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“The Catalogue of Piero Sraffa’s Library: What Can We Learn from a Bibliophile and His Philological Rigor?”

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This impressive catalogue, published jointly by the Fondazione Raffaele Mattioli per la Storia del pensiero economico (Milano) and the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (Torino), includes an essay written by Luigi Pasinetti, “Piero Sraffa and his books”, and an introduction by Giancarlo De Vivo, the editor of the book. These two beautiful introductory notes, which provide illuminating insights and interpretative suggestions, considerably enrich the book and make the task of the reviewers particularly interesting and rewarding.

Thanks to De Vivo – who spent many years and significant energy on this project, rendering an invaluable service to all scholars interested in the life and work of Sraffa – we now have at our disposal an annotated list of the entire collection of books which Piero Sraffa gathered over more than fifty years and left to Trinity College at his death. The catalogue counts nearly seven thousand entries and is completed by a section containing the main references quoted in the text, an Association Index and a General Index of Persons with more than three thousand names.

In the entries we typically find the name of the author of the book, pamphlet or article, the complete bibliographic reference of the item, and in many cases other information on the presence of signatures, comments, newspaper cuttings, etc.; in brief, the signs of the interaction between Sraffa and the book. Sraffa scholars will not be surprised to discover that his library contained not only works by economists, but also quite a lot by philosophers, political scientists, historians, mathematicians and novelists (Bassani, Defoe, Conan Doyle, Dostoevsky, Petrarca and Pushkin, to mention just a few).

This mix may raise some interpretative questions on the connection between the library and Sraffa’s scientific production. Not all the books have been carefully searched and acquired by Sraffa; several of them are complimentary copies. But is not so hard after all to identify the traces of a well-defined personal trajectory.

Mercantilists, anti-Mercantilists, Physiocrats and the authors of classical political economy appear as the protagonists of the collection. This echoes Sraffa's lament that the teachings of classical political were unduly neglected: "It is terrific [sic] to contemplate the abysmal gulf of incomprehension that has opened itself between us and the classical economists."¹ His meticulous edition of *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, his only book *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities. Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory*, his library: these can all be seen as building blocks in his lifelong project to fill the gap and to create a bridge over the abyss.

Browsing the catalogue, we get the distinct impression that in this attempt he found a special group of allies among pre-classical and classical economists. We know that Sraffa was deeply critical of the neo-classical theory of value and distribution, and that from a very early age he questioned the logic of the Marshallian approach. He wanted his work to be part of the foundation of an alternative paradigm. He was convinced it was appropriate – if not necessary – to return to the point of view adopted by economists of a few generations ago, in particular by those who adhered to the representation of the economic system of production and distribution as a circular flow, "in striking contrast to the view presented by modern theory, of a one-way avenue that leads from 'Factors of production' to 'Consumption goods'" (Sraffa, 1960, Appendix D).

In his quest for "fellow travellers" Sraffa included authors who are not *stricto sensu* classical. On this subject it is instructive to mention an anecdote recently narrated by Arnold Heertje, an avid collector of rare economic books. Heertje recalls that Sraffa once proposed to him the following book deal: Heertje would exchange his copy of the first edition of Johann Heinrich von Thünen's *Der isolierte Staat* for Sraffa's copy of the first edition of Hermann Heinrich Gossen's *Entwickelung der Gesetze des menschlichen Verkehrs, und der daraus fließenden Regeln für menschliches Handeln*. According to Heertje, Sraffa motivated the exchange by arguing that "for his conception of economic theory Von Thünen's book with its emphasis on production and on agriculture as the innovative engine for economic development, is far more important than Gossen's book with the emphasis on subjective aspects of the demand side of a market economy" (Heertje 2017, 69). Although Heertje refused the deal, he acknowledges that the book had a special significance for Sraffa: "For him Von Thünen belonged to the Classical economists; he looked at the 1826 edition of Von Thünen's book as a cornerstone of his library" (*ibid.*).

¹ Sraffa Papers, D3/12/4 f.14.

The catalogue reveals in striking detail how meticulously Sraffa collected books which he deemed of crucial importance in the context of his personal intellectual curriculum. In his introductory essay Pasinetti affirms that “in conversing with him, with his books all around, one felt to be in the presence of, or to be moving within, or in any case to be immersed into, a sort of un-written, but quite clearly perceivable and fascinating history of economic thought *according to Piero Sraffa*” (Pasinetti, 2014, XVIII).

However, Sraffa’s collection of books also bears the traces of histories of friendship. De Vivo tells us that already in 1921-22 Piero Sraffa helped his father Angelo and his professor Luigi Einaudi find books in London, frequently visiting the city’s most important booksellers. In Sraffa’s preference for writings by authors from Mercantilism, Physiocracy and classical political economy we can see a parallelism with Luigi Einaudi, passionate bibliophile as well (there are more than 7000 books in Einaudi’s Library). In a famous letter from 1958 Sraffa addressed Einaudi as the “Master Bibliophile”, but at the same time drew Einaudi’s attention to certain details he had apparently overlooked in a publication on the origins of the word “Physiocratie” (Sraffa 1988[1958]). We have to notice that the great friendship between Luigi Einaudi and Raffaele Mattioli also had an important bond in their love for books, and that the same bond united Piero Sraffa and Raffaele Mattioli. Sraffa and Mattioli bought books in a sort of friendly competition, sometimes for the satisfaction of being able to give the other a rare book he had been looking for. Significantly, the Fondazione Einaudi and Fondazione Mattioli have sponsored the publication of this volume.

