Book review

ECONOMIC HARMONIES AND THE MUSICALITY OF THE SCIENTIFIC METAPHOR **Whereas Some Can Barely Put Together a Piece for a Single Instrument, Others Can Write Symphonies of Ideas With Grace and Ease**

Review of two books authored by Octavian-Dragomir Jora
The Economic Seasons of the Earthlings. A Diary of Boom and Bust (2003-2010)
Free Will Is on a Stand-Still. A Diary of Economics and Politics (2011-2018)

Dumitru Miron

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Please cite this article as:

Dumitru Miron, 2019. Economic Harmonies and the Musicality of the Scientific Metaphor: Whereas Some Can Barely Put Together a Piece for a Single Instrument, Others Can Write Symphonies of Ideas With Grace and Ease – Review of Two Books Authored by Octavian-Dragomir Jora, *Amfiteatru Economic*, 21(52), pp. 728-735

DOI: [10.24818/EA/2019/52/728](https://doi.org/10.24818/EA/2019/52/728)

“Sonata”

Bearing no intention of blasphemy, I would like to begin my review of two excellent books with the following paraphrase, and I shall leave it to the readers to contemplate it throughout their reading: *“blessed are the wise,... for they shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven and the gratitude of the world”*. When I began to reread Octavian Jora’s books, my thoughts evoked Paulo Coelho’s invitation to reflect upon a truth – that *“the word bears power, and the written word is even more powerful”*. It would seem that this adage inspired the author of these books, who managed to embed as much truth as he could in the pages of his works.

The state of mind that the books in question bring about serves as a most appropriate abode for the ideas of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who described books as *“daughters of the heavens themselves, descended on earth to alleviate the sorrows of mankind”*. We must nevertheless admit that most books cannot, on their own, alleviate the suffering of humanity – many a times, they cannot even mend that of their authors, let alone those of their readers. However, some may shed honest light on the real causes underlying the symptoms of the “patients” to better prepare them for genuinely helpful therapies in lieu of superficial, ineffective cures. It is in the latter category that the two books reviewed here most undoubtedly belong.

Disavowing any vanity of coming across as erudite, I believe that, whenever we have the pleasure to read a new book and the privilege of being asked to provide an opinion on it, we should bear in mind the essence of the words of José Luis de Vilallonga: *“one does not choose a masterpiece, but falls in love with it”*. This is what I’ve experienced once I finished my second reading of both anthological volumes (I must say, I’d had the opportunity to read part of the texts contained therein in their initial form, before they were added to the collection. However, revisiting them did nothing to diminish the pleasure of the experience; if anything, it enhanced it).

I have reasons to believe that a “voluntary” reader (our author has no “conscripted” readers) of Octavian Jora’s works will appraise them as very well-written books, the likes of which one could hardly put down before reading the very last page, only to revisit them at least once more to elucidate ideas and meanings that were inevitably overlooked during the first reading. This holds true even when the reading is not done purely for “leisure” but rather for both passion and professional reasons. Monsignor Vladimir Ghika’s subtle yet extremely profound observation that *“whereas books heal you of people, people heal you of books”* serves as a litmus test which the books reviewed here pass in a most successful and personally meaningful manner.

In these books, as well as in other works, Octavian Jora does not seek to play the role of a “doctor” and heal his readers of various societal ills – he holds a Ph.D. in economics, and economics is a soci(et)al science – rather, he aims at describing them both rigorously and “playfully”, allowing the readers to judge for themselves the right dosage for the treatments that best suit their specific ailments. The author’s call to his readership can be interpreted in the sense that people should *not* quench their thirst for reading, in general, and for reading books of fine quality, in particular. His stance resembles that of Michel de Montaigne to whom the highest pleasure one could aspire to was *“igniting the thirst and love for book reading”*, captivating the readers and instilling in them a desire to read further works, the conviction to build upon what they’ve already read and yield even further eloquence, imagination, refinement and depth.

