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Problems in the Translation of French Political Economy and Social Science into English

ABSTRACT

This essay is based on the author's experience of translating three major economic/philosophical texts from French into English: Alain Finkielkraut's *La Défaite de la pensée* (*The Undoing of Thought*), Benjamin Constant's *Principes de politique* (*Principles of Politics*) and the work of Frédéric Bastiat. It explores the difficulties of translating economic language from French into English both in the eighteenth and the twentieth century and compares the different challenges it brings.

KEYWORDS

Economic translation, political language, philosophical language, enlightenment, French language

The present author makes no pretence at expertise in the theory of translation, if such theory exists, which more practised colleagues assure him is the case, though apparently in the form of *theories* for specific forms of translation, rather than of any single, unified theory. The only formal qualification I bring to the exercise is a general degree in languages which I picked up -- in the operative phrase -- four and a half decades ago at Durham. I have of course learned a lot of French from all the translation I have done.

This essay is no more than an attempt by a writer specialising in topics and issues in the borderlands of sociology, economics, history and philosophy, mostly but not invariably in the context of educational analysis and discussion, at putting on record some of the difficulties and problems he has encountered in translating French political, economic and social writings into English. My main business is writing books and articles in *English*. Reading in and translating from French is a challenging change of scene and responsibility. It is challenging because it is difficult if the conceptual side of the text is complicated. It is taxing because though the translator has no responsibility for the arguments, he has a deep responsibility to keep the arguments as presented in his translation faithful to the original and at the same time intelligible.

It is not this particular translator's inclination to engage in translation of those modern French writers whose intention is not in the first place to achieve intelligibility. It seems to me that in the case of the late Jacques Derrida, for example, the problem facing the translator would be to make an accurate rendition of the

unintelligibility of the original. This point is not as vacuous as it might seem and I shall return to it, or something akin to it, when I assess the varying difficulties I have found in translating those few writers I have worked on.

My track record in translation was till fairly recently modest in the extreme. My activities may be divided into four parts. I began with translating short articles. Professor Françoise Thom, expert in Sovietology and subsequently Post-Sovietology at the University of Paris, was in the 1980s very complimentary about my renderings of her various articles in *The Salisbury Review*, then under the long editorship of Roger Scruton, who very much encouraged my translating activities and made a point of introducing me to Françoise. Scruton at that time was also proprietor of Claridge Press.

Next came the second stage of experience, translating a whole book. Armed with my experience with essay translations, in 1989 I published a translation of Alain Finkielkraut's best-selling *La Défaite de la Pensée*, which Claridge brought out under the astute title chosen by Scruton, *The Undoing of Thought*. It was the best-selling book in the brief history of that press, with sales of some 2000, gratifying but of course miniscule in comparison with the sales of the French original. One oddity, which surely counts as a difficulty encountered by translators, is that soon after mine, another translation appeared. I did not read it, but Professor Anthony O'Hear refused to review it in his journal, *Philosophy*, on the grounds that he regarded its publication as redundant. More important for this account of my little odyssey through the uncertainties of translation, is that although I enjoyed the work I found Finkielkraut very hard going.

The third stage, certainly the most momentous one, came at the invitation of Liberty Fund of Indianapolis. A senior member of staff, Dr Emilio Pacheco, brought to my attention the oddity that Benjamin Constant's enormous *Principes de politique* had never been translated *in toto*, though Biancamaria Fontana had produced a translation of a smaller group of writings effectively constituting a sub-set of the eighteen books of the larger work. Would I consider taking it on? The translation took something over four years to bring to fruition. Published in late 2003, it enjoyed very good reviews. These reviews necessarily concentrated on the brilliant character of Constant's arguments. The translation itself, however, was praised for its accuracy.

It has to be said that when Liberty Fund were trialing my initial efforts, the latter met with some ferocious and off-putting snubs by the Ivy League professors called in to do the evaluations. A minority

saw merit in it, and Liberty Fund had good reports of my earlier work. It can properly be claimed, all the same, that extreme hostility by referees must count as a genuine problem for beginning translators. One of the senior professorial members of Liberty Fund's *ad hoc* committee was intransigently hostile from the start.

If the opinion of such authorities is that the famous writer to be translated is worthwhile, why the hostility? One can do no more than speculate, but my particular suspicion is that these hostile posturings reflect anxious territorial defences by people who would not themselves be able to do the work, owing not to their French, which far surpasses that of people like me, but to their inability to handle the range of politico-economic and philosophical issues involved. To translate economics, sociology or philosophy, you have to know some.

