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THE REBIRTH OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS?*

When Charles Darwin voyaged aboard the famous Beagle, he identified some erstwhile missing links in the evolutionary chain (2). The march of science is seldom so brisk, as all too often the stages in evolution have had to be interpolated between observations of before and after. We know, for example, that some formerly drab butterflies have taken on the coloration of monarchs, thereby deceiving bluejays into thinking that they would also *taste* like monarchs. But we know little about the interim color arrangements; and we know nothing at all about the decision to opt for a color change instead of a flavor change (or whether the flavor option was even considered).¹ Similarly, we speak of the extinction of certain species without being at all certain that they have not mutated into some thriving subspecies without our having recognized the transition. I strongly suspect, for example, that the Doberman pinscher—which my son keeps in our living room—is really a mutant of the brontosaurus. Failure to recognize a mutant will be termed a Type A Recognition Failure, whereas an opposite (Type B) failure to note the disappearance of the predecessor was exposed in my treatise (1) on the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*). That study suggested that *Oeconomicus agricultura*² is extinct, and cast some light onto the characteristics of the surviving mutants, notably *Mustela felinus* (the pussy-footed ferret), *Mustela certus* (the sure-footed ferret), and *Mustela succarum* (the sugar-footed ferret).

But the double helix is immensely complex, and our present inability to predict the outcome of genetic evolution attaches all the more importance to a careful taxonomy of the mutants as they appear (avoidance of Type A Recognition Failure). With this in mind, and whereas my earlier study was confined to mature specimens, my latest research has been directed to the examination of mutants of *Mustela nigripes* at birth. The methodology employed is the analysis of birth records, examining the nomenclature of these records in a sociolinguistic matrix.

Before presenting these latest results, the state of our present knowledge may be very briefly summarized. We know that the prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) population has been decimated in recent years. We know the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) as a much smaller parasitical population, subsisting entirely on prairie dogs in antipathetic symbiosis. My original linguistic breakthrough

* This essay is a sequel to my article "Agricultural Economics: An Orientation for the 70s," published in the last issue of this journal (1).

¹ Are butterflies inherently deceptive? This is a dreadful thought.

² Or, if one prefers everything in Greek, *Oeconomicus agronomia*.

(1970) revealed the idiom in which prairie dog means farmer, and black-footed ferret means agricultural economist. Breaking the linguistic code led promptly to the solution of a very perplexing ecological enigma. Data had shown the number of farmers plummeting and the number of agricultural economists skyrocketing—how could the parasite thrive in the face of a dwindling food supply? The answer lay of course in deception (and erstwhile self-deception);³ agricultural economists were extinct by 1970, whereas the growing numbers being reported were various mutants, including the aforementioned pussy-footed, sure-footed, and sugar-footed ferrets, none of which eat prairie dogs.

I wish not to appear as overstating my claim to originality in this finding, particularly since vague adumbrations of most major breakthroughs are constantly cropping up in earlier literature. My own search of the literature has unveiled no stronger intimation than the following brief passage in Thurber (5, p. 198):

It wasn't that agricultural student but it was another a whole lot like him who decided to take up journalism, possibly on the ground that when farming went to hell he could fall back on newspaper work. He didn't realize, of course, that that would be very much like falling back full-length on a kit of carpenter's tools. Haskins didn't seem cut out for journalism, being too embarrassed to talk to anybody and unable to use a typewriter, but the editor of the college paper assigned him to the cow barns, the sheep house, the horse pavilion, and the animal husbandry department generally. This was a genuinely big "beat," for it took up five times as much ground and got ten times as great a legislative appropriation as the College of Liberal Arts.

This passage, as clearly as it foreshadows the decline in farm numbers and incumbent occupational shifts, does not foresee that a whole generation of us would be turning to agricultural economics while farming was going to hell, before trying our hands at carpentry or journalism.

More recently, but prior to the release of my (1970) study, there were changes in departmental designations—to "applied economics," "food and resource economics," and the like—which implicitly recognized at least the impending extinction of *Mustela nigripes*.

Neither Thurber, nor McNulty (who was the first to recognize the conflict between national policies aimed at prairie dog extinction and black-footed ferret preservation, in 3), nor even my own recent work, however, accurately foresaw the unfolding course of events. McNulty failed utterly to foresee that *California* policy, instead of protecting the endangered species as does federal policy, would aim at the *destruction* of all remaining ferrets. "Museums across California have been notified that their ferrets must be destroyed or disposed of—'euthanized' is the way Bernie Faist of the Wildlife Protection Branch puts it—with 30 days" (6, p. 24A).

