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*Lauren Soth's Viewpoint*

# To Make Choices, You Need Argument

## *A Few Words in Favor of Words*

Agricultural economists have been trying hard to elevate their stature as scientists, and they have achieved profound results in empirical research. But this trend toward scientism costs the public something in the quality of political debate. Today ag economists deliver less argument, in words, to answer policy questions and more evidence, in numbers, to analyze the questions. What is needed is more argument.

### **Limitations of Eloquent Math**

Ag economists are, of course, just following the pattern of the economics profession as a whole. Examine the journals. In his new book *The Rhetoric of Economics*, Donald E. McCloskey writes about "economic conversation" and how "its most eloquent passages have been mathematical." He holds that since the 1930's economists "have become enchanted by the new and scientific way of talking." He finds economic journals "look like journals of applied mathematics or theoretical statistics."

In reviewing 159 full-length papers published in the *American Economic Review* during 1981-83, McCloskey found only six used words alone while "only four added to the words tabular statistics alone, the one formal device common in 1931-33." But he found that fully two-thirds of the papers "used mathematics explicitly."

I suspect that a count of articles in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* would show something similar. Some of us older members of the Association can scarcely read

many of the Journal pieces. Politicians, farm organization leaders, and farm journalists are probably even more mystified.

CHOICES is fast becoming the Association's vehicle for translating econo-mathematics into the common language. But sometimes, I fear, an honest translation will reveal little substance behind the diagrams and equations.

The main trouble is that economists take this modern style of analysis seriously as the one way to truth. Economics, no matter how mathematized, is only part of the study of human behavior and of the ingredients of public policy. We need a return to the study and practice of economics as political economy, the way the classical economists did it.

The modern economists, with their computers, strangely tend to be "classical" in their worship of the free market as the salvation for all public and private economic problems. Their "scientism" fools them into thinking—as many physical scientists do—that there can be no argument with the truth revealed by numbers derived from proper scientific methodology.

### **Use Numbers, But . . .**

Don't misunderstand me. I value fully the work of digging up mathematical relationships of economic data. I'm just saying that we need to learn how to use the numbers without making them dogma.

CHOICES also should be a vehicle for that.

I recently checked the reporting by major newspapers about the 1985 farm bill and recent food-agriculture policy issues. I conclude that the input (an "in" word of modern eco-

nomic jargon) by agricultural economists toward public understanding needs to be enlarged. My fellow journalists tend to report official or otherwise authoritative economic analysis without questioning the faith which lies behind the authority.

### **Avoid Spurious Accuracy**

John D. Black, one of the most influential agricultural economists of the century, was a great questioner and doubter. He did it in colorful, understandable English. A young reporter or novice economist could follow his line of thought and get to the heart of the issue. He would have been a most valued contributor to CHOICES.

He wrote: "It is very easy to overwork statistical method . . . The worst bane of all research work in economics and sociology is 'spurious accuracy.' The science of economics deals largely with value concepts. This means that the variables used are frequently measured in value units."

Looking at the statistical projections now being made—of effects on farm income, food prices, exports . . . of this or that change in price supports . . . under assumption of this or that rate of economic growth, population, inflation—we have to ask if some yield only "spurious accuracy"? Projections correlating all available data and putting in the most reasonable estimates and assumptions should be made. But their assumptions and presumptions ought to be challenged and argued and explained as refined guesswork—better than crystal-gazing but not really scientific truth. Too many variables that cannot be measured are not included in the models and cannot be foretold.

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... when things don't fit and other thoughts

## Paul L. Kelley on Another Land Grant Challenge

### It's Time (Past Time) for Land Grant Universities to Internationalize Their Commodity Agenda

#### The Need for Argument

The way to better public understanding, as you suspected I would say, is through more vigorous disputation—robust debate. Making public policy is an adversarial proposition. Policy should not be based on somebody's computer-driven religious faith and "proof" of the truth. To expose the issues, we need journalistic specialists in economics and economists skilled in talking to the press and the public.

Here is where CHOICES comes in: The first two lively issues are getting the magazine off well in the direction of healthy argument. CHOICES will attract controversial debate. It will invite controversy; it will publicize disagreement. Not alone for the sake of the argument and stirring readership but for the sake of informing the political-economic community—everybody. I look for CHOICES to become a prime source of information on policy relating to food, farming, rural society and the public interest in these affairs for newspapers, magazines, and the electronic media.

CHOICES can become the national forum for food and agricultural policy debate—more than a mouthpiece for the ag economists themselves but also an outlet for legislators, business executives, labor leaders, government officials and others with something to say about its subject matter. The first two issues contained an admirable diversity of these opinions. □

*For a copy of Donald E. McCloskey's book "The Rhetoric of Economics" write to the University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 53715. The cost is \$21.50.*

*In the second issue of CHOICES, Edward Schub challenged land grant universities to narrow the gap between the frontiers of knowledge and problems of society. Where Schub appealed for more relevance, Paul Kelley has a more specific plan for commodity policy analysis.*

Research and extension programs at land grant universities with few exceptions are losing credibility as a key source of research and extension information for designing national farm and food policies. They are losing their place because they have not "internationalized" to deal with the irrevocable interdependence of agriculture in a world economy.

Possible explanations of this situation include: (1) misplaced priorities, (2) lack of a broad conceptual program strategy, and (3) institutional lag in redirecting their missions in a significant way towards problems arising from interdependence of world agricultural systems.

#### Misplaced Priorities

For several decades, research economists at land-grant universities have spent an inordinate amount of time studying such topics as the elegance of the so-called "competitive market," questions of U.S. agricultural resource allocation, and microeconomic issues of the firm. However, the principal problems that plague U.S. farmers today are centered in macroeconomic policy issues, dealing with major societal concerns such as the national deficit, exchange rate policy, and the impact of

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worldwide trends in real prices of food and fiber on farm incomes and survival.

As the relevant educational gap for the national agricultural policy agenda widens, a rapidly increasing number of groups have sought to establish themselves as basic sources of credible knowledge in this area. Many of these organizations are well-heeled, non land-grant-based, and tend to make use of only a small elite group of specialists from land-grant universities. Let me name a few: Curry Foundation, National Agricultural Forum, Dialogue, Council for Agricultural Science and Technology, National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy, American Enterprise Institute, and the National Planning Association.

There are some exceptions such as the Center for Study of Domestic Agriculture Policy at the Department of Agricultural Economics of the University of Missouri and a similar center for the study of International Trade Issues located in the Department of Economics at Iowa State University. And certainly I do not wish to imply that there are no others. But top administrators in land-grant universities and the profession of agricultural economics have some cause for concern about the trend noted above.

#### Developing a Conceptual Strategy

In terms of agricultural policy, the role of research and extension programs at land-grant universities is simply to provide citizens with an improved information base for participation in group decision processes. There are at least two broad areas of relevant inquiry involved. The first concerns the dynamic nature of the decision process.

We really have limited, rigorous, research knowledge of how national agri-