

## EE-T AND DIDACTICS: A PROJECT FOR TEACHING HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT WITH ICT TOOLS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

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### Abstract

*The EE-T Project is a European research and educational project sponsored by the European Commission, whose aim is to promote a digital interactive educational tool focused on translations of economic texts, with the objectives of supplying a teaching and research tool for better understanding how the economic perspective, language and different traditions became a key component of the European model in policy and social relations. This paper explores the use of this new ICT tool in the History of Economic Thought teaching, stressing the importance of international circulation of economic ideas, in which translations of economic texts plays a crucial role. This phenomenon provides with powerful insights on the building of the economic science and the present state of this field of knowledge.*

### Introduction

In many universities (a rapidly decreasing number, though) bachelor and master degrees in Economics include some courses in the History of Economic Thought. This paper deals with a didactic and research project, one of whose objectives is to launch a new strategy and methodology to improve learning in this discipline, through a direct contact of students with the ideas of major economists in the history of economic science. This contact will take place by an active using of the main writings of these economists through a new ICT tool especially designed to teach History of Economic Thought. This tool, which is being currently created by a bunch of research groups in several European universities (among which the University of Barcelona), consists on a database of original economic texts and its translations in the most spoken languages of the European Union, complemented with reading guides, exercises, and other materials for students' learning. The combination of the analysis of some of the most important texts in the history of economics with the exploitation of this ICT tool is aimed at facilitating students' access to the main historical economic ideas, supplying them with instruments for analysis and understanding, and giving them the opportunity to analyze those ideas in their original version (essentially English, but also other languages) and also in their translated versions, therefore also experiencing the importance of the phenomena of diffusion of economic ideas through nations and elites.

## Teaching History of Economic Ideas through original texts

It has been recently that many economists, some of them among the most renowned in the world (Krugman, DeLong, Roubini, Ferguson, Eichengreen, etc.), have expressed the idea that a deeper specific training in economic history and in the history of economic ideas is essential in the university background of future economists. This has been stressed particularly in the light of the events surrounding the current economic and financial crisis. These economists have highlighted the importance of an accurate knowledge in these disciplines, in order not only to understand better the nature of present economic problems, but also to open new insights to tackle the specific problems that the crisis is posing to policymakers in all nations.

Contrary to modern trends in economic teaching in many countries, we join these opinions and believe that there are plenty of motives to defend the need of a course in the history of economic ideas among the most essential subjects in the training of an economist. This is even more important as far as courses such as methodology of economics or ethics and economics are being quickly eliminated from syllabi, which are fostering instrumental technical courses without any hesitation. An essential function of the history of economic ideas, be it in undergraduate or graduate courses, and the main reason to demand its presence in economic teaching in universities, is to make the students able to integrate the development of the economic science in a complete overall panorama, showing that the different competences that the student acquires along his training have precise historical origins, which is linked to particular circumstances, theoretical and ideological framework. A course in the history of economic thought must provide students with insights to the when, how and why of the contents that they learn in the rest of the courses on economic theory they take in their syllabi. It is important to grasp the complexity of its evolution and the existence of possible alternatives to the conventional economic theory that is usually taught in Economics schools. This is important for future economists to develop critical conscience with respect to predominant theories and models.

The use of original writings in the study of the history of economic ideas is an essential way – and perhaps the most effective – to apprehend this subject and appreciate it. It is clearly through the study of works by economists that one can develop an intimate knowledge of the big authors that have shaped the history of this social science. This is grounded in the impression that students should directly experience the original expression of the ideas that have shaped not only the history of the economic analysis and present economic science, but also the economic policies successively implemented by governments and, moreover, the entire economic system that societies have developed. The living cycle of these ideas, this is, how they were created, adopted and adapted and transformed by successive economists and other social thinkers, expanded, and, in some cases, incorporated into the system of beliefs of societies (or rejected and relegated to oblivion) is crucial to understand the evolution of economics. Direct contact, without interpreters or intermediaries, allows the student to approach the authors and make critical assessments of their ideas. Reading the original works by the most important economists in History – Adam Smith, David Ricardo, J.S. Mill, Marx, Marshall, Keynes, Friedman, etc. – allows understanding better the innovation (and in some occasions even the revolution) their ideas brought up and their consequences for the development of modern economic analysis up to today. We believe that it is essential that a trainee in Economics (and much more a student in a master degree) should not end its grade (or master) without having known directly

