

# **A Brief History of the American Economic Association**

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ABSTRACT. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century American economics profession and its leading professional organization—the American Economic Association (AEA)—were privileged and shaped by the federal government’s need to direct resources and to call on experts. Bureaucratic tendencies to classify and count had an impact on the discipline’s self-concept, the articulation of subdisciplines, and the establishment of multiple research agendas. They also powerfully framed the strategies for growth and development formulated and deployed by the AEA itself. A consensus of professional opinion and the standardization of curriculums emerged out of the involvement of economists and the AEA with governmental affairs. At the same time, such public engagement was fraught with risks and contradictions—posing challenges and difficulties with which the AEA and the profession would have to contend for decades to come.

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## I

**Creating a Professional Community**

THE AMERICAN ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION (AEA) was inaugurated by a miscellaneous group of scholars, university administrators, and public figures in September 1885, in the early stages of a sustained expansion in American academic life. Its original objectives of encouraging research, publications on economic subjects, and perfect freedom in economic discussions have been consistently maintained, sometimes not without difficulty, given the disagreements among its members and the persistent tension between the desire for scientific objectivity and nonpartisanship and the urge to make an impact on public policy. This problem was especially acute during the AEA's early years, when economic questions were at the forefront of public discussion. A number of prominent American economists were then under attack, and some were dismissed from or forced out of their university posts because of their opinions. However, under its first president, F. A. Walker, an internationally known figure who served for the first seven years, the AEA gradually lost some of its initial reformist tone and concentrated increasingly on more strictly scholarly issues. Unlike the British Royal Economic Society, which has frequently had a nonprofessional president, the AEA has invariably been dominated by academic economists, although in recent decades prominent government professional economists have occasionally held the office—for example, Alice Rivlin, the first female president, in 1985.

While the AEA's contributions to economic knowledge through its periodicals—the *American Economic Review* (from 1911), the *Journal of Economic Literature* (from 1963), and the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (from 1987)—and in various other ways are undeniable, its services to the profession have perhaps been unnecessarily restricted because of the heterogeneity of its constituency, which has always included a substantial proportion of nonacademic members, and its commitment to nonpartisanship. Thus, for example, the AEA's reactions to the conflicts and tensions in American society have been distinctly more cautious than those of some other learned societies, both within and outside the social sciences, with respect to academic freedom issues. However, the AEA played a notable and constructive

part in both world wars by organizing professional expertise for government service, and by conducting open debates and issuing publications on the economic problems of war and peace. The Association has also since 1945 occupied a leading role in the internationalization of the economic profession. It has always been an "open" society, with no significant membership restrictions, partly because of the objections to control by a limited elite or coterie. Consequently, it has only occasionally had any direct influence on doctrinal developments in the field. Nevertheless, there have been periodic protests about the organization's un-representativeness and oligarchic management, a state of affairs reflecting the size, diversity, and geographical dispersion of its membership, which now stands at a bit over 22,000 (including subscribers).

Under its charter of incorporation, the AEA committed itself to "the encouragement of economic research, especially the historical study of the actual conditions of industrial life," as well as to "the encouragement of perfect freedom of economic discussion." In particular, "the Association as such [took] no partisan attitude, nor commit[ed] its members to any position on practical economic questions." While the formal organization was thus made distinct from the individual activities and convictions of its members, nevertheless the stresses and strains attendant upon the struggles over its initial establishment were, in its earliest years, never far from the surface. These anxieties in turn framed the process by which major decisions were ultimately made concerning AEA membership criteria, annual meetings, publications, and operational procedures; what is more, they made the Association's leadership particularly eager to seize upon whatever opportunities and circumstances within the public arena might enhance the prestige and sway of their field.

