A Bibliography of Translations of Economic Literature to 1850

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A Bibliography of Translations of Economic Literature to 1850

When I began in the early 1970s a bibliography of translations of pre-1851 economic literature, I simply started to type up entries. Doing so was fun. The work was totally absorbing, a joy. I did not try to determine the scope of the project, and I did not draw up a plan. It may be just as well that I did not do so. If I had, perhaps I would not have started. The fact is, though, that I could not have estimated the number of entries it would come to contain. That may be inevitable when compiling an enumerative bibliography. More than that, though, I could not have known that developments in the scholarly world would increasingly have provided a rationale for ever more detailed entries. I could also not have known that computers and the web would significantly change the bibliography.

Insofar as I had an idea of the project, it initially was that entries would be more or less like library catalog cards: author, title, place and publisher, pagination, and subject, with a note identifying the original. That is basically the style of entry in some of today’s major digital retrospective bibliographies, such as the ESTC and the Netherlands STC. Those data elements in searchable fields are a great boon to scholars, but I learned that a bibliography of translations, if it were to serve well, would need to go much beyond the traditional descriptions.

Merely to identify the original implies that the translation is its equivalent, albeit in a different dress. Learning that that was not so had been a major impetus behind the bibliography, so entries had to indicate differences. That meant recording added prefatory material and other additions. Prefaces or introductions to translations often discussed other showed that not to be the case, for they pointed out omissions or additions to the original. I began to include relevant quotations in the entries. Actually handling the books and comparing the original and translation also showed significant differences, and I began to seek opportunities to examine both the original and translation side by side. In fact, comparing a translation with those in other languages came to be desirable, for some translations are made from translations. Obviously, copies in the same language but under different dates need to be compared. Is it a question of a different translation entirely? a revision of the translation? a reprint of the translation without textual change but from a new setting of type? a reprint from stereotype plates? a reprint from standing type? a reissue of the original sheets?

I originally thought that the main users of the bibliography would be historians of economic thought. That led to an emphasis on matters related to the text. So did the fact that in the 1970s the history of translating dominated scholarship on translations. Scholarly developments made it clear that entries should be expanded, for everything related to the production of the text, its publishing, its dissemination, and its use became relevant. The field of the history of the book, which began to flourish in the last two decades of the twentieth century called for a broader approach. More recently, the history of translating has become the history of translations, and that has reinforced the
desirability of including the types of information that is needed by the book historian. Everything related to the book has become relevant.

Thanks to digitization, one can more readily bring together information that goes well beyond the traditional card catalog. For example, instead of merely including the name and dates of a translator, one can ask who in fact the person was: a professional translator? someone who had contact with the author? an older person who translated to fill leisure hours? a young person in need of money? The search for such information can take one beyond the standard sources. One can more easily find reviews, and they can provide significant information. Some have been found even to point out a translation done by more than one person, that is, by a translation factory. Newspaper advertisements besides noting the price perhaps give a clue as to the target audience. Newspapers, along with national book-trade journals, the notable example being the Bibliographie de la France, also pinpoint the date.

Digitization both of library catalogs as well as copies of books themselves, makes for a degree of completeness that experience shows was earlier unobtainable. To be sure, handling the books makes for better and fuller entries, but the enumerative function of the bibliography is well served by entries from digital copies.

The digitization of periodicals and newspapers will ultimately transform our knowledge of past cultural milieux, and the increasing availability of such material shows the desirability of a fundamental change in the scope of the bibliography. Long excerpts, even entire texts, appeared in serial form, and the bibliography, as it stands, records some such, but systematic work is needed in order to reveal cultural patterns that were formerly impossible to see.

The sections of the bibliography on this site are, for now, only translations into English and Swedish. Other sections will be added for Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek (ancient and modern), Hungarian, Italian, Latin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, as well as a few in other languages. The over-all total will come to be nearly 3,000.

The English and Swedish sections are close to final shape. The other sections to be added will be less so. I will make them available, despite inconsistencies, incomplete entries, transcription errors. The entries can, however, be updated. I hope that readers will point out errors, and I am also open to collaboration, with full acknowledgement appropriately made. I can be reached by email at kencarpenter@comcast.net.

Kenneth E. Carpenter