

The EE-T Project: Economics e-Translations into and from European Languages. Teaching History of Economic Thought with ICT tools

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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.

KEYWORDS: History of Economic Thought, economic ideas diffusion, translation, education

JEL CLASSIFICATION: A1, B1, B2, B3

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.¹

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

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

economic thought.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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,

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

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

⁵ Stigler (1983), 538-543.

making it obsolete. The second is aversion to risk, which leads young researchers to opt for theories that are already accepted.⁶ Some 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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 a new ICT tool.

The EE-T Project

Reading original texts, especially those from the 18th or 19th 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).

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

⁷ For instance, Krugman (2009) and Cardoso (2009).

⁸ See Forget (2010).

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 19th 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”.⁹ 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 adaptation, their discussion and applying can be a great tool to fulfil this task.

In this framework, the EE-T project aims at promoting a digital interactive educational tool focused on translations of economic texts. The first objective of the project, “to create a dynamic triangle of knowledge between research, postgraduate education and innovation by promoting the joint application of both ICT tools and the innovative trends of research in the History of Economic Thought and the study of European Languages for Special Purposes”, would be reach through the development of a ICT tool: An open online platform containing a systematic and classified database of translations of economic texts in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries into and from various European languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Greek, and Turkish). The database will provide with the maximum details available on the translations of the original works, and, in the case of major works (and in many other secondary writings too) will supply with links to the texts online (original and translations). The platform will be complemented with some educational tools. These will

⁹ EE-T Project Summary (2011), p. 1

include guides to the reading and to the linguistic, semantic and textual analysis of the texts included in the database; online questionnaires and exercises so that students can check themselves whether they have understood texts; online lectures using the database and its tools; short essays on particular aspects of the database; and an online forum. This is the ICT tool we propose applying in courses in History of Economic Thought both in undergraduate and (especially) graduate levels. Therefore, the platform aims at promoting direct experience of translations of economic texts to economics students, allowing work based on the educational tools supplied: text analysis, search of specific terms or phrases, comparisons between translations, lexicographical analysis, etc.

Other objectives of the EE-T Project are educational, but fall far from the scope of this paper: “To establish an interdisciplinary collaboration between History of Economic Thought scholars and linguistics and foreign language scholars”, for which a guided use of the platform will help students of Economics degrees to develop in-depth contrastive study of these texts, which can be very useful to the learning of the specific language of law and economics. Another objective is to promote “multilingualism and inter-culturalism at the European level, as a basis for a more conscious European citizenship”.¹⁰ Target groups of the EE-T Project are students, both graduate and undergraduate, professors of history of economic thought and linguistics, and also researchers in the history of economic ideas. The EE-T Project started officially on October 2011 and is due to finish in September 2013. The database is due to be finished by the end of July 2012. Annexes to the database (lectures, exercises, guides, etc.) will be delivered after this date up to the end of the project. A working group belonging to the Department of Economic History and Institutions of the University of Barcelona (the signers of this paper) is in charge of developing the database of original texts and their translations into Spanish, as well as the rest of annexes. The web address of this project is <http://eet.pixel-online.org/>

The EE-T Project as a teaching tool

The EE-T Project platform might seem more adapted to researchers interested in the transmission of economic ideas; however using it in a course of History of Economic Thought will be useful to engage students in the process of production of economic ideas and subsequent diffusion. This will help them to understand the phenomenon of ideas

¹⁰ EE-T Project Summary (2011), p. 2.

transmission and adaptation to different circumstances in different periods. The nature of a course of history of economic ideas in the undergraduate level make it difficult to devote time to this topic; however, we believe it would be interesting taking a brief walk through this subject at least for the students to grasp the complexity of the formation of economic paradigms and schools of thought. This is why perhaps this ICT tool might be more useful in the graduate level teaching, where students have knowledge of the main traits of the most important schools of thought and are able to appreciate the importance of ideas diffusion. Having texts in an online database allows using new pedagogical techniques. Students can work online, using texts and the educational tools of the project portal. They can use original texts for learning in an interactive way. Online tools allow them to work out of class, which should make lectures more profitable. Presenting economists of the 18th, 19th and first half of the 20th centuries (who are often linked to old writings whose contents have been overcome) in an innovative digital format to which students are already familiar should encourage the study of the ideas of these economists, which might provide with new insights to improve present economics.