The fourth stage in the O'Keeffe detour into translation is the present one, which began in early 2004. I was asked to take on work in connection with a vast project aimed at presenting in English the total corpus of the writings of Frédéric Bastiat, in seven projected volumes. The brief was not to translate, but to oversee, correct and refine, a translation from French to English, contracted between a leading American publisher and two professional translators. The exercise had rapidly run into serious trouble, and was regarded thus far as un-publishable, both by the French general editor and by the publishers themselves. My brief has been to make a failed output presentable.

I was innocent of this kind of work, though it obviously must have happened often enough before. It has something in common, of course, with translation itself, as well as with the refereeing and vetting that accompanies most translation. I have to read the whole text in French, along with the submitted English version. Then I dispatch what I have read, together with comments and corrections, to the general editor. My final text is then in turn relayed to the publishers.

What it amounts to is a very specialised *sub-form* of translation. It is about five or six times quicker than a translation undertaken *ab initio*. One already has, after all, an English text and the work divides between correcting the very many minor infelicities and removing gross errors, which are very much fewer. On both accounts the work I have been receiving is certainly un-publishable. This is clear evidence that careful vetting, however offensive to aspiring amateurs like myself a while ago, is a vital part of the exercise.

There is an aesthetic drawback to such *sub-translation*, as readers might anticipate, namely that one never has the feeling of controlling the flow of the English text. This constitutes an insuperable problem if the hope is for a standard as high as one can achieve starting from the beginning.

Substantive Difficulties

How much of the foreign language in question, however, does the translator have to know? Before my initial encounter with Finkelkraut, I would have taken lack of outstanding command of the language to be translated, as a huge drawback. "Lack of an outstanding command"! This certainly described my knowledge of French some seventeen years ago. Even today, when I have learned a lot just by engaging in translation, my knowledge of French remains modest. I know it far better than most other British or American sociologists and economists, many of whom are entirely ignorant of it. I am, however, neither bi-lingual nor outstandingly fluent. One should, I now see in retrospect, have relied on obvious historical parallels and realized that the challenge is not actually so daunting. There have been *countless* scholars of Latin, Greek and Hebrew who have achieved very high quality in the *translation* of languages they could not possibly have spoken fluently or read effortlessly, given that the ruling test was to read sufficiently or labour to translate, rather than speak.

Moreover, in the seventeen years since I worked on *The Undoing of Thought* I have learned what every practised translator knows: that it is *mastery of the language one is going into* that counts, not full control of the language from which your text to-be is exiting. The late Colin Welch said in *The Spectator* of my English version of *La Défaite de la pensée* that it read as if it had been written in English. This was my intention. Philosophically this is no more than a rule; the execution of it may often constitute a vexing problem, however. Lots of translators either do not try for it or at any rate do not succeed in doing it.

I had the same intention with regard to Constant. Liberty Fund naturally made it very clear that this was what they were after. It was very gratifying when one of the leading British sociologists, Professor Christie Davies, of the University of Reading, in a review praising the brilliance and continuing relevance of Constant's political intelligence, also said that the quality of the translation reflected my command of English.

One obvious stumbling block can be that a certain word, or perhaps several words on a given page, are so central to the author's meaning, that a less than fluent translator is badly held up by them.

This was the case, as I remember, with my first brush with Thom's essays, which though written in flawlessly clear French, often contained words and phrases I did not know. I cannot cite particulars, because, perhaps foolishly, I did not retain the original French texts. In defence of this apparent laxity let me say that I had no idea that I would be doing so much more translation in the future. In the event, after the four months which it took me to translate Finkielkraut, and many years later, after battling for almost half a decade with Benjamin Constant's gigantic *Les Principes de politique*, I found that the problem is largely self-curing. Look a thing up lots of times, or read it in context sufficiently often, and you come to learn it. I look up vocabulary much less frequently when I am working on Bastiat, precisely *because* I have completed my apprenticeship under the tutelage of Finkielkraut, or more importantly, of Bastiat's immediate predecessor in the tradition of French liberalism, Benjamin Constant.

