

Getting Along by Getting Together

By N. Gregory Mankiw

We live in a time of great discord. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, and fans and critics of President Trump not only disagree, they often despise each other. In a small way, however, I am trying to change that.

I teach at Harvard University, where every few years I offer a seminar to a dozen freshmen. The course has the anodyne title “The Economist’s View of the World,” but its purpose is subversive. The goal is to help my students understand and even appreciate the perspectives of those with whom they vehemently disagree. The lesson is one we could all benefit from.

Most economics courses taken by first-year college students cover the textbook tools — supply and demand curves, the theory of comparative advantage, the analysis of profit maximization, and so on. We have that course at Harvard as well (and I run it), but my seminar is entirely different.

It is more like a book club. Every week, we read a book by an economist that is aimed at a general audience. The books represent a wide range of views. Together, the students and I wrestle with each author’s ideas. Which are dubious and which are persuasive? Which force us to rethink our preconceptions?

The first book is the classic “The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers,” by Robert L. Heilbroner, who taught at the New School before his death in 2005. Even the book’s title reminds us of the field’s roots. At times, modern economics can seem like a branch of applied mathematics. But it began more as an offshoot of moral and political philosophy. After all, philosophers can improve the world only if they understand how it works.

The seminar then takes up books in which various economists offer their perspectives on the nature of man and the state. One of the most popular is “Capitalism and Freedom” by Milton Friedman, the onetime University of Chicago professor who was a fearless defender of classical liberalism (a.k.a. libertarianism).

Even students who disagree with Professor Friedman appreciate the force and clarity of his arguments.

Economic inequality, along with the question of how to judge fairness in society, plays a significant role in our discussions. The stage is set with “Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff,” by Arthur M. Okun, the economist from the Brookings Institution who was an adviser to President Lyndon B. Johnson. According to Mr. Okun, redistributing income is like trying to help the thirsty with a leaky bucket: We can achieve a fairer allocation of resources only by losing some along the way.

The perspective of the left is represented by Thomas Piketty’s 2015 book, “The Economics of Inequality,” which is much briefer than his “Capital in the Twenty-First Century,” the surprise best-seller from a few years ago. The perspective of the right comes from “Fair Play: What Your Child Can Teach You About Economics, Values, and the Meaning of Life” by the iconoclastic University of Rochester economist Steven E. Landsburg. He suggests that the values we learn on the playground can inform society’s broader conceptions of equity.

Next, we question economists’ standard assumption that people are rational decision-makers. Over the past two decades, the growing field of behavioral economics has been incorporating the insights of psychology. In some years, we have read “Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness” by the University of Chicago economist Richard H. Thaler and the Harvard law professor Cass R. Sunstein. This year, we are trying “Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines our Lives,” a collaboration between the Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan and the Princeton psychologist Eldar Shafir.

The seminar concludes with “The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies” by Bryan Caplan, an economist at George Mason University. The book was written about 10 years ago, but given the current dysfunction in Washington, it seems more relevant than ever.

As anyone who has ever joined a book club can attest, good readings are important, but even more vital are the right members. This is true for discussion-based seminars as well.

Whenever I offer this course, about 10 times as many students apply as there are slots. The university gives its faculty wide latitude in choosing which students to admit. My main goal is diversity.

To begin, I admit an equal number of men and women. The economics profession has been accused of having a toxic environment for women. To the extent that's true, gender balance helps counteract it.

More important, I also aim for political balance. My seminar application asks, "On issues of economic policy, do you tend to lean toward the LEFT (liberal, progressive, more active government) or RIGHT (conservative, libertarian, more limited government)?" I choose a roughly equal number of students from the two sides of the political spectrum.

People are often surprised that I can find enough conservatives at Harvard. But while Harvard's faculty is mostly left of center, I've found that its students appear to be more representative of the nation. Achieving political balance in the seminar ensures a lively discussion, which benefits all its participants.

This year's seminar met for the first time just a few days ago, but from experience, I can predict what will happen in the coming weeks. During their first term of college, students are especially open to new ideas and new friends. Debating personal perspectives with a small group of peers over 13 weeks won't necessarily change anyone's mind, but it will cement friendships among students with opposing points of view. The tolerance and comity learned from those friendships can last a lifetime.

In a small way, it can make the world a better place. If you want to participate, find a friend with whom you often disagree and read along with us.