

From the editor

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Accepted: 15 June 2010 / Published online: 4 July 2010
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Although this column is not a customary place to provide a book review—there are four proper book reviews in the final pages of this issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*—I would like to comment on a book recently published by my colleague at the University of Missouri, Dr. Patrick Westhoff. The book, entitled *The Economics of Food: How Feeding and Fueling the Planet Affects Food Prices* (FT Press, 2010), explains why world food prices increased dramatically beginning in 2005 and then fell during the latter half of 2008 and into 2009.

Dr. Westhoff examines all of the culprits, including biofuel production and energy prices, economic growth in China and elsewhere, the weather, government policies, and even the role of speculators. He explains how the suggested factors affected world food prices and what lessons the public can learn from understanding the basic economics underlying each factor. An important contribution is his articulation of rules of thumb that embody basic economic principles. Some of these are “*Increasing biofuel production raises the price of food*” (emphasis in original, p. 10), “*Food prices tend to move with crude oil prices*” (emphasis in original, p. 35), “*Market speculators can push prices higher or lower, but fundamentals eventually rule*” (emphasis in original, p. 129). Some readers, particular those who consider themselves informed, may react to these statements with an audible “Duh!” However, the value in discussing them is not only in making explicit what many people might have expected, but also in showing how a combination of factors makes the story both

fascinating and highly complicated. There was not one major explanation but a true confluence of events that resulted in the change in food prices during the 2005–2009 time period.

Commentators on all sides of the food price debate will find support for their claims in this book, as well as something to criticize. And this is what makes the book important. Dr. Westhoff presentation of economic principles as they apply to world food prices gives readers the ability to form their own opinion, but an informed one nonetheless. But the book does more than this. Dr. Westhoff also makes clear an important caution about the value of economic principles and the use of economic statistics: explanation is easy, but prediction is not. “If there is one lesson readers should take away from this book,” Dr. Westhoff writes in the introduction, “it is that analysts who say they know exactly how food prices will evolve in the future are misleading their audience or fooling themselves. By focusing instead on the factors that will drive future food price changes, the goal is to provide the tools needed to understand a fast-changing world” (p. 6). This is precisely what this book does.

So read the book and use the tools, but use them wisely.

That said, this issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* contains its own set of scholarly tools in eight original research papers. In the lead article, Sutherland conducts a comparative study of private farmers in Bulgaria and Russia and identifies different typologies of farmers derived in part from differences in their operating objectives. Zagata summarizes the history of organic farming in the Czech Republic and emphasizes the impact of three different types of organic producers on the development of organic agriculture in that country. Cranfield, Henson and Holliday present results of a survey of Canadian farmers to assess issues relating to conversion from conventional to organic production. Van de Kerkhof et al. use an

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innovative framework to evaluate the effectiveness of participatory workshops designed to improve the sustainability of Dutch agriculture. Valkila and Nygren critically examine the distributive benefits of Fair Trade certification on Nicaraguan coffee producers. Izumi, Wright and Hamm present case studies of regionally-based food distribution companies to explore their effectiveness in fostering locally-sourced farm-to-school initiatives. Puente-Rodríguez investigates the effect of genetically-modifying the biofuel plant *Jatropha* on the livelihoods of small-scale farmers in Honduras. And Abrams, Meyers and Irani report findings from focus groups with US consumers to assess their knowledge and understanding of natural and organic food labels.

On a final note, I am pleased to introduce Dr. Carol J. Pierce Colfer as our new book review editor. Dr. Colfer is a Research Associate at the Center for International Forestry Research in Bogor, Indonesia, and a Visiting Fellow at the Cornell Institute for International Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD) at Cornell University. Dr. Colfer's academic training is in anthropology. A longtime member of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society, she has published widely on issues relating to forestry and has a book coming out soon entitled *Collaborative Governance of Tropical Landscapes*, published by Earthscan. Welcome aboard, Dr. Colfer!