Review of: The Spread Of Economic Ideas by David Colander and A. W. Coats

Kate J. Stirling
*University of Puget Sound, stirling@pugetsound.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs](http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs)

Citation

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.
The Spread of Economic Ideas. by David Colander; A. W. Coats

Review by: Kate J. Stirling


Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association


Accessed: 13/10/2014 17:12

The Annual Middlebury College Conference on Economic Issues was the original setting for these 18 papers. Often such collections are uneven and the papers ill suited to one another; these are not. Whatever rough edges may have existed have been smoothed out nicely by the editors, and the engaging style of the contributions makes for enjoyable, provocative reading. The central subject of economic ideas allows the contributors, who come both from within and without the academy, to draw on their own particular areas of expertise. The result is an eclectic volume that should appeal to a wide audience.

The transmission of economic ideas is discussed under four headings: within the profession, to the lay public, to the policy maker, and funding. In the first essay Robert Clower addresses whether there are any valuable ideas rather than how economic ideas are disseminated. His experience from journal editing leads him to lament “[w]hat was remarkable was the absolute dullness, the lack of any kind of new idea, that predominated in the selection of papers. . . .” (p. 27). Next, in a theme he revisits in Part IV, Colander argues furiously that new ideas are impeded by the “internal dynamics of the profession: who is allowed to become a member, who gets promoted, who gets paid what, [and] who gets the laurels. . . .” (p. 32). The dialogue, though polite, heats up with the next piece, by Robert Solow, who disagrees with the conclusions reached by the previous authors and asserts that so do “most of the functioning economists” he knows. Charles Kindleberger suggests that with the proliferation of journals it has become virtually impossible to remain current in the discipline. Using examples drawn from international economics, he proposes five life profiles of economic ideas. Colin Day, representing university publishing, differentiates readers by a knowledge line and argues that books may serve to communicate ideas better than journals, which face greater space constraints.

Robert Solow, in Part II, posits that if ideas are communicated to the public, they are turned to “mush” in the process. Mind you, says Solow, that is not all bad: “the World Out There believes that the economist’s case for the market is stronger that it really is . . . without that illusion the World Out There would not appreciate how strong the case really is”’ (p. 78). David Warsh, an economic columnist for the Boston Globe, examines the vastly different methods that led to the forging of a strategic trade policy. To understand the diffusion of ideas, he suggests, we should look at the degree of skepticism involved in each of those methods. In a critical essay Donald Lamm, chair of W. W. Norton, argues that very few economic books are written for the common reader primarily because “economists insist on placing the highest value on exchanges with other economists. . . .” (p. 105).

A. W. Coats begins Part III by identifying the particular skills and abilities needed to communicate and persuade others of economic ideas. Few economists, he says, are inclined toward those attributes. William Barber finds scant evidence that the world is ruled by little else than our ideas, despite the ever-increasing number of economists in the government. Those economists who return to the academy from a stint of government service, however, are equipped to “speak with some authority about what is relevant in public debate” (p. 126). James Galbraith, an economist at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, analyzes the institutional restraints within Congress to surmise that the spread of ideas may be seen as an “exchange of favors for commitments, between those with political capital to spare and those without” (p. 131). Although it is in vogue in our profession to call for policy rules, he argues that such simplifications subvert the means by which ideas may be translated into law. In Joseph Minarik’s essay the passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1986 unfolds like a Spielberg movie. He observes that once economists stopped urging a comprehensive income tax
it was adopted by policy makers: the implication being, he suggests cautiously, that the “way to spread an economic idea is to abandon it” (p. 148).

Part IV begins with Craufurd Goodwin’s examination of the inherent tension between the underlying principles of the Ford Foundation and the economics profession. This tension has resulted in reduced funding for economists, which may lead “economics to join the humanities in genteel poverty. . . .” (p. 159). James Smith examines the role and structure of think tanks, which he views as pivotal in the new politics of ideas. The director of the National Science Foundation’s Economics Program, Daniel Newlon, provides a vigorous defense of the NSF’s funding process and argues that it has been instrumental in the purveyance of economic ideas. In the final essay Gordon Tullock argues that adoption of a patent system of ideas would increase incentives and swell the production and funding of economic ideas.

I cannot imagine a reader who could not find something of interest in this volume. Some might take exception to the casual and informal style but that, of course, is consistent with the editors’ sociological approach. This does pose something of a dilemma for Colander, in particular, who argues that only formal models are accepted within the profession: if the book is well received by economists, it may mean he needs to re-examine his thesis.

KATE J. STIRLING, University of Puget Sound

GENERAL AND MISCELLANEOUS


Our image of homework has been based more on the polemics of policy advocates than the painstaking reconstructions of social scientists. This superb collection of essays moves us beyond the conventional, one-dimensional stereotypes of, on the one hand, immigrant women and children sweating away their lives in cramped tenements surrounded by piles of unstitched garments or, on the other, “middle-class women handcrafting while their toddlers play by the fire” (p. 247). Through a series of well-chosen and nuanced case studies, homeworkers emerge in all their variety: from the privileged script-writer, unionized newspaper reporter, or skilled professional starting up a home business, to the “artisanal” Vermont handknitter and the self-employed black laundress, to the marginal and beleaguered insurance claim processor bleary-eyed from unremitting doses of full-time child care and piecework.

Yet paradoxically, as the social reality of homework emerges, the category itself begins to dissolve. Whether a particular homeworker achieves a living wage, flexibility and autonomy at work, or enhanced power in the domestic sphere, a sense of workplace community and a feeling of productive accomplishment appears to depend more on the bargaining leverage of the individual than the site at which the work takes place. Indeed, for those few homeworkers who are male or unionized, the problems often described as inherent to homework—low pay, insecurity of income, invisibility of work, and social isolation—disappear. In short, as many of the authors make clear, the policy issues concerning homework have as much to do with correcting persistent sexual inequalities in both the public and private sphere as with the location of waged work within the home.

The editors are to be commended for their insightful introductory chapter which carefully pinpoints the themes that are then echoed and complicated in the ensuing essays. In part because of their thoughtful editing, the volume has unusual coherence