



ON A RECENT “REVIEW ESSAY” IN *JHET*

BY

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On September 22, 1994 we signed a contract with Edward Elgar Publishing Limited to edit *The Elgar Companion to Classical Economics (ECCE)* (Kurz and Salvadori 1998). Dr. Terry Peach accepted our invitation (dated January 10, 1995) to contribute an entry to *ECCE* by July 15, 1995. He was reminded of the deadline in a letter dated June 19 and again in a letter dated August 28, when we suggested a new deadline of September 30. Our only response from Peach was a letter dated September 5, also to the publisher, informing us that he had “to rescind [his] offer to contribute an entry.” This unexpected withdrawal was justified on the following grounds:

My critical position on the Sraffa-inspired history of economic thought, and particularly on the “Sraffian” interpretation of Ricardo, is probably well known to you. After long deliberation I have decided that I cannot in all conscience make even a minor contribution to a project which, to a pronounced degree, apparently seeks to promote a particular version of the history of economic thought to which I am profoundly opposed.

In our letter asking Peach to rethink his decision, we stressed the fact that among the more than 130 contributors to *ECCE*, only a minority could possibly fit his characterization. Receiving no response from Peach, we decided in late spring 1996 to ask someone else to take on the task Peach had originally accepted.

Volume 21, Number 4 of *JHET* published a “review essay” of *ECCE* by Peach. We do not know when or if the editor of *JHET* and/or the three colleagues (Salma Ahmad, Mark Blaug, and Andrew Glyn) Peach thanks for “helpful comments” without the usual disclaimer were informed by Peach of the contents of his letter of September 5, 1995. Presumably, the desire for an unprejudiced reviewer of *ECCE* would have disqualified him for the task had the letter’s contents been known. Be that as it may, it comes as a surprise that someone who had stated prior to having seen a single entry to *ECCE* that he was “profoundly opposed” to what he took to be its message could “in all conscience” accept to write a review article of it. In the article Peach fails to note that he had both been asked to contribute to *ECCE* and urged to reconsider his decision “to rescind.”

We should like to thank Dr. Peach for granting us permission to quote from a letter dated September 5, 1995 he sent to us and to the publisher of *The Elgar Companion to Classical Economics*, Edward Elgar.

Peach has not read the volumes edited by us with that measure of “good will” which authors are entitled to expect of a reader. His review amply reflects this. It abounds with statements which are outside the normal confines of intellectual discourse because they are either purely hostile or cannot possibly be proved. A few examples must suffice:

Kurz and Salvadori ... seem intent on establishing a version of the history of economics according to which they emerge as sophisticated modern standard-bearers of a “surplus” tradition in “classical” economic thought (p. 449).

[T]he editors’ keen interest in allowing different views to be heard must have dissipated when it came to views *directly* contrary to those of their own ... (pp. 449–50; emphasis in the original).

The editors’ declared interest in pluralism, while not exactly false, seems more in the nature of a fig leaf to cover the doctrinaire nature of the *Companion* (p. 450).

[T]he purpose is to provide attractive historical window-dressing for the Sraffian project (p. 462).

On what basis could Peach attribute unstated intentions and motivations on our part?

There is no need to conjecture what Marx may have thought had he been confronted with the Sraffians’ physically specified production schemes. We *know* what he thought: they cannot explain the nature of capitalism (p. 459; emphasis in the original).

How does Peach “know” what Marx would have thought had he been confronted with Sraffa’s conceptualization?

[C]ore Sraffians are radically confused and misled by their adoption of the category “classical political economy.” ... [T]hey are suffering from a form of collective identity crisis (p. 461).

What are Peach’s professional credentials that would allow him to diagnose a “collective identity crisis” on the part of “core Sraffians”?

It seems incredible that the Sraffians can be so emphatic that something of which [something missing?] there is agreed by competent scholars ... (p. 457).

Is Peach the one to decide who is “competent” and who is not?

Apart from contentious and aggressive statements of the kind quoted above, Peach’s paper has not much to offer.¹ In fact, he claims “no novelty for [his] argument. My excuse for the following remarks is that, just as the Sraffians tirelessly rehearse the same arguments, so it is essential that critical voices continue to be heard” (p. 450). Judging from his publications, Peach has indeed been concerned to a considerable degree with serving this task. While he accuses

¹ A particularly annoying example of the first kind is Peach’s contention that Ian Steedman’s entry “Classical Economics and Marginalism” contains “a superb critique of Sraffian historiography” (p. 450, n. 3). The reader is invited to check whether that entry really amounts to an overall critique of Sraffian historiography. Steedman in fact writes that the “rational reconstruction” which is “greatly influenced by Sraffa,” and which we endorse, “is indeed defensible” (Steedman, in Kurz and Salvadori 1998, vol. I, pp. 119–20).

the Sraffians that “They repeat, endlessly, the same tired formula—‘mantra’ might be more appropriate—that Sraffa brilliantly clarified and revived *the* classical theory” (p. 462; emphasis in the original), reading his papers one does not exactly get the impression that he would welcome it if the “mantra” he hears were to die away. On the contrary, he shows a vivid interest in its longevity: “No doubt the debate will continue” (p. 456, n. 19). Since his views have already explicitly or implicitly been dealt with by us in previous writings, we shall not encroach unduly on the good will of the Editor of *JHET*: the length of this note is well below the 2000 words to which we were asked to limit ourselves.²

There is only one aspect of Peach’s paper we must address. It concerns his grouping of the contributors to *ECCE* into “Sraffians” or—even worse?—“core Sraffians,” on the one hand, and colleagues who are said to have served us well in providing a much needed “fig leaf to cover the doctrinaire nature of the *Companion*,” on the other.³ This borders on libel with regard to us in our capacity as editors. Peach’s insinuation is groundless. After having accepted the task of editing *ECCE* we were keen to invite all scholars known to us as experts in the field. A large majority of those invited to contribute accepted; some of them negotiated additional or different entries. To our regret a few declined the invitation, a handful accepted without delivering on time, but only one (i.e., Peach, himself) first accepted but then dropped out. This involved some self-selection which, for obvious reasons, was not our responsibility.

Having bent over backwards to include an entry from Peach in *ECCE*, we find it somewhat peculiar to be accused that our “keen interest in allowing different views to be heard must have dissipated when it came to views *directly* contrary to those of [our] own.”

REFERENCES

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- Kurz, H. D. and N. Salvadori. 1999. “Understanding ‘Classical’ Economics: A Reply to Mark Blaug.” Submitted to *History of Political Economy*.

² In a recent issue of *HOPE* Mark Blaug published a review article of which a large part is devoted to a critical assessment of the “Sraffian” interpretation of the classical economists (see Blaug 1999). He focuses attention on what he considers to be the distinguishing features of classical economics and whether they correspond with those identified by us with regard to the theory of value and distribution. (Peach, on the contrary, deals with “what the Sraffians believe [!] to be the distinguishing features of *their* [!] conception of classical political economy” (p. 450, emphasis in the original).) We read Blaug’s paper, whose tone differs markedly from that of Peach’s, as an invitation to discuss the matters in dispute as intellectuals should discuss them: soberly and with a quest for truth. For our reply, see Kurz and Salvadori (1999).

³ Interestingly, Peach neither provides lists of people who according to him belong to the first and to the second set, respectively, nor a criterion defining the first set. Peach, who shows so much concern that different authors of the past are not unduly grouped, apparently has no qualms whatsoever to lump together different contemporary authors as “Sraffians.” We wonder what makes him think that caring for differences is all important in the first case and totally unimportant in the second.