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The Political Economy of Latin American Independence

**Edited by Alexandre Mendes Cunha
and Carlos Eduardo Suprinyak**

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2 Circulating economic ideas

Adaptation, appropriation, translation

José Luís Cardoso

Introduction

The writing of this chapter was originally motivated by the general theme of the 4th ESHET Latin American Conference held in Belo Horizonte in November 2014, under the heading of *Originality, Adaptation and Critique: the Place of Latin America in the History of Economic Thought*. The conference featured a roundtable on the topic of the “International Dissemination of Economic Ideas.” These notes correspond to the attempt that was made to promote the discussion of a few ontological and methodological issues related to the study of the spread and diffusion of economic ideas across countries and continents.

This research subject is of utmost relevance for countries and regions that are usually seen as net importers of original ideas created abroad. Notwithstanding the capacity to build up creative thinking in Latin American countries, especially as regards original contributions to the theories and policies of economic development, there is plenty of evidence of the richness of the procedures involved in the critical adaptation and appropriation of economic knowledge. The scholarly debates on the diffusion in many Latin American countries of Enlightenment ideas on economic reform, Adam Smith’s political economy, List’s system of national political economy, or Keynesian economic policies – to name just the obvious and well-studied cases – offer multiple reasons for claiming the relevance of studies of this kind in the dissemination of economic thought.¹

The development of economic ideas and theoretical constructs in particular regional contexts is socially and politically determined, thus inviting historians to explain why, when, and how the spread and diffusion processes occurred. The aim of this contribution is to highlight a few points that help to understand this relevant issue in the historiography of economic thought. After a brief summary of canonical interpretations, I shall explore less cultivated territories of research, crossing borders within the universe of the social sciences.

Historiographical (and conventional) wisdom

The historiography of economic thought has accumulated enough evidence on the relevance of the theme of the international mobility and diffusion

of economic ideas. The topic has been revisited many times and, to avoid redundancy, the reader should be invited to follow the main references suggested by a few bibliographic surveys.²

The theme suggests, first, a concern with the formation and production of economic ideas and with the conditions and obstacles that can accelerate or hinder the processes governing their transmission and diffusion. Second, if one adopts the position of the receiver country or institution, it is necessary to take into account the constraints dictated by different levels of economic development and by the greater or lesser degree of cultural and political cosmopolitanism, which determine both the opportunity for, and the depth of, the diffusion processes.

Another relevant issue explaining different levels of circulation is the capacity to deal with the technical content of economic theories that seem appropriate to justify the implementation of certain economic and social policies. The degree of development of the economics profession is indeed an important factor for explaining how economic ideas may develop and mature in a particular environment. The processes of communication and diffusion between professional economists, and between these and the public at large, as well as policymakers, are fundamental conditions that help to understand the spread of ideas and their impact in society. However, sometimes the flow to the public sphere is not particularly successful, as Robert Solow accurately points out: “The transmission of complicated ideas is imperfect. By the time an economic idea reaches its ultimate destination it has been changed, distorted in one way or another. This is surely the case when an idea diffuses outside the profession” (Solow 1989, 75).

Studying the processes of international transmission also allows for the formation of a critical view of the attempts to create rigid schemes – quite common within the conventional historiography of economic thought – tending to divide authors into distinct periods or to classify them according to schools or streams of thought. In fact, such attempts have always warned against the difficulty of establishing single definitive categories or typologies. If we look at the problem through the looking-glass of international transmission, it is quite common for authors who are rarely joined together in their country or countries of origin to be jointly and simultaneously imported or assimilated into a different country.

Finally, the study of the international transmission of ideas and theories offers an excellent pretext for furthering the analysis of the national histories and traditions of economic thought. The introduction of a national dimension does not seek to deny the universal character of economics, but rather to demonstrate the relevance of different adaptive processes in the spread of economic theories and ideas. The pertinence of a particular model for explaining reality does not depend only on the inner consistency of the theoretical and doctrinal discourse, but also, and indeed very particularly, upon the successful adaptation to this same reality of the political presuppositions and consequences that are inherent therein.

