

Welcoming Remarks for the Sixth Wendt Distinguished Lecture

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Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the American Enterprise Institute on this crisp and brilliant October afternoon.

I'm Nicholas Eberstadt, the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy here at AEI. This is my very favorite day of the year, and the very favorite part of my job: for this is when I have the pleasure of introducing the annual awardee for AEI's Wendt Distinguished Lecture. In just a moment you will be hearing from our honoree: Stanford University's Professor C. Peter Timmer.

AEI's Wendt Program in Global Political Economy was established through the generosity of the SmithKline Beecham pharmaceuticals company—and also Mr. Henry Wendt, CEO emeritus of SmithKline Beecham (now Glaxo SmithKline).

Henry Wendt is very much with us—in fact, he is with us in the front of the room right now. His career has been an adventure story in itself—Mr. Wendt is an entrepreneur, philanthropist, sportsman, vintner, and patron of the arts, among other things. The Wendt Program at AEI is one of this latter-day Renaissance Man's diverse contributions to public life.

The Wendt Program is devoted to the study of globalization and its consequences. It is particularly concerned with the global extension of liberal political institutions—democracy, civil and commercial freedom, open markets, and the rule of law—and with the maintenance of the arrangements necessary for those institutions to flourish.

One very special component of this program is the Wendt Distinguished Lecture. The lectureship is awarded as an honor—conferred on a scholar or thinker who has made major contributions to our understanding of some aspect of what we might term the modern phenomenon of globalization—but it is also an intellectual event in itself, an occasion at which the awardee is invited to extend his or her ambit for our benefit in public.

Our first five Wendt Lecturers were Angus Maddison, Deepak Lal, Jeffrey G. Williamson, Ronald D. Lee, and Dwight H. Perkins—eminent scholars and thinkers all who need no introduction here. We are delighted that Peter Timmer, arguably today's foremost thinker on the interplay between agricultural progress and economic development, should agree to join in this select confederation.

According to our sometime AEI colleague Paul Johnson, the modern era—the truly global era—was born just about two centuries ago.^[1] Throughout our modern era, the very most modern of our thinkers have had precious little use for agriculture and its

trappings. To the contrary, they have typically viewed farming, and indeed the whole rural sector of real existing societies, as an embarrassment: as an affront to modern life, or worse.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—perhaps the most influential moderns of their day—wrote unashamedly of what they called “the idiocy of rural life”: in their account, one of the precious few virtues of the “bourgeoisie” was what they described as its “rescue” of the vast numbers of families then being incorporated through capitalism into urban and industrial routines.[2]

Embracing in power those very same intellectual prejudices barely a century later[3], would-be moderns who had captured the commanding heights in major low-income societies—Russia, China, and others as well—visited tragedy on untold millions through anti-agricultural policies and practices: the tombstones of their works go by names like “the scissors crisis”, “collectivization”, and “the Great Leap Forward”. Suffice it to say the modern world has learned, at terrible expense, that rulers cannot make a society urban and industrial just by ordering farmers to be abolished.

Marx and his children may be somewhat out of fashion today, but among all the other currently thriving intellectual lineages sired by descendants of the moderns, the agricultural sector and those who inhabit it still remain essentially orphans. This is evident, among other places, in the august halls of economic theory, and on the front lines of development policy in practice.

Consider the World Bank’s annual flagship, its *World Development Report*: between its inception in 1978 and its twenty-eight edition last year, exactly one—just one!—volume was devoted to the problems of agriculture: the sector, and occupation, whose circumstances govern the prospects of the great majority of the world’s very poorest families.

As for the Nobel Prize in Economics: between its inauguration in 1969 and the present day, a single one of the sixty-plus Laureates to date was honored for achievements related to the economics of agriculture—that renowned exception being the illustrious Theodore W. Schultz. (Here at AEI, we are proud to note that Schultz’s great student, the late D. Gale Johnson, served as Chairman of our Council of Academic Advisers for many happy and fruitful years.)

Like Ted Schultz and Gale Johnson, today’s honoree can honestly claim to be an economist who was “country when country wasn’t cool”. Indeed: for nearly four decades, Peter Timmer’s powerful, penetrating and ultimately persuasive work has illuminated the humanizing truth that agriculture and industry are not locked in a zero-sum struggle on the path to material advance: but rather, are complementary components in the formula for economic progress, and indeed always have been.

Peter has to give a lecture this afternoon, so I will perforce cut this encomium rather shorter than his contributions warrant. I must note, however, that his attention to

agriculture and the rural sector as the vital springboard for broad-based economic advance goes back to the beginning of his career—and as it happens, to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

In 1969, Peter published a study titled, "The Turnip, the New Husbandry, and the English Agricultural Revolution"[4]; esoteric though it may sound, this exploration of economic history made the case that it was indeed a mundane agricultural innovation which facilitated the economic surplus that ultimately helped to make possible the English Industrial Revolution.