Sraffa’s love for books strengthened in 1927 when he became Marshall Librarian in Cambridge, a position created especially for Sraffa thanks to an intervention of Keynes. It deserves to be mentioned that Keynes, too, was an enthusiast bibliophile with whom Sraffa used to visit booksellers (De Vivo, 2014, XXXIV). Again friendship and *bibliophilia* played a significant role when they jointly edited the reprint of a rare pamphlet “An Abstract of ‘A Treatise of Human Nature’”, with an introduction in which they convincingly attributed the work to Hume and not to Smith (Hume, 1938).

Sraffa’s *bibliophilia* is associated with a strong philological rigor; this constitutes an intrinsic characteristic of Sraffa’s method, but not an end in itself. This is aptly illustrated by his editing of the writings of David Ricardo, a long journey which he commenced in 1930. As is well-known, this work reveals Sraffa’s rigorous handling of Ricardo’s publications and manuscripts. The edition was the main reason why in 1961 Sraffa won the Söderström Gold Medal of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden. In the motivation of the prize we can find that he was awarded the medal not only as an acknowledgment of his precision and erudition, but also as a great contribution to the history of economic thought, a contribution that is at the same time a powerful

instrument to lead a debate on the roots of political economy (Arthmar and McLure, 2016).

This was precisely what Sraffa aimed at, using that rigor. Heinz Kurz has drawn attention to a passage of Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere* underlined by Sraffa. There Gramsci affirms that if we want to explore the genesis of an idea not clearly expressed by an author, "it is necessary first to do detailed philological work, carried out scrupulously with regard to accuracy, scientific honesty, intellectual loyalty, absence of any preconceptions and a priori or position taken"². According to Kurz, "Sraffa's own editorial work has rightly been praised for its philological meticulousness, its maximum scrupulousness as to exactness, its scientific honesty, its intellectual loyalty and the absence of any preconceptions and apriorisms or position taken" (Kurz 2012, 1538).

Pasinetti helps us give a more precise meaning to Sraffa's philological rigor, emphasizing that Sraffa had in fact the intention of writing a book on economic theory "which had the characteristic of being firmly based on solid foundations of history of economic thought" (Pasinetti 2014 1, XIX).

Although it cannot be denied that Sraffa's contributions³ are many and profound, it would be exaggerated to claim that his approach has been very influential. This is not the place to speculate about the reasons for the lack of success of Sraffian economics. What the catalogue of Sraffa's library shows, is that he was a meticulous scholar who was exceptionally well-read in his field of expertise. For him, the study of economics meant first of all a return to the writings of classical political economy. This stands in sharp contrast to the study of economics using handbooks instead of original texts, which unquestionably contributes to reinforcing "normal" or "mainstream" science and to silencing "dissenting" or "heterodox" views. Sraffa's lifelong efforts to create and expand his own library with the utmost care serve as an example that it is possible to do things differently.

² Our translation. Here the whole quotation : "Quistioni di metodo. Se si vuole studiare la nascita di una concezione del mondo che dal suo fondatore non è stata mai esposta sistematicamente (e la cui coerenza essenziale è da ricercare non in ogni singolo scritto o serie di scritti ma nell'intiero sviluppo del lavoro intellettuale vario in cui gli elementi della concezione sono impliciti) occorre fare preliminarmente un lavoro filologico minuzioso e condotto col massimo scrupolo di esattezza, di onestà scientifica, di lealtà intellettuale, di assenza di ogni preconcetto ed apriorismo o partito preso. Occorre, prima di tutto, ricostruire il processo di sviluppo intellettuale del pensatore dato per identificare gli elementi divenuti stabili e «permanenti», cioè che sono stati assunti come pensiero proprio, diverso e superiore al «materiale» precedentemente studiato e che ha servito di stimolo; solo questi elementi sono momenti essenziali del processo di sviluppo"(Gramsci A., 1933-34, Quaderno 16, par.2)

³ Here we refer both to his contributions to economic theory and to his contributions in other areas, for instance through his influence on Gramsci and Wittgenstein.

The catalogue of Sraffa's library, together with the online "[Papers of Piero Sraffa \(1898-1983\), economist](#)"⁴, provides all scholars with a precious instrument of research and reflection. Misunderstandings about the meaning and scope of Sraffa's work might become less likely, as these sources allow us to interpret Sraffa not only on the basis of the relatively few pages he published, but also on the basis of the material that constituted the foundation of his theoretical positions.

As stated by Kurz, Sraffa's "studies and manuscripts reflect impressively his comprehensive intellectual concerns and the numerous and diverse sources he tapped. In private conversation, Sraffa is reported to have called his notes and papers an 'iceberg', the tip of which is his published work. Hence, what is needed is an investigation of that iceberg—the materialisation of the inspirations he derived from many different sources, of the process of his intellectual development and of the progress of his analytical work. The papers ought to be studied together with the sources he explicitly refers to in them, many of which are to be found in his library" (Kurz 2012, 1539)

Sraffa himself said that "In economic theory the conclusions are sometimes less interesting than the route by which they are reached."⁵ Giancarlo De Vivo's painstaking research gives us a fascinating new insight into the road travelled by Sraffa.

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⁴ Very recently Sraffa's notes on *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (PCMC) have been uploaded to the online version of the Sraffa archive. Section H of this archive, "Bibliographical and manuscript interests", is divided into the following sections: H1 Copies and typescripts of printed and manuscript works; H2 Booksellers' correspondence; and H3 Bibliographical notes. Section H2 covers the period 1938-1975 and contains hundreds of letters to and from booksellers from all over the world. As far as section H3 is concerned, for the moment only the titles of the notes are available online. We can see that there are many notes on the Mercantilists, on the Physiocrats, on Petty, on Smith, on Saint Simon, on Marx, but also on Voltaire, Foscolo, Swift, Cavour, and Mazzini.

⁵ Sraffa Papers, C26, quoted by Kurz (2012: 1535).

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