From its earliest days, the AEA faced certain difficulties associated with maintaining the separation between professional image and individual values. One of these involved continuing struggles over academic freedom issues, involving economists at certain educational institutions across the nation. The most celebrated of these, although by no means the only ones, were the cases of Richard Ely at the University of Wisconsin, Edward Bemis at the University of Chicago, and Edward Ross at Stanford University. All three scholars had been

accused in the 1890s, in different contexts and in various ways, of poisoning the minds of their students with ideas and beliefs inimical to corporate interests and private wealth. Two of them, Ely and Ross, managed to bring their careers back from the brink of the abyss; Bemis was not as fortunate and, in the end, was condemned to oblivion. Whether in success or failure, however, the defense of colleagues placed in jeopardy for their political convictions and beliefs relied more on the *individual* support of powerful champions within the profession rather than on the *collective* imprimatur of the AEA.

Fretting over the size of their professional society was, for the early AEA leadership, one thing; firmly articulating the Association's *raison d'être* was something else. Declarations of purpose, no matter how frequently or even stridently made, served only to a point. It was in actual practice, and in the decisions that animated it, wherein the professional community of the AEA truly explained and revealed itself. No amount of enforcement of particular boundaries of expertise could substitute for the rigorous refinement of colleagues that would result from the inculcation of specific ways of doing the community's business. Whether self-consciously or not, Association members and officials were, from the earliest years of the century, concerned to frame the interests, activities, and procedures of their group in ways that would, more powerfully and vividly than any set of membership standards might, decisively create and preserve the profession that it was their goal to foster.

Creating a professional journal was also quite challenging. With no debate among AEA secretariat colleagues, the founding editor of the *American Economic Review*, Davis Dewey, rejected a suggestion from Theodora B. Cunningham in 1916 that the journal include "a Women's Department of household economics." Dewey's decision in this regard was thoroughly consistent with not one but two strategies of professionalization in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. On the one hand, it furthered the conscious effort of AEA founders to secure a distinctive place for economics as a scientifically grounded enterprise that avoided the lesser prestige of feminized occupations like "home economics." On the other, it actually dovetailed with efforts dating from 1900 to constitute home economics as a separate discipline in its own right. Women professionals eager to find in the home economics

field the same authority and influence that their male counterparts struggled for in an array of other disciplines had worked assiduously to establish collegiate degree programs, journals, and a national association—the American Home Economics Association (AHEA). Their very success made the “defeminization” of economics at the hands of professional communities like the AEA rather easy.

In fact, the question of publication standards threatened to destabilize the general consensus about the desirability of creating the *American Economic Review* in the first place. Argument over the implementation of standards not only raised questions of intellectual freedom and openness but also drew attention back to the general and often delicate matter of the journal’s purpose. Not simply value as to method and technique, but also significance and appropriateness as to subject figured prominently in the deliberations of the AEA Executive Council respecting the new journal and the Association’s annual meetings. These discussions continued for years and ultimately decades to come. They were, in fact, often intertwined, touching upon related concerns about professional status and prestige, scientific conduct and codes, and the boundaries (topical and methodological) of economics itself. Stoutly defining what economics was involved being clear-minded about what it was not. At the very moment they were wrestling with the nature of a new publication for the Association, prominent AEA members vigorously protested to President Seligman that sociologists be kept at bay from the annual meeting and even the quarterly itself. “We have heard [the sociologists] so many times,” Henry Carter Adams wrote Seligman in the spring of 1902, “that we know absolutely what each one of the[m] will say upon any subject.” When gathered in an annual convention, Thomas Carver argued, “Economists would prefer to stick to the subject of Economists. [One] should especially doubt whether the members of [the] association would easily find a common ground of discussion with Miss [Jane] Addams or Mr. Felix Adler, admirable as these persons are and valuable as their work is. [One] should be afraid that there would be difficulty in trying to think in the same language.” The same, Carver believed, was true for the *Review*. He doubted very much if “it would be wise to include much sociology, except such as has a distinctly economic coloring.”

