# Forum
# Responsibility and Objectivity in Economic Research

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The comments by Mules (1985) on our earlier report (Powell *et al.* 1981) are somewhat puzzling. He does admit that we were aware of some of the problems he raises and that we have warned readers of our report about the limitations of our analysis. In this response, we are not concerned with a detailed rebuttal of his comments. Rather, we indicate that the kind of requirements he seeks to impose on economic research are unreasonable at best, and, at worst, likely to discredit and discourage economic research.

Mules makes essentially three points. The first suggests that since " 'facts' depend for their meaning upon a conceptual framework and a definition" (Mules, p. 29), we must be incorporating some "unconscious bias" into our impact studies. In company with all economic researchers to date, we must admit the inevitable bias of things being as they are defined for the purpose. We would, however, modestly claim to be conscious of this problem, since it has been part of the discussion of the philosophy of economic research for some time. We are much less concerned with the Mules claim that the concepts and techniques used in the Powell *et al.* study "... only have relevance within the framework of our own mixed free-enterprise economic system" (Mules, p. 29). The universal adoption of input-output tables and analysis in all economic systems from more-planned to less-planned economies certainly belies this claim. Further, the relevance of an argument critical of our use of a model in a particular market context, which Mules regards as appropriate for that model, is puzzling.

The second point refers to bias through selectivity, that is, the failure to produce a comprehensive economic/social evaluation of the production and consumption aspects of the industry. We regret that we cannot feel inadequate for failing to aspire to become the first economists to produce such a comprehensive study on any topic. Some selection bias must be inevitable with all research projects. However, we reject the suggestion that it is somehow unethical to provide *more* information for a public debate without providing *all* the information for that debate, and that partial studies of industry significance are somehow ethically unsound. We believe that it is a valid and ethical exercise to measure, for example, the economic significance of the animal industries without probing in detail the reported consumption effects of animal fats, or of the automobile industry without searching for all of the consequences of car ownership. To deny economists this, and to insist on an "all or nothing" approach to economic analysis, would have a very interesting (negative) effect on economic research indeed. It could be suggested that severe selectivity bias could occur if some industries are seen by an economist to be more socially acceptable than others, and that some particular industries deserve comprehensive social evaluations, while others do not. We do not seek to make these moral judgements.

In a more specific sense we reject the Mules statement that the "Powell *et al.* study ... concentrates only on benefits and ignores costs" (Mules, p. 30). We simply define economic impact. This can be defined as benefits or costs according to the point of view of the player. For example, in an evaluation (which must be seen as different from a more modest impact study), the costs of growing and distribution could well be viewed as a cost and not a benefit as suggested by Mules. Furthermore we blanch at the suggestion that scientific research (including economic research) "can be and should be judge and jury" (Mules, p. 30). It might well be that individual economists feel that their research befits them to issue definitive judgemental pronouncements on the social or economic desirability of some phenomena. We decline to claim such abilities and question the responsiblity of such an attitude to economic research. We believe that research has a more modest role of contributing information and insights to improve levels of awareness and the decision base.

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Third, Mules implies that researchers must accept some responsibility for the use of their research, citing the example of the inventor of the rifle. Research results themselves cannot be judged as "good" or "bad"; that evaluation lies in their interpretation and their application. Further, given that research results are publicly available, we cannot agree that a researcher can be held responsible for *any* future uses or abuses of their work. The implications for economic research and the publication of the results of such a suggestion are mind-boggling. Mules's contention may mean that information will be withheld from publication because it could potentially be misused!

We are puzzled also by the implication that impact measurements are usable only by the industry in question. A measurement is a measurement, and not an argument or a reason — these follow from the interpretation of the significance of the measurement by both pro-industry and anti-industry forces. This argument suggests that bias is in the eye of the beholder, and that professional independence can be recognized only for analysis of selected industries.

Clearly, Mules raises a number of issues relevant to economic research. However, he appears to have in mind a more Utopian world than that in which we seek to make a modest practical contribution.

## References

MULES, T. J. (1985), "Where there's smoke there's fire — an apology and a statement", *Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics* 53(1), 29-31.

POWELL, R. A. *et al.* (1981), *The Impact of the Tobacco Industry on Regional, State and Australian Economies, Volume I, The Tobacco Industry and Impact Measurement*, Department of Agricultural Economics and Business Management, University of New England, Armidale. Miscellaneous Publication No. 7.