It is precisely this last issue, traditionally associated with methodological discussions on the international diffusion of economic ideas, that requires special attention, given its pertinence for explaining the specificity of national approaches, namely the "place of Latin America in the history of economic thought," this being the question that the title of the conference sought to address.

Innovative approaches: place and travel

The following remarks are intended to provide some useful paths of research to be followed in the process of dealing with issues relating to the dissemination of economic knowledge. These are topics that have received substantial attention from scholarly research in the fields of the history of science, the history of ideas, and other related subjects. They are not specifically addressed to the discussion of distinct problems in the economic sphere, though they have also certainly proved to be useful in this field.

History and social studies of science have given great prominence to the problem of place, which is equivalent to stressing the importance of the local context in the fabrication of knowledge. The idea of a universal science for which national and regional features are totally irrelevant has been gradually replaced by a new approach in the cultural and intellectual history of science that takes vigorous account of the "local manifestations of universal science" (Ophir and Shapin 1991, 5).

According to this viewpoint, science is generated and assessed as a response to the demands of specific geographic, historical, and institutional contexts. Science is locally shaped and its impact and domain of application also has a local dimension. This further means that knowledge creation is embedded in streams of practical life and occurs in spatial arrangements where social interaction takes place. The value assigned to place is a further element that emphasizes the role of social institutions in shaping cognition processes. In short: the importance granted to place in studies related to the history of science engenders renewed attention to the circulation and diffusion of knowledge, as well as to the process of the local, *in situ* development of science (cf. Livingstone 2003).³

By giving new focus to the points of reception and to the historical and institutional circumstances explaining the motives for both the adoption and the adaptation of economic ideas and practices, I wish to emphasize the relevance of the institutional milieu, in order to explain the conditions under which new forms of economic knowledge have emerged and developed, well suited to particular places and contexts of appropriation. It is therefore worth addressing the historical conditions that make the reading of certain authors or certain economic arguments useful and relevant in a given context.

We may take for granted that science is always marked by the local and spatial circumstances involved in its making. However, there are similar patterns of production in other places that make it possible for scientific discourse to

travel from place to place. One of the main conditions for efficient travel is the degree of trust gained by unmodified scientific knowledge when it reaches similar contexts where it may be applied. As Shapin puts it: "The wide distribution of scientific knowledge flows from the success of certain cultures in creating and spreading standardized contexts for making and applying that knowledge" (Shapin 1998, 7). The travel of scientific knowledge has deserved close attention from scholars interested in studying the mastering of natural and economic resources in colonial empires, as a means both for improving agriculture and manufactures and for deepening the dependent relationship between peripheral colonial territories and the dominating metropolises.⁴

Nevertheless, this is not only an issue of efficiency, control, and power, but also an issue of trust and the appropriation of scientific knowledge in the public domain. An example that clearly illustrates this claim is given by the translation of scientific texts, which should be viewed as an instrument of the travel of knowledge that gains further meaning when it serves communities of different places.

The same considerations apply to the travel of ideas from place to place and to the study of the conditions that cause some ideas to flourish more vigorously in some places than in others. And they also explain why some ideas simply do not fit in with the intellectual context to which they have been imported. As far as economic science and thought are concerned, this issue has motivated previous studies, and the relevance of the subject, whenever methodological debates on national styles and traditions are under scrutiny, is broadly acknowledged.⁵

Adaptation, appropriation, and translation

The scholarly field of cultural studies has developed a concern with the uses of literary or scientific texts as part of an adaptation process that can be described as follows: "An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; a creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging; and an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon 2006, 8).

Although the use of this type of approach is particularly important within the realm of literary and cultural studies, it is worth noting that an adaptation is not only a concrete product or outcome (e.g., the adaptation of a novel into a film, or a drama into a musical performance, or poetry into prose), but also a process of creation and reception that is applicable to other forms of communication. It is therefore interesting to apply this type of approach to the adaptation of ideas in different contexts of production and reception, in the sense that, "adaptation [is] an attempt to make texts relevant or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating" (Sanders 2006, 19).

Running counter to the notion of homogeneity and cultural dominance, adaptations introduce elements of creative thinking, diversity, and variation

that offer new insights for the study of the processes of transmission and diffusion, including those pertaining to the circulation of economic ideas. There is no longer a concern with remaining faithful to the original source, or studying influences within a static framework, but instead with the appropriation of words and arguments that gain a new meaning.

