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THE ROLE OF THE CONSUMER IN THE AGRICULTURAL COALITION

by

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In their work "A Behavioral Theory of the Firm," Cyert and March [3] view the firm as a coalition of interest groups such as ownership, management, workers, suppliers, customers, and government, each of which makes certain contributions to the firm and consequently places certain claims upon the coalition which in turn must be satisfied if the firm is to survive. In their analysis, the theory of the firm does not have as its basis profit maximization since this will satisfy only one of the coalition members—namely, ownership—but it contemplates along the lines of system analysis the ways and means whereby all the members of the coalition may in fact be satisfied. Member satisfaction would then stabilize at some minimum point which would basically maintain the coalition intact and thus foster the survival of the firm.

Although my task in this paper is not to discuss the operations of a firm, I would like to borrow this coalition approach with respect to the whole of the agricultural economy. I argue that this economy is composed of a coalition of producers, processors, suppliers, workers, the ever ubiquitous and adumbrating government, and of course, the consumer of food and fiber. Each of these coalition members has to make contributions to and place his claim against the coalition. For the purpose of this paper, I would like to concentrate attention upon the member of the coalition called the consumer.

As we look through the literature in agricultural economics and agricultural policy, we find volumes upon volumes of treatises on production functions for untold agricultural commodities, on pricing problems, or on elegant statistical statements using some of the most sophisticated mathematics on the market today. In the area of agricultural policy, we find lively discussions regarding the survival of the family farm, relationships between government and farm firms, the dialectic of evolution and dissolution of farm programs. In the international area, we find weighty questions which either concern themselves with the purchase of the souls of "friendly" nations through food or which debate commodity problems which have a discernible "to dump or not to dump" ring to them.

In the marketing field, we read of structure, performance, and conduct, we learn of marketing orders, horizontal and vertical coordination, x-efficiencies and o-efficiencies and various excellent detailed statements on the various marketing functions. We also read about market development for selected products, promotion, advertising, new product development, etc.

Most studies, however, have two characteristics in common: (1) They have the optimal performance of the agricultural production and/or marketing firm at heart and (2) they take a rather static view of the products which are available to the consumer.¹

In terms of our approach to the agricultural economy as a coalition consisting of the various components mentioned above, we find that the consumer's position, his wishes and attitudes toward the commodities he is offered for consumption are only peripherally considered. It seems as though we as agricultural economists have implicitly agreed to a thesis which says: "If the farmer (producer) operates efficiently, if the processor operates efficiently, if the marketing machinery operates at optimal rates oiled by large quantities of capital, research, and supposedly strong competitive pressures, then it follows ergo ipso that the consumer is effectively and efficiently served." In short, we seem to argue that if we keep all the components (minus one) of the agricultural coalition happy and operating at top efficiency, we automatically also satisfy that last component—namely the consumer.

It is my contention that this thesis very likely does not hold for a number of reasons but particularly and most importantly because we know very little about the wants and the desires of the consumer.

My plea, therefore, is that we consider the satisfaction of the consumer as a central goal of agricultural economic and agricultural policy considerations. I submit that the time has come for us to look upon agricultural

production, the distribution of agricultural commodities or the formulation of our agricultural policies not as a means in itself or for its own sake or for the sole gratification of the farm firm but also as a means of satisfying the consumer for whom, after all, production, processing and distribution is to be carried out. Of course, in this process the satisfaction of the other components of the coalition must also be considered and met but there should be a clear understanding of the central position the consumer should hold in this system.

It is this point upon which I wish to concentrate the first part of this paper. I purposely abstract from the many consumer protective and advisory services such as food inspection, grading, standardization, inspection of processing facilities, publication of advisory consumer bulletins, etc. which are presently available since these are already well known and have long been an integral part of activities within the agricultural economy. I should, however, mention in passing that even in the area of grading, standardization, and inspection, the interests of the farm and processing firm frequently take precedence over the ultimate interests of the consumer. Various grades and standards are determined by committees of industry members and very rarely is the consumer an active participant in the deliberations.

