TRANSLATOR’S PREFACE

Scholarship is a triumph of the human mind because it is capable of imposing order and pattern on the unruly material of human experience.

—Noel Annan, “Lytton Strachey and His Critics”

What is a welfare state? The question has many disparate answers, and the term itself is treated as having many meanings across the spectrum of debate, from the most punctilious and intensive scholarship to the crudities of everyday party-political argument. Some meanings have positive associations in some countries and ideologies, some negative, but debate rarely extends to examination of the underlying and often conflicting assumptions and diverse histories that the exchanges take for granted. For that reason, I was not only honoured but pleased to be asked to help Franz-Xaver Kaufmann translate his book so that, to complement their own understandings, the English-reading public could be offered an introduction to the meanings and intellectual roots of the concept of the welfare state as understood from the European continental perspective.

The disagreement about meanings goes far deeper than mere semantics or ideology: it is rooted in differences in the national cultures of intellectual and scholarly approaches to the subject. In his seminal essay on intellectual styles, the sociologist Johan Galtung (1981: 817–856) analysed some of the contentious issues, and among the ideal-type styles he distinguished, two are relevant to this translation – the saxonc (roughly speaking, the Anglo-Saxon intellectual style that can be distinguished into UK and US versions) and the teutonic intellectual style (which is not confined to Germans). Regarding ideas of ‘the welfare state’, an oversimplified distinction suggests that from a saxonc perspective, all states and their governments carry out some sort of social policies for some citizens, but by no means should all of them be called welfare states. The seminal work on the idea of a welfare state by such English writers as Richard
Titmuss, Dorothy Wedderburn, or Asa Briggs exemplifies this position. In complete contrast to this approach, a common European continental assumption is that all modern industrial states are welfare states, but not all of them carry out social policies. This has led, not surprisingly, to some mutual incomprehension.

This is no place for a fuller explanation, but the confusion is not helped either by the saxonic tendency to seek empirical evidence to trace the development of social policy and welfare institutions to the point where they might be conceptualized as a welfare state, or by the teutonic preference for logic- and theory-based normative approaches that start from the assumption that modern states must be welfare states because they are by definition concerned with the welfare of all their subjects, whether or not the empirical evidence supports this belief. Much hangs on the qualitative meanings of the term ‘welfare’ and whose meanings they are – those of all the people in question or those only of the observer, as illustrated by the mutually contradictory connotations of the term ‘subject’. From the teutonic perspective, in which the state always exists (exemplified by whatever form of rule it has), the great emancipation of the individual was from the status of an object at the disposition of the ruler to that of a subject of the state, to be treated with consideration. But from other intellectual perspectives, the individual was always the subject of the state until emancipation enabled the emergence of the autonomous citizen. As the Nordics put it, ‘it’s not “the state” against us (subjects); we are the citizens and it’s our state’.

This book is therefore indispensable as a tool with which to dispel the confusion. In responding to Franz-Xaver Kaufmann’s invitation to translate chapters he had written in German and edit some he had written in English, I came to the process with a good deal of diffidence as I was mindful of my previous experience of translating and editing densely written German scholarship into English. On that occasion, the (different) German academic author commented to me after the process was completed that he had felt it necessary to change some of my ‘plain English because it had not sufficiently conveyed the complexity of his German thought’. As Galtung implied about the teutonic style of academic exposition and argument, complexity and profundity are inseparably intermingled and thus hard to translate, but in practice a greater problem was one to which the philosopher Karl Popper referred in his memoirs:

Everybody who has done some translating, and who has thought about it, knows that there is no such thing as a grammatically correct and also almost literal translation of any interesting text. Every good translation is
an interpretation of the original text; and I would even go so far as to say that every good translation of a nontrivial text must be a theoretical reconstruction. Thus it will even incorporate bits of a commentary. Every good translation must be, at the same time, close and free…. Incidentally, it is a mistake to think that in an attempt to translate a piece of purely theoretical writing, aesthetic considerations are not important…. In any case, although a translation may be bad because it is not sufficiently precise, a precise translation of a difficult text simply does not exist. And if the two languages have a different structure, some theories may be almost untranslatable. (Popper 1982: 23–24, emphasis in original)

Experience showed me that Popper’s demanding criteria could not be met if the translation was to be precise and was not to be my theoretical reconstruction of the author’s text. The demand for German conceptual precision sometimes jarred with clarity of English expression, and even technical dictionaries failed to provide equivalents for some expressions in German, a language where scholars commonly convey conceptual innovation and complexity by coining polysyllabic neologisms. Since my objective was an English version of Kaufmann’s work without obtrusive evidence of my own views on either substance or style, and since we agreed that the process of translation was to be collaborative and iterative, I tried to work through stages, from an initial broad-brush translation of the German to an English version that reflects not only the precise substantive details of the argument but even some of the texture and terminology of the style of the original. The final text thus owes as much to the author’s own views on how his argument should be expressed in English as it does to my views, as faithfully as he and I could achieve it together.

I want to express my appreciation and thanks to all those who made this translation possible. The Hanse Institute for Advanced Studies in Delmenhorst generously granted me a research fellowship for five months in 2008 and 2009 to enable me to work there on the translation and to pursue my own research, and I greatly valued the kind support of its staff. I very much appreciated the help Thomas Skelton-Robinson gave me with five chapters. The additional costs of the translation were also generously supported by Franz-Xaver Kaufmann and by the Bielefelder Universitätsgesellschaft. I am particularly grateful to Stephan Leibfried for his friendly help and encouragement throughout the project.

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Notes

2. I am indebted to Andreas Busch for drawing this highly relevant paper to my attention.
3. The references are given in an essay and a response (Veit-Wilson 2000, 2002) in which I tried to outline some of these issues.