WHAT DO OUR READERS WANT?

A survey reported in the August 1964 issue of this Journal included some questions about the kinds of articles wanted—and not wanted—in the JFE. The strongest votes (especially among older readers) were for “less mathematical orientation” and for “less technical sophistication.” What did our readers mean?

Mathematics has enabled economists to define accurately such concepts as diminishing returns, marginal costs, and elasticity of demand. Do our readers want vague, indefinite concepts? Mathematical economic theory has allowed us to make precise statements about such things as the effects of competition and monopoly, the incidence of taxes, and foreign trade. Do we want wordy, fuzzy, literary discussions of such matters? Sophisticated techniques are necessary to analyze difficult problems in our complex world. Do we want to bar from the Journal articles that use graphic analysis, multiple regression, or linear programming? If we do these things, the Journal might be easier to read. In fact, one might read it without thinking. I don’t believe this is what the readers wanted when they voted for less mathematical orientation and for less technical sophistication.

I suppose these readers were voting against papers that make mathematics and techniques ends in themselves—playthings to amuse a select few, escapes from the real world into the superstratosphere of pure thought, means of impressing the reader, or even confusing him. Some of us may have been guilty of these sins. We should repent, and try to do better in the future.

But let’s not make our Journal so nonmathematical and so unsophisticated that it is useless in analyzing our basic problems in agricultural economics. Let’s use wisely the tools that are essential to progress in all sciences.

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