AN APPRAISAL OF THE MARKET FOR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS - - STRUCTURE AND PERFORMANCE

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“The Great Society is the 'age of the economist.' One finds economists not only at the center of economic policy, in the Council of Economic Advisers, but also as important formulators of policy in the Departments of Defense, HEW, and HUD, and even as analysts of the status of the performing arts.”

[6] (USDA could have been added.)

Despite the contemporary accuracy of these lines from a recent issue of The Public Interest, any inference that the Great Society was the first "age of the economist" is patently wrong. That label belongs to economists as social scientists will pose them first as servants of the public. In a recent meeting, Professor Boger of Michigan State remarked on how much our profession is publicly identified. This attribute does not equate public service with policy making, though the latter is seldom totally absent. However, it does draw meaning from the historical origin of our profession as immaculately conceived (to parallel Kenneth Boulding's literary license) in a platonic union of the public university (then the land grant college) and the United States Department of Agriculture. Like most biological vertebrates, the procreators did not fail to nurture the progeny.

Kirkendall credits the service intellectual as an American species emerging from the American educational system (including the land grant university), but he also finds antecedents in Old World intellectuals, such as Francis Bacon and Herbert Spencer, and institutionally in the German universities [7, p. 1].

It is no happenstance that when Kirkendall set out to make his study of social scientists in the New Deal he found the best examples to be in the field of farm policy. His uncommonly perceptive book gives first billing to M.L. Wilson, second to Howard Tolley, and third and fourth about equally to Mordecai Ezekiel and Rexford Tugwell. Henry Wallace, himself an economist of no mean talent, shows up frequently and advantageously in supporting roles.

AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS IN PUBLIC SERVICE

It will be inferred, not without meeting a few ohms of resistance, that this paper devoted to agricultural economists as social scientists will pose them first as servants of the public. In a recent meeting, Professor Boger of Michigan State remarked on how much our profession is publicly identified. This attribute does not equate public service with policy making, though the latter is seldom totally absent. However, it does draw meaning from the historical origin of our profession as immaculately conceived (to parallel Kenneth Boulding's literary license) in a platonic union of the public university (then the land grant college) and the United States Department of Agriculture. Like most biological vertebrates, the procreators did not fail to nurture the progeny.

To this day, the majority of our fellows are employed in public service, including universities. A few more are in the quasi-public employ of foundations. Only our agribusiness contingent is entirely privately

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1 More than an inference. The article names lawyers as outranking economists in the New Deal [1].
affiliated, and the difference in philosophy associated
with private versus public focus is more often the
cause of division between agribusiness and other eco-
nomists than are the issues which frequently are
publicized.

GENERAL WELFARE ORIENTATION

Perhaps, the simplest conclusion to be drawn from
these opening remarks is that agricultural economists
are predominately general welfare economists. Though
not untrue, the deduction is not only simple but
simplistic, and it can distract from other important
characteristics.

Above all, that characterization overgeneralizes.
Our internal composition is mixed. In structural
language, we are a conglomerate. On another occasion,
I classified the ‘product’ that agricultural economics
transfers” as of management counsel to the firm,
guidelines to the making of public policy, and ana-
lytical techniques [3, p. 343]. Historically, most of
the management counsel has been directed toward the
farm. If we ask how it happened that statistical search
for optimum rates of applying fertilizer were com-
bined with policy debate over “farm relief” to de-
lienate a discipline, we get only an unsatisfactory
negative, that in U.S. agriculture there is no conflict
between the private and public interest. We need a
positive answer, and I believe it to be that in agric-
ulture we traditionally have used public resources to
enhance private welfare. Moreover, the labors of
 economists are one of the resources. If not too
strained, this answer reinforces my opening emphasis
on public policy as a major focus of agricultural

Does the easy identification of private and public
interest extend to the management economics of agri-
business firms? Despite some public relations claims
to the contrary, market structure analysis makes the
answer clear. Imperfectly competitive structure denies
codetermination of optimum private and public wel-
fare. By no means does this even hint at a general
normative judgment on business performance. It
merely says that economic analysts do not enjoy the
opportunity for indolence when they dabble in
welfare considerations in agribusiness economics. They
cannot traffic in effortless a priori pronounce-
ments.

Though the subject will be dealt with again later,
may I suggest that agricultural economics cannot hope
to service agribusiness firms in the total and exclusive
fashion that they have done for farm firms. Moreover,
if we were to attempt to do so, we would deny our
best talents and actually debase our service both to
agribusiness and to all our clientele.

