

Economics, Law and Ethics

Part IB CST

2023-24

Lecture 3: Market failure and behavioural economics

Konstantinos Ioannidis,
Jennifer Cobbe, Richard Clayton,
Claire Benn, Alan Blackwell



with many thanks to Ross Anderson

0

Overview

- Market failure:
 - The business cycle
 - Recession and technology
 - Trade
 - Public and club goods
 - Monopoly rents
 - Collusion and price fixing
 - Information asymmetry
- Behavioural economics:
 - Bounded rationality
 - Cultural biases
 - Nudge theory
 - Agency effects

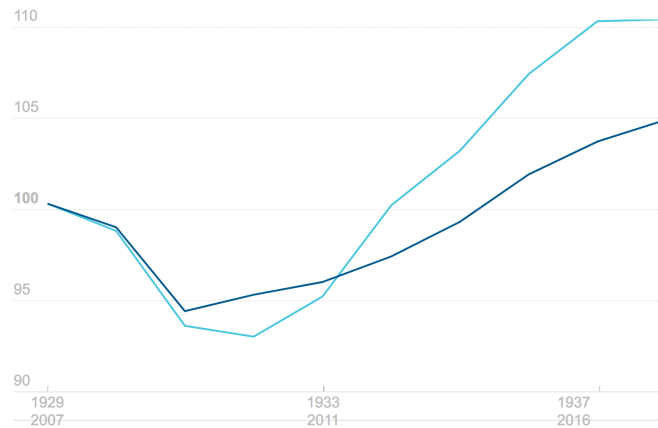
1

1

The Business Cycle

GDP per 20- to 64-year-old. Index, 100 = level in pre-recession year

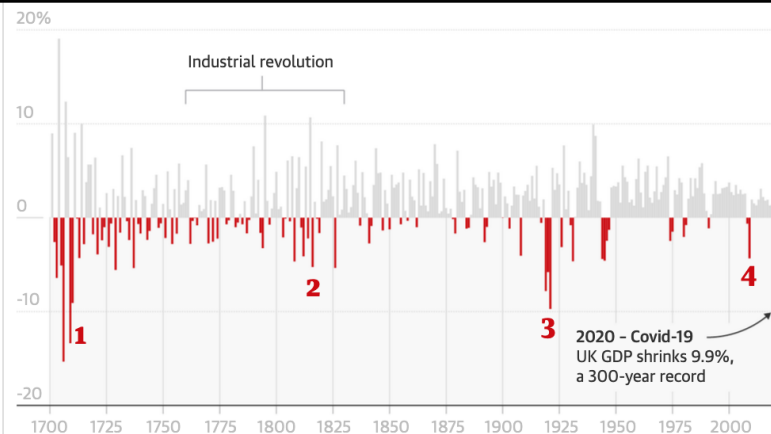
■ 1929-1938 ■ 2007-2016



Guardian graphic | Source: House of Commons Library, Bank of England, Central Statistics Office, ONS

2

2



1 1709: The Great Frost

The economy is dragged down as frozen rivers, canals and seaports disrupt trade across Europe

2 1815: The end of the Napoleonic wars at the battle of Waterloo is followed by economic depression. Poor harvests and the Corn Laws push up food prices and clamour for political reform leads to the Peterloo massacre in 1819, and foundation of the Manchester Guardian two years later

3 Post WW1 slump

The biggest downturn of the past two centuries comes after WW1 and the Spanish flu pandemic, which kills more people than the conflict. Growth returns in 1922 but aftershocks lead to the 1926 general strike, which causes another recession

4 Financial crisis

The collapse that follows the banking crisis is the worst since WW2. It begins in 2007-08 and a decade of anaemic recovery, made worse by austerity, follows

Guardian graphic. Source: Bank of England, ONS

3

The business cycle (2)