Enforcing disciplinary boundaries in both publication strategies and convention planning also involved making precise decisions about the relationship between scholarly research and contemporary policy debate. With apparently little discussion or debate, the AEA Executive Committee formally chose in 1915 to exclude from the pages of the *American Economic Review* a “department of current economic events.” Even if contemporary policy concerns found their way into the submissions to the Association’s quarterly, the editors were determined “that current economic questions . . . be treated by scholarly men and not left to the sensational magazine writer.” In some respects this was a curious position for the leadership to assume, given the additional concern that the work of economists be made visible and influential in the world of public affairs. The notion that the *Review* should be “a craftsman’s tool” had, after all, animated a great deal of the effort of the editorial office from the earliest days. Maintaining a dispassionate, scholarly tone while encouraging a wide and even diverse readership was neither a simple nor an obvious task. Editor Davis Dewey put it well to the distinguished English theorist Francis Edgeworth in January 1911 when he wrote: “We are trying to appeal to a somewhat varied membership who are interested in current questions. We do not, however, wish to be popular in a commonplace way, but shall endeavor to have our articles prepared by men of scholarly standards.” The problem of attracting “a somewhat varied membership” while adhering to “scholarly standards” that would guard against being “popular in a commonplace way” was truly vexing.

## II

### **Economists and the State in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

THE COMING OF THE GREAT WAR stimulated the professionalization of the AEA ranks. In the spring of 1914, the AEA secretariat fashioned a special opportunity to bring the potential benefits of professional economics expertise to the attention of federal officials. Not surprisingly, it involved concerns with the ways in which the U.S. Department of Agriculture (DOA) calculated and reported statistical data on the performance of the nation’s farms. Cornell University professor

Allyn Young contacted the Secretary of Agriculture, David F. Houston, to express the fear of the AEA leadership that “much of the statistical work . . . issu[ed] from government offices [w]as of disgracefully poor quality.” He noted that the failures of the DOA in this regard were by no means unique. Clearly, “many of the activities of [federal] government bureaus furnis[h]ed statistical by-products that [c]ould be of the greatest usefulness.” There was a clear need, in Young’s opinion, that these data be “properly tabulated and published.”

By the interwar period, additional federal legislation also gave the AEA a unique opportunity to define itself. For example, the Classification Act passed by the 67<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1923 provided for the categorization and grading of technical and professional employees in the civilian branches of the federal government. Like their counterparts in many other fields, the leaders of the American Economic Association succeeded in linking this particular federal effort to their own continuing pursuit of professional cultivation. An early 1924 resolution of the AEA Executive Committee began steps to “secure the classification of the technical economists in the professional and scientific services” of the federal government. The findings of a committee tasked to collate the results of this survey were reported to the Personnel Classification Board (of the U.S. Civil Service Commission), the Committees on the Civil Service of the two houses of the Congress, and to the executive office of the U.S. president. In many respects, the classification survey powerfully resonated with what had begun a decade earlier as part of the effort to support national mobilization for war. Yet here, in peacetime, it extended beyond the confines of an emergency canvass and became instead the basis of a continuing and ever-more-specific detailing of economics subspecialties. Indeed, for some older members of the profession, the steps taken to stipulate as precisely as possible the expertise of individual practitioners could at times appear to narrow, and thereby adulterate, what the discipline as a whole had to offer. For most colleagues, however, that governmental needs melded so well with professionalizing strategies was cause for satisfaction rather than regret.

By the late 1930s, a segment of the AEA membership dissatisfied with the Association’s perceived lack of attention to financial issues worked to create the American Finance Association (AFA). At the 1939

AEA Annual Meeting, formal steps were taken to create the AFA. Although World War II slowed the evolution of the new organization, by 1942 the new journal *American Finance* appeared. It ultimately evolved into the well-known *Journal of Finance* just after war's end. Over 1,000 members populated the AFA ranks by the early 1950s.