Since then, Professor Timmer has contributed over 150 published studies and roughly a dozen monographs, books and special studies to the professional literature in economics, economic history, and economic development.

From the perspective of extending the envelope of economic theory, my own favorite may be the study where he poses the question, "Is there 'Curvature' in the Slutsky Matrix?"[5] (Peter's tentative answer is, yes—and no, you will not get in trouble for looking this up on the internet at work.)

Professor Timmer's standing among his colleagues is indicated by the fact that he has served as co-editor of not only *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, but also *The Journal of Development Economics*—disparate assignments, attesting not only to quantitative expertise but also to a range and depth of familiarity with the whole range of pressing and important questions bearing on poverty alleviation.

Though tenured in turn at Stanford, Cornell, and Harvard (the last occasioning a twenty-one year stay, and ultimately an appointment as Thomas D. Cabot Professor of Development Studies, at Large), Peter Timmer has insisted on pursuing unfashionable research—work, I dare say, that might have been positively tenure-killing in the modern academy for a lesser intellect. So much of this work was: well, practical!

He was, for example, the lead author on the seminal volume *Food Policy Analysis*[6]—a path-breaking text for policymakers in low-income countries who needed to understand the complex and far-reaching constellation of forces and considerations at play on both human and economic planes with respect to disposition of these literally vital commodities. *Food Policy Analysis* stands as the *locus classicus* in its field—and is unlikely to be displaced any time soon.

Further, Peter devoted much of his career to detailing the linkages between food and agriculture policies, rural sectors, macroeconomic growth, and poverty alleviation in low-income countries today. His work does not offer a grand scheme of how to save the world: just a variety of insights into how we might improve the world a little bit, day by day.

Peter Timmer happened to grow up on a farm. In fact, I suspect that he may well have been the only tenured member of the Harvard economics faculty in his time who knew

how to operate a tractor or repair canning equipment. But in a bigger sense, Peter is actually a gardener. We see this in his commitment to teaching. Peter Timmer's gentle and caring cultivation has helped raise a generation and a half of students from Stanford, Cornell, Harvard, and now again Stanford.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Peter is a beloved, and indeed inspirational, figure for his students. That is why we see many of them here tonight.

Professor Timmer has done some of his most important teaching overseas. Since the early 1970s, he has been devoted to teaching food policy in Indonesia, where he has trained a veritable cadre of food and agricultural policy professionals. Though perhaps unheralded internationally, Peter Timmer can nevertheless claim some perhaps considerable credit for Indonesia's qualified success against poverty in rural and urban areas over the past quarter century and more. And make no mistake: while Indonesia's record of progress against poverty is arguably qualified, it is also most assuredly a success.

I mentioned earlier that until this year, the World Bank had devoted just one of its many annual World Development Reports to the issues of agriculture. I am happy to note that the latest WDR, released earlier this month, is titled *Agriculture for Development*. I hear that our now-AEI colleague Paul Wolfowitz may have had something to do with selecting this particular theme; I know that Peter Timmer was intimately involved in the report itself.

Tonight's lecture is titled "A World without Agriculture"—an ironic play on some of the themes he contributed to this latest WDR.

Without further ado: Peter Timmer, take it away!

[1] Cf. Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

[2] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party", 1848, available online at Gutenberg.org.

[3] Note that Marx's modern-day devotees have labored strenuously to rescue the master from what they perceive to have been a glaring faux pas in this formulation about 'rural life'. In the retelling, "die Idiotismus des Landlebens" did not really mean "the idiocy of rural life", but rather something more akin to the Greek root of the term "idiot": i.e., isolated individual. Cf. "Notes from the Editors", *Monthly Review*, October 2003, available electronically at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/nfte1003.htm>.

Unfortunately for these salvage efforts, the fact of the matter is that Marx and Engels were famously jealous of their turns of phrase and notoriously exacting in their use of language—and both knew English rather well. Engels, in fact, personally reviewed and

edited the 1888 English language translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, in which “the idiocy of rural life” was canonically pronounced. Thus further attempts to excise the phrase or to suggest alternatives to “what Marx really meant” may perhaps best be conducted via the Ouija board.

[4] C. Peter Timmer, "The Turnip, the New Husbandry, and the English Agricultural Revolution," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 83, no. 3 (August 1969), pp. 375-395.

[5] C. Peter Timmer, "Is There `Curvature' in the Slutsky Matrix?" *Review of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 62, no. 3 (August 1981), pp. 395-402.

[6] C. Peter Timmer, Walter P. Falcon and Scott R. Pearson, *Food Policy Analysis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press for the World Bank, 1983