



## **Freakonomics: a Rogue Economist Examines the Hidden Side of Everything**

**by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, Harper-Collins, New York. \$27.95, 242 pages. 2006. ISBN-13 978-0-06-123400-2**

For those who find that neoclassical economics fails to explain how the world works, *Freakonomics* gives a new perspective on the “dismal science.” For any skeptics who crave a new and practical explanation for the anomalies in our current economic system, this book is a treasure trove of anecdotes, economic trivia, and solid though nonconventional research that turns conventional wisdom on its head. It is no wonder that *Freakonomics* has been on the New York Times non-fiction bestseller list for weeks.

Conceptualized by renegade University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt, this unique research reports on conventional economic incentives as seen from a different angle. Why do students cheat on exams, and their teachers on how tests are administered and evaluated? How is this parallel to carefully documented fixing of matches in the professional sumo wrestling circuit in Japan? The authors related these weird results to purely economic incentives: better test scores that enhance teachers' salaries and school budgets, and higher sumo rankings that guarantee higher income and status.

The intricacies of the real estate market are dissected to demonstrate, with solid data, how agents get more for their own homes than they earn for clients. The complexities of raising children are analyzed, and convincing evidence presented that shows higher test scores from children of highly educated parents with high economic status and many books in the house and native English in the home. An intact family, non-working mothers, Head Start classes, and listening to reading every day are not correlated with test scores. These are huge studies with data on thousands of students from Chicago Public Schools.

In a risky study of the drug-selling culture in a major city, a courageous graduate student found that the organization and operation of a drug ring was surprisingly similar to a franchise hamburger chain, and showed why street dealers and minimum wage burger flippers both still need to live with their parents to survive.

In these and many other examples, Prof. Levitt shows the way to use simple though often large data sets available to everyone to explain complex phenomena. He clearly demonstrates the primacy of

economics – supply and demand. But in addition he takes a totally unorthodox approach to research that is refreshing and insightful. Students entering a career in research would be well advised to read this perspective, and those who challenge conventional wisdom will be affirmed in their quest for the truth. This is a useful book for all of us in the teaching and research professions.

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## **Breeding Field Crops, Fifth Edition**

**by David Allen Sleper and John Milton Poehlman. Blackwell Publishing, Ames, Iowa. 2006. 424 pages. \$84.99**

Dr. Poehlman first published this text in 1959. Very few texts are sufficiently long-lived that a fifth edition is published almost 50 years after the initial textbook was produced. It is a fitting tribute to Dr. Poehlman that Dr. Sleper has continued the co-authorship of this edition even though Dr. Poehlman's death at the age of 85 occurred shortly after the fourth edition was published.

Plant breeding has increased in complexity over the period of these five textbook editions. This latest version does a solid job of describing new molecular genetics techniques and the methods used to incorporate them to improve plant breeding efficiency. Breeders continue to find traditional qualitative, quantitative, and population genetics among the useful tools in efficient breeding programs. Because students enrolled in plant breeding courses are frequently not taught these topics in their introductory biology or genetics courses, it is helpful that descriptions of these subjects, along with useful study questions, have been incorporated in this edition.

Plant breeding is an applied science. As such, the ability to provide students with visual representations of the real-world aspects such as the people, plants, fields, and tools used in breeding is most helpful. The figures in this edition are well-drawn and clear, and the many photographs help bring the human dimension to the student and help the students visualize the field and laboratory aspects of breeding programs.

After an introduction to plant breeding, there are three chapters that provide an overview of reproduction and of the genetics (qualitative, quantitative, and population) that are used by breeders. A section devoted to tools of plant breeders includes discussions of ploidy levels and their manipulation, mutation breeding, fertility management, and biotechnology.

## Book Reviews

Four methodology chapters give overviews of the basic techniques used in cultivar development of self- and cross-pollinated plants. Germplasm resources are addressed in an individual chapter.

Approximately half the book describes how the principles of plant breeding are applied to specific self-pollinated, cross-pollinated, and clonally propagated field crops. The book concludes with a chapter on maintenance and seed production of cultivars.

The focus of this text is on breeding of field crops, as the title implies. The nine chapters that use specific crop species to illustrate principles of breeding include wheat, rice, soybean, corn, sorghum, cotton, cross-pollinated forage crops, potato and sugarcane. As a plant breeding instructor in the southeastern United States, I have always valued the first half of this textbook, but have found that the crop-specific chapters are too narrow for my students. At some colleges and universities, plant breeding courses must address students interested in breeding forest tree species, vegetables, fruit crops (annual and perennial), and ornamental plants (annual as well as herbaceous and woody perennials). If students in a plant breeding course are largely interested in agronomic crops covered in this text, one cannot go wrong. However, if students are interested in a broader set of species, texts with a greater emphasis on applicability across the plant kingdom may be more appropriate.