This notion of the appropriation of knowledge (or of scientific ideas, practices, and techniques) overcomes the less suitable notions of transmission, diffusion, and adaptation, because it underlines the active role, the strategy, and the planning of those directly engaged in the process of importing and assimilating ideas. It also obliges us to analyze the institutional conditions that enable us to legitimize the appropriated message or object, as well as to overcome the constraints and resistances that it may have experienced before becoming accepted. Briefly: "Thus our context is that of the active receiver, which entails a shift from the point of view of what has been transmitted to the view of how what was received has been appropriated" (Gavroglu et al. 2008, 154).

One of the instruments placed at the service of the strategies of appropriation is the translation into the national language of texts and books produced in a different national and linguistic setting. Translation thus reveals a heuristic capacity applied to the study of the processes of knowledge adaptation and appropriation.

The theme of circulation is closely associated with the history of book production and reading and therefore with the history of translation. This offers us the opportunity of thinking in terms of books as acts of communication with receivers (the audience), producers (authors and translators), modes and conventions of transmission (through rhetorical strategies), and feedback effects, thus allowing for the use of cybernetic models and concepts that were one of the basic tools of the conventional, canonical view on the spread and dissemination of ideas.

Another possible approach to the role of translation is based on the notions associated with knowledge or science in context, i.e., with the notion of "science as practical activity, located in the routines of everyday life" (Secord 2004, 657). According to this line of thought, it becomes apparent that a translation is an expression of knowledge in transit, an act of communicating science that allows for a better understanding of the generic regularities, as well as the local peculiarities, involved in the circulation of knowledge.

By following any of these paths of research we reach the same conclusion: circulation through translation helps to explain the processes of the spread and transmission of knowledge.⁶

It is also advisable to move forward to new directions and point out the importance of an interdisciplinary dialogue between historians of science and ideas and philologists, in order to gain a better understanding of the activity of translation as a means of tracing the transfer of scientific knowledge and the development of scientific vocabulary in each of the national and linguistic contexts considered (cf. Tymoczko 2002). This cooperation may bring new insights to the understanding of cultural contexts and language frameworks

that are relevant for the analysis of the transmission and appropriation of scientific knowledge. In a nutshell:

Renditions of scientific texts into other languages can serve the historian in more significant ways, however, than as an indicator of publishing success. With respect to translation studies, historians of science could profit by turning to philologists, who have long recognized that a translation is not merely a medium of transfer, but more importantly a mental meeting point where barriers of language and culture are crossed.

(Rupke 2000, 209)

Translations of political economy texts: the Enlightenment context

In order to show the relevance of this topic for historians of economics, one may take as an example a specific period in the history of translation of economic texts, namely the period corresponding to the emergence and development of political economy as an autonomous field of scientific inquiry. Indeed, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was an explosion of translations of economic literature which corresponded both to the euphoria of translation as a rewarding and useful endeavor, and to the growing relevance of political economy as a subject that had reached and captured the public domain.

In most European countries, by the mid-eighteenth century, translations into Latin were no longer needed for international readership, and Latin lost its role in scholarly writing, as well as in fiction and poetry. The Enlightenment had offered the opportunity for cosmopolitan conversation without a common or universal language, though French had gained the status of a *lingua franca*. However, being a *lingua franca* did not mean achieving exclusivity or uniqueness, and the common acceptance of French as a language of universal communication implied a wider process of translation from and into French of texts seeking widespread diffusion.

Translation was sometimes a process of creating new words and a new technical language. Thus, national cultures and national languages were somehow challenged and modified by means of translations:

These [receiving] languages were, to various degrees, affected by the translated texts and influenced by new literary standards and ideas. They also transformed the texts themselves, both through active intervention and through the subtle mechanisms of linguistic shifts. Translation, the tool of a new Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, eventually became the medium (and target) of new linguistic self-awareness and cultural nationalism.

(Oz-Salzberger 2006, 396)

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was no legal control over the contents of translations. There were no assignments of copyright, and

translators could take liberties with style and argument, without respecting the original message of the text (cf. Forget 2010, 655). Substantial differences could therefore be found whenever translators acknowledged the disclaimer of a “free translation,” even when they claimed to have attempted to remain faithful to the author’s central message.

