

College of Business Book Review by Inhyuck “Steve” Ha

Title: The Economics of Public Issues, 14<sup>th</sup> edition

Author: Roger LeRoy Miller, Daniel K. Benjamin, and Douglas C. North

Publisher: Pearson Addison Wesley

Length: 255 pages

Price: \$27.20 (paperback)

Reading time: 3 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

In their book, “The Economics of Public Issues”, Roger Miller, Daniel Benjamin, and Douglas North once again make underlying economic principles easy to understand. No graphs. No calculus. They explain economics concepts by addressing three dozen current issues in a small 250-page book. You can read a chapter when booting your computer. Do not try that, however. You will miss your morning meeting or picking up your child. This book is readable and enjoyable for everyone from middle-school students to college professors.

Over 150 years ago, Thomas Carlyle gave economics (political economy as it was then known) the name “the dismal science.” Since then, this notorious nickname has frequently been referenced whenever the economic situation is not promising. Popularity breeds various meanings. Whether Carlyle was right or not, it is not difficult to find people in your neighborhood who have had unpleasant experiences with economics in either high school or college. At some point, economics became the quantum dynamics of the social sciences. Most average people do not seek to understand basic economic principles, but simply admit their importance. Recently, that atmosphere has changed drastically. Thanks to several best-selling authors from the ivory tower, books that easily explain economic principles can now be found on the shelves of local bookstores. This book is a good example.

The authors illustrate economic concepts by discussing an abundant and diverse range of issues, including drug legalization, prostitution, obesity, an increase in SUV consumption, free trade, etc. Their journey starts from the passenger seat of your car, and ends in an unknown street in China. Their debates start by questioning government airbag regulations. People lock the doors to their homes even though the government does not require it. If people believe airbags are so important to protecting themselves from injuries and death, why does the government require their installation? Since automakers began installing airbags in 1989, about 230 people—two-thirds of them children—have been killed by airbag deployments in low-speed crashes. How can one justify the unnecessary and avoidable loss of lives when making policy decisions about safety?

They continue by asking: can we stop or reduce drug usage through regulation? What should we learn from history? During Prohibition (1920-1933), the death rate from alcohol poisoning was more than 30 times higher than today. In 1927, about 12,000

people died from acute alcohol poisoning while only about 3,000 people per year die due to an overdose of cocaine or heroine today. Prior to 1914, cocaine was legal in this country. Cocaine was even included in the original Coca-Cola. When a substance is made illegal, consumption becomes intensive.

The authors conclude this chapter by asking why tobacco is not illegal in this country when nicotine is the most addictive drug known to human beings, and cigarette smoking is estimated to kill over 300,000 people per year. The government has not failed totally. However, the success has not been achieved as claimed when the government, in particular, attempts to prevent mutually beneficial exchange.

These are only a couple of examples to show their insightful accomplishment. Their discussion continues. Now economics is everywhere. This book will help you understand the world better by using a basic economics tool—demand and supply—and others.

Inhyuck “Steve” Ha is an assistant professor of Economics in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His interests include regional economics and community economic development. For previously reviewed books, visit us at our website at [www.wcu.edu/cob/](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/).