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Profile

■ by Gerald F. Vaughn

Benjamin H. Hibbard: Scholarship for Policy Making

Henry A. Wallace, regarding his preparation to become secretary of agriculture and ultimately vice president during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, said:

My first introduction to economics came by way of Professor B.H. Hibbard. I remember being asked in 1910, at the close of my college course, who had influenced me most, and I said Professor Hibbard. Later, of course, we came to disagree violently about the McNary-Haugen Bill and some other things; but I still think that Professor Hibbard is a very good teacher.

Hibbard was one of the most complete agricultural economists of his era, with uncommon ability to use economics to help form better public policy. His concept of agricultural economics and policy making evolved with his interest in the economic history of American agriculture, an interest nurtured by Frederick Jackson Turner. Kenneth H. Parsons writes of Hibbard: "Being a profound student of history, he appreciated that all social events have significant histories that can be fully understood only in their historical perspectives." Thomas Huffman states that "From Turner he acquired and then applied the idea that understanding the human relationship with the environment could produce historical scholarship of significant interpretive power." Hibbard was interested in history's implications for public policy making, and to this end he became a broad and avid reader of the leading works in the English language.

Throughout Hibbard's career his painstaking thoroughness in research,

viewed as exceedingly academic by some, set a standard for scholarship seldom equalled in modern agricultural and resource economics. His most important book, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (1924), was the first comprehensive economic and statistical analysis of America's disposition of the public domain. Moreover, he supervised the doctoral dissertations of distinguished economists such as Theodore W. Schultz (agricultural economics' only Nobel prize winner), Bushrod W. Allin, John D. Black, Henry E. Erdman, Kenneth H. Parsons, Oscar C. Stine, and Clarence Alton Wiley.

Hibbard served as chairman of the University of Wisconsin's agricultural economics department from 1919 to 1932, succeeding the first chairman, Henry C. Taylor, when Taylor was called to Washington, D.C., to reorganize agricultural economics work in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Hibbard was a key advisor to Taylor during the formative years of USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Hibbard also helped shape the research agenda implementing the Purnell Act of 1925, which initiated federal funding to state agricultural experiment stations for research on the economic and social problems of agriculture.

Hibbard served as president of the American Farm Economic Association in 1922 and remained a vital force in the profession well into the 1940s. He authored his remarkable undergraduate textbook *Agricultural Economics* in 1948. Better than any other text then available, Hibbard's historical approach correctly interpreted American agriculture's evolving role in the integrating world economy.

Preparing for scholarship

Born in Iowa in 1870, the brother to three sisters, Hibbard was reared on a prairie farm among a community of German immigrants during the period of rapid frontier settlement and agricultural development by homesteaders. In 1895, despite relatively little formal education, his keen intellect enabled him to enter college. By superior performance he received his bachelor's degree in 1898 from Iowa State College (now University). After graduating, Hibbard remained at his alma mater for one year as a teacher of mathematics.

While at Iowa State, Hibbard was associated with Edgar W. Stanton, head of the department of mathematics and economic science and several times acting president of the college. Hibbard's high standard of scholarship bears the initial imprint of Stanton, who admonished his students with these words: "We must keep our work on a high plane; we must not let it descend to this low level." Stanton taught the only course in economics open to agricultural students, using Francis A. Walker's *Political Economy* (1888) as the text. Walker's fine text was still widely used at colleges and universities, though increasingly supplanted by Richard T. Ely's *Outlines of Economics* (1893).

Eager to learn more about economics and the tools of scholarship, in 1899 Hibbard came to the University of Wisconsin for graduate study with Ely. Ely held a broad social viewpoint of economics. Dedicated to serving the public interest, he was a staunch advocate of sound economic inquiry as the basis for public action. Those who trained under Ely received instruction in institutional economics blended of law and



neo-classical economics, with an emphasis on the historical-geographical approach to economic inquiry. Ely, William A. Scott (who taught the economics of agriculture), and Frederick Jackson Turner (American history) markedly influenced Hibbard's intellectual development at Wisconsin. Turner was both an eminent historian and, Ely states, "also a good economist," which appealed to Hibbard.

Wisconsin doctoral students interested in agricultural economics were encouraged to study agricultural aspects of economic history and, for their dissertations, to apply economics to some phase of agricultural history. To Hibbard the historical and geographical approach proved so essential that, later as a teacher and department chair-

man at Wisconsin, he felt that undergraduates interested in agricultural economics should take courses in economic history and agricultural geography before they took any courses in agricultural economics.

In obtaining his PhD in economics under Ely in 1902, and inspired by Turner, Hibbard wrote his dissertation on "The History of Agriculture in Dane County, Wisconsin," published in 1904. He had a dynamic point of view, by which the evolutionary changes in farmers' choices could be interpreted. Henry C. and Anne Dewees Taylor write, in *The Story of Agricultural Economics* (1952): "In general outline, the contributions of the Hibbard monograph to the economics of agricultural production in Wisconsin remains the

classic on this subject. Had a similar monograph been prepared on the agriculture of each state in the Union, as a starting point for studying the economics of farm management in the area covered, agricultural economics would have had a better start in this country than it has had."

