A Comment on Sen’s ‘Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci’
Ajit Sinha

Introduction

There has been a revival of interest in the nature of Sraffa’s work after the opening of Sraffa’s unpublished papers to the public at the Wren Library. Even though Sraffa was quite reticent about writing down his philosophical ideas on paper and communicating the nature of his influence on Wittgenstein,1 a reading of his notes and a perusal of his library leave a strong impression of the philosophical sophistication of his mind. It is important that Sraffa’s contribution to economics, particularly the *Production of Commodities*, is not only seen as a contribution to economic theory but also as an application of a philosophical position to economics. In this context Sen’s recent contribution (Sen 2003) is most welcome. Though I agree with Sen on some important points, I find his explanation of the nature of Sraffa’s contribution in the *Production of Commodities* and his account of the nature of Gramsci’s influence, via Sraffa, on Wittgenstein not entirely convincing. In this paper I intend to critically engage with Sen’s recent important contribution with an intention to deepen the understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Sraffa’s book.

**Sen on Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci**

Sen’s paper (2003) has two projects: (1) to interpret the nature of Sraffa’s contribution, particularly in the *Production of Commodities*, in the light of his philosophy, and (2) to trace Gramsci’s influence on the later Wittgenstein via Sraffa.

---
1 I wish to thank Professor P. Garegnani for his permission to quote from Sraffa’s unpublished papers. My thanks are also due to very helpful and friendly staff of the Wren Library and to Professors Murray Brown, Duncan Foley, G.C. Harcourt, and John King for their comments.

1 In his response to Ryle’s invitation to contribute about his communications with Wittgenstein to the special issue of *Mind* dedicated to Wittgenstein, Sraffa wrote, “Thank you for your letter. I am honoured by your invitation to contribute something about Wittgenstein to ‘Mind’ & I hope that I will not seem unappreciative if I say frankly that I shall be unable to do so. I am an incredibly slow writer, even on my own subject; & I am sure that an attempt to record conversations, mostly of ten to twenty years ago, on a variety of subjects, & of which I have kept no notes, would end in failure & yield no result.” Also see Sen’s account of his conversations with Sraffa in Sen (2003).
He takes up the second issue first in order to establish the nature of Sraffa’s philosophical position. He briefly narrates an interesting account of his conversations with Sraffa that he had had between 1958 and 1963. Apparently Sraffa did not think much of his influence on Wittgenstein even though they had regular conversations for more than ten years, which, according to Wittgenstein, provided the “most consequential ideas” for his *Philosophical Investigations*. Sen finds Sraffa’s attitude highly puzzling given the momentous nature of this development for modern philosophy. All he could get out of Sraffa was that “the point he was making was ‘rather obvious’.” (Sen 2003, p. 1243). Sen’s solution of the puzzle is that Sraffa most likely was making the ‘point’ that was apparently commonplace among the Gramsci’s circle in Italy to which Sraffa belonged before coming to Cambridge in 1927.

So what was the “point” that Sraffa apparently made to Wittgenstein? Sen puts the famous break in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and meaning from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations* in this way:

> While the *Tractatus* tries to see language in isolation from the social circumstances in which it is used, the *Philosophical Investigations* emphasizes the conventions and rules that give the utterances particular meaning. (p. 1242).

He points out that Wittgenstein had once told his friend Rush Rhees that “the most important thing he gained from talking to Sraffa was an ‘anthropological’ way of looking at philosophical problems.” (Monk 1990, p. 261).

After establishing these basic facts, Sen goes on to investigate Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* on the assumption that “the *Prison Notebooks* were, in many ways, a continuation of Gramsci’s long standing intellectual pursuits and reflected the kind of ideas that the circle of friends were involved in.....” (p.1244). He cites three quotations from Gramsci. In the first quotation Gramsci claims that the language “is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not simply and solely of words
grammatically void of content.” In the second quotation, Gramsci emphasizes the social positioning or conditioning of an individual in acquiring one’s conception of the world. And in the third quotation, Gramsci takes issue with Bertrand Russell’s claim that one can think of two points one to the North and the other to the South in space without the existence of man. Gramsci, as quoted by Sen, points out that the notions of North and South, East and West are anthropologically determined and cannot be thought without the existence of man. From here the dots are connected and the conclusion is drawn:

[I]t is plausible to argue that, in one way or another, Sraffa was quite familiar with the themes that engaged Gramsci in the twenties and early thirties. It is not hard to understand why the program of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* would have seemed deeply misguided to Sraffa, coming from the intellectual circle to which he belonged. Nor is it difficult to see why the fruitfulness of “the anthropological way”—novel and momentous as it was to Wittgenstein—would have appeared to be not altogether unobvious. (Sen 2003, p. 1245).