“Adagio”

Upon reading these two volumes, it is not at all inappropriate to agree with Walter Pater’s remark that *“a book is a refuge, almost ascetic in nature, from the vicissitudes of the real world”*. Yet, the fact is that the author has sought refuge in the world and not away from the world (in his dual quality as academic and journalist). Each part of the collections in these two volumes is at once an oasis of placidity and a river rippling with passions, a static “photo” yet also a dynamic “film”, an accurate exposition of reality such as it is, overarched by the author’s aspirations, subtly conveyed to us, his readers.

The more we let ourselves drawn in these books, the more we come to sense the strong, suggestive resonance of the ideas of the highly popular and distinguished Paulo Coelho: *“the most destructive weapon isn’t the lance or the battering ram – they can wound the body and bring down walls. Indeed, the most terrifying weapon of them all is the word – it can destroy lives without shedding a drop of blood and the scars it leaves never heal”*. We must underscore though that the phrases we find in these two books are masterfully pieced together by the author to outline significance and inspire sensitivity; they are not harmful tools meant to wound, but highly potent nepenthes with the power to heal the throes and bruises of life.

While Iancu Văcărescu believed that the National Theatre, upon its inauguration, becomes a shrine for both spoken and unspoken language to reach their apex, and the notion that *“...mores are redeemed and minds are sharpened...”* rings ever so truthfully, Octavian Jora instead bids throughout his pages *“weave thyself into the wreath, pearl”*, reminding us that life cannot be lived in separately packed chunks, but is a synergetic whole that welcomes us such as we are and seeks to make us better, wiser, kinder and more considerate.

Boris Marian Mehr gives us a poem with the following lines: *“one does not cleanse oneself of words”* and *“grinding words into the mill, yet all for naught”*. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to want to part with the fantastically arrayed words by Octavian Jora in idioms, sentences and phrases imbued profusely with content and substance. Once the readers complete their journey through the author’s pages, they wouldn’t find that words have been meaninglessly peddled around, but gain worth, usefulness and a meek yet burning, venomous tinge, which is in fact the antidote to several seductive poisons that easily enthrall the weak into a fatal addiction.

As much as Octavian Jora has evidently read (and indeed, it is a lot), I do not believe he didn’t at least once reach Marc Levy, who told us that *“you see an image and believe it to be the truth. It is not always the case. The written word offers you greater room for contemplation and interpretation”*. Irrespective of whether or not the author of these books has allowed himself to be spellbound by the enciphered meaning of these words, he does not see images and takes them at face value (he’s not, in other words, a Gelu Ruscanu), but decodes highly complex states of affairs and subjects them to a metaphor-laden, multi-parameter analysis of deep significance. Not only does he allow himself a greater degree of freedom for contemplation through the medium of words, but also transforms his own contemplation into a creed and his interpretation of angles that aren’t always easily apparent becomes a symphony for the senses.

Reading the essays within these two books lends truthfulness and substance to the assertion that *“we live in a present that feeds itself on the past, transforming itself into a future to come”*. In the author’s view, the past is assimilated with factorial accumulation and the

possibility to productively understand life, the present is the manner in which we might live it meaningfully, while the future can be described as a horizon of aspiration where we seek to acquire a sustainable comprehension of things and of our brethren.

The author of these two books does not seem touched by the fear that, whenever he utters the word “quiet” and “rationalises” it, he might obliterate it, for each metaphor he creates sows disquietude and irrationality alike. The pages we read here incite us to doubt even apparently immutable truths as a token of intelligence and of possessing a scrutinising spirit. The author thus brings us near the image of the famous nineteenth century publication, *A paper for the mind, heart and literature* [original title, in Romanian, *Foarte pentru minte, inimă și literatură*].

Each of the two works consists in at least three more books: the book that was published, the book that was envisioned and the book that the author could tell, if he had time to speak to each and every one of his readers. He wrote cautiously, fully aware of the historically well-documented risk that, whereas spoken words can ruin a man, written words can bring empires crashing down. The phrases in these books are not meant to demolish, but serve the purpose of building and refining. There is another, collateral and complementary effort to eliminate any erroneous preconceptions the interlocutors might hold, to purify their understanding of the significance of the topics being discussed. When we read these books, we will not ground ourselves into a comfort zone, but plunge into an effervescent reflection, goaded by the desire to uncover more.