Insofar as a desire to distill professional opinion dated back to the early years of the Association's founding, it is not surprising to find that renewed interest along these lines emerged as economists turned their attention to planning for another war and its aftermath, and anticipating the role of economists in government during peacetime. During World War II, the AEA leadership began deliberations "to [consider ways of] making the informed opinion of our membership more effective in matters of public policy." Because the Association, by the terms of its charter, could take no partisan positions, the trio nevertheless believed that the "technical competence" of members could be expressed on "matters of public importance." This would require of course that "all academically respectable views on any posed controversial question be represented" on committees formed to pronounce on policy matters.

While striving to adhere to its strictures against partisan endorsements, a task made all the more difficult in the highly charged politics of the immediate postwar era, the leadership of the American Economics Association turned its attention to engagement with seemingly more "objective" needs of the national security state. In these efforts, their work was paralleled by that of colleagues already assigned to some of Washington's highest echelons. Over the course of the 1950s, for example, government economists made frequent visits to the military service academies, and to such institutions as the War College of the Air Force and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (of the National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.) to discuss (and participate in conferences on) such matters as "mobilization of the national economy in the face of atomic attack," "economic stabilization after attack," and "domestic economies and their relation to national power."

AEA officials also worked closely with colleagues on government duty to assist the national service academies in fully integrating an increasingly rigorous and operational discipline within their curricula.

On behalf of the Armed Forces Institute, Secretary-Treasurer James Washington Bell coordinated the efforts of several scholars to oversee textbook selections in the field for cadets and midshipmen, thus “prov[iding] the Armed Forces of the United States with educational materials which [we]re in accord with the best civilian practices” in economics as a whole. By the mid-1950s it also became common for AEA functionaries to help designate particular professionals for work in special seminars on international organization and security convened by the transnational diplomatic and military alliance known as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It was a short step from these activities to involvement with the recruitment of undergraduate and graduate economics students for work within the now greatly expanded domain of the national security apparatus—including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Postwar reconstruction also brought the Association into the business of aiding professionals in devastated areas overseas. In addition to contributing free books and copies of the *American Economic Review* along with cash donations to scholarly libraries in Europe and East Asia, the AEA became involved in the revision of curricula and the rehabilitation and vetting of foreign faculties. American economists going overseas, on either official or personal tours, were asked by government authorities to check up on colleagues who had perhaps been imprisoned, wounded, or otherwise victimized by German national socialism or Japanese imperialism. Letters to Association members from economists abroad often contained information regarding colleagues who either had or had not collaborated with the enemy. Efforts were made to raise money for the relief of those who had opposed fascism and militarism. A note from a German colleague to former AEA president Paul Douglas was forwarded to the Association offices because in it there was “a very valuable list of economists who either opposed Hitler or kept their honor clean.” American economists were now in a position not only to secure greater influence and prestige at home but also to reconstitute virtually from scratch the European and Asian branches of the guild.

The reconstruction of foreign scholarly libraries prompted the American Library Association to ask professional societies to provide book lists in their fields to guide rebuilding efforts. AEA officials

canvassed the membership for suggestions and ultimately provided such lists, with regard to economics, to the ALA. With such recommended titles as *Stalin, A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* and *Marxism: An Autopsy*, the ideological content of the library aid effort seems clear. This is of course hardly surprising. The point here is not that American economists would generally be loath to suggest books that extolled Marxism or Stalin—indeed, AEA members and the AEA leadership utterly failed to defend beleaguered colleagues victimized by the anti-communist hysteria stoked by McCarthyism—but that Allied victory had the added impact of giving them a great deal of influence on the future course of foreign scholarship in the field. If postwar reconstruction served to recast Europe and Asia in America's image, as some scholars have suggested, the representations of that process in the academic and intellectual world should not be overlooked.