The problem with this story is not that it is incorrect but rather that it does not go deep enough in understanding the nature of the break in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and meaning. We shall investigate this point later. But before that let us turn to Sen’s other project of interpreting the nature of Sraffa’s contribution in the *Production of Commodities* in the light of his perceived philosophy.

Sen takes up two major contributions of Sraffa to economic theory: (1) the critique of aggregation of capital and the reswitching proposition, and (2) the mathematical determination of values or relative prices by given methods of production and income distribution without any regard to demand. With respect to

---

2 It should be noted that Sraffa's position on the role of demand was quite complicated as discussed in Sinha (2004). In a letter to Arun Bose in 1964, Sraffa wrote:

”I am sorry to have kept your MS so long—and with so little result. The fact is that your opening sentence is for me an obstacle which I am unable to get over. You write: ‘It is a basic proposition of the Sraffa theory that prices are determined exclusively by the physical requirements of production and the social wage-profit division with consumers demand playing a purely passive role.’

Never have I said this; certainly not in the two places to which you refer in your note 2. Nothing, in my view, could be more suicidal than to make such a statement. You are asking me to put my head on the block so that the first fool who comes along can cut it off neatly.
the first point, Sen argues that its significance is not so much in terms of an analytical or logical critique of the neoclassical theory.

But neoclassical economic theory need not be expounded in an aggregative form. It is possible to see production in terms of distinct capital goods and leave it at that. Also, the kind of practical insight for policy that one may try to get from arguing in aggregative terms (such as the case for using less capital-intensive techniques when labor is cheap and the cost of capital is high) is neither dependent on how interest rates are actually determined, nor conditional on any very specific model of capital valuation. (Sen 2003, p. 1246).

He finds the significance of Sraffa’s above propositions in terms of a response to a particular descriptive account of capitalism, which justifies the system and the profit income on the grounds of ‘productivity of capital’. Sen argues that Sraffa’s theoretical critique takes away this normative and popular justification of the capitalist system. In other words, Sraffa’s contribution is mainly a contribution to the ideological struggles over the nature of capitalism.

With respect to the second point, Sen again argues that its significance should be seen in terms of popular descriptive understanding of “why gold ‘though of little use compared with air or water’ exchanges ‘for a great quantity of other goods’?” (p. 1250). There are two popular accounts of this problem. One emphasizes the marginal utility aspect of the goods consumed and the other emphasizes the objective cost of producing the goods. The first relates the problem of value with the relation of commodities to the psychology of consumers and the second relates the problem of value with methods and relations of production. Sraffa’s intervention establishes the correctness of the latter description. Further on, Sen goes on to add a methodological argument on this score. He reports that Sraffa thought “that the use of counterfactuals involved difficulties that purely observational propositions did not.” (p. 1251). Since the marginal utility based description requires counterfactual magnitudes whereas

Whatever you do, please do not represent me as saying such a thing.” (PSP C32).
Sraffa’s cost based description requires only observed magnitudes, the choice in favor of the latter description was a methodological one as well. Sen, however, sees “little merit in trying to exclude counterfactuals in trying to understand the world.” (p. 1251). Again, the problem with Sen’s interpretation is not that it is incorrect but rather that it does not go far enough.

The most crucial point to Sen’s account is his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remark that the most important thing he learnt from Sraffa was an “anthropological way of looking at philosophical problems.” Sen thinks that it is all there in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*:

The role of conventions and rules, including what Wittgenstein came to call “language games,” and the relevance of what has been called “the anthropological way” which Sraffa championed to Wittgenstein, all seem to figure quite prominently in the *Prison Notebooks*. (Sen 2003, p. 1245).

And here, at the most crucial point of his argument, we think that he is largely mistaken. Below we shall inquire about what could Wittgenstein mean by “an anthropological way” and what kind of problems he considered “philosophical”? We shall argue that Gramsci’s philosophical concerns or problems are not the same as Wittgenstein’s and that there is evidence to show that Sraffa from early on had started to think about Wittgenstein’s problem, which does not have much trace in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

**Wittgenstein, Sraffa, and Gramsci**

The problem of the *Tractatus* is to draw a line between sense and nonsense by finding the limit of language.