some of the most relevant texts in his field of specialization.<sup>1</sup>

The diffusion of economic ideas is a subject that is not particularly highlighted in an undergraduate course in history of economic thought, and perhaps might be deemed a specialist area to be taught at most in a master course. However, the phenomenon of transmission of economic ideas, particularly at the international level, is extremely important to understand national histories of economic analysis and the design of economic policy. Economics is a relatively young science, whose formal origins are associated to a definite geographic area and to a limited theoretical framework, condensed in a few works, from which it was diffused to the rest of the world. This has been a major topic for research: Some scholars have suggested theoretical models to explain the phenomenon of the transmission of economic thought.<sup>2</sup> There are also plenty of studies on particular cases of spread and reception of economic ideas, as a consequence of the strong development of the analysis on the diffusion of individual authors' ideas or schools of thought in different countries or regions. Besides, some authors have kept methodological debates on national styles and traditions of economic analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Transmission of economic ideas is interesting as far as they can, through a process of assimilation and adaptation, decisively influence economists' work and economic policy in the receptor country. Many factors can be held responsible for the influence that an idea can exert at a precise time, especially in the area of economic policy: The particular dimensions of an idea (new features it embraces, concepts it introduces and the implications it involves) can influence its spread in quite different manners. Economic and social circumstances can play an absolutely crucial role in the influence of an idea. Its power of persuasion largely depends on its linkage to current economic and political circumstances. Also its expansion is affected by the circumstances of receivers, for instance, the factors that people in charge of designing the economic policy consider crucial regarding a new idea. In this framework, the reception of economic ideas by policymakers is especially crucial.<sup>4</sup> The diffusion of economic ideas among economists is also particularly relevant, as they are the major producers of economic ideas. Stigler pointed out two ways through which an idea succeeds within the economic profession. It should not contradict any other idea already established in the scientific *statu quo*, and it might be accepted for the sake of necessity, because there is no scientific alternative to this new idea. In his opinion, the institutional organization of economic research is a potential influence regarding a science's receptiveness to new ideas.<sup>5</sup> Becker pointed out that an important part of the reluctance of scientists to accept new ideas can be explained by two economic concepts: the first one is the concept of human capital: senior academicians have a background in a specific field of knowledge, which would be reduced if a new theory emerged, making it obsolete. The second is aversion to risk, which leads young researchers to opt for theories that are already accepted.<sup>6</sup> Some

<sup>1</sup> We have already defended this position somewhere else. See Prat and San Julián (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Among the most suggestive, see Spengler (1970), Mäki (1996) and Llombart (2005).

<sup>3</sup> See Cardoso (2003) for a general panorama of these subjects and bibliography. On some general aspects of the transmission of economic ideas, see the collective work edited by Colander and Coats (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Hall has studied this phenomenon: To politicians, ideas must be viable in three aspects: They must be economically viable, this is, serve to solve a significant set of economic problems; administratively viable (and would be more easily accepted if they fit well to the uses of local public officials and to the implementing capabilities the government is endowed with); and finally, politically practicable, this is, they must match the objectives of the leading politic parties, the vested interests of the main lobbies, the current political agenda and the reputation that this idea and the policies it involves have gained in that country. Hall (1989), 364-375.

<sup>5</sup> Stigler (1983), 538-543.

<sup>6</sup> Stigler (1983), 538. Kindleberger studied a set of profiles of typical economic ideas, showing how they develop among economists. Kindleberger (1989), 51-59.

economists have currently stressed the importance of these factors when confronted to the mystery of how economists could have missed to forecast the present crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Translations are a particularly effective way of international circulation of economic texts and transmission of economic ideas. Some relevant points around this phenomenon deserve attention in order to fully understand its significance as a means to promote the dissemination of economic knowledge. The context in transmission of ideas through translations – social, political, cultural, economic, institutional –, the sponsors of translations, the linguistic problems and embedment of transmitted ideas into a new language, influence the process of circulation of ideas through this means. Original texts are thus adapted, transformed or just plainly reproduced in other language depending on these and other factors, which may influence decisively the development of economic ideas in a particular region or in a particular audience.<sup>8</sup> Devoting some time in a course in History of Economic Thought to the diffusion of economic ideas taking translations as a proxy to this phenomenon can be useful for students to complete their training in this discipline. This would allow them to see the evolution of the influence of economic ideas. This is what we suggest doing using an ICT tool.

## The EE-T Project as a teaching tool

Reading original texts, especially those from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, might pose some difficulties to students, especially undergraduate. We are here proposing to make this approach through an *ad hoc* ICT tool, which is now in an advanced phase of development. This tool is the most evident output of a Project launched in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme, Erasmus Sub-Programme, financed by the European Commission (Education and Culture) entitled 'EE-T. Economic e-Translations into and from European Languages, an Online Platform' (EE-T Project).

This project stresses the idea that, since its origins, Economics has been a matter of public discussion and enlightenment, turning also into a language of public opinion. In this framework, the transmission of economic ideas turned out to be essential in the configuration of this language of public debate, first across Europe and the Western world, and later, to the entire world. The international circulation and diffusion of economic ideas was the outcome of many facts and processes, among which translations of economic works, an early phenomenon, no doubt stand out as a crucial means for transfer. The diffusion of economic ideas through translation of economic texts offers a particular interest in what regards linguistics aspects, which might turn essential to understand historical economic writings. Translations of economic texts have been made with specific means, objectives and characteristics, which mirrors not only the intention of the editor or translator, but also his cultural background and the context of the period. This is particularly important concerning texts which date from the mid decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and backwards. Therefore, as the project summary states, “a linguistic analysis of the different translations made is therefore necessary to fully understand the history of economic thought”.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the EE-T project deems political economy language as a basic tenet of public debate in Europe since the 18th century and an essential element of the construction of Europe and its identity. The project links this fact to the current need to build a sense of European belonging, based on historical knowledge. The analysis of the circulation of economic texts, their transformation and

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Krugman (2009) and Cardoso (2009).

