Grit, luck and epic failures: writing on the JEL codes

Beatrice Cherrier
HES Chicago 2018

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<th>D Microeconomics</th>
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What are the fields in economics?

Economists organize their discipline in fields from agricultural economics to urban economics. Many economists specialize in a field by publishing original essays on topics and teaching courses in a specific field.

The fields are in two sets: Those that develop core skills and those that emphasize application of the skills in specific settings. The core itself involves two modes of analysis. The first involves economic fundamentals and how they are extended to specific areas. The second is the study of the historical development and evolution of economic thought in fields.

A standard classification of economic fields given below appears in the *Journal of Economic Literature*. These field labels provide enduring markers on the terrain of economic thought.

**Journal of Economic Literature Classification of Fields**

**A. General Economics and Teaching** -- The principles course in the economics curriculum develops core ideas. The course also provides the big picture of how individual economic events fit together to shape aggregate outcomes. Mastering basic ideas and getting a sense of how the parts fit into the whole is an essential entry point to the study of other fields and more advanced ideas in economics. The A category also includes discussion of the teaching of economics.

**B. Schools of Economic Thought and Methodology** -- Economists who study the history of economic thought investigate how the core ideas in economics have developed.
A. The questions
A. The questions

Economic “fields” as historical objects (not yet)

I know nothing of the construction of the JEL classification system and of its subsequent updates. When, how and why was it fashioned? Is it a sign of the unification of economics around a “core,” or of the fragmentation of the discipline? Are JEL codes postwar objects? And if so, were there no “fields” in the 1900s, 1930s, 1950s? For sure, labor, international and agricultural economics, to name but a few monikers, largely predate the establishment of codes. But would scholars label themselves labor economists back in these years? For instance, it seems a distinct caste of “ag economists” is traceable up to the early days of the twentieth century. Why so? When do “themes” or “subjects” or “interests” morph into “fields”? And when is a new field given a code by the AEA? Upon request of a sizeable community of men? When a society or an annual conference is established? Which level of institutionalization is reflected in this coding? How does it meet a demand for financial, institutional and intellectual independence by some groups of economists? Finally, what is meant by the AEA’s claim that fields “are more signposts than fences?”
A. The questions

some fields emerged, gained autonomy, blended and floundered. For such project, the JEL classification might be helpfully recast as a *historical object*, on that reflects and in turn frames the dynamics of economic fields.

The “fence” analogy suggests that the JEL classification does not merely *reflect* intellectual and institutional evolutions, but also *inform* economists’ discourses and practices. How does naming, coding and classifying frame academic and intellectual space? One way to
B. the results

1) Sometimes the JEL codes are a good proxy of the image/transformation of the discipline (what is the status of ‘theory’ in 1948; unification/fragmentation in 1980s)...

2) ... sometimes they rather reflect external influences (World War II draft, Cold War needs, computerization) \(\rightarrow\) impure image

3) Tensions regarding the status of theory and applied work have been *permanent*

4) Microeconomics and macroeconomics are late constructions. The former was straightforward, the latter was a hell to make

5) The JEL codes *reflects* and *shapes* the image of the discipline: power struggles involved
From A to B: the process

1) Grit

Needles and haystacks

<table>
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<tr>
<th>AEA office files and Executive Committee records</th>
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<td>AEA miscellaneous office files, 1955-1983</td>
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From boring listings to a history of the discipline

To leave room for future change, let’s renumber C.8-3 and C.8-4 to C.8-7 and C.8-8. We also suggest changing the title of C.8 to Data Collection Methodology and Computer Programs to make the contents of C.8 more explicit.
From A to B: the process

2) Luck

Finding explicit debates; working on AEA archives allows a general discourse on the structure of the discipline

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget and Finance Committee</th>
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3) Epic failures

-disprove most hypotheses

-abandon naïveté
The process: archives

Check your camera!

Where to find material:

1) Mark Perlman archives
2) Help → AEA archives
3) “JEL codes” folders
4) Alternative strategies

→ dates (of major revisions: “65-67”)

→ Names (not necessary author: editor, contact, network node, secretary, advisor: “Ruggles”)

→ Institutions (university, think thank, policy, patrons: “NSF”)
An impure image of the discipline: from 1967 classification...

