



For Whom the Nobels Tolled

Beach or Airport Lounge Reading about and by Nobel Laureates in Economics

On October 14, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences will award the “Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel,” unofficially the Nobel prize in economics, for the 51st time. This sixth field was added in 1968 to the original 1901 set of five. So: Who were the recipients? Where did they come from? Anyone you’ve heard of, or anything of likely interest to you personally?

Among the four scientific fields (i.e., setting aside Literature and Peace), more Nobel awards—377—have gone to Americans than from anywhere else. The United Kingdom ranks second (130), followed by Germany (108), France (69) and Sweden (31). More than half of the economics Nobel laureates were born in the U.S; the U.K. is a distant second.

BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON

By institution (undergraduate or graduate degree), among the science fields, there are more Nobel Laureates associated with Harvard—157—than any other university, followed by Cambridge (116), California-Berkeley (104), the University of Chicago (97), and Columbia (95). In economics, the University of Chicago holds the top spot with 32 laureates, followed by Harvard (30), MIT (28), Stanford (25), Berkeley (23), Yale (21) and Princeton (19). In terms of the graduate department awarding the PhD degree to economics Nobels, about half have come from just five universities: MIT (11), Harvard (10), Chicago (9), Carnegie Mellon (4) and the London School of Economics (4).

To date, Elinor Ostrom, a political scientist from Indiana University, is the only female economics prize recipient. Thus far, there have been 12 women honored in medicine, three in physics, and five in chemistry. Sir Arthur Lewis is the only black scholar to have received the honor in economics.

In addition to those who have received a Nobel over the last 50 years, there are other distinguished economists who did not win owing to their death before 1969. John Maynard Keynes, Britain’s most famous 20th-century economist, would top that list (he died in 1946). In terms of household names, John Kenneth Galbraith, long-time Harvard economist, prolific writer, and liberal political activist, was never selected (he died in 2006).

Apart from their purely academic output, many of these economics laureates have also written for intelligent lay audiences (think *Chicago Life* readers). Widely-read books from economics

Nobels in the ‘70s would be two University of Chicago Press classics: *The Road to Serfdom* by F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.

The 1994 joint award to John Nash, John Harsanyi, and Reinhard Selten expanded the definition of economics to include game theory. Nash, best known of the three, was the subject of Sylvia Nasar’s book *A Beautiful Mind* and the 2001 Oscar-winning film of the same title. (*The Art of Strategy*, written by two “No Bells,” Avinash Dixit and Barry Nalebuff, is a superb layman’s introduction to game theory.)

The 21st century opened with a Nobel award to Gary, Indiana, native Joseph Stiglitz. His *Globalization and its Discontents* is a thoughtful volume—and recently updated to include the Trump era. Behavioral Economics, a hot frontier area, was ushered in with the 2002 award to Daniel Kahneman. His best-selling book *Thinking Fast and Slow* appeared a decade later. (Michael Lewis of *Moneyball*, *Liar’s Poker*, and *The Big Short* fame chronicled the friendship and intellectual odysseys of Kahneman and Amos Tversky in *The Undoing Project*.) Other behavioral Nobel honors: in 2012 to Alvin Roth, author of *Who Gets What—and Why*, and in 2017 to my colleague Richard Thaler; his *Misbehaving* treats the making of behavioral economics. Thaler is also the co-author, with legal scholar and part-time economist Cass Sunstein, of the popular *Nudge*.

Another worthwhile stop: *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality* by 2015 laureate Angus Deaton.

(Two new non-Nobel volumes, both sort of lagniappes from left field: Steven Landsburg’s *Can You Outsmart an Economist?* offers 300 pages of fun logic and statistical puzzles; Allison Schrager’s *An Economist Walks into a Brothel* presents an entertaining guide to risk.)

Who should be contemplating a trip to Stockholm this fall? These prizes are awarded on the basis of accomplishment, of course, but chance and timing are also factors. After all, it took the Academy until 1994 to make awards to game theorists, and until 2002 to recognize the emerging fields of behavioral and experimental economics.

What’s around the corner? Economics is certainly not immune from contemporary issues and political winds—casting the net beyond the U.S. and Europe, being attuned to “inclusion” and “diversity” desiderata. And as someone said, it is a difference of opinion that makes a horse race—not counting the 2019 Kentucky Derby! □