More Sex Is Safer Sex: The Unconventional Wisdom of Economics

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With his long-running 'Everyday Economics' column in Slate and his popular book, The Armchair Economist, Steve Landsburg has been leading the pack of economists who are transforming their science from a drab meditation on graphs and charts into a fascinating window on human nature. Now he's back and more provocative than ever with surprises on virtually every page. In More Sex is Safer Sex, Professor Landsburg offers readers a series of stimulating discussions that all flow from one unsettling fact. Combining the rational decisions of each of us often produces an irrational result for all of us. Avoiding casual sex can actually encourage the spread of diseases. To solve population pressures, we need more people. In his tantalizing, entertaining narrative, Landsburg guides us through these shocking notions by the light of compelling logic and evidence and makes suggestions along the way: Why not charge juries if a convicted felon is exonerated? Why not let firemen keep the property they rescue? As entertaining as it is inflammatory, More Sex is Safer Sex, will make readers think about their decisions in unforgettable ways-and spark debate over much that we all take for granted.

More Sex Is Safer Sex: The Unconventional Wisdom of Economics Details

Date	:	Published April 17th 2007 by Free Press (first published 2007)
ISBN	:	9781416532217
Author	:	Steven E. Landsburg
Format	:	Hardcover 288 pages
Genre	:	Economics, Nonfiction, Sociology, Science

From Reader Review More Sex Is Safer Sex: The Unconventional Wisdom of Economics for online ebook

Ensiform says

The author, an economist and columnist, uses cost-benefit analysis to tackle some thorny social issues, from the polygamy of the title to such varied topics as giving to charity, overpopulation, euthanasia, the global preference for baby boys vs. girls, disaster relief, the benefits of being tall and/or beautiful, the American propensity for self-denial, flaws in the justice system, and outsourcing jobs. Not only does he apply the principle of costs vs. benefits to these issues, he argues that this is the only rational way to approach them, dismissing in most cases such flimsy notions as patriotism or religion or human compassion. (In fact, he would say that cost-benefit analysis is the only compassionate route in the case of, say, taking a comatose woman off a respirator, since that respirator is then freed for someone who will presumably gain more benefit from it). He’s an intelligent writer who argues deftly, and his writing has the cocksure tone of the experienced professor, mixed with the somewhat defensive attitude of one who has heard many counter-arguments and gotten a lot of mail about his opinions before. The crux of his political thought is that if you’re not “footing the bill” (in various ways, not always with actual dollars), what others do is none of your business; this free-market libertarianism allows him to argue that, for instance, companies are doing the right thing by outsourcing jobs, as the jobs in India are just as “valuable” in an economic sense as an American one. That this should not be true to an American is lost on him.

Reading this book, which of course I found much to disagree with about, I was reminded of Thaler and Sunstein’s Nudge, which makes a distinction between Humans, who do not always act rationally and have preferences for things that sometimes are not valuable, and Econs, who think everyone always knows what their neighbor is doing and include all available data in their calculations before acting. Landsburg is the consummate Econ – absolutely uncompromising, equating rationality with validity in every case, and nearly pod-like in his refusal to understand why his solutions would not work in the real world of irrational, patriotic, religious, humans, who cry over a picture of one hurt puppy but don’t blink at news reports of human massacres. This leads Landsburg to some bizarre conclusions, such as his argument that the world needs more people or that the world’s oil will not be over-used: since over-population and oil use must, according to Econ-style analysis, be voluntary, it will always serve our needs. (This is, of course, total nonsense; even if there was one person in the world and one can of oil, he could burn all his oil in one day and then be cold for the rest of his life, thus over-using it; and in the real world no one knows what others are doing with their oil use.) Landsburg’s Econ analysis also leads him to appear creepy and off-putting, as when he describes his daughter as a “cost.”

At times he is being jocular, as when he suggests that firefighters should be paid in the loot they save from fires; at other times he seems to be serious when he suggests the President of the USA be paid in land grants across the country, as if anyone becomes president for the big cash salary. All the time, his insistence of every action being a “cost” makes him appear downright obtuse, as when he claims that while a polluter might be costing a swimmer the ability to swim, the swimmer is costing the polluter the chance to dump gunk in the water! He really goes off the rails when he equates conservation with robbing the poor (people today) to give to the super-rich (our grand-children, who will surely be more prosperous than us!) – he seems truly unable to understand that a conservationist is not interested in transferring income but slowing consumption. Finally, although he’s clearly a very smart guy, he cheats on some of his own arguments, as when he claims that a husband who wants to bury his brain-dead wife is “preventing” the woman’s parents from feeding her and thus the parents have the greater claim – but he never classifies the parents as the “preventers,” who are stopping the husband from enjoying his right to bury. He also ignores his own respirator argument from earlier in the book: in feeding the daughter, the parents are selfishly “preventing” others from benefiting from the respirator, but he never mentions this. In short, some of Landburg’s arguments made me consider my assumptions. Some made me want to be in his class so I could ask follow-up questions. Some made me want to punch him in his stupid face. This must be, then, a very successful book: it captivated me and made me think about some things from an angle I'd never considered. I was engaged and enraged, and isn't that a good thing?