The major problem of rendering satisfaction to the consumer today is no longer only one of how to produce more at greater rates of efficiency but how to improve product quality and to adjust that quality to the consumer's wishes. The perusal of product adjustment to the consumer is a relatively new concept and very much in the midst of evolution. It calls for: (1) formulation of methods which will enable us to ascertain the consumer's *real* wants and (2) the concentration of our effort on the development of production and distribution systems which on the one hand will assure the consumer the *right* product and on the other hand assure that the provision of the product is a profitable process—that is, that it satisfies all other members of the coalition.

In other words, it is no longer sufficient to simply observe and analyze one movement of the product from farm to consumer and to dwell upon the usual demand and supply projecting analysis. Nor is it sufficient to merely hypothesize upon the consumer's product profile. We must carry out the type of attitudinal research which will reconstruct for us this profile as the consumer envisions it. Then we must proceed to find ways to produce accordingly.

The problems attendant to such determinations are considerable for we are called upon no longer to produce and process in our own image or in the image of what we *believe* the consumer may want. In fact, we must try to produce in the consumer's image. Here also the time element enters, for our determinations are not only to be made for the immediate future but for the long run. The major problem in planning here is that we tend to take certain attitudes or concepts of individuals as given.² Our assumptions are largely colored by our own experiences and feelings. We therefore form opinions and hypotheses about the behavior and wishes of others which we assume to be imbedded in their frame of reference as strongly as they are in our own. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, we invariably find our hypotheses considerably ameliorated or disproven by fact. To substantiate this statement, permit me to make reference here to a few findings which we have made in the course of some research work carried out in this direction in Hawaii. In a recent study on consumption patterns and consumer attitudes towards various selected dairy products, we wanted to establish consumers' attitudes toward various milk products. Among other things we inquired into the respondent's views on the comparative health values contained in whole milk, two percent low fat milk, skim milk, and powdered dry milk solids. It was our own assumption that the greater majority of consumers would find no significant difference in the food values of these products. Our findings, however, showed that more than 60 percent of the 1,400 randomly chosen respondents believed that only whole had any nutritive value (e.g. contained all the vitamins, minerals, etc. which are normally ascribed to milk) while two percent low fat milk had little, and skim milk and dry milk solids had none. Similarly, our hypothesis that age and ethnic composition would affect the product profile of milk also was proven inaccurate [4, p. 120].

In another piece of research carried on in conjunction with the Atomic Energy Commission, we hypothesized that gamma irradiation of foods for the purpose of disinfestation and shelf life prolongation would cause considerable consumer acceptance problems. So sure were we of our contention that we even considered and designed alternative educational programs through which to assure the consumer the safety and effectiveness of gamma irradiation applied to food. Two independent surveys were carried on in Redlands and Sacramento, California. One dealt specifically with questions of food irradiation and involving 2,000 randomly chosen households

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[9, p. 31]. The other pertained directly to consumer acceptance of gamma irradiated papaya involving 400 households in Sacramento alone [10]. The first survey revealed that 76 percent of all respondents would have no objection to the consumption of gamma irradiated foods. The second survey showed very similar results. Seventy-seven percent of all respondents would not hesitate to consume gamma irradiated papayas. In both cases, attitudinal studies were carried out.

Product development and consumer satisfaction require that hypotheses that we may hold with respect to consumer behavior and wishes must be constantly probed. Let me emphasize here again that the kinds of studies that I have in mind are not of the consumer preference type which are and have been carried out in substantial volume by USDA and university researchers. It is not a matter of product acceptance or product disappearance rates. I am speaking more of product creation and development based directly on consumer specifications and appropriate market segmentation. Of course, this type of work should not and cannot be carried out by agricultural economists alone, nor is it at all necessary. We are rapidly approaching an era of team research where each problem may be attacked through a form of group analysis. Consider again the task of determining what the consumer really wants in the food products he wishes to consume. The cooperation of psychologists, communication experts, food technologists, plant pathologists, agronomists, animal scientists, and economists may be required. When management of a large poultry and egg marketing cooperative association in the Pacific Northwest accidentally stumbled upon the suspicion that there may be such a thing as a preferred egg yolk color among consumers, it immediately instituted a number of surveys to obtain the required information. From these inquiries a definite yolk color for eggs was determined, the appropriate poultry feed mixture developed and when the final product got onto the market, it moved rapidly into a position where it could command a 10 percent premium over all competing eggs on any supermarket shelf. A number of scientists ranging from poultry specialists to agronomists to economists, participated in that research.

