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Arnaud Orain, *Les savoirs perdus de l'économie: contribution à l'équilibre du vivant*. Paris: Gallimard, 2023. 384 pp. Notes, references, and index. €22.50 (pb). ISBN 978-2-07-292510-8.

Review by David Kammerling Smith, Eastern Illinois University.

In his foundational work *Une historie intellectuelle de l'économie politique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Jean-Claude Perrot famously bemoaned the small corpus of works--less than 10 percent of works with economic topics--from which scholars had built the history of political economic thought. Perrot challenged these scholars' emphasis on the dialogues among the "grands textes" while forgetting "le milieu nourricier dont ils se sont détachés."[1] In his important and fascinating new book *Les savoirs perdus de l'économie: contribution à l'équilibre du vivant*, Arnaud Orain not only substantially expands Perrot's vision but does so in promoting a new, alternative approach to economics that challenges (or, better said, aims to supplant) neo-classical economic thought. Orain's work is not a new history of economic thought as an abstracted, theoretical intellectual exercise. Rather, Orain develops a history of economic knowledge production and circulation with a strong emphasis on practical knowledge--a knowledge that drew from broad currents of thought and practice and that produced many possible developments which then "ont disparu" (p. 11).

Les savoirs perdus de l'économie is a learned book that develops extended sections on topics ranging from Greek political economy to contemporary environmental economics, although the long eighteenth century serves as the book's central focus. Orain asserts that classical (and subsequently neo-classical) economics as established by the Physiocrats, Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, David Ricardo, and forward was intellectually founded on a naturalist ontology marked by a fundamental division between humans and nature. Humans act, and nature, which is exterior to humans, provides resources for humans on which to act. As the discipline of economics institutionally established itself in the neo-classical mode over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, economics reduced its analysis of human actions to econometrics and created its origin story as the culmination of and successor to previous economic thought.

Now in the twenty-first century, Orain asserts, economics, like other sciences, faces a crisis as society increasingly rejects its expertise based on mathematical modeling and as its naturalist ontology itself comes under question. Further, environmental and ecological economics, with their focus on the balance between scarce resources and various organizational outlets, have failed to overcome the naturalist ontology. Orain thus turns to the eighteenth century--a period before neo-classical dominance when many possible and unorthodox economic ideas circulated--

to (re)discover alternative economic knowledge. Orain notes that three successive phases of economic knowledge have marked the post-Roman Western tradition: pastoralism and political theology; the economic policymaking of *raison d'État*; and the political economy of liberalism. He aims to draw upon *Les savoirs perdus de l'économie* in order to suggest the contours of and lineage for a new stage of economic knowledge.

The work's seven chapters are divided into three sections: chapters one through three on the *science du commerce* followed by chapters four through six on *physique œconomique* with a final chapter on the possibilities drawn from the previous two sections for contemporary economics.[2] Orain's discussion of the *science du commerce* focuses on its epistemology, often in contrast to that of Physiocracy. The latter's zig-zags and assumption of perfect markets as a basis for analysis were thoroughly rejected as the products of the philosopher's imagination, particularly by Vincent de Gournay and his Circle. In contrast, the *science du commerce* gave priority to the triptych history/description/comparison. Close and careful descriptions of local environments and practices, soils and ecosystems, and comparisons between territories and products by merchants and farmers, wholesale traders, and guild masters built over decades a substantial evidentiary basis for economic knowledge. This "real-world" body of knowledge allowed, through induction, the development of principles (not laws) closely and narrowly hewn to localities, to particular circumstances, and to sets of practices. Orain's focus on the conflicts between Gournay's colleague François Véron de Forbonnais and the Physiocrats in the 1760s effectively demonstrates the lost economic approach that Gournay's Circle promoted.

Further, the *science du commerce* was not a doctrine set down by a priestly class. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogic literature in which multiple views and positions are represented, Orain argues that Gournay, Forbonnais, and others presented their generalized principles in a dialogic and open framework. Their annotations of translated economic works offered both the original view and the editors' often critical commentary on it, and their "Le conte économique" also included diverse perspectives. Readers were free to arrive at their own views. Rather than the distinct, abstracted vocabulary of physiocracy, the accessible language in these publications allowed merchants, manufacturers, and workers to reason through the issues from their own immediate physical and economic environments in a process of co-constructed knowledge. Specific, local environment, thus, not only provided a body of economic knowledge but also provided the context in which to interpret and understand what principles might be drawn from that knowledge. Orain identifies a democratic element in these dialogic practices that stands in sharp contrast to Physiocratic dogmatism.