WHO ARE WE

Henry Steele Commager has recently observed that
Americans get along better when they do not try to be
ideological [5, p. 24]. We agricultural economists
might be well advised not to worry too much about
who we are and why we are here. This is strange
advice in an era when most human beings, sensing
themselves caught in a highly structured social system,
engage in frenzied search for their individual identities.

Indeed, why do we exist at all as a profession or
discipline? Some of our own members are nothing less
than disloyal, believing we could well sever our
fraternal bonds. Let our theoretical and method-
ological friends slip into mathematics, statistics and
general economics, they say, and ask our firm manage-
ment associates to seek shelter in business schools. I
suppose farm management would be tossed into a
quiet corner somewhere, never more to inquire into
the relevancy of various formulations. Although their
arguments are put in epistemological terms, that may
be smokescreens, our friends may be physically re-
jecting being identified with farming and agriculture.

We are only taking our own propaganda to heart.
We have said that the best thing for farmers to do is
to leave farming. We have proclaimed the inferiority of
rural culture. Why ought we remain intellectually
affiliated?

Lest there be any doubt about the tenor of my
remarks, thus far, I hold no sympathy with disparage-
ment of our profession. As economists we have served
creditably; the record of our performance is good.

Let me pick up the theme that perhaps our tech-
nical credentials, when dissected, do not appear im-
pressive. We may not have much more going for us
than a few adages about slopes of supply and demand
curves. As theorists, we doubtless cannot compete
with the Samuelsons and Baumols. Although our
historic inventiveness in commodity price analysis is
impressive, and we have some fine econometricians
among us, we hardly lead that field. On monetary policy, foreign trade, and similar subjects, we accept
hand-me-down ideas. When we work at our new job of educating for agribusiness, we confess to considerable
dependence on business schools. Only in advising farmers about their business do we retain clear distinction.

A few years ago the Washington Senators baseball
team had a player who was rather slow afoot, whose
arm was ordinary, and who hit for high average but
few extra bases. Skill by skill, an undistinguished
athlete was he. As a composite baseball player, he
was only the most sought after among the 200 men
on American League rosters.

Agricultural economists are rather like that ball
player. To shift to our own idiom, according to the
law of variable proportions, it is the combination
of factors that counts. I assert that agricultural econo-
mists present the right combination. Even though
piecemeal we aren’t much, put together as organic
entities ours is a profession whose graduates are
eagerly sought after and whose salary scale has ad-
vanced as steadily as the cost of medical service -
the most demanding statistical simile to be found.

It is extremely difficult to isolate just what our
magic is - just what we have going for us. It must have
something to do with combining the theoretical and
applied. Our versatility is a plus factor - we range from
the esoteric to the prosaically practical. We earn
approval for being sensitive to needs of the times, and
being willing to apply our talents to them. Perhaps
we are blessed with a sixth sense that keeps us protect-
ed against drifting into our own obsolescence. My
view credits the land grant tradition. It is unique in
the history of the world, and if all agricultural and engi-
eering sciences are beneficiaries, it possibly can be
argued that our amorphous discipline has particularly
profited.²

CULTIVATING OUR DIVERSE SKILLS

More important than taxonomy is the devising of
a regime to be followed in the future, by which to
cultivate our salubrity if not our survival. I am glad to
offer a few suggestions, even while admitting some
insecurity. This is treacherous ground and is made
the more so by the irresponsibility that it invites.
Anyone can sound off on such a subject, and he
cannot be proved wrong until after his demise if
not our profession’s.

One kind of counsel relates to cultivating our

² In an excellent paper Ruttan uses similar language: "... this very parochialism and fragmentation of agri-
cultural economics has ... represented a source of strength..." [9, p. 8].

³ For a note along the same lines, urging that we apply our talents to “solving the significant economic
To be sure, there is a language problem. When I drafted an article a couple of years ago, subsequently published [3], my reviewers were lukewarm, generally, and they particularly steered me toward the term, objectivity. More recently, Emery Castle has dealt with the same issue and has used somewhat different nomenclature [4].

