

**Reseña por Cati Torres**  
**Profesora titular de Economía de la Universitat de les Illes Balears**

\*\*\*\*\*

**José Manuel Naredo**

***La economía en evolución. Historia y perspectivas de las categorías básicas del pensamiento económico***

*(Economics in evolution. History and perspectives of the basic categories of the economic thinking)*

Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores S.A., 2015 (4<sup>th</sup> edition)  
ISBN: 978-84-323-1496-4 (PB) €24.50. 784 pp.

‘By looking now only at the table of contents of your volume, I am happy to see that while considering the historical thread of the entropic problem, you have also marshalled the analytical essence of the problem in a comprehensible way that, to my knowledge, has no parallel in the tide of the new contributions in the field’. These are some of the words Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen dedicated to José Manuel Naredo, one of the most prestigious economists in Spain and a pioneer of ecological economics there, in a thank you letter dated 20 January 1988 after the Spanish author sent to him his volume *La economía en evolución. Historia y perspectivas de las categorías básicas del pensamiento económico* (Economics in evolution. History and perspectives of the basic categories of the economic thinking) published in 1987. Indeed, in the book, which has not been published in English yet and whose latest edition is reviewed here, Naredo analyses as nobody in the field has ever done before the construction of the economic science since its origins in the eighteenth century. From Part I (chapters 1-2) on the ideological *Context* where the discipline originated to Part VI (chapters 26-27) on the *Prospects* offered by an economic science in decline, he enlightens us with a mastering analysis about the meaning and consequences of building a discipline eager to emulate the objectivity and precision of natural sciences. That is, a discipline following the Newtonian mechanics approach and the Cartesian method according to a new anthropocentrism built on the ‘faith in the unlimited capacities [of science] to solve any problem’ (p. 37). Naredo reflects on the contradictions of a so-called “amoral” economic system governed by *homo economicus* subjects and market equilibriums.

On a tour through the *Genesis* (Part II, chapters 3-8), *Strengthening* (Part III, chapters 9-12), *Zenith* (Part IV, chapters 13-19) and *Unification and Decline* (Part V, chapters 20-25) stages defining the evolution of economics, the author evidences how ‘the usual idea of economic system creates its own positivist assertions preventing that system from any critique’ (p. 29). Such a system makes us mistakenly believe that the perpetual growth of a monetary aggregated magnitude called “production” (or GDP) will unequivocally lead to happiness and social progress. Indeed, the idea that increasing “production” generates utility dates back to the eighteenth century when the physiocrats postulated that human intervention should enhance nature’s capacity in generating wealth thus producing renewable flows without undermining the underlying resource base. However, the concept of wealth which economics builds on today has its roots in that established by Adam Smith who liberated it from the physical context: ‘wealth is all material products which are necessary, useful or nice to man and have not been given to him by nature unlimitedly [resulting] from a nation’s labour’ (p. 174). Revolving around the notions of labour and *subjective* scarcity, a *unified* idea of wealth

equating to exchange value was gradually constructed post physiocracy. Since then, and strengthened by utilitarianism, the only focus on monetary values has made possible the continuous, accelerated GDP growth ending up with a view of progress ‘as the simple proliferation of goods or capital gains regardless of how they have been elaborated [this serving to praise] the productive virtues of capitalism’ (p. 133). Nowadays, for the sake of an ambiguous notion of “production” freed from physical limits and ignoring the second law of thermodynamics, ‘we destroy day-to-day the main source of [it] which is the biosphere, and for the sake of utility and consumption we destroy the main use values we consume’ (p. 427). Even worse so, this so-called “utility-generating” GDP growth does not accurately reflect the true *taxonomy of profits* supported by a financial system promoting speculation. This is why Naredo usually refers to the *absolute metaphor of production* and the *myth of economic growth*.