### III

#### **Influence and Authority in the Postwar World**

PARTICIPATION OF THE AMERICAN economics profession in the emergent Pax Americana of the 1950s also expressed itself in a continuation and evolution of links between economists and the military-industrial establishment that had necessarily arisen in the 1940s. Economists of course participated both in the private sector and at the government level in the mobilization and allocation of resources for war. In addition, the profession became increasingly involved in establishing curricula at the nation's armed service academies on the economies of national security and defense. Defense-related research and support of basic economics investigations by armed forces agencies became more and more common. Moreover, the emergence of wholly new aspects of the discipline—such as “linear programming” and “input-output analysis”—was inherent in the association of professional economics with the national security state. The AEA even helped the U.S. Information Agency in securing prominent and competent personnel to do radio broadcasts on economic subjects for the Voice of America.

Curriculum revision and reform was a project that lasted well into the 1950s. Two months before the opening of a second front in

western Europe, the Association Executive Committee asked that the new Committee on Undergraduate Teaching and the Training of Economists concern itself with “the long-run postwar period.” Ultimately, of particular interest to this committee with regard to the matter of undergraduate instruction were “problems of indoctrination [of students] as to social consciousness and professional responsibility.” Four months after the surrender of Japan, 160 college and university economics departments around the country received questionnaires from the AEA soliciting information on undergraduate instruction. By the autumn of 1950, the AEA secretariat initiated plans for a conference on social science teaching at the precollegiate and collegiate levels. At the same time, the Committee on Graduate Training in Economics began its work, seeking to formalize in detail the professional requirements for the Ph.D. degree. To this effort, the Rockefeller Foundation donated \$16,000. When the committee transmitted its findings to university deans and presidents, return correspondence was grateful and enthusiastic. War-related agendas thus carried over into long-standing peacetime activities.

Interestingly enough, and not surprisingly, concerns with the content and delivery of economics curricula emerged directly from World War II experience. Wartime efforts on behalf of the National Roster of Scientific and Specialized Personnel (NRSSP) had made the leadership of the American Economic Association both particularly sensitive and responsive to requests for information about the discipline and its specialists. Moving from a focus on calculating the profession’s numbers and activities, as the NRSSP had requested, to a self-conscious assessment of teaching methods, course content, and educational performance standards was altogether understandable and clear-cut. AEA initiatives in this regard were only further stimulated by the desire of the Veterans Administration and related agencies to facilitate the reentry of armed forces personnel to civilian life after World War II and the Korean conflict.

Defining what an economist was, and what he or she did for a living, was one thing; stipulating how an economist was to be trained, not to mention evaluating his or her professional skills, was something else. In a series of studies, the first of which was launched in 1949, with follow-ups taking place throughout the 1950s, AEA taskforces

conducted wide-ranging surveys of undergraduate and graduate curricula throughout the country. Of particular importance to these committees were the “opinions of leaders in graduate training” in the field at the nation’s foremost research institutions. Recognizing that “[t]he Association ha[d] a definite professional responsibility in this [regard],” the Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Training in Economics made its first report to the AEA Executive Committee late in 1950. Determined to guide universities in the establishment and maintenance of “good graduate program[s] in economics at various levels,” the committee particularly encouraged institutions to improve standards for the selection of incoming students, articulate precise objectives for advanced study in the field, and vet subject matter and course content with a view toward the rigorous training of new colleagues. Specifically, the committee believed that the “important tools” in all graduate economics instruction were “mathematics, accounting, statistics, history, logic, scientific method, and foreign language.”

#### IV

#### **Prosperity and Confidence**

NOT LEAST OF THE HISTORICAL FORCES that shaped the continuing evolution of the American economics profession in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the unique prosperity the nation enjoyed throughout the 1950s and 1960s. If the application of a new learning to the management of a “mixed economy” provided an exceptional opportunity for social scientific expertise to demonstrate its rigor and effectiveness, the context within which that display took place set the terms of both its practice and its success. Having proved its mettle in the extraordinary years of the world wars, and having continued to do so in the early stages of what would be an even longer Cold War, modern economic theory was now deployed in an altogether novel exercise—the pursuit and maintenance of full employment growth in peacetime. That, owing to history itself, the national economy was singularly well positioned for sustained expansion in the postwar period made that task all the more tractable.