Derek says

Landsburg's crafty way of illustrating the basic nature of trade offs and the application of cost/benefit analysis was not only refreshing but entertaining.

I'd recommend this book to anyone wanting to look at the world throught the wacky eyes of an economist.

Anne says

Ugh! The author comes off so cold and calculating I found it difficult to even finish the book. His arguments are based on economic analysis and pretty much nothing else. I get the impression that if he saw somebody drowning he'd pull out his notebook and calculate whether or not it'd economically worthy his time/effort to save the person.

As many others have said before me, read Freakonomics instead.

Visakan says

I'm distraught by the amount of negative reviews I saw here, but I'm not entirely surprised. I just re-read the book for about the 4th or 5th time over the years, and each time I find myself discovering that my previous frustrations with the author were, in fact, manifestations of my own logical inconsistencies. Landsburg is, in fact, a compassionate man of the highest order- we're just too clouded with our caveman minds to see it. Adam Smith became an economist because he was a moralist who wanted to figure out how to make moral decisions with limited resources. Landsburg carries on that vein of thought.

If you're an idealist who's easily offended by ideas like "disaster relief is bad" or "we shouldn't put poor people on ventilator support" or "sweatshops are a good thing", then you'll hate Landsburg. But if you take the time to carefully study his arguments, you'll realize that he's operating within constraints and limitations- he's being pragmatic rather than idealistic, offering applicable ideas and solutions rather than grand gestures.

At several points, Landsburg demonstrates (painfully, for me) the immorality of our own moralistic thinking. I will be re-reading this book for many years to come, just to get a sense of how sharp and incisive human thought can be.

Jessica says

I liked this book but I didn't love it. I bought it to read since the back cover caught my attention like "Freakonomics" did. It wasn't as good in my opinion. This author confused me a lot and I am not 100% sure why. It wasn't as easy to follow as "Freakonomics" was. It really seemed to me like a lot of what he was arguing was purely from a methodical and calculating viewpoint. Basically the world wants only boys for children and we shouldn't give our money to more than one charity. Overall there were some interesting arguments and the stuff I did understand was thought provoking and nothing more.

Robert says

A lot of interesting theories. The sub title is The Unconventional Wisdom, and the theories really are unconventional. I had an issue with the theories as they were just presented and did not provide much data to back the them. In the index the author provides the articles and books in which he got the data from, but to find the articles and books and then read them would take much more time. The author must have thought that people would accept the theories without questioning them. More of the theories could have been acceptable if he showed more research and data. An okay book, but not a great book

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Kaylee says

Let me be clear: I chose to give this book one star not because I thought the writing was horrible or the topic unpalatable; I merely disagreed with most of what he said. If I were to rate this book based on emotional reactions while reading it, it would have had five solid stars.

While I appreciate Landsburg's attempts to "shock and awe" the reader into a new way of thinking about economics, I would like to take him to task for two very major issues:

1) Landsburg has a tendency to point out holes in others' arguments while blithely ignoring the holes in his own. Beat down any argument you want, but for heaven's sake, don't ignore the fact that you're not fleshing out the many possibilities in your own. If he'd stated even *once* that there were countless other possibilities/outcomes/reasons/etc that he hadn't thought of, I would have read with more pleasure.
2) Most statements he made were merely based on his own feelings on a subject's importance/relevance. I'm not saying I'm too sentimental to place value on human lives, or that I can't abide by disagreeing with someone on moral issues. I'm saying he shouldn't have written everything as if his beliefs were the right beliefs.

I guess I just don't like arrogance.

Mark says

A not-so-subtle libertarian conservative manifesto masquerading as a "freakanomics" style book to cash in on the trend.

Lgf_united says

If there was a single page in this book which did not a contain an argument or logical construction which failed the laugh test, I can't recall it.

Oh, check that, there was one argument in the beginning which I vaguely recall making some sense. Unfortunately, I also remember that this argument could be used to invalidate the rest of the nonsense which followed.
I particularly enjoyed the author's description of handicapped ramps as unnecessary. The only place I could imagine ramps being unnecessary is a thus far nonexistent home supply store which only sells staircases.

Renee Hana says

Three words are very important to keep in mind while reading this book: all else equal. This is a very common caveat added to economic arguments that allows one to set a scenario without having to worry about an infinite number of what-ifs/but-waits. Landsburg suggests the "rational" (read: purely economic) answer to many hard questions, but I think it's a given that these aren't actually solutions-- of course there are many other non-economic factors to consider. Because I read the book with this in mind, I enjoyed Landsburg's application of economic rules to everyday issues. It was an interesting read, if nothing else.
Sidenote: I've found that pop-econ books all have the same redundant, drive-the-point-into-the-ground tone. I find it characteristic of the genre and don't judge this one book for it.