Les savoirs perdus de l'économie's second section turns to *physique œconomique*. Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus plays a central role for Orain with Linnaeus's development of the "œconomy of nature" as a foundation for an œconomical science. Linnaeus's approach embodies a necessary tension between, on the one hand, the balance and order among natural beings and, on the other hand, the unique role of humans to manage natural beings and their environments in order to sustain the balance of life. The importance and value of natural beings to humans compel humans to study and understand the natural environment profoundly so that humans can effectively maintain the equilibrium among natural beings. Within Linnaeus's œconomical science, nature, rather than exterior to humans, is interdependent with humans.

Orain establishes coherence between Linnaeus's œconomical science and œconomic physics through an extended study of the *Journal* Œ*conomique*. Both carried a commitment to practical knowledge aimed at society's benefit. The work of œconomic physics continued into the revolutionary era with a focus on environmental systems, particularly around the problem of deforestation, that reaffirmed the interdependent quality of all nature, including humans. The re-establishment of learned societies and academies in 1795, however, promoted a rupture between the social (the œconomic) and the natural sciences. Specialization led biologists and political economists into separate institutional silos, and political economists followed the Physiocratic path into abstraction, mathematization, and modeling in which nature was that thing upon which humans acted. The œconomical science of Linnaeus and œconomic physics of the *Journal* Œ*conomique* faded into the lost economic knowledge of the pre-classical era.

In the final chapter, Orain rather audaciously (and delightfully) draws upon this lost knowledge to identify a new (or revived) economic knowledge that will serve to move past the current crises in economics. Most importantly, Orain points to *physique œconomique* as a foundation for a new environmentally-conscious economic science that can address environmental crises large and small through the interdependencies of nature. Humans act within nature, not simply on it. The externalities of wealth production (climate change, poverty, racism, and more) cannot be ignored as "social" problems beyond the concern of economic analysis. Interdependent economic analysis requires deep empiricism, which Orain sees emerging in some economic fields--an empiricism that demands greater attention not only for historical economics but for a broader and more democratic range of participants in such analysis.

Like all fine books, Orain's *Les savoirs perdus de l'économie* raises questions and has implications for future scholarship. Two particular issues would seem ripe for evaluation. First, the emergence of French overseas trade and colonization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered an important field of commonality for the *science du commerce* and *physique œconomique*. The unfamiliar environments of North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and India required identification, categorization, and organization, both naturally and socially. The colonial efforts at natural history began far removed from the knowledge-production systems in France itself. In addition to merchants and craftworkers, enslaved people, Indigenous populations, sailors, soldiers, and others added to the body of information as they sought to survive in new and/or changing environments. The colonial context--in which the interdependency between humans and the natural environment was starkly evident--would seem an ideal setting in which to explore how the *science du commerce* and *physique œconomique* shaped and were shaped by these key economic regions.

Second, Orain builds an important argument about the epistemology of the *science du commerce*. By identifying the broad participation in economic discourse, Orain's argument points to the importance of moving beyond published sources to explore the voluminous, unpublished debates and discussions on economic issues large and small found within administrative dossiers. Administrators in royal councils, bureaus, and offices actively sought input from individuals and groups who would be affected by proposed policies, and individuals eagerly sought to bring their own issues to the Conseil. *Chambres de commerce*, *jurisdictions consulaires*, merchants, manufacturers, guild masters and workers, and even peasants and day laborers offered their views on rules, regulations, and policies. Similar bodies of material for the colonies exist in the

naval archives. These materials offer an opportunity to trace the changing economic languages used by people of all backgrounds across the eighteenth century, better identifying how economic ideas were developed and abstracted and how people argued based on the peculiarities of their environments.

Les savoirs perdus de l'économie serves as a substantial intervention in scholarship on eighteenth-century economics. I shall leave to experts in contemporary economics the assessment of Orain's efforts to shape the future of that field. His effort to revive the lost knowledge of the economy of the eighteenth century, however, is clearly a success, and scholars in a broad range of fields are encouraged to pursue the implications of Arnaud Orain's arguments.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: EHESS, 1992), p. 9. Perrot drew upon the important work of Christine Théré, "Étude sociale des auteurs économiques, 1556-1789," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris I, 1990).

[2] Orain here draws upon Philippe Steiner's classification of French economic periodicals. Philippe Steiner, *La « Science nouvelle » de l'économie politique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998) and *Sociologie de la connaissance économique. Essai sur les rationalisations de la connaissance économique (1750-1850)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998).

David Kammerling Smith
Eastern Illinois University
dksmith@eiu.edu

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