

Luces para la economía. Libros y discursos de economía política en el Atlántico español durante la era de las revoluciones

Título: Luces para la economía. Libros y discursos de economía política en el Atlántico español durante la era de las revoluciones (Nueva Granada, 1780-1811)

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Some studies on the evolution of economic ideas in Latin American countries have been published in recent years. For the Colombian case, in particular, interest has focused on the Republican period, and, especially, on the second half of the 19th century. Meanwhile, classical contributions with longer time spans, including the Colonial period, have concentrated on the great names of the Independence. Research on economic thought in the late 17th and early 19th centuries in Colombia have thus corresponded to the economic ideas of the heroes of the Independence, and their main concern has been understanding how liberal ideas from different economic trends became the source of the Independence discourse.

Bohórquez's book brings new air and contributes to a literature trying to understand how more or less scientific ideas from the "new science of political economy" penetrated the Revolutionaries political ideas and the daily lives of Colonial administrators and rising entrepreneurs. This volume will become an essential reference in the study of Latin American economic thought, not as a subsidiary to political thought but as a topic in itself.

In spite of the remarkable features of this research, the book somewhat lacks the support of economic theory and analysis in answering the questions it rises. The book is no doubt an important contribution to the history of economic thought but stops short in its contribution to economic analysis. The author seems to question economics from an external perspective. That is, his main concerns are the uses of economic knowledge, and the way these uses shaped particular social aspects beyond scholarly knowledge of economic ideas. This is not a flaw in itself, but it is important for the reader to know that the book's aim is not to provide an analytical history of the way in which theoretical ideas could adapt and transform conceptually, but rather to show how these ideas became actions and discourses without an assessment of their internal coherence or their analytical rigor.

Therefore, the book clearly takes sides in the history of economic ideas, privileging contextual history of ideas. But even for those looking for a more analytical understanding of the period, the book can be seen as an important starting point. It presents a thorough and organized treatment of the sources so that the reader can find here a guide to the most relevant findings. The author is very knowledgeable on the intellectual context of the rest of the world during the period, which allows him not only to identify the sources that influenced the main characters in the production and consumption of ideas, but, in particular, those that were surprisingly not so influential.

The book is divided in two parts in order to contrast the access to great works with the reasons to find and use ideas coming from political economy. The first part deals with the diffusion of theoretical knowledge and the characteristics of the text with the widest circulation in the New Granada. This constitutes an exhaustive research on the authors.

Bohórquez shows, using qualitative but quantifiable evidence, that there was a limited number of books on political or applied economics in the libraries of those who could be considered the enlightened generation of the Nueva Granada, compared to what they had on natural sciences and practical arts. Books with a broad scope on political economy and linked with a more general social philosophy were fewer than those dealing with applied knowledge, especially

those on different agricultural exploitation technologies. Those in the former group were authored by Spanish reformers such as the Count of Campomanes or Bernardo Ward, and other books by French and British writers were also available, most of which were available in French versions. There are very few texts from the Physiocrats in spite of the significant influence of French ideas at the time.

The author advances this distribution of works could be related with the Inquisition's censorship but gives no convincing evidence to confirm this hypothesis. The most probable explanation is that there was continuity between their interest in natural sciences and their applications, and the applied economics that become popular at the time. So, even if Bohórquez does not really explore this idea, it could suggest the presence of an industrialist reformism but based on agriculture. This makes even more striking the absence of texts from the Physiocrats given this social and economic ideal strongly related with Quesnay's and Mirabeau's ideas.

The second part explores how economic knowledge became a new science of government, in the public as well as in the private sphere. This part is built upon textual evidence from the written press and also purely political texts, and presents an in-depth analysis of a particular source that becomes ever more influential during the period: commercial texts and writings on political economy.

This second part seems somewhat disconnected from the first, as it had been written at a different time. The reader might find there is a missed parallel between both parts because the first focuses on great treaties whereas the second deals with the written press and other vulgarization texts. For example, the question about free commerce is almost completely absent from the first part. It is seldom mentioned and seems obscured by the search for evidence on whether texts from British authors were available or not. The author seems to forget that most of the reformist works and Physiocratic influences directly connect the development of a “good agriculture” with free trade and competitive markets.

This idea is particularly important to connect this Physiocratic influence and the reason to come back to these authors in a section of the book on “legal despotism” (pp.168-172) where Bohórquez deals with authors from the New Granada, such as Eloy Valenzuela, who wrote books where the practical interest on forms of modern agriculture and the more general goal of building a national economy specialized in agriculture but articulated with the world market and open to commodity trade with other countries. A very similar social project to that of the Physiocrats.

I would like to invite Colombian, Latin American and Iberian historians of economic thought to accept the book's invitation to explore the history of the presence of political economy in a peripheral region during a period of major social changes triggered by ideas. It is certainly a vast and rich research field that now has a solid starting point with Bohórquez scholarly work.