- The business cycle is a puzzle for classical economists. Why the pattern of boom and bust?
- Say's law: supply and demand are equal
- Mill and Ricardo argued that demand for goods + savings = supply of goods + investment, and savings = investment, so demand = supply
- 1930s: Keynes' more sophisticated model of 'liquidity preference'. People want a certain level of savings – maybe 3 months' salary. In a recession, liquidity preference rises

4

4

The business cycle (3)

- Credit actually introduces instability
- In a boom, people and firms borrow assets that appreciate faster than the interest they pay
- A bank that takes in £100 in deposits might lend out £94; so £6 of capital underwrites £94 of lending – a multiplier of $94/6 = 15.7$
- In a recession many things happen at once:
 - Some loans go bad, eating into capital
 - The bank's share price falls, further eating capital
 - The regulator raises capital requirements from 6% to 8%
 - The government competes for the available loans
- So the money supply could contract sharply
- This time round, governments fixed that (quantitative easing)

5

5

Recession and tech

- Great Recession kicked off by US mortgage crisis of 2007 which led to collapse of money markets
- Recessions may be fed by bubbles bursting but are often tied up with technology change
- Railways 1840s, electricity 1880s, cars 1920s, tech now – boom creates capacity, bust slashes prices
- We've killed whole industries (telephone switchgear), taken over others (bookselling), marginalized others (local newspapers, music publishers) and are disrupting most of the rest
- Schumpeter: 'creative destruction'

6

6

Recession and tech (2)

Big tech shows signs of a peak

Nasdaq 100 relative to S&P 500 (10 Mar 2000 = 100)



Source: Bloomberg
© FT

7

<https://www.ft.com/content/76944443-b4e6-42ac-a863-06234ac24db1>

7

Trade

- Adam Smith “Wealth of Nations” (1776):
‘If a foreign country can supply us with a commodity cheaper than we ourselves can make it, better buy it off them with some part of the produce of our own industry, employed in a way in which we have some advantage’
- Ricardo, 1817: it’s comparative advantage that matters

8

8

Trade (2)

- Ricardo considered the following costs:

	wheat	wine
England	15	30
Portugal	10	15

- Portugal has an absolute advantage at producing both
- But England has a comparative advantage in wheat – each unit costs 1/2 unit of wine versus Portugal’s cost of 2/3 a unit of wine

9

9

Trade (3)

- Suppose England has 270 units of labour, Portugal 180

	wheat	wine		wheat	wine
E	8	5	E	18	0
P	9	6	P	0	12
Total	17	11	Total	18	12

- Mill: welfare gains from trade come from cheap imports
- Heckscher-Olin model: capital v labour (outsourcing)
- Under perfect competition, free trade optimal; almost all economists agree it's also a pragmatic optimum; but there can still be losers. English vintners?

10

10

Externalities

- Externalities are goods / bads people care about, but not traded: typically side-effects
- Consumption externalities include smoking in restaurants, domestic heating emitting CO₂
- Production externalities include a steelworks polluting a fishery downstream, or emitting CO₂
- Positive externalities include education (1 more year = 2% crime reduction), file formats,...
- In the presence of externalities, competitive equilibria are unlikely to be Pareto efficient
- Can in theory fix with property rights (Coase) but this is hard with many players, or delays

11

11

Tragedy of the commons

- 100 peasants each graze a sheep on the common
- If one peasant adds one more, he gets 100% more, while the others get 1% less
- Overgrazing, overfishing ...
- Welfare theorems assume complete property rights, atomistic principals and full information
- Where this fails, private cost \neq social cost
- Observed forever, documented by 1830s, used to justify enclosure movement, inspired Malthus

12

12

Public goods

- A public good is non-rivalrous and non-excludable
- Example: scientific knowledge. The producer can appropriate a small part of the benefit (e.g. PhD thesis); the rest spills over to all
- Example of a public bad: CO₂ emissions. Again, everyone gets to 'consume' the same amount
- Strong temptation for people to free-ride!
- If production is decided communally, there are potential 'impossibility theorem' issues
- Alternatives? Prizes / taxes? Cap-and-trade? ...