An example of how the platform would be used can illustrate this idea. Let us take, for instance, a lesson on the penetration and development of the classical school of economic thought in Spain. During the Enlightenment, translations of economic works into Spanish supplied intellectual elites with the possibility of reading some of the most important foreign economic writings avoiding censorship by eliminating those paragraphs which could be considered dangerous to religion, moral or politics.¹¹ As a result, in the second half of the 18th century and first decades of the 19th century, the ideas of classical economists arrived in Spain only with a relatively short delay through translations and adaptations.¹² For instance, Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was first translated into Spanish from its English original in 1794 by José Alonso Ortiz, under the patronage of Godoy, with some changes in order to pass censorship. It had a corrected second edition, published in 1805-1806. Previously, there was Martínez de Irujo's partial translation of Condorcet's summary, issued in 1792. But the first complete

¹¹ Reeder (1978), 47-48.

¹² The main exceptions were Ricardo, whose *Principles* (first issued in 1817) were not translated until the 20th century, and Malthus' *Essay* (1798), which was first translated in 1846 from a 1845 French edition, although some pieces had appeared in periodical journals. On the other hand, for instance, Say's *Traité d'économie politique*, first issued in 1803, was already published in Spanish in 1804; and the *Catéchisme d'économie politique*, published in 1815 was also translated the following year.

translation would not been done until 1956.¹³ Beyond censorship, the factor that limited translations supply was shortage of demand from the public. R.S. Smith, in his pioneering work on the spread of foreign economic ideas (especially British) in Spain between 1776 and 1848, asserted that translations of English works was one of the most crucial elements to analyze this phenomenon.¹⁴ Smith believed that English economic thought permeated Spain erratically, not in a continuous flow, due to several causes. First, wars in Europe restricted the migration of ideas. Second, the relatively higher difficulty of understanding English to Spanish readers explains why a decent proportion of English works were known through French translations (and Spanish translations of French translations), which were not always perfect substitutes. Third, chance also played a role. There were some individuals interested in British economic literature who managed to get some original works (v.g. Jovellanos), but there was no institution in Spain, public or private, able to provide a sort of regular access to British writings. Likelihood of being censored could be a deterrent fact for translators, but the small size of the Spanish book market was probably more discouraging.¹⁵ In the 19th century, leaving apart some exceptions, Spanish economic thought was not but transcriptions of foreign ideas adapted to the nation's economic circumstances. Translations became the main way to spread the advancements of political economy. In this framework, French liberal economic thought strongly penetrated the country, turning into the main source for influence on Spanish economic economists, replacing British authors. Consequently, translations from French language became even more important in this period, particularly the works by J.B. Say and Bastiat. It was also quite usual that Spanish versions from economic works originally written in English or German were translated from their French versions.¹⁶ The extremely importance of French influence in Spanish economists in the 19th century is essential to explain the development of economic analysis in this country: A simplistic liberal classical paradigm deprived from theoretical analysis and mostly applied, and the absence of historical and marginalist approaches.¹⁷

¹³ Cabrillo (1978), 73-77; Perdices (2000), 275.

¹⁴ Smith (1968), 106-107.

¹⁵ Smith (1968), 135-137.

¹⁶ According to Cabrillo, some criteria guided the selection for translations into Spanish: language (French was preferred to English), the chance of the original writings and the prestige of some authors. See Cabrillo (1978).

¹⁷ Some scholars pointed out that the late spread of marginalism in France is a primary cause in the absence of marginalist analysis in Spain. Malo (2001), 432.

The EE-T Project database will serve to illustrate and follow this story. First, it will be possible to trace the translations and adaptations from Adam Smith into Spanish and see their main features (date of translation, characteristics, new editions, reprints,...). In this task, annex reading guides, questionnaires, etc. will help students to understand the meaning of every edition and to check differences among them. Then, students will be able to detect how English works disappear from the catalogue of economic translations into Spanish and are replaced by French. They will be able to check the numerous editions of J.B. Say, Garnier, Bastiat, Thiers (six different editions in one single year!), etc. and see also how censorship fades out and demand for translations increases. Students also will be able to trace these processes in other nations (for instance Italy, another net importer of economic ideas in the classical period), and see the differences with the Spanish case. In all, this example shows the importance of ideas transmission to understand the history of economic thought in countries that are importers of economic thought, such as Spain, 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.

From the didactic point of view, using this tool in bachelor and master courses in History of Economic Thought is expected to improve teaching in several aspects: First, it will entail an innovative transformation of 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 (although 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.

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 hopelessness 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. We believe that this can be useful in both undergraduate and graduate levels, although this subject is probably more adapted to a master course, and master students would profit more from this tool.

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