<sup>8</sup> See Forget (2010).

<sup>9</sup> EE-T Project Summary (2011), p. 1

adaptation, their discussion and applying can be a great tool to fulfil this task.

The most important educational tool the EE-T Project is an online platform containing a systematic and classified database of digital published translations of economic texts in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries into and from various European languages, complemented with guides to the reading and to the linguistic, semantic and textual analysis of the texts included in the database, questionnaires and exercises, online lectures, critical essays, a forum for students and researchers to discuss related matters and other educational tools. The project portal, still unfinished, is already available at <http://eet.pixel-online.org/>

From a didactic point of view, in particular referred to teaching and study of the History of Economic Thought, using this educational tool in degree and master courses is expected to improve teaching in several aspects: First, it will entail an innovative transformation of economics teaching by supplying the students with direct experiences of texts, aided by several instruments to understand and apprehend them. It is intended that this ICT tool will promote “critical attitudes, creativity and innovative ideas” among students of economics, which turns out to be crucial in the framework of current events, in which it seems that no replacement to new classical models emerge. Second, the experience of international transmission of economic ideas through economists’ writings is expected to help to understand the ways by which the “economic viewpoint”, this is, the language of economics, became “a key component of the European ‘model’ in policy and social relations”. In this regard, this new tool could be useful not only to teach the history of economic thought or economics itself, but also to other fields of social sciences and history. Third (not directly linked to the object of this paper), the multidisciplinary character of the platform could create a valuable interchange between linguistic specialists and history of economic thought scholars. This is of indirect interest to economics undergraduate students, but can provide some insights in the history of economic ideas to master students interested in the construction of modern economic science. Finally, ICT will foster the linkage between education and innovation, stimulating creation of new ideas and initiatives in these fields.

Using this ICT tool in a course of History of Economic Thought could be useful to engage students in the process of production of economic ideas and subsequent diffusion to economists in other countries, helping them to understand the phenomenon of ideas transmission and adaptation to different national circumstances in different periods. An example which can serve to illustrate this idea is the diffusion of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* into Spain. In the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, translations of economic works into Spanish should erase or transform controversial parts to avoid censorship. Books in the infamous Inquisition index (Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* among them) were thus translated and edited with modifications,<sup>10</sup> but living apart some exceptions (mainly Ricardo and Malthus), classical political economy arrived into Spain with a relatively short delay. Smith was first introduced in Spain through Martínez de Irujo’s partial translation of Condorcet’s summary of the *Wealth of Nations* issued in 1792. The first translation of this work from its English original was achieved in 1794, by José Alonso Ortiz, under the patronage of Godoy, with some variations to pass censorship. A second edition was issued in 1805-1806. The first complete translation of the *Wealth of Nations* was made only in 1956.<sup>11</sup> However, there was a factor limiting translations of economic works into Spanish, it being the narrow market for foreign works in Spain.

The database of the EE-T project allows students to trace this process of penetration of the *Wealth of Nations* in Spain, and the successive versions of this work in Spanish. It provides with interesting

<sup>10</sup> Reeder (1978), 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> Cabrillo (1978), 73-77; Perdices (2000), 275.



materials to experience the tortuous way this work reached Spanish readers, a process extremely influenced by contemporary institutions and circumstances. This example shows the importance of ideas transmission to understand the history of economic thought (in Spain in this case), and how an accurate analysis of original texts and its translations might aid students to grasp the process of creation of economic ideas and its diffusion and adaptation to other authors and in other nations. In this regard, the tool supplied by the EE-T project may be of great utility to experience these phenomena.

## Concluding remarks

Current economic events make it necessary as ever for future economists in their training years to acquire an accurate knowledge both of economic history and history of economic thought, in order to search for explanations for current events and to seek alternatives for economic policies to get out of the crisis. No doubt ignorance of these two subjects have played its role in the feeling of hopeless that many policymakers have shown when dealing with economic problems. We are here suggesting a new approach to the study of the history of economic ideas going back to the original writings of the most important economists, using a new ICT tool that can make it easier for students. This is a sometimes hard subject, but it is our opinion that, in order to avoid misinterpretations, it is good to approach the ideas of economists as they were expressed. The EE-T Project can aid the student in this approach, furnishing him with resources to better understand these ideas, to trace its evolution in time and to experience the phenomenon of its diffusion. This will be done through reading selection of original texts available online, as well as its translations, all accompanied with the explanation of teachers, and also with a group of complementary tools to grasp the real meaning of these ideas, its evolution and influences.

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