There is, for whatever consolation it affords, provision in California regulations for sparing ferrets that are made nonreproductive (by whatever means, including the option of "euthanizing" all of one sex).⁴

³ Deception (including self-deception) by agricultural economists seems not all that dreadful. Butterflies are free!

⁴ The prospect that *all* California agricultural economists might become homosexuals, if not dreadful, is at least dreary.

And whereas both Thurber and I recognized some occupational alternatives, neither of us saw these in terms of true comparative advantage. "At the National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Ill., ferrets are used to clean the proton accelerator, running through the four-mile circumference tubes dragging a line; after they've gone full circle the ferrets are fished out and the line is attached to a cleaner" (6, p. 24A).

I had observed as early as 1957 that such eminent ferrets as Butz, Galbraith, and Shepherd were running blindly around in circles (see 2), but it never once occurred to me that they were in training as accelerator cleaners.⁵

Against this background may now be placed new and more detailed findings. The larger deception of course still persists. Each year the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* publishes a list naming all of the black-footed ferrets born in the prior year, under the heading "Doctoral Degrees Conferred in Agricultural Economics." The May 1972 issue lists 219 black-footed ferret births for 1971; this is almost exactly the same number (221) of births recorded in the *three-year period* 1953-55. Comparison of these two samples in our sociolinguistic matrix can be quite instructive.

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC NOMENCLATURE

We shall now explicate the new procedure whereby the demise of the black-footed ferret is reconfirmed, and which also lends considerable support to the stronger hypothesis that most of the new mutants are not even ferrets, of whatever subspecies. The procedure rests squarely upon the characteristics of the ferret itself, defined in Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* as a "usually albino European polecat." The American descendants of albino European polecats have characteristic names—Smith, Johnson, Jones, Miller—the nomenclature is well known. The basic nomenclature was therefore comprised of the ten most common albino European polecat (A.E.P.) names, shown in Table 1. Two concepts are then employed in this analysis. The first, an A.E.P. index, is simply the number of entries of a particular name in the Palo Alto, California, telephone directory (March 1972). The A.E.P. index is attached parenthetically to each name in Table 1 and to each name appearing subsequently in this paper; e.g., Smith (840), Flinchbaugh (0), and so on. The second concept is the A.E.P. ratio, which is simply the percentage incidence of the top ten A.E.P. names in any list.

The results shown in Table 1 confirm my earlier finding of the extinction of the black-footed ferret, which was an exceptionally and consistently pure ferret strain. In contrast to the A.E.P. ratio of 4.5 for the Palo Alto telephone directory, our association of *Mustela nigripes* displayed A.E.P. ratios which were consistently twice as high (9.0 to 9.7). But the most recent litter, with an A.E.P. ratio below 1.0, is clearly *not* a ferret population.⁶ Whereas my earlier crude methodology had suggested the appearance of some new (pussy-footed, etc.) ferret strains, this new methodology enables us to press on, through disaggregation and microanalysis, to the identification of entirely new (non-ferret) mutants, as well as heterogeneous

⁵ It may not exceed the bounds of modesty to note that the accelerator at Stanford University is *linear*, which may help account for the fact that my own analyses have never been circular.

⁶ For those who like to deal rigorously with the improbable, the probability that the 1971 degree list comes from the combined population of charter members and 1953-55 degree recipients is 1.53×10^{-9} .

TABLE 1.—INCIDENCE OF THE TEN MOST POPULAR ALBINO EUROPEAN POLECAT NAMES IN SELECTED LISTS

	Charter members (433) of the A.A.E.A.	Past presidents of the A.A.E.A.	Fellows of the A.A.E.A.	Ph.D.'s in agricultural economics (221) in 1953– 54–55	Ph.D.'s in agricultural economics (219) in 1971
Smith (840) ^a	7			3	1
Johnson (689)	6	2	1	3	1
Miller (542)	5			4	0
Brown (520)	1			1	0
Williams (480)	2			4	0
Jones (448)	3			1	0
Anderson (433)	6			1	0
Wilson (349)	5	1	1	1	0
Davis (340)	1	2	1	0	0
Thom(p)son (329)	6			2	0
Totals (4,970)	42	5	3	20	2
A.E.P. ratio	$\frac{4,970}{110,000} = 4.5$ $\frac{42}{433} = 9.7$	$\frac{5}{55} = 9.1$	$\frac{3}{32} = 9.4$	$\frac{20}{221} = 9.0$	$\frac{2}{219} = 0.9$

Sources: Charter members, past presidents, and fellows of the American Agricultural Economics Association (A.A.E.A.) from *The Handbook of the American Farm Economic Association*, Nov. 1966; Ph.D. lists from the May issues of the *Journal of Farm Economics* (now *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*), 1954, 1955, and 1956.