Unlike any other industrialized nation in the world at the time, the United States met the 1950s with an economy not only physically

intact but also organizationally and technologically robust. The demographic echoes of war set the stage for an acceleration in the rate of population growth, while the labor market effects of demobilization surprisingly sparked a rise in wages and incomes. Rapid and profitable conversion to domestic production was further engrossed by foreign demand—most vividly and poignantly emanating from those regions most devastated by the war itself—for the products of American industry and agriculture. As for international finance, the nation stood as creditor virtually to the entire world, and the dollar, both by default and by a multilateral agreement first reached by the Allied nations at Bretton Woods, had become a kind of *numeraire* to a newly emergent system of global commerce. With no small justification, the 1950s and 1960s came to be regarded as a golden age of American capitalism.

Macroeconomic management, demanding under any circumstances, was made substantially easier for a postwar generation that found itself the beneficiaries of historical circumstance. Far from solving the cruel puzzle of idle capacity and widespread unemployment that had characterized the Great Depression, and unlike the challenge to rationalize allocation and maximize production in the emergency of war, the task that lay before American economists by the mid-1950s was both more straightforward and less difficult. More straightforward because, thanks to both the “Keynesian revolution” in economic thought and the policy experience derived from mobilization and war, the relationship between individual market behavior and aggregate outcomes was finally subject to systematic understanding. Less difficult because, given the sturdy rebound of the economy in the wake of World War II, there existed both the confidence (most especially exemplified by the moderate rates of return in the markets for Treasury bills and other government obligations) and the means (most vividly represented by rising income tax receipts) to realize fiscal spending targets with a minimum of redistributive implications.

So optimistic were politicians and the vast majority of economists concerning the effectiveness of stabilization policy techniques that it became fashionable by the early 1960s to speak of the “end of the business cycle” and of the ability of policymakers to “fine-tune” macroeconomic performance. In the 1965 report of his Council of Economic Advisers, President Lyndon Johnson made it clear that he

“[d]id not believe recessions [w]ere inevitable.” Similarly, in what was arguably the most influential economics textbook ever published, Paul Samuelson wrote that his colleagues “knew how to use monetary and fiscal policy to keep any recessions that broke out from snowballing into lasting chronic slumps.” He went on to claim that the business cycle was thus a thing of the past. Expert knowledge buttressed by a healthy and resilient economy could now make the periodic deprivation and hardship once believed to be the inevitable consequence of the cycle truly a thing of the past.

Cultivating a politics of aggregate productivity and a discourse about sustained prosperity was not solely the result of professional self-assurance and self-promotion, nor was it simply the manifestation of a particular politician’s (or a particular party’s) strategy to procure votes. The focus on growth and accumulation so characteristic of the new economics of the postwar era represented as well a transformation in the nation’s political culture that had been in the making for decades. For 19<sup>th</sup>-century convictions regarding the probity of thrift and self-improvement, mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Americans had swapped a fascination with a virtual anxiety about the individuation and comfort associated with consumption. Production was no longer an end in itself, nor could it alone provide meaning and dignity to one’s life. Rather, it was the goods and services of the material world that afforded freedom and amenities, setting one’s self off from others and liberating all from both the overt and the hidden injuries of class, ethnicity, and gender. What came to be known as the “economic growthmanship” practiced by a new social scientific elite was, on the one hand, a particular aspect of a stage in the evolution of a professional community; on the other, it distilled, within a set of seemingly unassailable aspirations and beliefs, a society’s unself-conscious embrace of an altogether new set of cultural ideals.