The last example incidentally points up another factor which is frequently overlooked in our studies: The fact that the hundreds of items offered to the consumer each and every day survive the competitive battle of the retail shelf does not in itself represent any proof whatever that the consumer gets the product that he really wants. It may merely mean that among a set of competing products, there is not one which really gives him the desired satisfaction but that he simply has no alternatives. The x numbers of brands of cigarettes on the market do by no means imply that x numbers of cigarette choices are available to the consumer since even the most experienced of smokers if blindfolded cannot tell the taste of one brand from another. Nor is the quality of gasolines as much differentiated as the television tube tries to imply. Nor am I persuaded that the colorful but expensive print on cereal boxes (for which the consumer pays handsomely) affect in any way the taste of the product contained therein. Does the consumer's selection of this item from the retail shelf imply that he really wants this package? Or does he do so only because no matter what brand he picks, it too will be contained in an expensively printed box? Has anyone asked him?³ It appears that businesses frequently substitute intensive advertising for an effort in the direction of consumer satisfaction.

Yet, of course, today's food and fiber technology has made it possible to provide a sufficient and varied diet for most of our consumers (although marked exceptions will be noted at a later point of this paper). In today's general prosperity, the average family spends about 16 percent of its income for food. Most of our super-markets carry some 6,000 to 7,000 items, 75 percent of which are foods in a bewildering array of variety. This proliferation, however, is not without its mixed blessings. First of all, while it does offer considerable choices for the consumer's diet, it also can be extremely confusing. To select those items which are of optimal value (i.e. give the highest satisfaction and nutrition at lowest possible outlay of money) requires the skills and capabilities of a computer. Pre-mixing, pre-cooking and pre-packaging while it conduces to the consumer's convenience not only adds considerable costs to the marketing bill but also prevents the consumer from obtaining an optimal value for his shopping dollar. The seemingly infinite array of container sizes, weight differences, quality differences, make it an almost impossible task to make intelligent choices.

In order, then, to meet our requirements in placing the consumer into the center of the agricultural coalition, two major tasks become now discernible:

1. We need to determine his true wants and desires and find ways and means to direct production and processing efforts accordingly.

2. We need to assist the consumer in finding his way about in this continued proliferation of products on the supermarket shelf.

With respect to the second point, it should be noted that the very concept of assistance to the consumer is subject to considerable dispute in wide circles. For example, a number of members in the National Commission of Food Marketing who for various reasons voiced their reservations and dissent to the final report issued by the Commission, also denied the Commission's contention that the consumer as buyer has great difficulty in getting his money's worth in his food purchases. They conclude with liberal reference to Professors Max Brunk of Cornell University and George J. Stiegler of the University of Chicago that the consumer in his product selections is intelligent, that the range of errors he can commit is not very great and that the competitive system will assure that his demands are fully met. They sum up their contentions with a statement from an address given by the then Secretary of Commerce, John D. Conners, delivered to Brand Names, Inc., in which he says that: "... in a free open and democratic society the individual has the responsibility to keep himself informed but not many people want to make a career out of being the smartest shopper in town. They prefer to spend their time enjoying the many wonderful products you manufacturers are providing and they gain some of that time by being able to buy with complete confidence in the quantity and quality they are getting for their money. . . ." [7, pp. 150-151].