[T]he aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression to thoughts: ...It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense. (Wittgenstein 1922, pp. 3-4).
Without going into the details and complexities of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the *Tractatus*, let us briefly draw the basic contours of his arguments so that we can understand the nature of the break in his philosophical position. In the *Tractatus* he argues that all propositions can be broken down or analyzed into elementary propositions. All elementary propositions contain only one fact and they are independent of each other. A proposition is a combination of words, and words are names of things or ‘simples’ they represent. The form of a thing or a ‘simple’ is to be a constituent of the states of affairs. Facts are the possibilities of the states of affairs, and therefore, the structure of a fact consists of the structures of the states of affairs. But to be able to represent facts the proposition must have a structure common to the structure of facts similar to a pictorial representation of facts. Thus a proposition has sense only if we can picture it to ourselves, i.e. be able to think it, and what is thinkable is also possible. Thus the structure of facts and the proposition that represents it must depict a logical form, as we cannot think illogically. What is the logical form, however, cannot be said in language through propositions—it can only be shown.

The criteria for distinguishing sense from nonsense are clear. Any proposition that entails logical contradictions or fails to give meaning to a sign in the proposition is nonsense.3 To recapitulate, there are three basic elements to the *Tractatus Thesis*: (1) atomism—all propositions can be broken down or analyzed into independent elementary propositions; (2) essentialism—the meaning of a word is correlated with the thing it represents; and (3) logic is independent of language—it is the property of facts, language must have the logical form to sensibly represent the facts.

---

3 Thus the *Tractatus* argues that language has severe limitations. Only factual propositions can be sensible as only factual propositions can have ‘things’ correlated with words. More important aspects of life such as ethics, aesthetics, mystic and spiritual fall in the realm of silence, “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” (p.89).
In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein points out that the *Tractatus* dictum that ‘a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it’ uses the word “meaning” illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that correspond to that word. With careful construction of extremely simple languages, which he called “language games”, he showed that the words get their “meaning” from the context of their use. Such contexts are like games with their rules known to the players. The meaning of a word is neither attached to the things it names (a word is like a tool that can be used for many purposes) nor derived from the subjectivity of its user. The rules of the game are *objective* and are known to the players who use words in a particular language game. Thus the very notions of ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ are context specific. Learning a language is akin to getting *training* in how to play a game—“‘language game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.” (11e). Furthermore, Wittgenstein argues that these ‘language games’ are not reducible to any common denominator such as ‘logical form’ but rather only resemble one another like faces of individuals in a family. Thus the *essence* of language does not lie outside the language in the so-called *real*, i.e., the meaning of a word cannot look for support outside the linguistic practice. Clearly all the three basic tenets of the *Tractatus* have fallen by the way side.

However, if the meaning of a word is acquired by observing the linguistic practice, then can there be any nonsense spoken? The problem of separating sense from nonsense remains a central problem for the later Wittgenstein as well: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense." (133e) In the *Tractatus* he had drawn an outer limit of language, which allowed only factual discourse to be meaningful and pushed all other kinds of discourse to the realm of silence. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he realizes that

---

4 See David Pears (1985) for a reading of Wittgenstein on this line.
no outer limit to language can be drawn. However, various internal limits within a language can be drawn—the ‘language games’ are constituted by such internal limits. Thus when one tries to transfer a word from one language game to another, she produces nonsense. For example, the words like God or Soul have well understood meaning within a religious discourse, but produces nonsense in a scientific discourse. Thus there is no general principle, as in the Tractatus, by which the line between sense and nonsense can be drawn, it can, however, be drawn for particular cases.

Wittgenstein thought that most of the philosophical problems arise due to such confusion about language. For example, Hume’s problem of identification of ‘having a sensation’ with ‘having a material thing’ stems from confusing a discourse related to material things with a discourse related to sensations. As Wittgenstein once remarked, “philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.” (19\*). Hence the importance of the “anthropological way of looking at philosophical problems.”

