

When sexual restraint is like pollution

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A new book has appeared on the tottering pile of popular economics tomes on my desk, and appropriately enough it is a welcome return from the writer who laid their foundation back in 1993 with *The Armchair Economist*.

Steven Landsburg writes beautifully, is very smart and very creative, and I loved his new book. Some will hate it, but then Mr Landsburg won't mind that at all: he has long taken a mischievous pride in offending sensibilities.

More Sex is Safer Sex is a collection of short essays - often based on Landsburg's long-running column in *Slate* - exposing the economics deep beneath the surface of life. His opening chapter explains that if sexually reserved people slept around a bit more, we'd all be at less risk from sexually transmitted diseases, because we'd spend less time sleeping with a small number of sexually active, very risky partners. Sexual restraint, therefore, is rather like pollution, and it would be nice to find a policy to encourage less of it. Landsburg casts around for a solution but doesn't find one that totally satisfies him, and then he's off to the next subject, by which time both the verve of the writing and the edginess of the arguments are obvious.

Subsequent chapters cover politics (give every American an extra vote to cast in a different district, so that voters can punish pork-barrel politics), fire-fighting (let fire crews keep all the property they save, but watch out for arson-for-profit) and jury service (give jurors financial incentives to reach the right verdict, and hold a few fake trials to keep them honest).

Evidently, this is a provocative thinker even by the standards of economists. Indeed, many economists disagree with Landsburg even while they entertain themselves trying to find the hole in the logic. If you think the flaws are easy to find, though, you haven't thought hard enough.

When it comes to charitable giving, for example, Landsburg advocates giving exclusively to your favourite charity. People instinctively want to spread their money around, but that's self-centred thinking: we don't diversify our stock portfolios because we want to be fair to every company in the S&P 500, but because doing so solves our own narrow investment problem. This is classic Landsburg: original, arresting, "obviously wrong" and actually entirely correct.

All the arguments I've mentioned so far are based on logic rather than evidence, which should come as no surprise from the author of *The Armchair Economist*.

Landsburg's background is in maths, and while there are no equations or technical terms in the book, he is fond of logic alone, even when field research might have helped. Logic is often enough to win the day, but some readers will occasionally wish he had strayed further from his armchair in search of the truth.

When the book is good, it is very good. Landsburg's account of his bilateral trade deficit with his local Barnes and Noble is my favourite popular economics essay. After reading his chapter on "how to fix the justice system", you'll never view jury trials the same way again, while his riff on the virtues of population growth is simultaneously important, unexpected, and very funny.

Landsburg has an acid pen and he usually wields it to good effect. When he characterises protests against child labour as advising African children to "kick back, relax, and take life a little easier", he punctures the pigheadedness of those who would rather make impassioned demands than think seriously about development.

But sometimes in his eagerness to provoke he goes too far. When he invites us to consider the legal and political controversy over whether the comatose Terri Schiavo should have been unplugged from her ventilator, he compares her with a toaster, before opining that her husband would have had a stronger case for unplugging her if he'd wanted to cook her body for dinner. That is neither funny nor illuminating. It is a fine line between clever, and too clever by half.

Yet he usually gets it just right. Here is an example: "In one recent survey, 37 per cent of New Yorkers said they'd leave the city if they could. Of course, since none of them had left the city, and since all of them could, the only proper conclusion is that 37 per cent of New Yorkers lie to pollsters."

Splendid stuff, but it poses a puzzle. His cracks about cannibalism invite hate mail that he will have to field all by himself. His wit and originality help other economists by making readers aware that the subject really can be fun. Sharing the benefits and keeping the costs to himself is irrationally altruistic of him. I am not sure whether Landsburg would agree, but I know he would recognise the argument.

The writer is an FT columnist. His book *The Undercover Economist* is out in US paperback, and in the UK on May 3