Melanie says

This book is so, so awful. The only thing worse than the author's flawed logic is his insistence on being purely vitriolic towards anyone who dares to offer a counterpoint. Arrogant a**hole economist thinks he's better at understanding HIV prevention than an M.D. That's only one example of the many times that he chooses to PERSONALLY ATTACK critics of his ideas instead of engaging in intelligent debate/discourse. A lot of the time I just felt uncomfortable reading this. So far, he's spent 25% of the book describing legitimate phenomena, another 25% proposing wackjob "only in theory" ideas based primarily on the logic of cost-benefit analysis (like, say, firefighters being allowed to keep whatever they save since that would be the only TRUE way for them to benefit from working their hardest???), and the remaining 50% launching angry, spiteful personal attacks on anyone who proposes a different viewpoint. I'm just grateful that I took this book out from the library and didn't waste money on it; I saved my money for Superfreakonomics! At this point I'm just finishing this book because I'm stubborn and hate quitting in the middle. Can't wait...

Dmpower says

This book is in the same vein as "Freakonomics" and in fact actually references the book a few times. Be warned, this book is mostly theory. For example, the author's suggestion for reforming the electoral system includes having all congressional reps run nationwide races with their constituencies divided by the alphabet, not state and county lines. If you accept that most of the author's ideas are not going to be packaged in any politician's list of new reforms, you can have fun with entertaining his assertions. A great read.

Mycroft says

Landsburg uses abbreviated information to draw unsupportable conclusions. For example, the title of the book is taken from the notion that AIDS and other STDs are spread largely by high-risk individuals like prostitutes and others with large numbers of sexual partners. Landsburg contends, then that if more people had a few sexual partners, but not so many as the outright promiscuous (2 to 3 per person), the spread of these diseases would slow as fewer people would be visiting the promiscuous. This theory ignores several factors:

1) Some individuals will be more promiscuous than others for reasons unrelated to disease and thus one will not eliminate the promiscuous high risk contact by convincing more people to increase the variety of their sex partners.

2) Even if one ignores the issue of ongoing promiscuity, at some point, the portion of the population infected through his partner increase method is such that the population will eventually share the same risk as the population where the disease is spread largely by the promiscuous. In a gross oversimplification, let's say that one has a 1% AIDS infection rate and everyone has exactly 3 sex partners per year and 100% of those who contact an infected partner are eventually infected themselves. At the end of year 1 the infection rate is now 4% as the 1% have had 3 sex partners who are now infected. At the end of year 2, the infection rate is now 16% (4% original cases + their 3 new cases per person), by year 3, 64% of the population is now infected, and so on. Surely this is no safer than frequenting prostitutes?

Likewise the case where Landsburg claims that by having more children one increases the odds of genius being born ignores that genius is not randomly distributed: It is almost always fostered with resources, education and attention. If one has more children than one can afford to lavash with attention, education and resources, one decreases ones the fostering for all of the children thus decreasing the odds that any will make any significant contribution to humanity. Unfortunately, lack of nourishment including well balanced meals and education and care, also increase the odds of criminal or anti-social behavior. So before you go and start popping out as many kids as you can in the hope of winning the genius lottery, consider how many you can realistically provide with food, education and care.

Hope Harris-Gayles says

Finally, I get to write the review I've been pondering since about page 165. I didn't care for this book AT ALL (so let's just establish that fact). I think the title should've been my first tip-off--a book that so clearly needs sex to sell can't have much going on between the covers. I would be terribly upset if I'd paid money for this book. As it happens it was thrust upon me by Judy (thanks.)
I'd just read Freakonomics and thought this might be similar. Let me assure you it is not. I know Freakonomics had no unifying theme--this one even less so. The author just kind of aimlessly wanders from point to point sometimes without even giving an answer to the question he raised. When he does provide an answer it's ultra-libertarian, pure costs/benefit analysis. Little Jessica down the well wouldn't have gotten saved if it were up to this guy. Call me crazy, but I like solutions to problems to have a shread of moral fiber running through them. Also, the author has a tendency to assert that anyone who disagrees with him is either A. not following his logic or B. an idiot. Here's a news flash Steven E. Landsburg: We're not morons; we follow your logic and it sucks!

For those who still have a desire to touch this book it's only worth a skim. Also, Landsburg has written some essays for Slate (I don't know how recently, but it seems like a lot of the book is based on those essays). So, find the essays, give them a read, and if you like them then read the book. At least you'll only waste minutes and not days of your life.

Andrew Flack says

Really like these kinds of books. Landsburg is a professor at my school and I'd love to take one of his classes after reading this book. The title sums it up: The Unconventional Wisdom of Economics. Economics can surprisingly be applied to so many situations in our lives (with results that you might not expect!). Quick and easy to read, very entertaining.