Recent research done by Ralph Nader and Associates and many others have placed the last statement in serious contention. I am inclined to agree with the Commission's report that the consumer needs to be given additional information. At the same time I believe that: (a) this is not sufficiently emphasized, and (b) that the amount and degree of information implied in the report is not enough to do an effective job.

To obtain the desired results, I should suggest that the United States Department of Agriculture create a Consumer Affairs Division which would operate in urban as well as rural centers which would have two basic functions:

1. To carry out the kind of research which would elicit information of the consumer's desires and wants in his food and fiber requirements, and
2. To give the kind of guidance to the consumer through the maze of products and product values which today's proliferation almost makes mandatory

To fulfill the first function, the Division would maintain a research staff which would collect and analyze received information and then transmit its findings to producers, processors, marketers, and other interested groups in the agricultural economy. To fulfill the second function, a Consumer Extension Service operative in urban as well as rural areas in cooperation with the Land Grant Colleges should be established. In fact, this would amount to an expansion of the existing Cooperative Extension Service into the urban areas. As such it would also more fully reflect the purposes of any government agency namely to be of service to all citizens and not just to a small segment of the population. I would envision that this expansion of service will be a source of information on methods of food and fiber uses, on comparative food values, as well as on questions concerned with nutrition. It would be an educational arm of the USDA which would render a valuable service to consumers everywhere.

Thus far, we have largely considered the average relatively well-to-do if not affluent consumer. But there is still another consumer who is a citizen of what Michael Harrington calls "the other America," the America of poverty [5].

The main concern with the former consumer rests upon an improvement of the product and its adaptation to his wishes. In the case of the latter consumer, however, a dual problem is involved namely the very acquisition of food and basic satiation of hunger on the one hand and the eventual determination of his product profile on the other. In contrast to his past performances this member of the coalition now tends to make his claims on the economy more clearly heard than ever. The long run considerations of this problem lead to an area more nearly definable as social than economic where, however, lack of attention and solution could bring about far reaching and serious social, economic, and political consequences. Our own professional literature seems largely bereft of any sizable consideration of this member

of the agricultural coalition. Discussions of any proposals of assistance such as food stamps, food stamp plans, school lunch programs are carried on mainly in conjunction with or under the heading of market expansion of agricultural products. Also, Congress seems to view food stamp plans as an instrument of aid not so much for the consumer but for the farmer member of the agricultural coalition. We find evidence of this contained in the working of some portions of the Food Stamp Act of 1964. Thus, Section 2 of the Act: Declaration of Policy, states among other things: "...the nation's abundance of food should be utilized to safeguard the health and well being of the nation's population and to raise levels of nutrition among low income households..." But it carries on to state in the same section: "The Congress hereby finds that increased utilization will tend to *cause the distribution in a beneficial manner of our agricultural abundance and will strengthen our agricultural economy as well as result in more orderly marketing and distribution of food...*"⁴ Further evidence of this can be seen in Section 10A of the Act. "All practical efforts should be made in the administration of the Food Stamp Program to insure that participants use their increased food purchasing power to obtain those staple foods most needed in their diet, *and particularly to encourage the continued use of those in abundant and surplus supply so as not to reduce the total consumption of surplus commodities which have been made available through direct distribution.*"⁴

In 1967 nearly 9,000,000 households were found to live in poverty in this country. This represents about 30,000,000 individuals comprising 15 percent of the nation's population. Of this group, only 5.4 million persons participated in food assistance programs through direct food distribution, school lunch programs, Section 32 Programs (PL-320) and food stamp programs [2, p. 50]. In short, only 18 percent of the indigent consumers in this nation are able to benefit from any of the food aid programs provided for by law. The reasons for this are manifold and are well documented in a recent flurry of newspaper, magazine, and journal articles, as well as in the reports coming from the recent Congressional Committee forays into the poverty stricken areas of the country: First of all, of the 1,000 poorest counties in the United States, only one-third (331) participate in any of the food aid programs now available. Secondly, the poorest people in these counties are simply unable to afford the purchases of food stamps or school lunches. Distribution of food commodities frequently is ineffective since potential recipients have no means to transport to their homes the quantities of products offered them or to prepare meals from them. I still recall a few years back the mass of 100 pound bags of flour which had arrived in two rail cars shunted on to a siding in Yakima, Washington and which were to be distributed among the indigent population of the city provided they came to pick them up. It soon became clear however that only very few had any transportation to carry 100 pounds of flour to their homes nor did most have facilities to bake bread or otherwise prepare meals from the flour at home. As a consequence very few individuals benefited from this program.