^a Numbers in parentheses are the incidence of each name in the Palo Alto, California, telephone directory (the A.E.P. index; see text).

mutants which cannot be identified. Consider, for example, the degree lists from the University of Minnesota. The earlier (1953–54–55) list was predominantly albino European polecat (A.E.P.), including an important sub-category of characteristic *northern* European polecat (A.N.E.P.), which is more predominantly albino than A.E.P. The following are most of the names with their A.E.P. indexes.

A.E.P.		A.N.E.P.	
Day	(46)	Dahl	(20)
Lee	(235)	Sorenson	(34)
Manning	(28)	Swanson	(59)
Martin	(259)		
Montgomery	(67)		
Pierce	(59)		
Summers	(21)		

Contrast this earlier list with the following (complete) list for 1971:

Ban	(2)
Boisvert	(1)
Lilwall	(0)
Matetic	(0)
Recto	(0)

The probability of being dealt a royal flush in a five-card hand is one in approximately 650,000. The probability that any list of five names would be Ban, Boisvert, Lilwall, Matetic, and Recto is infinitely smaller—just try to imagine a basketball team comprised of Ban and Boisvert at guards, Lilwall at center, and Matetic and Recto at forwards.

But if the Minnesota mutants defy identification, other quite recognizable poker hands can be drawn from this deck. Consider the following morphologically homogeneous sample (royal flush),

Basil Glasford Coley	(3)
Andrew Gordon Cuthbertson	(8)
Wallace Clayton Dunham	(11)
John Horton Humphrey	(15)
David John Standish Rutledge	(6)

One can almost hear the trumpet call, as the ferret, a hunting animal, has in these instances mutated into a foxhound. In their agricultural economics disguise, these gentry will take very little interest in land reform.

Another readily identifiable hand consists of the following:

Parker Ditmore Cashdollar	(1)
John Oak Early	(6)
Barry Lee Flinchbaugh	(0)
Duane Hacklander	(0)
Lynn Goochey Sleight	(0)

These are hunting mutants also, but coondogs rather than foxhounds. While not true ferrets, they will prove to be a sturdy and reliable breed, and may earn consideration as a truly separate species. In the anthropocentric vernacular in which they are called agricultural economists, they will tend to focus upon such decentralized agri-business enterprises as the processing of corn in hilly country. Batterham (0), Bull (11), Rude (3), Stammer (0), and Tubbs (3) comprise another litter of exactly the same species. (In poker parlance, these are "straights.")

It is worth noting the (parenthesized) A.E.P. indexes of these three groups. The foxhounds, it will be seen, are only partial mutants, having lower A.E.P. indexes than the top ten polecats listed in Table 1, but considerably higher than those of the coondogs. (A.E.P. indexes of twenty or higher are usually associated with true ferrets, between ten and twenty with transitional mutations, and below ten with full mutants *which may not be true species*.) The coondogs are clearly full mutants, and in addition are thought to be a true species because of their undeviate characteristics. The Minnesota litter, while fully mutated according to A.E.P. indexes, are deviates.

A REBIRTH OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS?

The foregoing analysis has reconfirmed the extinction of the black-footed ferret, revealed the ferret itself as a threatened species, and identified such mutants as the foxhounds and coondogs. Rather than press further in the quest for morphologically homogeneous mutants, we conclude the present study by directing attention to a possible instance of the biologically rare process by which a species, once extinct, may reappear. This is called degeneracy, or retrograde evolution or atavism. A textbook example is the sea squirt, a species which once became extinct through evolution into higher forms, then reappeared as the higher forms degenerated back into sea squirts. The possibility that *Oeconomicus agricultura* has reappeared is suggested by the extraordinary incidence of one name in the 1971 list of degree conferrals. This single name, which has a high A.E.P. index (109),

appears more frequently in the latest Ph.D. list than *all* of the top ten A.E.P. names combined, although it has appeared only rarely in our past birth records. *The name is GRAY*. If indeed there is a rebirth of agricultural economics, it will be reflected in the fact that the only bona fide agricultural economists in existence are degenerates named GRAY!

CITATIONS

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3 Faith McNulty, "A Reporter at Large (Prairie Dogs and Black-footed Ferrets)," *The New Yorker*, June 13, 1970.

4 Alan Moorhead, *Darwin and the Beagle* (New York, 1969).

5 James Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival* (London, 1945).

6 Jim Wood, "Why the Ferrets Are Doomed to Die," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, Sec. A, Feb. 18, 1973.