

Recent highlights from the Ideas blog

BRAINIAC; What's wrong with economics

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The Notre Dame economist Philip Mirowski explores the post-crash reckoning, or lack of same, within the economics profession, in the Summer 2010 issue of *The Hedgehog Review*. While general-interest publications, "previously cheerleaders for the economics profession," suddenly turned hostile, searching for economist villains and heroes, Mirowski writes - and while economists themselves began throwing brickbats at each other - the rot at the core of the field went largely unexamined: a lack of connection between economic models and "the specifics of actual existing economies."

"This is what happens when you banish history and philosophy" from economics training, Mirowski writes, and drilling students on "problem sets, problem sets, and more problem sets" leaves them ill-equipped to ask broad, penetrating questions about the articles they are asked to read, the theories they imbibe.

And although few of those theories proved useful during the recent meltdown, "Apologists are already hyperventilating that nothing untoward has happened," Mirowski writes, creating a danger that no lessons will be learned. For explanation of this denial, Mirowski turns to the inventor of the concept of cognitive dissonance, Leon Festinger, who noted the tendency of many people, when presented with hard evidence that their worldviews were flawed, to "show a new fervor about convincing and converting people to [their] view." Economists, Keynes excepted, reacted that way in the 1930s, Mirowski says. And that's how most are reacting today.

John McPhee, style maven

The writer John McPhee is certainly stylish, but his impact on the fashion world has been rather slight - until now. *GQ's* latest issue spotlights a fall line of men's clothing produced by the noted designer Michael Bastian for Gant. The line is a sportier, less expensive (though still expensive!) variation on the high-fashion products Bastian creates for his own company. And everywhere on these clothes there are lacrosse motifs.

On the breast of the polo shirts, there's the silhouette of a laxman shooting. One preppy, nearly Christmas-y green sweater has repeating lacrosse sticks where you might expect iterative snowflakes. Crossed lax sticks appear on the ends of ties. And on and on.

Why lacrosse? "I read this *New Yorker* article a while back about lacrosse," Bastian tells *GQ*. "It was fascinating." ("Plus," he notes, "it's a sport that was born in America - like Gant.")

The article Bastian had in mind was "Spin Right and Shoot Left," written by McPhee and published in the March 23, 2009 *New Yorker*. It traced the history of the sport, including its transfer from Iroquoian to European culture, and the author tagged along with Princeton University's team to Spain and Ireland, where the game is fast taking root.

For good or bad (decide for yourself), McPhee has now influenced couture as well as culture.

The \$1.99 decider

Behavioral economics has revealed all sorts of interesting cognitive traps and cul-de-sacs in human decision making. Time to monetize them!

Dan Ariely, a Duke University economist and author of "The Upside of Irrationality," has unveiled an iPhone app to assist a particular kind of procrastinator. It was inspired by the social science finding that people who are wavering between two similar options (say, two highly rated family cars) rarely take into consideration the cost involved in not deciding. (In the case of a new car, that cost includes schlepping around in an outdated, possibly unsafe vehicle.)

With the \$1.99 app Procrastinator (no Android model, yet), you enter the choice you're having trouble making and a time limit. If you fail to make up your mind within the allotted time, Procrastinator will arbitrarily select one of the options. You thereby cut down on the hidden costs of indecisiveness - provided, that is, you are cognitively capable of abiding by the random "decision" of a machine.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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