

A Public Economist at a Public University



Cyndi Spindell Berck

Peter Berck was a forestry economist, an environmental economist, an agricultural economist, an energy economist, and eventually a development economist. He summed it up as a “public economist.” He also loved teaching at a public university and used his position to open doors for students and colleagues. The chapters that follow illustrate the breadth of his engagement in research, teaching, and service.

Peter’s interests were too wide-ranging to be confined to one field. For instance, “Hard Driving and Efficiency: Iron Production in 1890” was published in 1978, while he was an assistant professor. It was a work of economic history, comparing production methods in the United States and Great Britain. He kept two letters from senior faculty from his pre-tenure days. One advised him to stay focused. The letter granting tenure noted his breadth of scholarship.

As a faculty member at a public university, Peter wholeheartedly supported the success of women in the Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics, as Chap. 16, “[Peter Berck’s Impacts on Gender Equity in Environmental Economics](#),” explains. In addition to working for gender equity in his own field and department, he chaired the University of California Academic Senate Task Force that founded U.C. Merced, which has been designated a Hispanic-serving institution by the US Department of Education, and heavily enrolls first-generation students.

Peter’s many contributions to the public sector in California included public finance, greenhouse gas emissions, recycling, and more. Chapter 17, “[Recycling Behavior and Convenience](#),” sums up the findings of the California Recycling Project, which was Peter’s last major research grant. Peter and Sofia Villas-Boas were co-principal investigators. Peter was Sofia’s mentor and “older brother.” A “CalRecycle” meeting was often the highlight of Peter’s day.

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As an economist who helped shape public policies, Peter taught and mentored many students who went on to work in the public sector. Chapter 18, “[So You Want To Be Relevant: A Policy Analyst’s Reflections on Academic Literature](#),” talks about how economic research can contribute to government decision-making. The author, Gloria Helfand, has retired from the Environmental Protection Agency. Previously, she was on the faculty of the University of California, Davis, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Peter was her graduate advisor and frequent coauthor. Gloria’s family and the Berck family shared camping trips and other happy times. She helped craft the wording of BERCKonomics: Bonding over Environment, Resources, Coffee, and Kindness.

Chapter 19, “[Challenging Conventional Wisdom in Defense and National Security](#),” is far afield from resource economics. Peter and Jonathan Lipow coauthored several papers on defense economics. Peter was Jonathan’s thesis advisor—in Jonathan’s words, a storied economist, best friend, mentor, fellow traveler, ally, and intellectual soulmate. In 2014, as Professor of Economics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, Jonathan was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for the Global War on Terror in recognition of his contributions to US national security—certainly an important example of public economics.

Chapter 20, “[The Red Queen](#),” concludes this book with the commencement speech that Peter gave when he accepted the Distinguished Teaching Award from the College of Natural Resources. “The Red Queen” sums up the wisdom of a public economist at a public university.

Reference

Berck, P. (1978). Hard driving and efficiency: Iron production in 1890. *The Journal of Economic History*, 38(4), 879–900.

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