

The Immorality of Freakonomics

June 17, 2005

[Original link](#)

As the hype around the book *Freakonomics* reaches absurd proportions (now an “international bestseller”, the authors have been signed for a monthly column in the *New York Times Magazine*), I think it’s time to discuss some of the downsides that I mostly left out of my main review. The most important of which is that economist Stephen Levitt simply does not appear to care — or even notice — if his work involves doing evil things.

The 1960s, as is well-known, had a major civilizing effect on all areas of American life. Less well-known, however, was the immediate pushback from the powerful centers of society. The process involved a great number of things, notably the network of right-wing think tanks I’ve written about elsewhere, but in the field of education it led to a crackdown on “those institutions which have played the major role in the indoctrination of the young”, as a contemporary report (*The Crisis of Democracy*) put it.

The indoctrination centers (notably schools) weren’t doing their job properly and so a back-to-basics approach with more rote memorization of meaningless facts and less critical thinking and intellectual development was needed. This was mainly done under the guise of “accountability”, for both students and teachers. Standardized tests, you see, would see how well students had memorized certain pointless facts and students would not be allowed to deviate from their assigned numbers. Teachers too would have their jobs depend on the test scores their students got. Teachers who decided to buck the system and actually have their students learn something worthwhile would get demoted or even fired.

Not surprisingly, as always happens when you make people’s lives depend on an artificial test, teachers begun cheating. And it is here that Professor Levitt enters the story. He excitedly signed up with the Chicago Public School system to try to build a system that would catch cheating teachers. Levitt and his co-author write excitedly about this system and the clever patterns it discovers in the data, but mostly ignore the question of whether helping to get these teachers fired is a good idea. Apparently even rogue economists jump when the government asks them to.

Levitt has a few arguments — teachers were setting students up to fail in the higher grade they would be advanced to — but these are tacked on as afterthoughts. Levitt never stops to ask whether contributing to the indoctrination of the young or getting teachers fired might not be an acceptable area of work, despite being an economist, he never weighs any benefits or even considers the costs.

Levitt, by all appearances, was not, like some of his colleagues, a self-conscious participant in this regressive game. He was just a rube who got taken in. But surely preventing others from the same fate would be a more valuable contribution.