Reseña


If asked to sum up the reviewed book in a line, it might be “Agriculture's confirmed loss of relative weight in the economy is not the end of the story”. This is one of the statements made in the ground-breaking book The social metabolism of Spanish Agriculture (1900-2008). The Spanish way towards industrialization. González de Molina and his colleagues challenge the conventional agrarian narrative of Spain by adopting a new approach which places sustainability rather than growth capacity in the center. In this framework, sustainability refers to whether the sector was able to grow over time without deteriorating its social and ecological resources.

The words of who is considered the “father” of Ecological Economics, Georgescu-Roegen, essentially inspired the authors’ proposal. Late in the 70’s, he claimed that “the economy’s ultimate goal is not the production and consumption of goods and services, but the reproduction and improvement of the processes necessary for their production and consumption” (p. 6). Roegen also distinguished between “flows” and “funds” elements, an idea which is also embraced in the book. Land, society, livestock and technical means of production are the four “funds” taken into account to address Spanish agrarian sustainability.

But, how do they do that? The authors develop a novel methodological and theoretical approach, named “Agrarian Metabolism”, which basically adapts the already operational Social Metabolism to the complexity of the agrarian sector. Agroecosystems are considered the basic unit of metabolic activity. To those not familiar with this terminology, Agrarian Metabolism refers to the “exchange of energy, materials and information that agroecosystems perform with their socio-ecological environment”. In this framework, existing metabolic methodologies and further instruments —many borrowed from Agroecology— are combined to conduct biophysical analyses. This kind of analysis is further integrated with the monetary, but always keeping the sustainability approach. Thus, the authors consider if the monetary growth was brought to farms, as well as the drivers that led to this path. Thence, the history drawn is fairly dark. Nevertheless, the book is full of hope at the same time. The methodological and theoretical approach presented is inspiring, opening a new path for sound future research. Additionally, feasible proposals are made (such as Organic Farming practices), which can help to revert and/or surpass the harmful trends followed by the sector right now. To all interested in agrarian history, but also in moving towards a more sustainable and fairer world, the book is definitely a must read.

Once the reading is over, one is able to understand in deep how endangered the sustainability of agroecosystems in Spain is, as well as the drivers that led to this path. Hence, the history drawn is fairly dark. Nevertheless, the book is full of hope at the same time. The methodological and theoretical approach presented is inspiring, opening a new path for sound future research. Additionally, feasible proposals are made (such as Organic Farming practices), which can help to revert and/or surpass the harmful trends followed by the sector right now. To all interested in agrarian history, but also in moving towards a more sustainable and fairer world, the book is definitely a must read.

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