“Minuet” (I)

The Economic Seasons of the Earthlings. A Diary of Boom and Bust (2003-2010) presents, in its pages written with a unique flavour, a series of images depicting the author’s journey through the fascinating landscape of economic press (the first host of the texts included in this volume, where the author exercises his journalistic talent – the one that goes hand in hand with that of university professor). In this book, the author attempts to convince his readers that he tried to strengthen his thoughts as a “classic liberal” economist in editorial meetings with numerous intellectual figures (editors and collaborators), which were somehow concessive with the existence of the state (government), reserving a stable (although not maximal) role for it.

Even since then, the author confesses that he would have liked a smaller role of this invasive public actor in the picture of economic rationality, regardless whether we are talking about Romania – at that time in the middle of the process of acclimatization before joining the European adventure – or about Europe as a whole. The author considers those years (2003-2010) as being only a short fragment of a secular hyperbole that contains numerous *boom* and *bust* moments. Such moments have spurred the functioning of modern economies and, invariably, those who were responsible for noticing them did so a little late, as usual, the explanation of “cyclicity” being sacrificed on the altar of a so-called “academic democracy”.

The author warns us from the very beginning that he did not want to make forecasts or be considered a person gifted with predicting the avoidable or the unavoidable, modestly acknowledging that, being guilty of an honest reading, unsupportive of passenger models, understood better than others why the inevitable is inevitable in certain circumstances.

From this epistemic platform that he built step by step, idea by idea and word by word, one could see, in the dynamics of economic cyclicity, the constraints and incentives manifested at institutional level (manipulative statist monopoly in the monetary-financial world), corporate level (where actors want to promote sustainability but very often don't understand what this really means), or individual level (who pretends to be free and rational, but lets himself manipulated and drawn in confusion).

I want to highlight, from the very beginning, a trap one could easily fall into when reading books (not all, only a part of them) written by Octavian Jora: labelling and placing them in the "journalistic register". The truth is that these works have a journalistic flavour (courtesy to wisely using metaphors and word games), but they are profoundly erudite, not only well-documented, which places them in the market for thorough and bold ideas. As the author warns us in the foreword of this book, and we also observe as we carefully read it, the work can be treated as *"a literary hybrid of analytical background based on economic science and stylistic form typical to an exercise of promoting ideas that present events to a public that is reflexive, rather than refractory when it comes to a battle of ideas"*; same as all the books he has written, this one also starts from the idea that economic science can only be part of an architecture of pluralism, which includes both an *ex ante* vision and an *ex post* diagnosis, about "what, how much, how, and for whom" are economic arguments produced. This work is announced by the author as a collection of articles that express his honest beliefs, shaped not by the influence of others, but by his own experiences.

We cannot ignore that the author did not actually write in a journal, but only used the journalistic writing to create a continuous story from several episodic ones. The author is not a field reporter who happened to be at the place where various economic or non-economic events happened, but a highly qualified imagist who makes his own journey in the space he analyses, be it with physical or digital steps, as the latter are facilitated by IT&C. What makes the author of this book different from his peers is his critical apparatus, handled with the kind of ability that only a good understanding of analysed phenomena would offer, doubled by reason that arbitrates between stories used to test judgments and, sometimes, prejudices.

Each essay included in this book starts from a key-word, from a theme, from an incentive conveyed by the society whose inner workings the author examines. For instance, we are warned that years have pass slower for those who are not or do not want to be properly prepared, that Romania's accession to the European Union is a stage goal, while the integration into this architecture takes much longer, bears enormous costs, and may never end, that stories about Prince Charming are good for kids, but do not help when they become policy makers, that monitoring does not necessarily mean enslavement, although it is not Heaven on Earth either. The pretentious reader finds in this book a good example of a work well-done, an invitation to reconsider both concession and compromise for an entity to align itself to the current state of affairs as well as to the process in which it got involved, an explanation for why we need to think many times before we cut once.

