), and has received particularly widespread coverage in the Netherlands, including a review by the leading left-centre Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant*. It has also been the subject of commentary on the Russian blog *Ruconomics*.^[2]

Its literary impact is evidenced through its shortlisting for the British Science Fiction Association's non-fiction award,^[3] and the Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize for books communicating 'the spirit of place'.^[4] It was also long-listed for the Orwell Prize, Britain's most prestigious prize for political writing.^[5]

It has received numerous positive reviews.^[6] For example, *Policy Review*, the journal of the public policy Hoover Institution of Stanford University, said "*Whether you are interested in the history of the Soviet Union or not, I am certain you will enjoy this marvelous book. It reminded me of Orwell at his best. But if you are interested in Soviet history, as I am, the book will have special significance.*" The *Financial Times* has described it as 'eccentric in construction, audacious in conception' and 'one of the strangest books ever written on the Soviet Union...an eccentric delight'; there have been similar comments in *The Independent*, *The Observer*, and the *London Review of Books*. Following its release in the USA in February 2012, it was reviewed in *The Dallas News* and twice in the *New York Times*, which described it as 'a genre-bender – part novel, part history... the result is a marvel.'

The publication of *Red Plenty* in the aftermath of the 2007-9 financial crisis played into a public conversation in the national media and online about alternative economic models. In a context of scepticism about economic institutions, it was read by many as containing lessons for contemporary self-understanding.

Spufford spoke on BBC Radio 4's 'Start the Week' and 'Today' programmes in August 2010.^[7] Subsequently, Radio 4 commissioned Spufford to write and present *Lenin in Letchworth*, an ironic look at the contacts between the Russian Bolsheviks and the British garden city movement. A programme on the arts station Resonance FM was devoted to the book.^[8]

Beyond the UK, he was interviewed twice by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe in connection with the Russian translation of the book, the second time speaking alongside Abel Aganbegyan, principal economic adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev and the original for one of the book's characters. He was also the subject of a programme on the English language service of Voice of Russia. In the Netherlands, he has been interviewed for both radio and television.^[9]

Spufford has appeared in live discussion events in cities across the UK. As part of the Russia-themed 2011 London Book Fair he joined a South Bank Centre discussion on 'The Soviet Dream' with Orlando Figes.^[10] At the 2010 Edinburgh Book Festival he spoke alongside the Soviet historian Rachel Polonsky, and on the Edinburgh Fringe debated with Paul Cockshott, a computer scientist and advocate of cybernetic socialist planning.^[11] This later sparked a technical discussion among computer scientists about the underlying computational viability of Soviet-style 'optimal planning', given the information technology of the present rather than of the 1960s. Cockshott eventually published his review of *Red Plenty* in his 2012 book, *Arguments for Socialism*.

However, the book's many-sided irony and its careful concealment of the author's own politics meant it was praised across almost the entire political spectrum, by libertarians, conservatives, neo-liberals and liberals as well as socialists and Marxists. In the United States, for example, it was applauded simultaneously in the *New Left Review* and in the journals of the centre-right Brookings Institution and of the libertarian Cato Institute. More recently, Spufford's title has passed into the language, floating free from the book and instead signifying any non-market form of prosperity. Thus a soup kitchen organized by leftwingers in Philadelphia operates under the name 'Red Plenty',^[12] whilst an essay in the cultural studies journal *Culture Machine* examines 'the computing platforms that would be necessary for a contemporary "red plenty"'^[13].

His insights have stimulated a lively public reaction, as evidenced in several political and literary blogs and online commentaries including *Crooked Timber*, the *Yorkshire Ranter*, *The Enlightened Economist*, *Tonsk79*, *Open Letters Monthly*, and economist Brad DeLong's *Grasping Reality*.^[14] His publication of a piece, 'Lessons from the Soviet Dream', on *The Guardian's Comment is Free* website in 2010 elicited a 125-comment public discussion thread.^[15]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Hard or electronic copies of all the sources listed below can be provided by Goldsmiths Research Office, on request.

1. *Red Plenty*. Publishers' sales figures are available to the Panel, confidentially, on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.
2. Ruconomics [blog](#) (7 November 2011)
3. Shortlist for the British Science Fiction Association's [non-fiction award](#)
4. Shortlist for the [2011 Ondaatje Prize](#).
5. Longlist for the [2011 Orwell Prize](#).
6. Reviews of *Red Plenty*: A compilation is available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.
7. BBC Radio 4 '[Start the Week](#)' (29 November 2010); and '[Today](#)' (27 August 2010).
8. Resonance FM [interview](#) on 'Little Atoms' show (14 Jan 2011). Airwave listenership is around 120,000 monthly; online and on *itunes* its shows gain considerably more than that.
9. International media: A compilation of information relating to the programmes described here is available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.
10. Russia-themed London Book Fair [event](#) and South Bank [discussion](#).
11. [Edinburgh Festival Book Fringe](#): Discussions with [Cockshott](#) (25 August 2010) and [Polonsky](#) (26 August 2010)

12. “Red Plenty” [soup kitchen](#)
13. Dyer-Witthford, N. (2013). [Red Plenty Platforms](#). *Culture Machine*, 14(0).
14. Blogs: Copies can be provided by Goldsmiths Research Office on request.
15. '[Lessons from the Soviet Dream](#)' in The Guardian's online *Comment is Free* site, 7 Aug 2010.