Yet, we can easily get lost in our own sophistry. A farmer neighbor of mine was able to simplify such matters: It is a question of whether something is right or is not right, he declared. Call it morality or ethics, or scientific objectivity, or intellectual honesty - use whatever terms you prefer, but the quality I am referring to is a sine qua non for relevant work by a responsible, vital, enterprising discipline now and in the future. If we are able to remain alive and vibrant, we must go where the action is and that usually is where conflicts of interest are found. It, also, is where the challenge to integrity is and where the metallic firmness of our intellectual integrity is tested. We may have to absorb some reproach even as those who benefit from our courageous performance are silent, if not actually ungrateful.

As I pointed out in the article referred to above, the more common transgression is not distortion of research results or any kind of falsification. It more frequently consists of simply avoiding the controversial. In my personal religious creed, sins of omission are given equal status with those of commission, and I doubt that as economists we enjoy any exemption.

I stress this subject more as a guide for the future than as a reflection on our performance to date. Yet, our golden scroll is hardly free of all bad marks. I have read testimony in public hearings, delivered by economists serving as consultants for private organizations (for a fee), that carried a flavor of at least being selective with respect to the facts presented. I know that some agricultural experiment stations in broiler producing states will not engage in research from one favorite field of endeavor to another. A letter received from James Bonnen at Michigan State remarked on instances in which transportation policy advocated by the USDA reflected the interests of the CCC in saving transport costs, and not a wise policy for all agriculture or all the nation [2].

If transgressions have been few, the subject nevertheless merits attention by virtue of structural changes in our economy that will force the question of scientific objectivity more to the forefront in the future. Honesty as a virtue may be independent of time and place, but the structure of our economy and our society affects the form and frequency with which it is put to test. In a decentralized exchange economy, integrity consisted mainly of not adulterating the product and not shortchanging the customer. In a more centralized and integrated economy, it enters into a host of transactions. Can it be that in our scientific and technological age, integrity is defined less in terms of tapping the till than in reporting data accurately and fully? Is it possible that in our corporate and syndicalistic economy the worst malfeasance lies not in padding an expense account but in failing to be totally honest with superiors? Galbraith seems to imply as much in his concept of technocracy. Can it be said that in an era when central government plays a more instrumental role, the greatest dangers lie not in rake-offs on supplying hospital sheets, as one of President Harding's lieutenants managed for himself, but in conflicts of interest that warp the legislative, executive and judicial processes?

FIELDS OF APPLICATION

If I am more confident of our technical skills than of our willingness to enter into a fracas that promises to be rough, the next question concerns the areas of activity to which agricultural economics ought to lend its resources.

A heartening quality of our associates nationwide is that they are concerned for just such questions as to where we should direct our talents and efforts. Witness thereto is the flood of mail I have received since becoming President of our national organization. So far as there is consensus, it takes two forms. One is to criticize our AA EA awards programs for putting too much emphasis on demonstrations of technique, particularly mathematical models, and too little on the importance and relevance of the subject matter. No such bias, if it existed, was ever intended, and the awards chairman has recently reminded all judges to keep their criteria in balance.

The second prevailing attitude, if my mail is a reliable gauge, is to deplore the herding instinct to which we seem to be subject, as we turn in unison from one favorite field of endeavor to another. A letter received from James Bonnen at Michigan State is an illustrative example, though not unique. As an advocate of attention to international development, Bonnen says we may have swung too far that way, to the neglect of many urgent "domestic growth problems." Among the latter he names, "poverty, the geographical distribution of potential new investment for growth, rural-urban balance (which he calls "an awful term," and I agree), depressed areas, and the intergovernmental relations or the public infrastructure of growth." He adds, "All of these are issues symptomatic of a huge domestic mess in which rural economists figure" [1].

ON LIVING IN JEOPARDY

What I have tried to say in this paper is that
agricultural economics has set a grand record. It has done so despite lack of luminosity on many individual fronts. It is our composite character that has won so much for us.

Although my confidence for the future is strong, I have not hesitated to preach a little. Scratch Breimyer, and you will find a little Calvinism there. It’s a bromide, but surely nothing is so hazardous as collectively resting on our laurels. I am convinced that agricultural economics can both survive and prosper if it looks to its structure, conduct and performance. (I have resisted the invitation implied in the assigned title to my paper to use Bainsian language but my message has been consistent with it.) I am utterly certain that we must retain a policy of national welfare orientation. So long as agricultural policy retains distinguishing features, there will be a potential place for us. Our performance, and not the opportunities, will determine our destiny.