Before we inquire about Gramsci’s philosophical concerns in general and language in particular, let me quote Sraffa’s brief musing about language from his unpublished papers written in 1931:

> If the rule of language can be constructed only by observation, there can never be any nonsense said. This identifies the cause & the meaning of a word. The language of birds, as well as the language of metaphysians can be interpreted consistently in this way. It is only a matter of finding the occasion on which they say a thing, just as one finds the occasion on which they sneeze. And if nonsense is “a mere noise” it certainly must happen, as sneeze, when there is cause: how can this be distinguished from its meaning?
>
> We should give up the generalities & take particular cases, from which we started. Take conditional propositions: when are they nonsense, & when are they not?
>
> “If I were a king” is nonsense, for either I, or the job, would have to be entirely different. I know exactly what the reasons are that makes this unthinkable & I see that the modifications required to make it thinkable would be so great, that I would not recognise myself so transformed, nobody would say that the job, as adopted to my present self, is that of a king.
>
> “If I were a lecturer” has sense. For I was last year, & I don’t think I have changed much since, nor has the job. The difference is small, or rather I
cannot see it. I don't know exactly in what I have changed since last year. There is nothing repugnant to me in the idea.

But does this simply depend on my knowledge? (For a difference is big or small, according to whether I see it clearly or not). If I knew enough they would all be nonsense.

Then of course there are the propositions where “if” stands for “when”: i.e., the name stands for a class, & the proposition is true (or thinkable, as supra) for one member at least of the class. (PSP D3/12/7).

Though the musing fails to arrive at any firm results, we can get a fairly good sense of the nature of conversations that must be going on between the two outstanding intellectuals. We can clearly locate most of the later Wittgenstein’s concerns about meaning in Sraffa’s musings. For example, how to distinguish sense from nonsense when the understanding of the language is based on the linguistic practices; and a move from generalization to considerations of particular cases.

Neither in the quotations from Gramsci cited by Sen nor in the other parts of the Prison Notebooks do we find Gramsci concerned with the problem of distinguishing sense from nonsense. Strictly speaking Gramsci is not concerned with what Wittgenstein will call a philosophical problem, the closest he comes to this is in his essay, 'Critical Notes on an Attempt at a Popular Presentation of Marxism by Bukharin', partially quoted by Sen (p. 1245), where he criticizes Russel's proposition about the existence of points in space without any reference to the existence of man. Gramsci's critique goes as far as that one cannot think of "thinking" without the existence of man and that naming of the points as East and West and drawing any relationship between them are necessarily an "historico-cultural construction". Here Gramsci does not deny the existence of space and points independent of man; he only denies the possibility of thoughts about them. Gramsci's critique leaves the object of mathematics untouched, whereas the later Wittgenstein's philosophy shows that the very object of mathematics exists only in so far as the community of mathematicians have accepted standards and rules by which the notions of space and points are
accepted as existing independent of man—the 'language game' of mathematicians. In this case the very object of mathematics is made contingent on an anthropological or linguistic practice. Thus in the two cases 'anthropology' enters the equation at two very different levels.

For Gramsci philosophy is mainly concerned with 'world views'. His main philosophical concerns are about how people acquire a certain 'world view'. He thinks that most of the common and working class people carry loose, humdrum, and contradictory 'world views' that they acquire through language, common sense, and religion. It is in this context that he claims that "all men are philosophers" and goes on to add that "language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not simply and solely of words grammatically void of content", which Sen has quoted. Gramsci's political program is concerned with raising the level of the humdrum philosophy of common people by introducing an element of critical thinking. Thus "Marxism can only present itself at first in a style of polemic and criticism, as overcoming preceding modes of thought and actual existing thought … hence above all as critique of 'common sense' …." (Gramsci 1957, p. 65). Clearly the later Wittgenstein's project does not have much in common with Gramsci's, since the later Wittgenstein valorizes 'common sense' by claiming that it is the philosophers who create non-problems by not understanding the rules of ordinary linguistic practices. The relevant question to ask here is, had Wittgenstein read Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in the late twenties and thirties, would he have felt "like a tree from which all branches have been cut"? Given the diversity of their philosophical problems and programs, the answer to the above question must be: No.

*Sraffa's Production of Commodities*

^{5} Nevertheless, there is one place in his 'Critical Notes…' where Gramsci asserts that there cannot be a "pure" or "mathematical" language (Gramsci 1957, p.112). However, he does not elaborate on why it is not possible except the claim that language is cultural.
Now we turn to Sen's interpretation of the nature of Sraffa's contribution in the *Production of Commodities*. As we have seen above, Sen sees it as mainly an ideological intervention. Reading Sraffa in the light of Gramsci inclines one in this direction. However, without denying the ideological aspect of Sraffa's book, one must face a prima-facie problem with such an interpretation. Gramsci was of the opinion that such interventions must be polemical in nature; Sraffa's book, however, is anything but polemical--as a matter of fact, his method of presentation, which shows no mercy for the reader, is highly Wittgensteinesque. Below we shall argue that the central concern of his book is Wittgensteinesque too.