13

13

Club goods

- Traditional communities can simply limit scale
- E.g. fishermen in Turkey: 40 fishermen gather in tea-house, arrange rota, signed by mayor
- Self-enforcing: if you find another boat in a good spot when it's your turn, chase them
- Elinor Ostrom studied many examples to work out the conditions under which this is sustainable
- Internet routing used to work this way!
- But what happens when the club breaks down?

14

14

Enter politics ...

- Buchanan: 'Politics is a structure of complex exchange among individuals, a structure within which persons seek to secure collectively their own privately defined objectives that cannot be efficiently secured through simple market exchanges.'
- But politics has costs too!

15

15

Monopoly rents

- Absent barriers to entry, firms will enter a market until excess profits competed away
- Economists define a rent as an excess, undeserved income resulting from barriers to competition
- 'Rent-seeking' drives much of politics

16

16

Lobbying



17

17

Monopoly rents

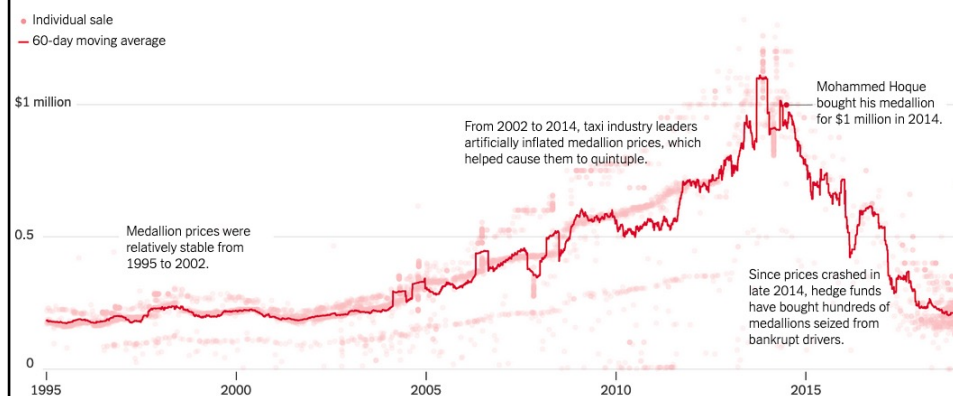
- What if we regulate prices?
 - In 1986, New York taxi licenses cost \$100,000 yet drivers earned \$8 an hour
 - License owner makes \$17k p.a. net – 17% ROI
 - Politicians put up fares, supposedly to help drivers
 - Extra \$10,000 p.a. just added \$60K to the value of a license, so helped the owners instead!
- Think about housing costs and the possibility of housing allowances to renters.

18

18

Monopoly rents

How the Price of a New York City Taxi Medallion Has Changed



By Scott Reinhard | Source: New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission

19

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/nyregion/nyc-taxis-medallions-suicides.html>

19

Collusion and price fixing

- Collusion: conspiring to fix prices, allocate markets, or engage in other anti-competitive activities
- Price fixing extracts economic rents by manipulating market conditions
- Centralisation and algorithmic price fixing

20

20

Asymmetric information

- Akerlof won the Nobel for the 'market for lemons'
 - 100 used cars for sale – 50 good cars worth \$2000, 50 lemons worth \$1000
 - Buyers can't tell difference – so price \$1000
- One fix is for sellers to offer a warranty – this is cheaper for owners of good cars, so can act as a 'signal' for the hidden information
- Why is a Cambridge degree valuable? It's hard for employers to tell smart diligent employees from interview, so many use education as a signal (Spence)
- Signaling theory is important for recommender systems – Google, eBay

21

21

Asymmetric information (2)

- Do Volvo drivers have more accidents because:
 - Bad drivers buy a Volvo to survive accidents better
 - Volvo drivers compensate for safety by driving faster?
- The first effect is 'adverse selection' and the second 'moral hazard': examples of 'hidden information' versus 'hidden action'
- Lemons market: adverse selection
- Insurance markets can also be trashed by moral hazard; hence excess, no-claims bonus, ...
- Moral hazard can also lead to surveillance, such as insurance company black boxes monitoring drivers