This book is (also) one: about the alternation of relaxed stability with consolidated instability, about the habit of putting the cart before the horses; about social inequality in a setting of economic efficiency and ecologic resilience (one of the current trilemmas); about the "after us, the flood" mentality and how much this has cost us throughout our history. We find in this work a series of latent vulnerabilities exactly at the moment when our country was preparing for EU accession, which are carefully highlighted by the author, and

now, so many years later, manifest themselves to the fullest. Conclusion: a well-written book must be read at the moment when it is published, its messages must be understood, its advice must be followed, and its author must be brought to the team of experts.

The author (also) contentedly argues that: the state should not be treated as a saviour; competition is not a threat, but an opportunity; justice and home affairs remained, in the EU, the logic of intergovernmentalism, although they sometimes seem to have been confiscated by the community integration method; there exist “free riders” even in the European integration picture; success stories of others cannot be ignored, but they shall not be plagiarized, as the reforms landscape often misses “the finger on the sore spot”. The work is both about geo-politics and geo-economics, it deals with the multilateralism context without neglecting that of regionalization, it puts the Westphalian logic under the microscope of a new global governance philosophy, it juxtaposes the national interest and the interplay between nations, asks questions and gives answers, speculates and certifies.

“Minuet” (II)

The other work, entitled *Free Will Is on a Stand-Still. A Diary of Economics and Politics (2011-2018)*, is the continuation of the steps aimed at contributing to the synoptic expression of the author’s professional profile (as scholar and journalist), as well as to that of his personal profile (as a gifted writer who handles words with virtuosity and verity). This is in line with the previously demonstrated rigor, representing a qualitative leap based on the accumulation of ideas. By arranging this new architecture of homogenous essays, the author does not leave the impression that he feared that the reader would think this is a work on football.

Knowing very well his most devoted readers, Octavian Jora was convinced that he presents the “social game” placed in the dialectics of economics and politics, enrolled in the register of social life, in the most generous sense, based on the search for a dynamic balance between authority and freedom, a game where each post is covered, where there are tactics and strategies. The game he proposes is one that runs both between people who are equal (when rules are respected), as well as between people who are unequal (when the rules become more lax, more translucent, and are written by some to be respected by others). The key-words of this analytical approach are competition, game, players, facilitators, referees, scores and adverse or perverse effects of the great social, economic and political game. The author has written to remind us that no societal actor, and, even more, no member of “the economists’ caste” can constantly be a spectator at this game that is played at all levels (micro, mezo, macro and mono-economic) without condemning itself to elimination.

The author’s well-grounded belief is that players carefully analyse, through the lens of economic rationality, each stage of the game, and behave as their own interests dictate them, as well as according to the manner in which they are arbitrated by the societal actors (self)-designated to be integrators or facilitators. Readers are urged to ask and answer some fundamental dilemmas. One of these, strongly highlighted by the author, is linked to the infallibility (or otherwise) of the referee-judge. The impression is that the social scientist – who can be an economist, such as the author, or a political scientist, a jurist, a sociologist – can be useful in the economics of this game, contributing to its design by providing it with a more functional mechanism and giving it a fluid and fluent processual dimension that would contribute to maximizing prosperity and sustainability.

It is remarkable how the author argues that in our society we need more and more referees (to ensure competition between them), a collection of production factors (most important ones being those generated by the quaternary sector, the creativity-intensive one), more and more valuable and durable results (the prevalence of marginalist logic that makes fair competition possible), a permanent revision of the regulatory and institutional framework, and the endowment with mechanisms able to sanction incorrect behaviours, deviating from the logic of ethics and general efficiency. As an economist, the author correctly elucidates the role of the “referee” (the government that seeks to rule “optimally”), inviting readers to seek with him the answer to the question “optimally, but for whom?”.

