Margaret Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. xi, 231, $40.00, ISBN 0-226-73569-9.
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That natural science has profoundly influenced economics is certainly well known, and perhaps obvious to the point of banality. Smith's famous reference to the natural price as a center of gravity is just once such instance. However, Margaret Schabas' book has a striking and original thesis to argue. She maintains that until about the mid-nineteenth century (J.S. Mill is the pivotal character in her account), the economy was viewed as essentially a part of the natural world, and that consequently new discoveries in science were viewed as applicable to an understanding of economic life, and not merely on an analogical or methodological level. By way of contrast, modem economics is erected on a foundation of human agency as a science of rational choice. Its subject matter is completely divorced from that of the natural sciences. Granted, economists have copied the mathematical and empirical methods of the sciences, and, granted, the widespread use of analogies to the natural world; nonetheless, substantively economics is a wholly separate sort of inquiry. In Schabas' words it has been ''denaturalized.'' The result is that ''there is now a sense that the economy can be engineered, if not entirely controlled'' (p. 3).

The book is essentially a broad-brush survey of the history of economics in a little over 150 pages. As such it is highly accessible. There are eight chapters, of which the first two situate her story into the early history of economics and of natural science. There are, then, a chapter each on the French economics of the Enlightenment, Hume, Smith, Classical Political Economy, and Mill. The last chapter summarizes the argument.

Her story of denaturalization is well taken if we look at the first macrodynamic models of the Physiocrats and the Classical Economists. Francois Quesnay and his followers self-consciously viewed the economy as a part of the natural order of things, and their policy advice was to let nature take its course. Wealth was essentially a gift of nature; human labor was productive only when it worked in nature. Agriculture created a surplus, trade and manufacturing did not. Land scarcity and diminishing returns went on to play a profound role in Malthusian and Ricardian versions of Classical economics, as did the passion between the sexes. Malthus' demolition of Godwin's utopia deploys a purely biological model, and, as such, it is not surprising that Darwin would take inspiration from it. Comparing these with the contemporary program of building up macroeconomic phenomena from individual rational choice models, it seems quite apt to speak of a ''denaturalization.'' Incidentally this may shed some light on why economists seem to be more optimistic about long-run growth prospects than are ecologists.

However, as an historian and philosopher of science, Schabas has placed her account into a survey of the important scientific developments of the period, thus positioning the history of economics into the broader history of science. There are excellent chapters, for example on Hume and Smith, that show these connections in original and fruitful ways. She has done significant research to argue that Hume was much more conversant with developments in natural science than was previously thought, and she uses this to good effect to show that Hume's monetary theory is more rooted in current discoveries in the field of electricity than his more obvious

references to water and its tendency to seek its own level. In sum, Hume may have been prompted to explain such properties as conservation, diffusion, capacity, condensability, ubiquity, and vitality because of his knowledge of recent investigations on the electric fluid (p. 73).

A similar line of argument bears fruit in relation to Smith. In relating Smith's sympathy to the eighteenth-century theories of subtle fluids (electricity again), Schabas helps clarify that Smith's concept of sympathy is really a technical principle. It is not itself a feeling or passion; rather, it is the principle by which the passions of an agent are transmitted to the spectator, who then experiences a sympathetic copy of the original passion. The pleasure of harmony arises out of the realization that the spectator and the agent are experiencing the same passion.

In writing broad-brush history, there are inevitably some messy issues when looking at the details. Not everything will fit neatly into such a grand schema. For example, there is perhaps more emphasis on human agency in the form of the development of the mind in Hume and Smith than would be strictly admitted to in this interpretation. In his discussion of the emergence of evolution of property rights, Smith shows how the mind, at first thinking only in concrete terms, can grasp a concept of property only for things in one's immediate possession as a result of the successful hunt. However, by the time society has advanced to the agricultural stage, the concept of property has become much broader, and in the process more abstract. The idea of possession is now, through the association of ideas, applied to land, its fruits, and its underlying minerals. These are abstract applications of the principle, since we cannot possess land the same way we do an animal we have killed or trapped.

This is a minor quibble. On the whole this is an enjoyable tour of the history of economics through J.S. Mill from a novel perspective. The thesis, I think, in the main has much to recommend it. Classical economics is surely more closely rooted in nature than is neoclassical economics, so there has been a "denaturalization" as the discipline has become ever more specialized. The evidence is largely circumstantial, by Schabas' own admission. However, it is certainly plausible. The book appeals to a wide readership, and will be of interest to all historians of economics.

Jeffrey T. Young
St. Lawrence University