The faith in the unlimited skills of the *homo faber* and the belief in a law of continuous progress of humankind have driven, the author states, the tautological construction of an economic science built on contradictions this making it barely operational to deal with real problems. The axioms defining and systematizing its study object, which are mathematically specified in a chapter brilliantly analysing the meaning of the so-called “quantitative macro magnitudes” explaining the economic system (chapter 24), have been endorsed, he argues, by most of economic thought schools. This leads him to question the ground-breaking nature of the “epistemological breaks” usually identified by economic historians since Adam Smith’s work. The internal critiques leading to such breaks ‘have mainly focused on analytical aspects and the distribution and functioning of the “macro magnitudes” of an implicitly defined economic system’ (p. 618). The author discusses how Marxism and Keynesianism are not exceptions despite interestingly criticizing the logics of capitalism and showing the unreality of market automatism, respectively. Marx and Keynes, he reminds us, uncritically accepted the universality of the categories shaping the economic system, thus further contributing to strengthen the divorce between economics and nature and hence unify the economic science. Naredo additionally reflects on the post-World War Two decline in the discipline’s preciseness due to the increasing role of macroeconomics for the good of a major pragmatism this feeding even more what Georgescu-Roegen called the *endless substitution fallacy*. The eager search for truth moving the fathers of economics’ intellectual work has been replaced, he says, by the very simple interest in forecasting on the basis of *pseudo-magnitudes* provided by accounting systems which poorly represent the socioeconomic metabolism of our societies. This suggests, he follows that the intention to justify as objective the policies granting benefits to the most powerful drives today the efforts to present economics as a physical-mathematical discipline. If not, why should a science built on tautologies and contradictions be still in such a good health? he wonders.

To guide the design of social development pathways reconciling ethical, aesthetic and utilitarian criteria, this book aims to facilitate the link not only between natural sciences and society but also between science and other ways of human knowledge. It is a claim for the economic thinking to transcend the existing dogmatism and be open to a multidimensional and transdisciplinary reasoning within a systems economy framework considering ecological and thermodynamic principles. This will require, Naredo points out, to go beyond the scientific rationality to include easy-to-understand value judgements to better inform the indispensable social participation. Accordingly, and as a key step to an *inclusive* economics, he proposes to follow an *Eco-integrating* approach recognizing the connection among all types of scientific disciplines and the interdependency of scientific knowledge and other intuitive, metaphysical and ethical fields. Its broader study object will definitely increase its

analytical and forecasting potential as the author has long shown through applied research resulting in a bunch of publications accessible at his website ([www.elrincondenaredo.org](http://www.elrincondenaredo.org)). To this purpose, increased awareness about the assumptions and limitations of the economic science as well as increased awareness about the need to advocate for a *moral* economics will be needed, he warns. Rather than rejecting the old system as false, ‘the progress of knowledge demands ordering [it], clarifying its foundations, limitations and potential to avoid glorifying its contribution’ (p. 712). For the author, this is the only way to really stir up the economics science: ‘revolutions require analysing the basic assumptions defining and structuring the study object of the science under assessment’ (p. 618). He also points to the need for ‘a common interpretation of the human evolution minimizing (to raise again) the old ideas underlying the current mental and institutional status quo’ (p. 747). This is, he ends up, another essential step to stimulate the necessary sociocultural paradigm change.

The actual socioecological crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic as one of its last exponents, invites us today more than ever to read Naredo’s book. In an understandable way, it provides us with a comprehensive analysis about what economics is and what it should be to solidly contribute to informing policies aimed to advance towards a socially and ecologically healthier society. The mastering analysis contained in its 784 pages makes the book not only a compulsory bibliographic resource to all economists but also an essential guide to rethink the way we teach economics at schools and universities and to dignify the economics profession. However, despite the relevance of its contents, the book still remains unknown to many people. The silence around Naredo’s work of economy scholars and in institutional contexts is not surprising in a world governed by global economic rules defined by the wealthiest with the blessing of conventional economists. His case adds to those of other critical researchers intentionally silenced by the system. In a time imbued with civilization crisis one comes to realize that translating it into English could help to increase the influence of such a crucial book. Georgescu-Roegen already insinuated it in his letter to Naredo in 1988: ‘I really hope that your volume will find a greater influence by its translation in English (the scientific vernacular of today)’. To a double aim has this review been written: to disseminate Naredo’s work and to capture the attention of researchers committed to the progress of knowledge pushing them to cooperating to get the book published in “the scientific vernacular of today”. Hopefully, this will also serve as a wake-up call to stimulate them to establish networks and work hand in hand with social movements in the search for a better planet. Such an endeavour would undoubtedly be the best tribute to the extensive intellectual work of one of the greatest economists in our time.