22

22

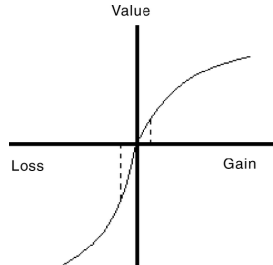
Behavioural economics

- Classical economics: Assumption that individuals are rational; they maximise self-interest utility with no cognitive limitations
- Behavioural/Experimental economics: Behaviours deviate from the rational choice model

23

23

Bounded rationality



- Recall Prospect Theory: people offered £10 or a 50% chance of £20 usually prefer the former; if offered a loss of £10 or a 50% chance of a loss of £20 they usually prefer the money for gains and gamble for losses!
- And recall the Asian disease problem – framing actions as ‘saving’ can make them more attractive
- The misperception of risk is a big deal: it’s how terrorism works (and a lot of other political marketing)

24

24

Bounded rationality (2)

- Herb Simon coined ‘bounded rationality’ in the 1950s along with ‘satisfice’
- People try to make just-good-enough decisions
- A satisficer will work hard until his lifestyle goals are met, then slack off.
- Most of us are satisficers, and VCs don’t like this!
- Another common rationality bound is ‘hyperbolic discounting’: people disregard far-future events (most people have inadequate pensions)
- The endowment effect: people generally demand a higher price for something they already own

25

25

Bounded rationality (3)

- The environment we make decisions in is complex and we make mistakes due to cognitive constraints
- Greedy algorithm is a good proxy for how people make decisions under cognitive constraints
- Economics assumes more choice can never hurt you (you can always ignore the additional ones)
- However, complexity can make more choice hurt you

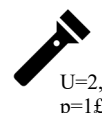
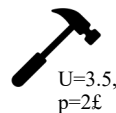
26

26

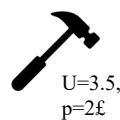
Bounded rationality (4)

- Imagine I have 2£ and can choose between two stores, one of which has more goods available.
- Greedy algorithm in such a setting selects items in decreasing order of value to price ratio.

Store 1:
Utility: 3



Store 2:
Utility: 3.5



27

27

Cultural biases

- Some biases we acquired from evolution are modulated by culture
- Caliskan noted that machine translation from gender-neutral Turkish text gave male doctors, but female nurses
- She ran experiments and found all MT systems were sexist, racist, homophobic ... inhaling prejudice with their training data
- Think what this implies for LLMs

28

28

Nudge theory

- Application of behavioural economics to policy
- The way choices are presented to people can have a powerful impact
- Changes to context can induce individuals to make better choices.
- Does not address underlying structural problems, often work only short term.

29

29

On the left, a U.K. Home Office ad in Arabic reads, "Don't believe the smugglers' lies!" On the right, an ad in Dari reads, "Don't lose your life for the sake of coming to Britain." (U.K. Home Office)

<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-uk-uses-targeted-facebook-ads-to-deter-migrants-now-meta-is-releasing-the-data/>

30

The power of defaults

- Most people just go with the flow. So:
- Marketing: firms make people opt out of getting spam / buying extra insurance ...
- Libertarian paternalism: governments make people opt out of some policy options, from pensions (US, UK) to organ donation (Spain) to use of medical records in research (most countries)
- Why do people worry too much about terrorism, but not enough about IT security?

31

31

What nudges have you come across that were designed to shape the behaviour of yourself or others?

32

32

Agency effects

- Classical economics sees institutions as rational
- But decisions are made by individual managers, who optimise their own utility too
- ‘New institutional economics’: study managers’ behaviour. Should you give them stock options to align their interests with shareholders?
- ‘Public-choice economics’: apply this incentive analysis to civil servants and elected politicians (“Yes, Minister”). What’s the cost of democracy?
- Why do public-sector IT projects fail more often?

33

33