Sincere thanks must be extended to Blackwell Publishing Company. Until this past year (2006), it was difficult to find an up-to-date plant breeding textbook. In addition to the publishing of this textbook, they have published *Principles of Plant Genetics and Breeding* by George Acquaah and *An Introduction to Plant Breeding* by Jack Brown and Peter Caligari will be available in 2008.

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### **A Return to Common Sense**

**by John Ikerd, R.T. Edwards, Inc.,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2007. \$19.00,  
219 pages. ISBN 978-1-930217-17-1**

A near-fatal heart attack caused author John Ikerd to reflect deeply on his personal career as an agricultural economist and to reach some unconventional conclusions. Over a period of four decades working in industry and academia, he accumulated a wealth of experience in U.S. agriculture. As a result of his research, teaching, and conversations with numerous farmers, his personal transformation from a neo-classical, mainstream advocate of the capitalist system to a highly motivated campaigner for reform provides an illuminating journey.

In practical and accessible language, Dr. Ikerd describes his awakening from a professional career steeped in the current dominant U.S. paradigm of

industrial agriculture to advocate a rejection of that same system and returning to one based on common sense. Although he firmly believes that Adam Smith and other noted economists were right in their theories for the context of their times, he argues that their assumptions about markets and consumers do not hold today. He describes a “glorification of greed” that has grown in cancerous proportions and has led to today’s domination of agriculture by large industrialized farms, and the whole system by a few giant corporations in the input and food processing sectors. Today he views “corporations” as the great social villain that has come to dominate agriculture, government, and an unconscious and complacent U.S. society.

The consequences, according to Dr. Ikerd, have been consolidation in chemical, fertilizer, and seed companies; expansion of corporate farms at the expense of diverse family farms; a handful of corporations controlling each of our basic food commodities; and a decline in rural communities due to an aging and out-migrating population. While recognizing the economies of scale that come with a degree of specialization and centralization of some production activities, he argues that our system has gone far beyond what is useful to society and the result is lack of competition and consumer sovereignty in the marketplace. The author strongly believes that capitalism has become “corporatism” where a legal duty of large commercial organizations is to grow and reap maximum profits, with no moral guidelines and disregard for equity of benefits to the public. He describes advertising as a total ruse that adds only cost and no benefits to the common citizen, and we are exhorted to continue to shop to help the economy. He even argues that the economy and shopping have become a new religion.

Dr. Ikerd insists that we need a new paradigm based on dynamic, regenerating, and self-making systems to replace those that exploit both people and natural resources. Although the mechanistic and reductionist approach may be useful to understand non-living things, humans and other life forms can only be sustained by understanding the multiple and complex processes and interactions that explain their function. He promotes a sustainable agenda that does not externalize costs to other places or future generations, and a government that serves people and not corporations. Consistent with the views of many in the Nordic Region, Ikerd suggests that health, education, and nutrition are basic human rights, a view that was part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 at the founding of the United Nations but is often neglected in our rush to development and profits in the private sector.

Economics should have both social and ethical dimensions, according to the author, and individual private economic incentives must be balanced with social or public economics as well as ecological and moral economics. He calls for a “Declaration of

Interdependence” that would recognize the intrinsic worth of all people as well as other parts of the ecosystem – and the essential importance of preserving intact agroecosystems as well as natural ecosystems for our very survival.

In a message of hope, Dr. Ikerd provides a vision for change from an industrial era that has run its course, and beyond the simplicity of a strategy that calls for informed knowledge workers in an information age. He insists that information technologies be available to all, and that we look for symbiosis in our dealings with other people, regions, states, and countries. He sees hope in the activism of people opposed to confined animal production operations (CAPOs), of farmers working cooperatively at the local level, and of people building positive relationships in rural communities. As he states, “the revolution begins within each person.”

In a chapter on restoring mind, body, and soul, Dr. Ikerd extols the importance of being guided by purpose not by goals, and by principles not by economic values. He also urges each of us to stay open to new opportunities, to create a desirable future and not to just adapt to current trends. He claims that this is the only route to reclaim democracy from the corporations, and to maintain viable communities in the countryside. John Ikerd is a professor emeritus in agricultural economics from University of Missouri who lives, writes, and travels from his home near Columbia. He is a strong moving force in helping us all envision and design a future agriculture and food system for the U.S.

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