The Period Problem and its Paradoxes

The problem has not gone away, however. I remain relatively hesitant with *modern* French vocabulary, as I discovered lately when I looked up some recent French commentary on Finkielkraut's subsequent work, on the internet. Though working on Finkielkraut helped me later on with these earlier scholars, for me his prose remains harder than theirs. It remains true, therefore, that a scholar, even if he sticks to his own field of inquiry, can be equipped to translate *some* sophisticated material in a given context, but not other works, for example, more modern texts. In considerable degree, Finkielkraut is a liberal in the old European sense in the same mould as Constant and Bastiat. He is a modern, however, and *ipso facto* harder to read than they. Indeed, it is an observable general rule that French and English style in subjects like politics, are further apart today than they were in the late eighteenth century or the first half of the nineteenth. The English convention remains wedded in the main to clarity. In France the imperative of obscurity has asserted itself, certainly in the last sixty years.

The works of the three writers I have been concerned with present on the one hand certain problems of translation in common. Taxonomy rarely admits of easy solutions. The exercise is to see why these writers are not equally easy or difficult to translate, however, and a classification would probably help. All three writers are liberals, though Finkielkraut in the book concerned does not promote the market economy, a theme Constant returns to often, while Bastiat finds it hard to leave it alone. It means that Constant and Bastiat presented me with the difficulties of economic

terminology as between the two languages. Finkielkraut did not. All three authors are supporters of the Enlightenment in its earlier stages, that is to say they wish to conserve the gains of those stages. Bastiat wishes in addition to conserve the Catholic church. Constant preferred Protestantism, though he was really a sceptic. Finkielkraut appears to take a dim view of the Vatican but expresses no hostility to religion as a general phenomenon. All three look to history as a source of wisdom. All this adds up to three men who are passionate without being intemperate and generally say what they mean and mean what they say. In the main their outlook favours ease of translation.

It is Constant who is most insistent on history as a store of experience. Mme de Staël once called him "the French Burke" I did not know this when I was translating him. Yet it was precisely in this spirit that I read Constant. There is the same grandiloquent prose, the same sustained brilliance of argument, the same effortless avoidance of banality, the same insistence on the primacy of the moral order, the same passionate conviction that the past is a store of wisdom. One is writing in French, the other in English. But they occupy *the same intellectual medium*.

Bastiat too has frequent recourse to rhetoric but though talented, even brilliant in prose writing, he is no Constant. He too writes long paragraphs and long sentences, but not with quite the same skill in construction and the same precision in meaning. Nor does he have quite the soaring beauty of language which Constant achieves. Finkielkraut, though like most French writers fond of rhetoric, is in his turn a less gifted writer than Bastiat. So there is a descending imperative of grandeur -- less need for reproducing magnificent prose -- facing the translator working progressively through the three of them, which of course I did not, since I did not know at the Finkielkraut stage about the Constant project, nor at the Constant stage, about the Bastiat one.

I repeat that Finkielkraut is the one I found most difficult, largely on grounds of period. In the first half of the nineteenth century many French writers aimed at the kind of clarity that the canons of the Enlightenment assumed. Since the Second World War, however, some French academic writing has tended to an advised and knowing obscurity. There are exceptions. One thinks of Raymond Aron. French economists often write clearly too. But French sociology, anthropology, literary theory etc. are deliberately predicated on obscure writing, on texts which are *intended* to be hard to follow.

More than this: the disease has spread to the Anglophone cultures. When it comes to post-modernism, multiculturalism and cultural theory the writings they generate are as obscure and impenetrable in English as they are in French. Finkielkraut is a model of clarity compared with Sartre, Althusser or Derrida. Nor does he share their antinomianism. But he does share something of their habit of making things difficult for the reader. In the first line of the third paragraph on his first page, Finkielkraut substitutes a verbless phrase for a proper sentence. "Malaise dans la culture." My translation deliberately reimposes a sentence on the words by inserting a verb. "So there is a malaise in the culture." Now there can be no empirical doubt, in my view, but that Finkielkraut was right about the malaise, which applies equally to this country. The malaise, however, involves a deliberate delight in obfuscation which makes all the material it distorts in French more difficult to translate into other languages. This aspect of the cultural crisis Finkielkraut does not mention.

Some Problems in Vocabulary, Especially in Economics

Though the changes in the presentation of writers of French constitute for me the *worst* problem in translating, there are also intrinsic problems of vocabulary. One severe one is the vocabulary of French economics. What precisely do French economics terms mean? Constant has a number of chapters on economics. So problematic was *his* economics vocabulary, that with Liberty Fund's consent, I sought the advice of an eminent French economist friend of mine. He checked the chapters concerned and made a few changes, though not many. He said that overwhelmingly I chose the words he would have used and shared some of my many uncertainties about quite which words to use.

