

The Thünen Society, North American Division

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The Thünen Society, North American Division is an American organization interested in fostering the memory and current applications of the works and spirit of Johann Heinrich von Thünen (1783-1850), a 19th Century German landowner, farmer and intellectual. Thünen's seminal ideas on agricultural location theory, the economic notion of the marginal rate of return, social welfare and the value of individual freedom of choice in matters economic and political have influenced generations of regional economists and geographers worldwide. His ideas are still current today and can be used as a guide in understanding the future.

The Thünen Society exists in large measure through the efforts of two people, Herr Rolf-Peter Bartz, Director of the Thünen Museum at Tellow and Professor Robert W. Peplies, a geographer at East Tennessee State University. Herr Bartz is founder and Director of the Thünen Museum at Tellow in Mecklenburg near the Baltic Sea in northern Germany. Tellow is the original estate owned and operated by Thünen and the source of much of the empirical evidence Thünen used to support his theories. Many of the original buildings still exist and now house the current museum. An organization, the Thünengesellschaft e.V., the German counterpart to the Thünen Society, North American Division, supports the museum. The latter was founded in 1992 by Dr. Peplies after he visited Tellow in September of 1990 and was present at the meeting in which the Thünengesellschaft e.V. was established. This was during the time that the estate was part of a larger collective farm under the control of the communist German Democratic Republic (DDR). It was only through an heroic, two-decade long effort on the part of Herr Bartz, a schoolteacher in a nearby village, that Tellow was recognized as an historical site and that Thünen was an historical Mecklenburg citizen well worth remembering. The communist regime had suppressed knowledge of Thünen and his works as he had been a landowner and capitalist who had acknowledged an intellectual debt to Adam Smith (1723-1790), the Scottish economist whose writings defined capitalism. Herr Bartz's purpose was to instill a sense of local pride in schoolchildren through knowledge of the history of rural Mecklenburg. He was surprised to learn from Dr. Peplies that Thünen was well known worldwide.

The Thünen Society, North American Division was established at a meeting in Asheville, North Carolina in August 1992. Since then the society has met five times, usually in September, to hear scholarly papers addressing historical, theoretical and empirical topics that relate to Thünen's ideas as they apply to modern times. Notable meetings have been held at the German Embassy, Washington, D.C. (1993), St. Louis, Missouri, sponsored by Anheuser-Busch, Inc. (1994), an International Symposium held at the University of Rostock, co-sponsored by the Thünengesellschaft e.V. and Thünen Society, N. A. (1995) and twice at the East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee (1996, 1997).

In addition to Thünen's theories and observations on public policy and society, Thünen's methodologies are of consequence. By far, his most well known work is *The Isolated State* (von Thünen, J. H. (1826) *Der Isolierte Staat in Beziehung auf Landwirtschaft und Nationalökonomie*, Hamburg: Frederich Perthes. See an English translation, Peter Hall, editor (1966) *Von Thünen's Isolated State*. Oxford: Pergamon Press). This work contained a simple geographic model of agricultural production, certainly the most famous quantitative model in geography. It is found in nearly every economic geography text and commonly taught in introductory economic geography courses throughout the West. It is an example of a deductive theory. It is unabashedly an application of the positivist scientific method to investigate a social issue. Current methodological commentary frequently refers to

positivist thinking about social issues in a pejorative sense, albeit, often in a straw man role. Thünen understood very well the value of using restricting axioms to greatly simplify relationships between variables as a means of understanding associations despite the abstractions being far removed from reality. He justifies this approach:

"...Finally I should like to ask the readers who intend to devote their time and attention to this work not to be deterred by the initial assumptions which deviate from reality and not to consider them as arbitrary and without purpose. On the contrary, these assumptions are necessary in order to clearly understand the effect which a given variable has. In actual life we have only a vague idea of the effect and operation of any single variable because it appears always in conflict with other variables operating at the same time. This procedure has thrown light on so many problems in my life and seems to me to be so generally applicable that I consider it the most important feature of my work." (From the preface of *Der Isolierte Staat*, 2nd edition, published in Rostock, 1842 and translated in part by Kapp and Kapp, editors, *Readings in Economics* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949).

To Thünen, abstract theory was a means to an end. He was pragmatic and interested in applying knowledge to practical ends. He wanted to be successful in his farming enterprise and he wanted to influence public policy in ways that would improve the quality of life for all members of society. He was from an upper social class but he was concerned with the welfare of his workers, again from pragmatic considerations. He believed farm workers would perform more effectively if they received reasonable compensation for their labors. This was not in concert with the views of his fellow landowners of the day. Nor is it in line with the thinking of modern day corporate executives who earn five hundred times the compensation of their lowest paid employees. His concern for labor welfare was so deep that, in the end, he requested that the abstract expression of his theory of the natural wage be engraved on his tombstone. It was done as he wished.

It is this independent and humanitarian spirit along with the application of rational inquiry into the affairs of humanity that makes Thünen and his writings worthy exemplars for a scholarly group that seeks to improve interdisciplinary studies in the social sciences and humanities. That Tellow still stands is only an added benefit. It is a beautiful place that we are pleased to try to help maintain. When you are in Europe next, consider a trip to the Baltic Sea. Tellow is less than an hour's drive south of the City of Rostock.

The Thünen Society, North American Division is scheduled to meet next September 16-17, 2002 at the German Embassy, Washington D. C. In addition to presentation of scholarly papers, an agenda item at this meeting will be discussion of the formation of a Thünen Foundation the purposes of which will be to support an International Center at Tellow and to promote scientific, scholarly, and humanistic endeavors in the spirit of the man, Johann Heinrich von Thünen.

For information about the September 2002 meeting in Washington D. C. contact

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