It should be self-evident that it is because I foresee public policy as a continued major focus that I stress the need to remain resolute on what I call objectivity. In advising a farmer on what his machinery investment ratio ought to be, or reminding him of prospects for lower hog prices in 1969, there is little chance that any of us will slant our counsel. But in our service to agriculture we may get ourselves involved in bargaining as a marketing and price-making device, in contests over foreign trade policies (such as import quotas for beef), in designing trade practice rules for contractual integration in agriculture, and in countless other murky fields. In these, the test of mettle has a different coefficient.

A meaning can be derived with regard to the agribusiness arm of our discipline. My personal philosophy is to want very much to keep agribusiness economists within our fold, yet I do not believe that we ought to reshape our subject matter or services substantially to that end; but we will reweigh the allocation of our resources, as we put more people into the agribusiness area. My reasoning is that we cannot meet all the business management training requirements within our own discipline.

Those should be obtained in business schools. But, we can provide agribusiness economists as incisive understanding of the singular aspects of the agricultural economy including public policies employed relative to it. So far as we do that more expertly, we improve our service to agribusiness economists, and do not detract from it.

In conclusion, I argue so firmly along these lines, because I believe we have not carved out a place for ourselves that is secure. We live in jeopardy. There is an air - - to use the words Ernest Grove and I resorted to in a recent exchange - - of disestablishmentarianism abroad. And a defensive antidisestablishmentarianism. The four main papers on the opening day’s program at Bozeman all carried this same unhappy note. Somehow, there is a distrust of the adaptability of our present political and social institutions. Admittedly, some of this is as natural as a GI’s complaining about his food; if that guy is silent, he should be sent to the infirmary. But it is dangerous to write off the ubiquitous attitudes of our day so readily.

Another straw in the wind is the sizable vote former Governor Wallace received last fall. I dare to guess that the vote under-reported the sympathy Mr. Wallace enjoyed. It can be argued, I think, that the vote was mainly an expression of anti-intellectualism. One of its facets was a preference as to how human beings are categorized and a pecking order established. We intellectuals prefer social, economic, and above all intellectual criteria for our ranking. Wallace supporters have simpler and baser means; and who is to say theirs are poorer? But more importantly, the Wallace protest was against the administration of national affairs on an elite basis, expecting the non-participating beneficiaries merely to be silently grateful, and to vote the party line - probably Democratic in most cases, as more Wallace votes apparently came from normally Democratic than Republican voters.

Finally, now and then, we find in Missouri that our exalted status as scholars at the University does not universally elicit deferential homage. When we undertook a study of food distribution programs among low income families, our interviewers found quickly that if they represented themselves as of the University of Missouri, the respondents turned chill. Thereupon, they presented themselves anonymously - as just sympathetic human beings, I suppose - and had no further difficulty. In another study, one of the turkey industry in Missouri, our graduate student interviewer found himself about to be run off a grower’s property until he could give assurance that the College of Agriculture (a safer affiliation than our megaversity) was sympathetic and would report the results of the study honestly. The charge sometimes made is that the big integrators have lines of communication to curators and even to appropriations bodies in Jefferson City, and could effectively block a complete reporting of the study. Irrespective of whether the fears are groundless, I am happy to say that to

---4 A good reference point for evaluating agricultural economics in the manner of Bay is Sosnick’s recent article, “Toward a Concrete Concept of Effective Competition” [10].

---5 If this orientation needs further bolstering, a case in point is the ease and effectiveness with which agricultural economics adapted itself to the need for servicing agricultural development in less developed nations abroad.
my knowledge no such pressure has been brought, and that so long as present personnel direct our research no such pressure, if it should appear, would be yielded to. We at least try to practice what some of us preach.

Essentially, I end where William Nicholls began in his presidential address before the (then) AFEA in 1960. Said he, “if we are complacent about the future of our profession” it like agriculture, must be a “declining ‘industry’”. He added, “However, if we are alert to opportunities for developing new markets for our services . . . if departments of agricultural economics . . . face forthrightly the . . . necessity of reappraising their objectives, their constituencies, their curricula, their research and extension programs, and indeed their whole reason for being” - if all this is done, “we can assure the future of agricultural economics in the United States for some time to come.” [8, p. 970].

To end in a reference to another eminence, if like St. Paul we see hope while imploring courageous endeavor, we can take some confidence in the fact that his enterprise has lasted to this hour. We too, if resolute, can look to our day of Revelation.

REFERENCES