The author’s perspective is based on the belief that an arbitrator must capture exactly the explicable propensity to self-autonomize and self-immunize in relation with those he arbitrates, accentuating errors and bailing-out frauds. It is not difficult to see in the pages of this book the author’s dissatisfaction with the actual state of the current international economy in which we have dystrophic relations of economic force, discretionary institutional behaviours, duplicity derived from the rhetoric invested in the idea of the necessity of multilateral rules of economic conduct compared to the realism of ignoring them. The book is full of examples that emphasize the author’s belief that the current referees of the economic game seem to penalize those who respect the rules and behave in the logic of rationality, legitimacy and justice.

The author has opted for the allegory of football to deal in an ironic manner with the fact that the international economic landscape is frequently populated by those who are thinking with their feet, rather than doing it with the anatomical part especially dedicated to this goal (the brain), by those who prefer the roundness of the soccer ball to the (indeed, square-ish) character of the books in the library, by those who make “maieutics” or “semiotics” lose their case from the very beginning in front of the science and technique of how to avert straight ways and choose shortcuts or turnings that allow avoidance. And now, the world to which the author invites us is one of a different ratio between supply and demand, not of goods and services, but of assets and liabilities, a world of maximizing the satisfaction promised to buyers, and not the actual utility of the goods. The key-terms that the author of the book prioritizes are fairness (but one of non-discrimination, reciprocity, privacy and the golden rule), accuracy (the author invites the reader to ask himself “compared to what?”), leadership (that should replace management), complementarity and substitution of capital, considered as the main factor of production (recognizing the role of talent and attitude), the theory of the whole (one in which we must manage impartial and intergenerational balances).

The vectors of modernity are also put in their place, treated in an epistemological and praxeological registry, disassembled and re-assembled, approached in the logic of both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinarity, in order to arrive at a synergic picture in continuous motion. The author uses a personal touch, sometimes anecdotal, permanently metaphorical, when referring to very serious and highly specialized aspects of economic and non-economic (“spiritual”) reality. For example: the industrial revolution is put into the same equation with the institutional revelation; sustainable development is decoupled from its pejorative components and the ballast of fetishism; discursive logic is juxtaposed with factual veracity; integration is interrogated using disintegration mechanisms; times are placed next to spaces; perennality goes hand in hand with transformation. Ideologies are invited to self-describe, their followers are asked to explain “what are now their foundations”, the West and the East are no longer just geographic dimensions, but become

geo-political and geo-economic vectors, as the Cartesian logic also has to explain to the reader what he notices in practice that “it does not make sense”.

“Rondo”

All the above-mentioned arguments serve as an invitation to read the books highlighted in this review, as there are solid reasons to partake in the dialogue to which their author engages us and to discover subjects for further debates, high-quality scientific analysis as well as ways to put certainties to the test and to diminish (not demean) states of uncertainty.

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On the author:

Economist, scholar, writer, and editor, **Octavian-Dragomir Jora** is a settled presence in the Romanian (as well as abroad) marketplace of academic and journalistic debates. He is Associate Professor, Ph.D., at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, where he has cultivated and developed (as researcher and educator) interests in, among others, comparative economic systems, critical and creative thinking, and geo-politics and geo-economics of cultures and civilisations.

Octavian-Dragomir Jora is active in epistemic communities – i.e., board member of the Romanian Economic Society (serving as director of the *Æconomica* journal), the Romanian Society for the Philosophy of Economics, and the Research Center in International Business and Economics. He is founding editor-in-chief of *The Market for Ideas* magazine (themarketforideas.com) – a publication that gathered in the first three years of appearance readers/writers from more than 180/50 countries of the world.

Octavian-Dragomir Jora is (co-)author of numerous books and other published or presented scientific papers (more than 100 titles), as well as of journalistic op-eds, analyses, essays, pamphlets (more than 800 titles), his works being distinguished with numerous and prestigious academic and media awards, granted by several public and private, domestic and foreign institutions. His (a)vocation is the freedom of expression in speaking and writing outlets, in graphic layouts, as well as in football fields.