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## A Letter from Piero Sraffa to Luigi Einaudi on the “Physiocratie”\*

Trinity College, Cambridge.

August 23, 1958.

Dear President,

When I happened to be in Milan, a few weeks ago, Mattioli gave me the two volumes of “François Quesnay et la Physiocratie”. I was most interested to read your stimulating remarks on the date of the “Physiocratie”, and subsequently I learnt of your communication to the Turin Academy of Sciences. The present letter is the fruit of a long talk with Mattioli; it has been written with the aim of submitting certain details to the attention of the Master Bibliophile.

The date of publication of the “Physiocratie” would seem to be established by a letter from Turgot to Du Pont of November 18, 1767, saying: “J’ai reçu la *Physiocratie* avant mon départ” (“Oeuvres”, ed. Schelle, II, 676).

With regard to the word “Physiocratie”, the first to use it was certainly not Baudeau in the *Ephémérides* of April 1767, as Oncken supposes (on the frail foundation of this assumption he builds an entire edifice of conjectures, “Oeuvres de Quesnay”, 1886, p. 697, note); being followed in this by Weulersse. Actually, the March 1767 number of *Ephémérides* (p. 116) had announced “un Recueil fort important, qui doit paraître incessamment sous le titre de *Physiocratie*, par les soins de M. Du Pont”. And it added that the publication was “point destinée à tout le public, mais aux amis de l’Auteur et de l’Editeur seulement”. However, “on trouvera quelques exemplaires de la *Physiocratie* chez Lacombe, Libraire”. The Lacombe in question was himself one of the publishers of *Ephémérides*.

\* The Italian original of this letter — given here in translation by Timothy Keates — is preserved in the Archives of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation in Turin, whom we warmly acknowledge. Thanks are likewise due to Prof. P. Garegnani, Sraffa’s literary executor, who has kindly given permission for publication. Especial gratitude goes, lastly, to Prof. G. Gilibert, who brought the letter to the notice of the editorial committee, putting at our disposal his bibliophile’s expertise and assisting us with certain problems regarding the old printing and binding techniques referred to in the letter.

and it should be noted that the announcement makes no mention of either Peking, or Leyden, or the bookseller Merlin ("Merlin the Enchanter", as Voltaire dubbed him). Therefore, the first use of the word "Physiocratie" was indeed as the title of the book.

That the "Physiocratie" was actually printed in Paris, and by the same printer, Didot, as printed the *Ephémérides*, is proved by irrefutable typographic evidence. For example, the vignette heading page 1 of the "Physiocratie" is identical with the one appearing on the first page (siglum Aiiij) of the March 1767 number (and other numbers in the same year) of *Ephémérides*. And that the wood block used is the same one is confirmed by several small details, such as the crack in the upper right hand corner.

At this point I must tell you that I myself own a copy of the "Physiocratie", with the frontispiece of Peking in both the first and second parts. Moreover, "François Quesnay et la Physiocratie", vol. I, p. 312, gives a description (with various inaccuracies) of the two Peking volumes. I have no idea what this description is based on, since, in contravention of the practice adopted in that bibliography, the author gives no details as to the location of the copy described. In any case, it is a pity that you were not urgently notified of the matter when the editors received your article.

Oncken himself in 1886 ("Oeuvres de Quesnay") was unaware of the Peking "Physiocratie", but learnt of it in 1902 and quotes it in his "Geschichte der Nationalökonomie" (pp. 332 and 335). And since in the preface to the latter work he thanks Menger for having given him access to his well-stocked library, we may assume that the copy he saw was Menger's.

The Peking "Physiocratie" and the Leyden one would seem to be nothing more than two variants of the same impression: the difference being that in the Leyden "Physiocratie" the original frontispieces of Peking have been replaced by cartoons. This is evident from the guards which appear in some copies, left over after the excision of the suppressed pages. Apart from the aforesaid cartoons, various others can usually be found elsewhere in the Leyden volumes. However, these latter cartoons also appear in my Peking copy (page 103-104, where the allusion to the King has been suppressed, is itself a cartoon). It sometimes happened that the replacement with cartoons was not carried out with due care; and from what you say, it would seem that in your copy the cartoon on pp. 103-104 was inserted without suppressing the original sheet.

But there is a further point in which the Peking and Leyden copies differ: namely, the "Errata" on the reverse side of the frontispiece of each of the two parts. In Volume I the difference is confined to the typographical arrangement of the Errata. In Volume II Leyden adds the corrections for p. 419 and p. 479 but, unexpectedly, omits a correction given in the Peking Errata referring to p. 201. This may perhaps be explained by the fact that

the sheet in question (pp. 201-202) was replaced with a cartoon evidently engraved after the printing of the Peking Errata but before that of the Leyden Errata. Furthermore, this cartoon also appears in my Peking copy, where on the page specified in the Errata there is thus no misprint.

The fact that the allusion to Louis XV was suppressed simply by inserting a cartoon appears to undermine the hypothesis according to which the change of place of publication from Peking to Leyden was counselled by the need to suppress the said allusion. There must therefore be some specific reason independent of that underlying the suppression of the allusion. My own pedestrian hypothesis is that Peking was originally stated in an attempt to save the Paris printer or bookseller from getting into trouble with the law, and simultaneously to afford Quesnay the opportunity once again of paying homage to China (the March to June numbers of *Ephémérides* carried his "Despotisme de la Chine"). But it may be assumed that the bookseller, or the printer, did not regard "Peking" as sufficient protection and asked to state a more plausible place of publication — hence Leyden.

With regard to Peking, it may be further noted that in 1767 Du Pont issued another work bearing the legend "A Pékin, et se trouve à Paris, chez Merlin, Libraire, rue de la Harpe": this is the little volume "De l'Administration des Chemins", which had already appeared as an article in the May 1767 number of *Ephémérides* (the book consists of a reprint of the original article, with additions).

I would now like to ask two favours of you. Firstly, could you, when I am in Italy, give me the opportunity of consulting the catalogue of the Morellet Library (of which you apparently possess one of the very few extant copies, perhaps the only one)? Secondly, I should be most grateful if you would be so kind as to send me an offprint of your communication to the Academy of Sciences, should you still have one available.

Please excuse all this chatter, dear President, and accept my most affectionate regards,

Yours,

*Piero Sraffa*