Section 32 programs which had to be based solely on surplus commodities according to former Secretary of Agriculture Freeman were also quite ineffective in assisting the needy. Of \$700,000,000 available in 1966 for this program, only \$200,000,000 were used for distribution in school lunch programs and for purchases of food for the indigent, while \$300,000,000 remained unencumbered and were carried forward into 1967. The remaining \$200,000,000 were returned to the Treasury of the United States while millions of people went without sufficient nourishment [2, p. 51]. It appears clear that a thorough revision of our domestic food assistance programs is necessary. The specter of a nation paying its food and fiber producers money for non-production in the face of starvation and malnutrition in various areas of the country is simply no longer tenable. At times our concern for needy individuals in developing countries seems to take marked precedence over the need of our own citizens if one considers the vigor with which the provisions of PL-480 have been and are now being carried out. To correct this condition, the following steps come to mind:

1. *School lunch programs:* School lunches should be furnished without cost to all school children enrolled in any non-profit grade or high school. For many youngsters, this lunch represents the only nutritious meal available during a whole day.⁵ Also I suggest that the state and county matching fund provisions now in force for food acquisition for this program be dropped and that each locality be merely held responsible for the provision and maintenance of suitable kitchen and dining facilities. At the same time, I should suggest that courses concerned solely with nutrition and nutritional values of various foods be made part of the core curriculum of

all grade and high schools in the country and that the service of the lunches be also regarded as an educational experience for the student.

2. *Food Stamp Plans:* The present method of food stamp allocation does not meet the intent of the law for reasons which I have already indicated. First, then a way must be found to take food stamp allocation out of the hands of state and county jurisdictions, many of whom, it appears, are hostile to the program in the first place. Secondly, there must be some assurance that *all* indigent families in the country can participate in the program. The basic requirements, I believe, would be as follows: All families below a given income level (and depending upon the number of family members) should be given free food stamps. Allocation of these stamps to families however should be tapered off with increasing income so as not to punish a family for advancing its own income position and to make sure that as a consequence of such advance the family does not incur a decline in its standard of living. Past a certain income level the family will be called upon to purchase food stamps at prices somewhat below their face value, the same way as food stamps are acquired today. Finally, past a third income level, no food stamps are to be given.

The administration of food stamp plans should remain in the hands of the United States Department of Agriculture and be carried out along the lines of the ASCS Committee system which is so successfully employed in conjunction with our wheat or feed grain programs. Only here the committee members will be chosen from among the indigent population. County committees will coordinate their work with state committees which in turn will be responsible to a USDA administrator in the previously suggested Division of Consumer Affairs or any other division that might be set up for the purpose of administering food aid programs. It will be the main purpose of these committees to find and to contact indigent individuals or families in their respective counties, determine to what extent they are entitled to food assistance and to keep a record of progress of each recipient with respect to changes in income, members in the family, and amount of aid each family has received. These committees will also be empowered to disburse and sell food stamps and to check upon the eligibility of various participating food stores. Committee members should be regarded as USDA employees and should be trained by USDA personnel either in their home counties or be brought to Washington, D.C. for training there.

In this way, the public would be assured that positive steps are taken to alleviate malnutrition or starvation throughout all parts of the country.