Translators tended to serve their readers and show loyalty to them, addressing their interests in terms of comprehension, without caring too much about the authors that were being translated or quoted. In a certain way, one can describe this biased approach as a market-oriented strategy of publishing.

Traduttore becomes *traditore*. The purpose of being faithful notwithstanding, there are difficulties of expression in a different language that originate involuntary misunderstandings. But sometimes, the translators themselves express their disagreement with the ideas spelt out and thus delete full passages that sound inappropriate or insert footnotes explaining their opposition to the author’s ideas.

Original texts are transformed in order either to attract readers or to create an audience better prepared to be aware of the contents of the message translated. However, by introducing notes and amendments to the texts, translators produce changes of meaning to the original, for the benefit of new audiences, for whom the transformed message seems to fit much better.

Translation, however, does much more than substitute words of one language for those of another. Like popularization, translation allows us to see how a scientific work is received by a particular audience and how it may be adapted for other audiences.

(Forget 2010, 674)

By the end of the eighteenth century, political economy was one of the main subjects contributing to the enlargement of the market for translations. The main purpose was to reach a broader audience interested in topics relating to public administration, the role of government, and the functioning of markets and economic life in general. This new science of the market and of the modern institutions that served the dynamics of the emerging industrial capitalism was also a science that was placed at the service of the legislator, with added responsibility in the design and implementation of the new functions granted to the state. It was therefore crucial to spread the good news concerning the interpretation and monitoring of economic life. Translations became an important vehicle for the diffusion and popularization of the new science of political economy and therefore a means for its appropriation in national contexts.

Translators of essays and tracts on political economy were also interested in maintaining a conversation and critically discussing the claims and arguments put forward by the authors translated. Thus, the process of translation was also a means of increasing public debate and revealing the role of the translator as someone who was entitled to the attributes of authorship.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to provide some motivation for an enlarged discussion of the relevance of the processes of diffusion, adaptation, and appropriation of economic ideas. Special emphasis was given to the function of translations, since they operate as an ideal demonstration of the route of economic ideas circulating in different historical and linguistic contexts.

It is undisputable that not all types of economic reasoning prove to be adequate for solving problems in any historical context. Therefore, the use and appropriation of economic discourse is, most of the time, a rhetorical device that serves as a means for claiming the appropriateness of certain economic policies aimed at achieving a predesigned set of political aims. The economists’ voices are not echoed in the public sphere because they are right, but because they serve particular goals to foster innovative projects of economic and political reform.

The appropriation of ideas and the adaptation of analytical or political arguments are also associated with a process of emulation, according to which what has occurred in a country that has reached a certain degree of economic development may serve as both a stimulus and a model to be followed by countries seeking to catch up. In this sense, the circulation of ideas is a mimetic process that involves the tracking of basic steps previously experienced in other countries.

Throughout the process of their being appropriated and emulated, economic ideas are also subject to innovative adaptation and/or distortion. The way in which authors are quoted, the transcription of partial excerpts taken out of their textual context, the translation of widely influential books, are all selective processes of circulation and diffusion that may imply substantial changes to the original meaning of economic texts, as well as to the presentation of economic arguments.

Notes

- 1 For a global approach to recent examples of the study of the spread of economic ideas in Latin and South American countries, see Cardoso et al. 2014.
- 2 For a guide to further reading on this topic, see Colander and Coats 1989 and Cardoso 2003.
- 3 On this topic, see also Withers 2007.
- 4 On this topic, see Drayton 2000.
- 5 Many comparative studies have been developed, giving rise to relevant publications in the field, exploring the paths of convergence and divergence in different European countries, USA and Japan. Cf. Augello and Guidi 2001 and 2012.
- 6 This is the main concern of a recent research project on “*Economics translations into and from European Languages*” (EE-T project), coordinated by Marco Guidi at the University of Pisa, with the main goal of assessing the impact of translations of economic texts on the historical development of economic thought in Europe. Further information on the outcomes of this project is available at: <http://eet.pixel-online.org/index.php>.

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