Upon receiving his doctorate, Hibbard rejoined Stanton and taught at Iowa State College from 1902 until 1913. Initially teaching courses in general economics and economic history, beginning in 1904 he also taught the economics of agriculture. He was interested in farmer movements to improve agricultural marketing and especially the potential of farmer cooperatives. Hibbard quickly was placed in charge of all economics instruction and soon began to organize an economics department.

Further preparing for scholarship, in 1908 Hibbard took an eight-month leave of absence to do post-doctoral study at the universities of Halle and Berlin in Germany. In 1911-12 he took another leave to work as a special agent in the agricultural division of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, helping to prepare the 1910 census for publication, refining his statistical skills, and producing several notable writings about farm tenure patterns throughout the United States.

Applying scholarship to public policy making

In 1909 Henry C. Taylor formed the first American university department of agricultural economics at the University of Wisconsin, and by 1913 Taylor needed a faculty member to teach, conduct research, and engage in extension work on agricultural cooperation and marketing. Taylor offered the post to Hibbard, who returned to Wisconsin where he would be closely associated with Ely, Taylor, John R. Commons, George S. Wehrwein, and other outstanding institutional economists.

Hibbard soon introduced a course in "Co-operation and Marketing," focusing on farmers' organizations, cooperative marketing, and credit, which appears to be the first such course of-

ferred in the United States. His efforts to advance agricultural cooperation were instrumental in enactment of the Capper-Volstead Act in 1922, America's foundational legislation governing the operation of farmer cooperatives. Hibbard was probably the leading authority in the United States on the history, development, and efficacy of farmer organizations. His additional course on "Farmer Movements" traced decades of populist efforts by agricultural interests to associate for economic and political power. His 1935 article "Legislative Pressure Groups Among Farmers" made clear the roles of farmer organizations in securing legislation favorable to agriculture.

Hibbard was cautious in his own policy prescriptions, too cautious to suit some activists. Yet his views and counsel were eagerly sought, and he played a key behind-the-scenes role in setting policy. As a social scientist, when his analyses told him that farmers' concerns were unfounded and/or their policy proposals ill-advised, he candidly said so. When the facts were on his side, he didn't dodge a controversy.

Hibbard also stood with Ely during some of the controversies the elder economist was drawn into. Probably the most heated was their analysis of and opposition to the Ralston-Nolan bill of 1920. The bill was a move in the direction of Henry George's proposed tax on the "unearned increment" of land values, the closest that George's proposal ever came to congressional enactment. While Ely and Hibbard respected George's insights about the ill effects of land monopoly and speculation, they did not share his followers' enthusiasm for this particular bill as a workable remedy. Ely and Hibbard were regarded as being mainly responsible for the defeat of the bill. Their analysis and opposition could have been accepted as constructive criticism and the basis for a more workable remedy; instead, Ely and Hibbard became the object of continuing diatribes by some Georgist adherents.

In the area of agricultural policy, farm price and income stabilization were the paramount concerns through-

out the 1920s and early 1930s. In his 1934 article "A Long Range View of National Agricultural Policy," Hibbard advocated recasting the tariff, radically revising our tax system, reforming our land policy, and providing some measure of assistance in controlling and disposing of farm output. He was sympathetic to New Deal farm programs as emergency measures, though outspokenly dubious of price-supports as the basis of long-term agricultural policy for the nation. He knew that the long-term solution to low farm income was to enable more farm families to obtain jobs in the nonfarm economy as it improved. The idea of encouraging and enabling farmers to leave agriculture was not well received in Hibbard's lifetime. It has since proven to be exactly the right adjustment.

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Rejecting preconceptions and political strategies, Hibbard preferred to draw conclusions from his own empirical research and analyses of specific economic problems. He was diligent in evaluating historical evidence and content to reveal limited, but verifiable, causal relationships that would facilitate public action. This is typified by the well-known economic studies, conducted under his general direction, of land-utilization, credit, taxation and delinquency, and rural zoning in the vast cutover region of northern Wisconsin. Those land economics studies assisted public policy makers to transform that region into a reforested public recre-

ation haven and stimulated similar research and action in submarginal farming areas of other states.

Hibbard wrote insightful books, beginning with *The Effects of the Great War upon Agriculture in the United States and Great Britain* (1919) and *Marketing Agricultural Products* (1921), the latter placing emphasis on the actual and potential roles of farmer organizations. He also wrote numerous illuminating articles and probing book reviews, wide ranging in the areas of agricultural policy, farmer movements, credit, taxation, tariffs, land tenure, marketing, cooperatives, government control of prices, and other subjects. He unfortunately was hampered by recurring health problems and left some important manuscripts unfinished, including draft outlines of a comprehensive treatise devoted to farmer movements.

