

Maurice Dobb Papers, Trinity College Cambridge

Oblivations DA112

1976

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A Note on the Discussion

I need hardly say, perhaps, that as against Suzanne de Brunhoff and others I agree with David Laibman's standpoint regarding the 'reconcilability' of Sraffa and Marx (if not with all the details of his statement). But I would go further in stating that, to my mind, the whole issue has been misrepresented by the critics through their failure to appreciate the specific design and intention of Sraffa's work (as represented, e.g., in the sub-title of his book, 'Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory'). It is in this context, I submit, that the debate ought to be conducted, and not in the 'slanted' perspective of a contest and choice between two alternative systems. This design and intention was, in effect, to answer certain major critiques of Marx (and by implication of the whole Ricardo-Marx approach) from Bohm-Bawerk onwards: criticism which has proved to several generations of economists completely persuasive, and from which they concluded that it was logically impossible to have a satisfactory explanation of relative prices without bringing in demand and throwing the main weight upon the latter. In the course of doing so Sraffa has both clarified the foundation of classical theory and of Marxian theory and at the same time raised theoretical issues that had not previously been perceived. In this sense his work is to be regarded as primarily constructive anti-kritik, and not as a new theoretical system, replacing or mediating between its predecessors.

The general upshot of it is to demonstrate that it is perfectly possible (contrary to what all orthodox economists have been saying for several generations) to explain prices in terms of conditions of production (without, i.e., bringing in consumers' demand, utility- and-all-that). Since this involves essentially the 'transformation problem' (Böhm-Bawerk's 'great contradiction'), it is natural that the demonstration in question should be conducted at the level of prices (with 'value' and 'surplus value' et al assumed as part of the data - just as the same is true of most of Vol. 3 of Capital).

As for the recondite notion of 'standard commodity': in a note that John Eatwell was good enough to append to his own article (Science and Society, Fall 1974, p.302) I claimed that this is simply an attempt to resolve the complexities involved in defining an 'average commodity' - complexities which Marxists and non-Marxists alike had previously failed to appreciate. To the analytical interpretation of this problem afforded by the Eatwell-article I have nothing further to contribute\* - unless it be just to say this. D. Laibman's

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\*Perhaps I might explain that this question of 'measurement' of economic quantities to which price-relations are relative is substantially the same as what I was getting at in my Political Economy and Capitalism in my attempt to find a formal justification for Marx's (and Ricardo's) grounding of value in labour. There, I believe, I had sensed the problem correctly, if only vaguely and incompletely. It was still a long way from this formulation to appreciating the full implications of having to represent the rate of surplus value, or relative quantities of labour embodied in wages and in the product, under 'average conditions of production'.

(Vide the statement in the opening chapter of that immature work, pp.9-10, that "a principle of value is not adequate which merely expresses value in terms of some one or other particular value",

'invariance postulate', on which he relies for a solution, strikes me as simply another way of postulating a money-commodity produced under 'average conditions of production' (in terms of which total values will equal total prices) without affording us any clarification as to how 'average conditions' are defined; thus leaving the latter problem open. In view of what we now know, is it not clear that this money-commodity required to give Laibman's 'invariance postulate' a concrete meaning is nothing else but Sraffa's 'standard commodity'?

Most of those 'leftist' critics who have coined the term 'neo-Ricardian' pejoratively in order to counterpose it to 'true Marxism' seem, accordingly, to have misunderstood and misrepresented the focal point of discourse. This they appear also to have done in a second sense - which is why I have elsewhere (in Problemi del Socialismo), characterised their intervention as 'sectarian'. They have apparently failed to appreciate the true centre and crux of the present stage of the debate, at anyrate in academic circles - something which has considerably more importance ideologically than many will allow, because via its influence on students who imbibe it through the spoken word, hearsay and assigned textbooks, it percolates down to much wider circles who accept its implications even though lacking any interest in, or probably any acquaintance with, its technicalities.

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and that the crucial determinants - evidently having in mind here the rate of surplus value - "must express a relationship with some quantity which is not itself a value" - meaning by 'value' in this context exchange-value or price-relation. To this it was added that the principle must be quantitative in the sense that "the determining relation or relations which figure in the equational system should be capable of expression in terms of quantitative entities in the real world" (p.11).)

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To my mind this contest is still predominantly (even 15 years after Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities first appeared) at the stage of criticism, and hence of undermining the century-old dominance of orthodox doctrine over economics teaching. That this battle is by no means won is shown by the recent mounting of a quite powerful counter-attack, in the shape of the general equilibrium theory, claiming immunity from the Sraffa-criticism of the '60's. When such an ideological contest is being joined, I would suggest that Marxists have more to gain by stressing what they have in common with their allies, in the shape of fellow-critics of prevailing bourgeois orthodoxy who would not perhaps go all the way with them in positive statements of what they believe; and that it is weakening and divisive (and in this sense sectarian) to focus primary attention on differences between Marxists, near-Marxists and others (even if such differences are not to be ignored). Joined with this consideration is the question of the audience one is addressing. If what has just been said is accepted, then this should be largely if not mainly those still-unconvinced by recent criticism. In the present context the sectarian critics have in my view much underestimated the extent to which rehabilitating Ricardo, for the great majority of people schooled in orthodox teaching in our two countries, is ipso facto an introduction to the study of Marx.