It may be hoped that if this program proves successful, the use of free food stamps may be gradually replaced by outright money grants. Eventually it is hoped that the government can determine the amount of funds required to afford each member of a family a nutritious daily diet. This method will do away with a lot of costly administrative labor, it would afford the family a greater choice of action, and it would be a more dignified way of handling the situation. While I grant that risks may be involved, that in some cases such funds may not go towards an improved diet, freedom of choice and independent action on the part of individuals has proven itself in the long run to be more effective and successful than controlled and directed action. This holds for the marketplace--why should it not hold for individuals, indigent though they may be.

I do not even pretend at this point to envision the cost of such a program. This could well be the subject of additional research and planning. I am, however, convinced that such a plan would make a considerable contribution toward the conservation of the most important resource of a nation, namely its people. Therefore, I also believe that whatever the investment may be, the returns will be manifold greater in the future. It will bring individuals into the economic stream who would otherwise have been physically and mentally destroyed through malnutrition and its attendant diseases. It has been shown repeatedly that only well nourished individuals can learn, work, and make a worthwhile contribution to their society.

In conclusion, let me state again that the time has come when we as researchers in the field of agricultural economics and policy can and should concentrate more of our efforts upon the consumer for whom after all and in the long run the production processes must be carried out. We must try to find

ways of improving his position in the agricultural coalition. We must also take along with us those whom technological progress and misfortune have left behind. Success in this direction will add considerably to the relevance of our profession.

FOOTNOTES

1. A recent exception to this is an excellent book by Marguerite C. Burk. See [1].
2. For an excellent discussion of this point, See [8].
3. An interesting treatment of this subject may be found in [6,] pp. 67-78].
4. Emphasis mine.
5. I am including *all* youngsters since I consider malnutrition not necessarily a function of income alone but frequently also due to a lack of nutrition acumen on the part of parents in general. Hence, I view this program as an investment in better general health of the nation and educational contribution for students and parents alike.

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DISCUSSION: THE ROLE OF THE CONSUMER IN THE AGRICULTURAL COALITION

by

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A discussion of Professor Spielmann's paper is fraught with danger. To simply agree is to serve no purpose; to disagree would appear to place one in the traditional producer- or marketer-oriented camp. Yet, there are points which must be raised.

Spielmann separates his discussion into two parts: one, concerned with purchasers who either do not receive equivalent utility for dollars expended or cannot obtain products or services required; and two, directed toward poverty or those potential consumers requiring some form of economic assistance. The thrust of this discussion will be directed toward the first part of the paper.

Spielmann does not offer a definition of consumer. Therefore, I suggest that the consumer be defined as the aggregate expression of all individual units of the economy who have an effective demand for goods and services. This is not to deny the seriousness or importance of poverty, but to suggest it is a matter of income distribution not appropriately dealt with through the agricultural coalition. Ostensibly committed to free selection through a market economy, a role in any sector must require an effective basis for participation. The desire or need for food does not constitute an effective demand in a market economy.

The implicit assumption on which traditional approaches to the agricultural economy are based is well stated, i.e., if all components of the agricultural coalition are operating at top efficiency except the consumers, the consumer is automatically satisfied. I would quarrel with the undefined use of the word "happy," since in a competitive system "happy" and "at top efficiency" may be contradictory terms. However, my reaction is primarily one of degree. Obviously, a great deal of attention to consumer economics or simply utility satisfaction is warranted. The difficulty is the extent to which the functioning of the agricultural economy can be predicated upon determination and satisfaction of consumer *real* wants.

Are consumer *real* wants capable of determination? -- Even by the consumer, let alone the researcher? While Spielmann seems to assume it is a question of expending effort, one must consider a number of rather formidable hurdles, perhaps even insurmountable ones. These include problems of aggregation, determinate utility functions, contradictions between attitude and behavior, and the possibility of economic irrationality. In addition, some of the available evidence used to evaluate consumer attitudes, such as the cited milk example, simply suggest an educational chore not completed. Let me return to the educational issue later.

The problem of aggregation is to suggest it may be impossible to combine the millions of individual utility or want-satisfaction functions into anything meaningful at the aggregate level. The assumption seems to be that a distribution of individual utility functions will generate some sort of macro-function with a probability of accuracy. The present marketing system is geared in this fashion. If consumer wants are not now satisfied, a further emphasis toward a "typical" consumer demand is less likely to succeed.

