

## GERMAN TRANSLATIONS OF PIERO SRAFFA'S PRODUCTION OF COMMODITIES BY MEANS OF COMMODITIES. PRELUDE TO A CRITIQUE OF ECONOMIC THEORY

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Officially, there is only a single translation of Sraffa's book, which was published in 1960, into German. The translation appeared in 1968 entitled *Warenproduktion mittels Waren* in the East German (the former German Democratic Republic) part of Berlin; the publisher was the Akademie Verlag. The book was translated together with an introduction by Behr and Kohlmey. In the Introduction the two editors put forward their interpretation of Sraffa's contribution, which was meant to legitimize the translation vis-à-vis the SED party line and accordingly portrayed Sraffa as an advocate of the labour theory of value.

In the 1970s Bertram Schefold wanted to reprint the Akademie Verlag translation in a book to be published by Suhrkamp (Frankfurt) together with his "Nachworte", i.e. comments on Sraffa's text and the historical tradition to which it belonged and the marginalist theory which it criticised.

I learned about these plans from an advertisement by Suhrkamp Verlag. I had read the German translation of Sraffa's book and had spotted some serious errors and misconceptions in the translation. I contacted Schefold and told him that the German translation was bad and distorted seriously the meaning of Sraffa's argument in various places. In order to discuss matters in detail I visited Schefold in Frankfurt and showed him all the problematic passages in the translation. Given the dimension of the problem, we agreed that the best thing would be a new translation of Sraffa's book. With this proposal Schefold then approached Suhrkamp Verlag, which in turn approached the Akademie Verlag who had the rights of a German edition of Sraffa's book.

The Akademie Verlag was strictly opposed to a new translation, but agreed that necessary changes are made without providing the public with detailed information about them. Instead they would only allow to inform the reader that typos in the mathematical formulations were corrected.

I reworked the translation and corrected the misconceptions and errors. This new version was then published without full information about what had been done.

As regards the shortcomings of the Akademie Verlag German edition of Sraffa's book, a few examples must suffice. Sraffa's book is analytically very demanding and at the same time it is written in a very terse prose. Sraffa's compact style has been aptly characterised by Amartya Sen in the following way: 'Sraffa refuses to write more than one page per month.' Therefore, translating his book is a real challenge. The translator need not only know English, but also mathematics and must be familiar with logic. The biggest errors in the translation are to be found in the chapter on joint production, which is the analytically most demanding one. In places the translator has totally reversed the meaning of Sraffa's argument, so that the reader is in a hopeless situation: the German text simply does not make any sense. It would, of course, be wrong to put the blame on Sraffa – it ought instead to be put on the translator.

Then there are numerous awkward and partly misleading translations, such as "Grenzmethode" for marginal method, "Aufkommen" for Output, "kostspielige Liebhabereien" for luxuries, "vorwegzunehmen" for prejudice, "Substitutionsmittel" for means of subsistence, "Erzeugnisstruktur" for composition of the aggregate, "Basisvariable" for basic products, "übereinstimmt" for corresponds, "gut geeignet" for proves to be valid, "Mehrprodukt-Zweige" for multiple product industries, etc. Several sentences change the meaning of the original English text. It is obvious that the translator had great difficulties to make sense of Sraffa's tightly woven argument and frequently simply misunderstood the original. In some places the translator dropped entire

sentences or parts of them and adjuncts, thereby suppressing important conditions to be met in order for the statement made in the preceding passage to hold true. The concept of “Profite” is erroneously used for that of rate of profits.

In the chapter on fixed capital there are numerous infelicities. “Verschleiß” is supposed to translate depreciation, a value concept. Entire sentences are problematic or outright wrong. There is clear evidence that the translator did not understand the English text and tried to make sense of it as best as he could. Alas, he missed the sense Sraffa intended!

The same can be said about the chapter on land and the rent of land. Elementary misunderstanding abound. Long passages of the translation are incomprehensible.

In the chapter on “Switch in the Methods of Production” investors are translated as “Bauherrn” and the death penalty is passed on Sraffa’s subtle argument in terms of the translation provided.

One can only wonder whether any reader of the German translation could benefit from it. One can only hope that the quality of the German text is not erroneously interpreted as a failure of Sraffa to argue properly and write convincingly.

An additional aspect of translations is to be mentioned. They are typically introduced by some foreword or introduction, in which some editor or the translator himself informs the reader about his relationship to the text. This is also the case in the present example. The foreword reflects the ideological leanings of the editors-translator and thus sheds light on how Sraffa was translated or rather interpreted. Very often translations involve some element of interpretation, and the book under consideration is a case in point.

## REFERENCES

Sraffa, Piero (1960), *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities. Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; German edition *Warenproduktion mittels Waren*, translated by Johannes Behr, edited and introduced by Johannes Behr and Gunther Kohlmey, Berlin-East 1968: Akademie Verlag; West German edition supplemented with a Postscript by Bertram Schefold and an Errata leaflet by Heinz D. Kurz, Frankfurt am Main 1976: Suhrkamp.