Harmonic and Conflict Views in International Economic Relations: a Sraffian view

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Abstract:

Recent teaching and research commitments led me to touch upon the field of international economic relations, an expression deliberately wider than International Economics. Dealing with the European imbalances and crisis and, particularly with the behaviour of Germany (Cesaratto 2011a, 2011b), I was looking for analytical approaches that went beyond the political rhetoric of international cooperation reinforced by the economic mainstream beliefs on the harmonic virtues of international laissez-faire. Some Sraffian contributions to the demolition of those beliefs were, of course, well known to me – although, unfortunately, less known to students of international economic relations, let alone of International Economics. The question was then to fill the theoretical vacuum. The pre-laissez-faire age, mercantilist tradition was a natural candidate to my attention. This was also suggested by the frequent accusation of mercantilist behaviour moved to Germany, that I examined in my works. Mercantilism, the world of non-harmony, may appear as a underground tradition – that a group of north-European economists has denominated ‘the other cannon’ – parallel to the laissez-faire tradition, both classical and neoclassical. A cynical view of international relations springs also from Political Realism, a major tradition in Science Policy. One intellectual father of Political Realism is Thomas Hobbes, contemporaneous of many British mercantilists. In this view, a social contract is possible at the domestic level by attributing the authority to the Prince, but not at the international level where no sovereign state would recognise a higher authority. Mercantilism and Political Realism converge in one main tradition within International Political Economy (IPE), a field born at the beginning of the early 1970s as an attempt to bridge the gap between International Economics and the science policy field of International Relations. Let us call this particular approach within IPE ‘International Political Realism’. This is traditionally opposed to a liberal tradition that holds a more harmonic view of the international economic relations. Traditional IPE, and particularly International Political Realism’, have recently begun to be colonised by neoclassical-trained policy scientists over the last years. The Sraffian criticism of neoclassical economics, specially in the field of International Economics,
would therefore appear remarkably precious to meet the neoclassical imperialism. The nation-
state is at the centre of mercantilist and International Political Realism’ traditions. The Classical,
Marxist and the modern surplus approach are not in easy terms with the notion of nation-state -
Capital is cosmopolitan, capitalists likely not -, so that to touch upon this topic was unavoidable.

In this paper we shall go through this intellectual track as a suggestion to further
developments and contaminations among different traditions proposing disharmonic views of
domestic and international economic relations in opposition to the harmonic beliefs of the
marginalist school.