Perhaps a more basic problem is whether a determinate utility function exists. If such a function exists, at least conceptually, it seems to be so dynamic with respect to time, alternative products, and a host of psychological factors as to be incapable of empirical determination. There are, perhaps, two factors contributing to this indeterminacy. First, the consumer appears to react to specific choices at a given point in time; in other words, he reacts to the market place rather than being able to specify a certain demand. This may be, as Spielmann suggests, simply frustration at not being offered what he wants, or it may be he doesn't know what he wants until the opportunity for some type of comparative analysis of

available alternatives is presented. Second, consumer attitude and preference studies tend to suggest that consumer actions belie explicit statements of what they want; while the consumer says he wants one thing, he behaves as if he wants something entirely different.

The economist tends to assume that the consumer is and must be an economic man. However, it is entirely possible that the consumer may be economically irrational and yet optimize total satisfaction. For example, Brownlee and Buttrick (1, p. 158) define optimizing in terms of consistent decisions. However, economically inconsistent decisions may actually optimize total satisfaction of "real wants." Perhaps we have not included all the necessary variables. For instance, are the costs of decision-making, of defining and expressing preference, of aesthetic satisfaction, of psychological satisfaction, and on and on, really understood? We may simply be at a point in economic development in which conspicuous consumption in the food sector has a different expression since the food itself approaches a free good, comparatively speaking.

Spielmann's suggestion on a Consumers' Affairs Division has merit, but I would suggest the emphasis be more in point 2, that of consumer education. The milk attitude study provides a case in point. The principal reservation should be awareness that what appears to be helplessness on the part of the consumer may, in fact, be one factor contributing to his total satisfaction; to use Spielmann's phrase (page 7) "the highest satisfaction and nutrition at the lowest possible outlay of money" may not be particularly significant to the consumer. The consumer may prefer the relatively low monetary cost of errors in selection through confusion and ignorance to the psychic or intellectual cost of specifying his wants in advance and perhaps limiting his "right" of selection. Furthermore, Spielmann's observation that "pre-mixing, pre-cooking, and pre-packaging prevent the consumer from obtaining optimal value per shopping dollar" does not necessarily follow unless one assumes that optimality is defined in some such terms as calories per dollar. Implied assumptions with regard to the utility of enlarged marketing margins for product transformation must likewise be based on consumer "wants" rather than the researcher's point of view.

I would heartily agree with Professor Spielmann's suggestion (page 6) that agricultural economists should not and cannot carry out research in the area of consumer economics alone. In fact, this could be extended to most any area of research. Complex problems require the combined and coordinated efforts of a multitude of discipline-oriented team members.

Toward a positive role for the consumer in the agricultural coalition, it may simply be to make every effort to inform marketers and through marketing channels, the producer, when he is not satisfied with a product. To the extent there are institutional barriers to such information transmittal, there should be removed or reduced. There may be both governmental and educational functions to be performed toward facilitating this role. The consumer's role then is to make known dissatisfaction and perhaps even to suggest ways of improvement.

When one considers the type of role Spielmann suggests for consumers in the agricultural coalition and the behavioral research required, one is reminded of the vast difference in viewpoint as expressed so well in a comic strip by Gus Arriola, called "Gordo." -- Hearing the sound of hands slapping, the dog, pig, cat, and chicken come running to get their tortillas. Gordo comments that Pavlov had only a drooling dog, but with him it's Lopez' dog, Lopez' pig, Lopez' cat, etc. Upon leaving with their tortillas, the pig asks, "Who's Pavlov?" The dog answers: "Some nutty scientist who developed conditioned reflex! Every time he heard a bell ring, he had this irresistible urge to feed a dog!"

FOOTNOTE

1. Brownlee, O. H. & John A. Buttrick, "Producer, Consumer, and Social Choice," McGraw-Hill, New York, 1968.