

Book review

Krugman's 'Conscience' focuses on politics instead of economics

If you are not familiar with Paul Krugman, you probably should be. Last year, he won the Nobel Prize in economics primarily for developing a new theory that helps to explain the relationship between international trade and economic geography.

After reading his revised version of "The Conscience of a Liberal," which he originally published in 2007, however, I am left with the nagging suspicion that he either has compromising photos of the members of the Nobel Prize selection committee or the criteria they use to decide who should win the prize are in dire need of rather serious examination.

The first problem with the book is that it is not really about economics. It is more about politics. And although the two disciplines are obviously related, Krugman should have limited the scope of his book to concepts and ideas with which he is somewhat more familiar and therefore more qualified to legitimately address. "Conscience" consists of 13 chapters in which Krugman attempts to deal with most of the critical issues of our time, ranging from the health care imbroglio to the high-profile shenanigans of the present leaders of the so-called "conservative movement."

With respect to health care, Krugman downplays the role of lifestyle as a contributor to overall costs in this country, while pushing the thesis that everyone should be entitled to the same benefits regardless of their motivation, ability to contribute or individual choice.

Krugman makes no claim that he is trying to be objective in his analysis of the current problems or his prescriptions for their resolution. He unapologetically favors pursuing "an unabashedly liberal program of expanding the social safety net and reducing inequality — a new New Deal."

Along those lines, in the chapter

titled "Movement Conservatism," he writes that, "By the early 1960s (Milton) Friedman had made an almost complete turn to free-market fundamentalism, arguing that even the Great Depression was caused not by market failure but by government failure."

Obviously, Krugman disagrees

Deal, FDR, was not entirely supportive of the creation of a welfare state. In "The Politics of the Welfare State" chapter, Krugman quotes the president's reaction to a book that advocated deficit spending during recessions: "Too good to be true — you can't get something for nothing."

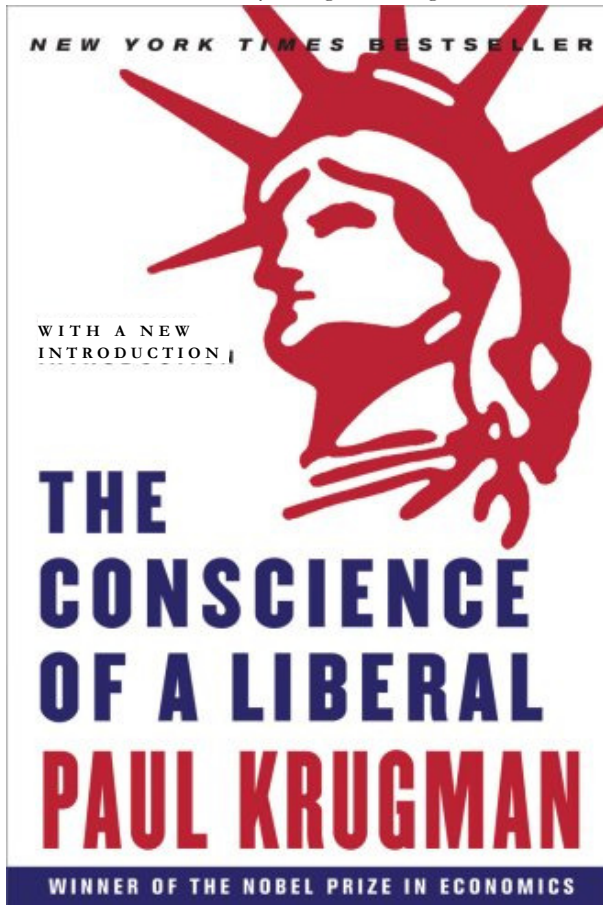
He can also be patently contradictory — sometimes on the same page. For example, in the "Confronting Inequality" chapter, he asserts that "...revitalizing unions should be a key progressive goal." Yet in the very next paragraph he admits that "The hard-to-answer question is the extent to which a newly empowered U.S. union movement would reduce inequality."

This is an important issue. He needs to make up his mind, or at least clarify, where he stands on it.

Part of the challenge of taking Krugman seriously relates to his ego. He seems convinced that he is in possession of insights into reality that have otherwise escaped mere mortals. But if that is indeed the case, it is not particularly evident from this book.

In conclusion, if you would like a primer on why we should not pursue a socialist agenda in this country, then "The Conscience of a Liberal" is probably the book for you. Just make sure you do most of your reading between the lines.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University



"The Conscience of a Liberal," by Paul Krugman. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. 296 pages, \$15.95.

with Friedman on this and many other points, but perhaps he should give the free market advocates a little more credibility. Next to some of the inane ideas he presents in "Conscience," they seem much more in touch with the root causes of many of our contemporary economic problems, as well as how to solve them.

To be fair, Krugman can be reasonably thought-provoking when he explores the historical precedents that led to our arrival at the present moment. His narratives about the role that economics has played throughout our nation's existence are interesting and even engaging, but he tends to interpret everything through the narrow context of his admittedly ultra-liberal lens.

He does acknowledge that even the principal architect of the New