## V

**Confidence and Anxiety**

WITHIN AN ECONOMICS of abundance and stability rested the ingredients of a prosperous commonwealth devoid of the class antagonisms and struggles over normative values that were a threat to both the

legitimacy of social scientific policy making and social tranquility and political cohesion. If an “emphasis on an ever-growing pie, rather than on slicing up a given pie in a new way, [was] well designed . . . to attract widespread support” for particular policies, it was also true that the depiction of the economy as a kind of positive-sum game from which all could benefit independent of their *relative* shares in particular outcomes was an essential part of the political-economic ideology of postwar America, from the time of Truman’s Fair Deal through that of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, up to and including the early stages of Richard Nixon’s New Federalism. Their specific analytical differences aside, virtually all mainstream American economists both embraced and relied upon this “depoliticization” of the marketplace in their determination to separate positive economic “science” from normative assertions. So long as the profession could retain this image of its work as a calculation of optimal means to a given end rather than the comparison of different and possibly incompatible goals, its claims to the authority and influence devoutly sought since the late 1890s were secure. As soon as that archetype was jettisoned or challenged, modern economics would find itself in a world, not of rigor and logic, but rather of ideological belief and political power.

Indeed, in December 1968, the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) held its first national conference in Philadelphia. This was done in opposition to the AEA’s Annual Meeting in Chicago, which URPE interpreted as an endorsement of that city’s violent response to anti-war demonstrations that summer. The AEA Executive Committee, chaired by then AEA president Kenneth Boulding, concluded that moving the meeting would have violated the Association’s policy of political neutrality. A year later, an activist disrupted the AEA Annual Meeting by reading a statement at a plenary session denouncing the Association for “perpetuating professionalism, elitism, and petty irrelevance.” This led to a mass walk of “radical economists.” In partial response to these insurgencies from within the ranks, the AEA established a Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP) in 1968—and, by 1971, a Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) and a working group on the status of minorities. The social change and

turmoil of American society in the Vietnam War era had come home to the AEA itself.

By the mid 1980s, concerns regarding the training of new generations of economists came to the fore in AEA deliberations. At a National Science Foundation symposium held late in 1986, many participants argued that graduate curricula in economics had become exceedingly esoteric and abstract, of little use in the resolution of contemporary economic problems. A Commission on Graduate Education in Economics (COGEE) was subsequently charged to study the problem. It issued a report in 1991 that identified a number of problems in the profession, such as a lack of focus on the inculcation of applied research skills, untoward emphasis on mathematics and axiomatic reasoning instead of analyzing institutions and historical change, inadequate attention to training with respect to communication and writing skills, an absence of creativity, and excessive emphasis on conformity and homogeneity in professional discourse. The COGEE report was so controversial that it was never accepted as an official AEA document.

Over a century ago, American scholars eager to understand the economic world in which they lived embraced a project of both theoretical and social import. In doing so, they yoked the insights of an intellectual revolution in the ways social scientists understood human behavior in commercial settings to a specific agenda of professional advancement. A late-19<sup>th</sup>-century transformation in economic thought afforded these investigators a powerful and versatile set of tools with which to situate human rationality at the center of a remarkable and immensely influential human institution—the marketplace. A “science” of individual behavior and social organization was thus established, the implications of which played no small part in the creation of a respected and ultimately quite accomplished community of professional experts—as exemplified by the AEA.

But an authoritative community does not, precisely because it cannot, subsist on its own. American economists were most eager to place their skills at the service of the state. Here history proved both a blessing and a curse, for the profession’s great achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially but not solely during years of global conflict and war, were also paralleled by failures and betrayals

emanating from the same source. Indeed, it would be these negative moments in the century-long progress of their self-realization that would drive economists and their discipline farther and farther from engagement with the affairs of state, in favor of an increasingly introverted and surprisingly opaque discourse. At the same time, eager like most professionals to retain influence and visibility in public affairs that would cultivate a continued appreciation of their virtues and skills, later generations of economists would make themselves—whether consciously or not—useful servants of those in both the political and the commercial worlds who had an altogether different view of public purpose and of the appropriate role of government.

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