

RESOURCES

RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE

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Paul R. Portney

HOW LUCKY WE ARE

RFF's 50th anniversary symposium, described in some detail in the following pages, preceded by only a month the death of John Rawls, Harvard University's brilliant philosophy professor. This coincidence caught my attention.

The work for which John Rawls was most famous was *A Theory of Justice*. One component of this theory is the view that to determine fair rules for society to live by, we would make such decisions before we knew to which station in life we would be born—the rules would be devised, that is, behind what Rawls called a “veil of ignorance.” Were job choices assigned behind a similar veil, rather than chosen as they are, I believe those ending up as researchers would be the envy of their peers.

I say this for several reasons. First, most researchers, including those at RFF, have great freedom to choose the problems on which they work, including very complex, intellectual challenges that tax their intelligence and creativity. This liberty is incredibly stimulating. Second, researchers often work more or less according to their own schedules and, if they're lucky, with smart and supportive colleagues who share their research interests. Third, researchers have the potential to shape not only the scholarly world, but also the “real world”—energy, environmental, and natural resource policy, in the case of those of us at RFF. Finally, and bringing me around to the 50th anniversary symposium, researchers occasionally get to listen to some of the world's very brightest and most interesting people—and call it work!

No job is perfect, of course, and research is no exception. First of all, it's hard—not physically demanding like construction, fire-fighting, or agriculture—but there's no punching out at day's end and leaving one's work behind. It's always gnawing away in the back of one's mind. Moreover, data are often hard to come by and sometimes downright uncooperative in statistical work; heading back to square one is a not uncommon but particularly discouraging phenomenon in research. Finally, researchers are never totally free of administrative responsibilities—they are always being pushed to attract research support, explain their work in ways understandable to non-academics, serve on committees to advance their institution's goals, and do other things that take time.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, I don't think many people offered such a job would pass it up for a chance at something better in the lottery of work and life. My RFF colleagues know this, and the 50th anniversary symposium described herein was but another reminder. I hope that reading about that event, or watching and listening to it on the web at www.rff.org, gives you some sense of the excitement we felt at having such wonderfully bright and interesting people with us for that day. Not to mention the good fortune we also feel that research is our life's work.