000. General Economics Theory; History; Systems
100. Economic Growth; Development; Planning; Fluctuations
200. Quantitative Economic Methods and Data
300. Domestic Monetary and Fiscal Theory and Institutions
400. International Economics
500. Administration; Business Finance; Marketing; Accounting
600. Industrial Organization; Technological Change; Industry Studies
700. Agriculture; Natural Resources
800. Manpower; Labor; Population
900. Welfare Programs; Consumer Economics; Urban and Regional Economics
Processus : interpretation

… to 1990 classification : fragmentation or technology ?

1967 downsizing wasn’t due to unification ; it was due to computerization

A General Economics and Teaching
B Methodology and History of Economic Thought
C Mathematical and Quantitative Methods
D Microeconomics
E Macroeconomics and Monetary economics
F International Economics
G Financial Economics
H Public Economics
I Health, Education, and Welfare
J Labor and Demographic Economics
K law and Economics
L Industrial Organizations
M Business Administration and Business Economics; Marketing ; Accounting
N Economic History
O Economic Development, Technological Change, and Growth
P Economic Systems
Q Agriculture and Natural Resource Economics
R Urban, Rural, and Regional Economics
Z Miscellaneous
Processus: interpretation

From image to object of power

The prevailing system of classification relegates the consumer to a minor place in the economy ... consumers are assumed to be uninfluential transmitters of trends ... suppose that consumer demand is a function not only of ability to buy, but also of willingness to buy, that is, of motive, attitudes and expectations ... the book editor of the AER would find no rational solution for classifying such publications ... I believe that the introduction of a section heading, such as Consumer Behavior or Household Behavior, is indicated. (Katona to Haley, 1960)
Processus: interpretation

Starmer: How do you think you should have been classified?

Plott: if it was a committe experiment, I would have put it ... with public choice. If it was a market experiment, I would have had it in microeconomics. I wouldn’t have separated it out as anything special. It’s data about phenomena

John Kagel: I agree 100% that they should be classified by the topic, by the subject matter of whether you’re dealing with auctions or you’re dealing with voting and this sort of things because it’s a tool...it’s not like econometrics ... it’s more an approach to looking at questions

(In Maas and Svorencik 2015, Witness Seminar)

→ Lack of data on how classification shape field hierarchies
Hypothesis 1: debating the status of applied econ is recent: **WRONG**

*Is there any theory that is not abstract? And, for that matter, is there any economic theory worth its salt that is not applied ... how about monetary theory, international trade theory, business cycle theory?* (Haley, AER editor, 1955)

Hypothesis 2: macro is more stable than micro; its status was challenged in the 1980s (microfoundations): **WRONG**

**Macroeconomics**

- General Aggregative Models (with entries for Classical/Marxian/Sraffian, Keynesian and co., monetarists, New Classical and Forecasting models)
- Production and Output Growth (including technological change and forecasting)
- Consumption and Saving
- Capital, Investment, Profit, and Rent
- Labor and the Macro Economy (including employment and wage determination)
- Price and Business Fluctuations
- Money and the Macro Economy
- Government and the Macro Economy
- Macroeconomic Policy and General Outlook

*finance* international trade
Processus: Writing

1) Chronological or topical structure?

A History of the JEL Codes: Should There be a Separate “Economic Theory” Category? [Part 2]
Posted on October 23, 2014

A History of the JEL Codes: the Making of the “Microeconomics” and “Macroeconomics” Categories [Part 3]
Posted on December 7, 2014

2) Writing for economists (says referee)

...fact, be quite interesting. Obviously, there is a demand side to the story, and a supply side -- and after reading the article, I did not have a clear sense of either.

--Bottom line: despite the fact that the title of this paper would suggest its suitability for the JEL (and I could imagine a paper on this topic in the JEL but it would need to be much more "economic" in its analysis, sort of like my paper on...
Conclusion: … and a lot of help

Rubinstein archivists (Will Hansen, Elisabeth Dunn), Ann Backhouse

Roger Backhouse, Steve Medema, Roy Weintraub

Protagonists: Drucilla Ekwurzel, John Pencavel, Roger Noll, Steven Shavell

Harro Maas, Yann Giraud, Aurélien Saidi, Matt Panhans, Andrej Svorencik, Malcolm Rutherford, Bruce Caldwell

AEA secretaries Peter Rousseau and John Siegfried,

Writer Paul Dudenhefer

JEL editor Steve Durlauf

Referees (even assholes)