In brief, the central propositions of Sraffa's book are as follows. Given the methods of production in use, the gross outputs, and a conventionally determined rate of profits, there exists a unique mathematical solution for all the relative prices and the wages in the system. In the general case, the relative prices change with the change in the given rate of profits, with gross outputs and the methods of production in use remaining unchanged. The nature of these changes in prices, however, cannot be understood if they are measured against any arbitrarily chosen numeraire; since in the general case of joint production what could be a rise in price against one numeraire may turn out to be a fall in price against another numeraire. However, given the methods of production in use, there always exists a unique standard, the Standard commodity, against which the changes in prices of all commodities can be interpreted unambiguously and consistently. Furthermore, all the prices would also change if there were any change in the methods of production (of basic goods). In this context there is no Standard commodity, i.e., there is no unique numeraire against which the changes in prices could be consistently interpreted. In other words, when prices change due to changes in the methods of production the extents as well as the
directions of the changes in prices become dependent on the arbitrarily chosen numeraire.

Let us translate the above propositions into Wittgensteinian language. (1) A given system of methods of production in use defines a 'language game' within which a theory of prices has any meaning. (2) Prices are implicated in a given system of production and distribution. In other words, there is no essence or essential cause of prices. Thus any attempt to find the essence of prices in labor or utility/scarcity would end up in failure. (3) Changes in prices due to changes in methods of production cannot be analyzed from the perspective of a theory of price determination. The implication of proposition (3) is that the neoclassical supply function does not make sense, as it relates changes in methods of production with changes in prices. His critique of capital aggregation is simply an example of this general concern, which shows that the idea of capital as an aggregate factor of production does not make sense. Thus his theoretical project remains close to Wittgenstein's, where separating sense from nonsense within economic theory becomes the central concern.

In a similar vein to Wittgenstein's critique of Hume's problem, Sraffa, in one of his unpublished notes, points out that economic theoreticians have created an unsolvable problem (i.e., have produced nonsense) by trying to solve the problem of price determination at a given point in time and changes in prices over period of time by a single theory. As Sraffa writes:

The general confusion in all theories of value (except Marx probably) must be explained by the failure to distinguish between two entirely distinct types of questions and the universal attempt of solving them both by one single theory.

The two questions are:

---

6 In a general equilibrium framework, even under a constant returns to scale assumption, a change in supply would in general entail a change in the methods of production since a reallocation of factors of production would in general create relative excess or scarcity of labor and capital and thus change the wage-rental ratio leading to changes in techniques in all sectors.

7 See Sinha (2003) for a detailed development of this interpretation.
1) What determines the [difference in the?] values at which various commodities are exchanged in a given market on a given instant?

2) What determines the changes in the values of commodities at different times? (e.g. of one commodity)

... The first problem gives rise to a geometrical theory, the second to a mechanical one. The first is so much timeless that it cannot even be called statical. It does not represent an ideal stationary state in which it is assumed that no change takes place: but it represents a situation at the instant of time, that is to say something indistinguishable from the real state of things in such a sort period of time that no visible movement takes place. Its object is, as it were, the photograph of a market place: and its problem is to determine why cabbages bear a label "6d. per lb" and herrings "8d. a pair". The first problem must be solved by the theory of value. The second, I think, can only be solved by the theory of industrial fluctuations. (PSP D3/12/7, 1928).

This completes our critique of Sen's interpretation. But before closing we must acknowledge that we agree with Sen that "Sraffa's economic contributions … cannot, in general, be divorced from his philosophical understanding." (p. 1252). Furthermore, we agree with him that "[t]he temptation to see Sraffa's contribution as a causal theory of price determination … must be resisted. … The sense of 'determination' invoked by Sraffa concerns the mathematical determination of one set of facts from another set." (p. 1253). In the end, let us point out a couple of minor points: (1) Though Sen correctly points out that Sraffa did not say much in his published writings on the question of subjective and objective descriptions of value (p. 1250), it should be noted that there is quite a bit on this question in his unpublished lecture notes; (2) The year of the Cohen and Harcourt paper should be 2003 and not 2002.
REFERENCES


Ajit Sinha
Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics
Pune 411004, India
sinha_a99@yahoo.com