Hibbard's major scholarly work, which he dedicated to Turner, was *A History of the Public Land Policies*. In the book, Hibbard systematically examined the historical development of our nation's land policies, the operations of programs for disposition of the public domain, and the consequent multitude of unresolved problems. The book originated in 1906 when Kenyon L. Butterfield, on behalf of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, asked Hibbard to write a history of federal and state land policies as they influenced economic development. The task was daunting and of such magnitude that Hibbard decided to concentrate mainly on federal land policies and let other researchers address state policies. Interrupted by other demands on Hibbard's time and by reorganization of the Carnegie Institution's research program, the project languished until 1920 when Ely at Wisconsin formed his great Institute for Research in Land Economics and Public Utilities. Ely's institute provided impetus and substantial aid to Hibbard in finishing the research and publishing the results in 1924.

Hibbard found that early policy makers either failed to recognize economic principles or viewed economic considerations as secondary to political ones. "Thus far," he concluded, "there

has been no genuine land policy in and for the United States. True enough, there have been temporizing plans, some of them good for a time, and for certain sections. But a plan involving and comprehending the welfare of the whole nation, varied to fit the different parts of the country, we have not had." Hibbard praised the Revision Act of 1891 as "the most signal act yet performed by Congress in the direction of a national land policy." Still, he knew there was much to be desired in national land policy. In 1924 he urged policies for general conservation, irrigation, public ownership and management of forest land, grazing, disposition of the remaining public domain, and avoidance of further land settlement, including withdrawal of submarginal land from farming and its conversion to uses for which the land is better suited. In one of his most cogent arguments, he wrote: "Thus far no far-reaching plan has been devised to prevent soil depletion, and worse, nothing has yet been found feasible for the control, through social action, of soil erosion. We are still 'mining' the soil." His book contributed toward enactment of some of these needed policies in years ahead, perhaps most directly to the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934.

As the most definitive historical treatment of public land policies, Hibbard's book was reprinted in 1939 and again in 1965. On the latter occasion, R. Burnell Held observed, "True, the story had by no means ended in 1924 when Hibbard wrote, but the studies which have appeared since then have complemented rather than replaced Hibbard's work. Even after acknowledging the errors, to which later writers have called attention, the book has stood the test of time and has achieved the status of a classic in the literature." Paul W. Gates indicates the

book attained its classic status "because of Hibbard's penetrating understanding of land problems, his critical and clearly defined judgments, the data he presents so graphically, the concise summaries at the end of each chapter, and by his advocacy of the changes he deemed essential for a modern and constructive program of land management."

Hibbard remained a major force in America's economic debate on agricultural and land policies into the 1940s, despite his disagreements with Wallace. When the American Economic Association, in joint session with the American Farm Economic Association, met in December 1940 on the subject of "The Agricultural Situation: A Review of Fundamental Factors, An Evaluation of Public Measures, and An Appraisal of Prospects," the four invited speakers

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were Howard R. Tolley, Theodore W. Schultz, John D. Black, and Benjamin H. Hibbard. Consistently challenging New Deal farm policy as a long-term solution, Hibbard asserted that the papers of Tolley and Schultz "probably go too far in accepting the present plan of agricultural relief."

Retiring as professor emeritus at Wisconsin in 1940, Hibbard concentrated on writing his textbook *Agricul-*

tural Economics (1948), a survey text that admirably served its purpose. Moreover, his comprehension of historical forces and trends is so skillfully woven into the tapestry of the economics of agriculture that this book might have been better titled "The Economic Development of American Agriculture." It is an excellent reference work in American agricultural history, especially for his extensive updating of the history of farmer organizations.

Hibbard helped his book's readers to place postwar agricultural changes in proper perspective and to anticipate likely policy alternatives and outcomes. In light of the upheavals caused thirty years earlier by World War I, he could see many adjustments ahead for agriculture in the aftermath of World War II. Continuing to question the soundness of price subsidies, and intimately familiar with America's long history of disastrous experience with high tariffs, Hibbard staunchly advocated freer trade. In 1948 he prophesied, "America will be better off when she lives in a world of many well-fed, well-clothed nations.... What we most need, and eventually must have, is reestablished world trade."

Until his death in 1955, B.H. Hibbard personified the professional agricultural economist's contributions and value to society. A creative thinker himself, he also was adept at refining the thoughts of his greatest contemporaries. He applied and taught a sound historical approach to scholarship, for economists who address public policy issues in any era. In trained hands the historical approach always will have significant interpretive power, too often missing in economic research and policy making. ■

Gerald F. Vaughn, retired from the University of Delaware, writes on economic and environmental history and biography.