Space does not permit much exemplification, but the word "travail" is a good example, and one which turns up even more often in Bastiat. It can mean "work", "labour", "production", "activity" and in the plural "travaux" it can also mean "projects". English can, like French, use certain words both for economics purposes and other ones. "Production" is a good example. "Industry" is another. All languages use such ellipsis. The special problem in French is that you have to know the nuances for some economics words which in English are represented much more often by separate terms. Alternatively, at times French uses phrases, because there is no single word. Bastiat himself points out that there is no word for "cheapness", so the French say "bon marché". This illustrates a general problem in an acute form. English has far more words than French, which shortage imposes on the latter certain elliptical

practices which run counter to the normal French insistence on explicitness, for example in the use of relative pronouns. While English too can use individual words in distinct ways, it retains in much greater abundance the option of distinct words

When I began my aesthetic, grammatical and social scientific improvement of the Bastiat translation, I was handed a long list of words in French alongside what the publisher's steering committee thought were the appropriate words in English. The strong suggestion was made that I stick to these words.

My experience of reading thousands of Bastiat's pages confirms that such a prescription is hopelessly inadequate. It is inadequate in principle. If one tried to do it, the text would not seem English. This would be the case if one always tried to represent "travail" in one way and one only. Educated French readers of the text read the same word, but resort to an internalised, nuanced understanding of its various contextual meanings. English readers would be mystified by a constriction in a vocabulary possessing well known alternatives of an explicit, differentiated kind.

Other Cases than Economics

The word "Commune" was one of the words on the chosen list. The committee said it should be translated consistently, either as "village" or "commune". It comes up endlessly in Bastiat, who has a vast knowledge of French local government in his period. If we translate this as "commune" we need an initial footnote to explain the constitutional and political connotations of the word in French. So there is what economists call a "trade-off" involved. If we use "village" we get a more pleasing and less taxing result for the reader in English. The text's English atmosphere will be enhanced and the literal meaning of the author diminished. So often does Bastiat use the word, so much does he write on matters of local government and local interest, about something which is *both a village and a political unit*, that in his case I decided to employ both "commune" and "village" in the text I am amending.

More significant are problems of the language of power and control. Take the phrase "la force sociale." In my Constant translation I translated this literally, as "social force," signifying the power of society over individuals and groups. By the time I was working on Bastiat I had come to regard this unfavorably. The French phrase is certainly common to both writers. It is obviously too vague. "Social control" is better because the noun "control", being more subject to nuance, is better than "force", but it is early twentieth century American sociology and therefore anachronistic. "Social force" could

in principle be referring to the power of society, as the phrase ostensibly suggests. It could also refer to the power of the government or to the power of the state. It could subsume all of them also. Since it is the government which acts, however, typically using its powers and some of those of those of ancillary state bodies, extreme caution should be exercised. Often the government and its state agencies do *not* express the overall wishes of the people or even the overall wishes of the majority. In November 2005, one could identify in Britain and France, very many acts of the state which do not flow from general public endorsement, nor even carry a substantial majority of the citizens. We might cite government policies on immigration, the treatment of murderers, general law-enforcement and very many others. My conclusion from all this rumination is that "the coercive power of the state" is a more reliable and accurate translation.

Finally, let us note, the central political language of Constant and Bastiat is pre-Weberian. They use "autorité," "pouvoir," "puissance," "gouvernement," and "les gouvernants" pretty well interchangeably. To us "authority," and "power" are different, because we have accepted the distinction, mainly coming from Max Weber, that authority is legitimated power, that is to say power which is acceded to and endorsed by those over whom it is wielded. While the distinction is not absent before Weber -- it is there in Machiavelli -- it lacked a widely received audience until Weber articulated it. We now find it odd to be informed that "authority" is acting arbitrarily. For us properly constituted government ("authority") by definition is not arbitrary. We *know* that Constant and Bastiat have as full a faith as Finkelkraut in political propriety. Their writings argue strenuously for the proprieties. One can, indeed, properly say that this is a theme central to all three writers. Finkelkraut's advantage is that his modernity spares us this grating contradiction in the meaning of words.

By way of conclusion let me note that I am engaged on Volume Three of Bastiat, with four volumes still to go. If the fates permit me to finish all seven, I shall perhaps be in a position to offer more observations, if a total disenchantment with the exercise has not by that time set in.

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