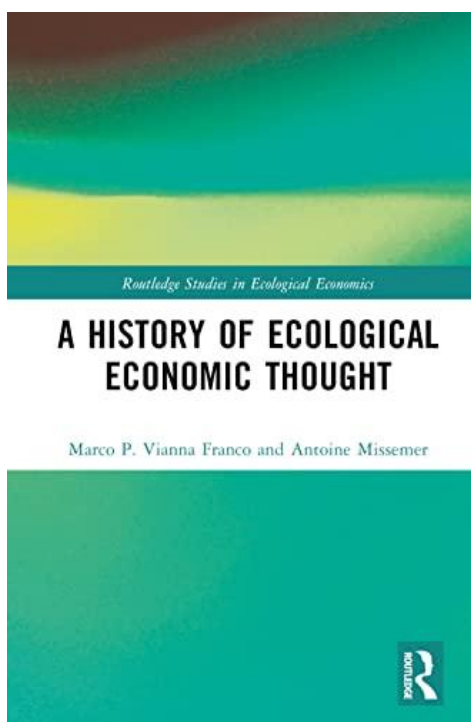


BOOK REVIEW

A Deep Look Back into Early Eco-Economics

Venkatachalam Lingappan *

Marco P Vianna Franco and Antoine Missemmer. 2023. *A History of Ecological Economic Thought*. Oxfordshire: Routledge. 200. ISBN (ebook): 978-1000624618. ISBN (hardcover): 978-0367363925.



The title of the book under review is a bit of a misnomer, as Marco Franco and Antoine Missemmer's volume is a historiographical study rather than a history of ecological economics, given its examination of economic–environmental conceptualizations going back to the sixteenth century.

Prior historiographies in this field generally identify the systematic development of environmental economics as beginning in the 1930s, with Pigou's seminal work (1932), while positioning ecological economics as a distinct movement emerging in the 1990s, rooted in Kenneth Boulding's foundational contributions from the 1960s. In contrast, Franco and Missemmer

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establish that the conceptual underpinnings of economy–environment relationships possess considerably older historical roots, extending through multiple centuries of intellectual discourse. The authors argue that longitudinal analysis of economics–environment interactions yields substantially richer insights than the focus on temporally circumscribed investigations of recent developments alone.

Where the existing historiographical literature on economy–environment dynamics predominantly emphasizes neoclassical environmental economics, Franco and Missemmer throughout this book illuminate previously marginalized strands of ecological economic thought, such as the role of chemistry and soil science in agriculture. Their work evaluates how earlier scholars investigated the interdisciplinary nexus between economic systems and natural sciences, chronicling conceptual frameworks characterized by shared ontological and epistemological understandings of societal functioning and natural world dynamics. The authors reconstruct the intellectual genealogy of Western ecological economic thought from the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods—spanning the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—through the 1940s. The book’s periodization reflects both the relative scholarly inattention to pre-1940s intellectual contributions and the substantial existing literature documenting post-1940s developments in the field.

The book then traces the deep and recurring entanglement of natural science with economic thought across multiple intellectual traditions, geographies, and centuries. At its core, the work argues that economic thinking has never developed independently of our understanding of the natural sciences—from the botanical and zoological inquiries of early modern natural history to the energetics movement, ecological utopianism, and conservation science of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A central theme running through the book is how specific scientific disciplines—chemistry, physiology, ecology, and evolutionary biology—shaped not only economic theory, but also the institutional and policy frameworks governing land use, agriculture, and natural resource management. The authors discuss, for instance, the transformative role of soil chemistry and plant nutrition science in agrarian governance, illustrating how laboratory advances translate directly to territorial economic policy. The book also highlights the geographical diversity of these intellectual exchanges: German *Naturphilosophie*, Russian and Soviet ecological scholarship, Austro–Hungarian social energetics, and North American conservation traditions. Each produced distinct but related frameworks to understand the economy, as embedded within natural systems. Particularly notable is the book’s recovery of underexamined traditions—such as the

“Other Austrian” (91) school’s engagement with nature’s incommensurability and Stanchinsky’s work (1930) on natural reserves as instruments of ecologically informed economic planning. In this examination, the authors anticipate the central concerns of contemporary ecological economics.

Franco and Missemmer’s analysis demonstrates that concerns regarding sustainability, resource depletion, and biophysical limitations on economic growth represent persistent themes in economic theorizing across several centuries. Far from constituting a uniquely twentieth-century development, these preoccupations possess deep genealogical roots spanning multiple centuries, they suggest. Through the recovery of these earlier intellectual traditions, the authors transform contemporary scholars’ understanding of the historical evolution of economic engagement with environmental questions.

The volume underscores the considerable influence of the natural sciences—natural history, including chemistry, biology, ecology, and physics—on the formation of ecological economic thought. These interdisciplinary engagements were not peripheral considerations but frequently served as foundational elements in the theoretical architectures that address economic phenomena, particularly those concerning agricultural systems, resource extraction, energy flows, and the material bases of production and consumption.

Although predominantly historiographical in orientation, the monograph carries significant implications for contemporary environmental and sustainability challenges. By retrieving neglected or marginalized intellectual currents, Franco and Missemmer equip contemporary scholars and policymakers with an expanded conceptual toolkit with which to analyse human–nature relations. This historical lens enables readers to recognize that ongoing debates surrounding sustainability, resource constraints, and ecological limits are built upon deep intellectual foundations, having been continuously shaped through centuries of scholarly discourse and contestation. This will deepen our understanding of the economy–ecology nexus and enhance appropriate policies to change the behaviour of people to take care of our environment seriously.

As such, it represents an indispensable pedagogical and research tool for graduate students and faculty engaged in the fields of economic thought historiography, environmental economics, and ecological economics.

The interdisciplinary approach advocated by the authors, while valuable, raises some important concerns. It is largely suited to empirical questions: for instance, evaluating the economic impact of water pollution on

agriculture draws on economics, soil science, agronomy, toxicology, and statistics. Yet several critical questions remain unresolved: Which disciplines are truly necessary, in what proportion should each contribute, and should the scope extend to fields such as history, anthropology, and sociology? More fundamentally, who determines this, and does the bounded rationality of researchers not risk making such an approach inherently incomplete? Without adequately addressing these questions, disciplinary coherence cannot be assured—and this is precisely where the book falls short.

Data Availability Statement: This is a book review, which does not have any original primary data included in the work.

Ethics Statement: It does not involve human participants, animal subjects, or original data collection, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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