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Economic Scene; Disneyland and the old U.S.S.R.: Sharing something in common.

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IT'S 3 o'clock on a sunny April afternoon, and tens of thousands of parents know exactly where their children are. Here at Disneyland, the line for Pirates of the Caribbean is an hour long. But that's nothing: Splash Mountain will set you back 90 minutes. And somewhere, deep in the bowels of Adventureland, 10-year-olds are hunkering down for the two and a half hour trial-by-boredom that precedes entry to Indiana Jones's Temple of the Forbidden Eye.

Nothing so graphically illustrates the organizational triumph of Disney as its ability to make people stand in line and like it. But wait. Didn't lines symbolize the bankruptcy of the Soviet system? Maybe Disneyomics has more in common with Soviet rationing than is first apparent.

Every veteran of Econ 101 understands the pitfalls of running an economy without the help of prices that reflect cost and value. In the Soviet Union, bread was cheap and easy to get. It was so cheap and easy that it was occasionally fed to pigs in lieu of grain.

By contrast, most consumer goods were deliberately rationed by waiting time. Thus everyone but party bigwigs and assorted heroes of socialism was forced into waiting lines for cars, apartments, video recorders, even good shoes. Nobody knew how many items to produce because nobody had a clue about their relative value.

So, why the comparison with Disney, that jewel in American capitalism's crown? Entry to Disneyland is by flat fee: \$45 for adults, \$35 for children plus \$6 for parking. Thereafter, all rides are "free." The only attempt to use prices to match demand to supply is at the gate, where southern Californians and vacationers on package tours obtain discounts on off-peak days.

But Mickey and Donald are gentle commissars, specialists in minimizing the pain of waiting.

Waiting times are generally posted. Crowd control is friendly but firm, eliminating anxiety that the race will be won by the aggressive. If V.I.P.'s do manage to talk their way past the crowds, the proletariat never notices. And the really long queues are hidden inside buildings. "We try to create a total guest experience," explains John Dreyer, a spokesman for the Walt Disney Company.

But that still leaves a puzzle: Why doesn't Disney charge for individual rides according to their popularity, thereby reducing the waste inherent in queuing? Why, for that matter, asks Gary Becker, a Nobel laureate in economics at the University of Chicago, doesn't Disney price like museums and cable television systems? After all, they manage to charge a flat fee for access to the standard fare and then add on additional charges for premium entertainment.

Alternatively, why doesn't Disney offer its version of business class along with coach, charging, say, \$100 to wait in separate (and presumably shorter) lines? Ski resorts manage this very discreetly, notes Walter Oi, an economist at the University of Rochester, by allowing skiers who buy lessons to cut into the lift lines.

One possibility is that theme park visitors are mostly one-time visitors, and thus Disney can afford to fool them by charging modestly and then delivering less access to rides than expected. But Robert H. Frank, an economist at Cornell University, dismisses the idea. "Disney," he explains, "lives on good will and word-of-mouth."

A more plausible explanation is the appeal of the salad bar: Americans don't like to think about budgets and find the experience particularly unpalatable when they are vacationing. It is no accident that cruise ships, ski resorts, rental car companies -- and most other theme parks -- use similar one-price-buys-everything plans.

Lawrence White, an economist at the Stern School of Business at New York University, offers yet another hypothesis.

"Waiting in line is part of the fun," he suggests. What's more, there is safety in numbers: the lines validate consumers' decisions to go to Disneyland, much the way the difficulty of reserving a table at a trendy restaurant confirms the patrons' choice.

Perhaps the most intriguing explanation comes from Mr. Frank. If rides like Indiana Jones were priced high enough to eliminate the lines, he argues, it would be possible for visitors to spend hundreds of dollars a day on not-so-cheap thrills. Hence flat-rate pricing, he argues, "may be a way of rationing kids' demands without ever forcing their parents to say no."

What, then, does Disney pricing have to do with Soviet pricing? Both assume efficiency isn't everything, that rationing with time instead of money allows people to avoid confronting the unwelcome realities of inequity and limited income.

Like the Disney Company, the Soviets were in the business of packaging fantasy. Needless to say, Mickey does it much better. But the fact that it works for Disney suggests it just might work in more situations than economists like to admit.

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