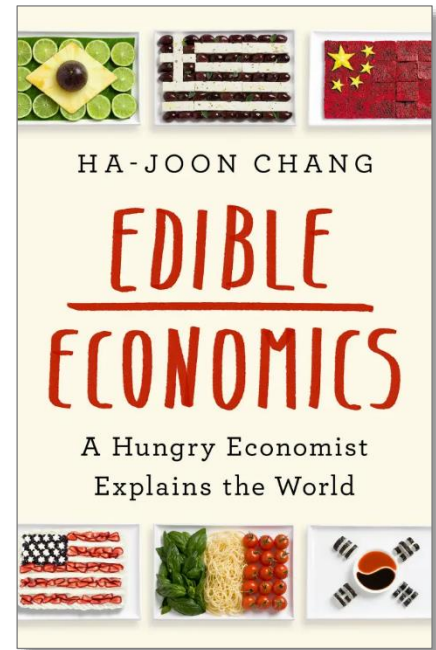


## Appetizers in development economics

*Book review by*  
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Review of *Edible Economics: A Hungry Economist Explains the World*, by Ha-Joon Chang. (2023). Published by PublicAffairs. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook; 224 pages. Publisher's website:  
<https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/ha-joon-chang/edible-economics/9781541700567/?lens=publicaffairs>



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In *Edible Economics*, South Korean development economist Ha-Joon Chang argues against the neoliberal philosophy that “has normalized self-serving behavior” (p. xxii). He contends that the discipline of economics is a determinant factor in idea creation and in the organization of our lives, and therefore it is useful to understand how economic theory translates into reality. He also believes that a broad understanding of economics can help “make our society a better place to live for us and the coming generations” (p. xxiv). Food, the author admits, does not fit seamlessly into this objective and is instead a device to reel in the attention of the reader before expanding on develop-

ment economic theory. The marriage between personal food stories and economics can sometimes feel disjointed; the reader may wonder how a chapter beginning with the history of rye leads to Otto von Bismarck’s establishment of the welfare state. But, with Chang’s palpable gregariousness, love of food, and general self-awareness, his essays succeed in making economics more “edible.”

Chang’s most compelling and trenchant arguments are critiques of the neoclassical and neoliberal conceptions of free-trade and freedom itself. Chang challenges the idea that economic freedoms are more important than social and political freedoms. Further, he argues that neoclassical economics tends to favor the proprietor class, with the freedom of others “at best ignored and at worst denounced as counter-productive” (p. 19). Only through restrictions on economic freedoms and in-

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vestment in social and political institutions, specifically “democratic constitutions, human rights laws, and legal protection of peaceful protests” (p. 19), can society create a more humanitarian economic system. In a chapter titled *Beef*, Chang continues to take aim at free-trade evangelism, invalidating the myth that the empires of the United States and Britain were built on free trade: “The US was a particular offender in this regard—it had average industrial tariff rates around 35-50% between the 1830s and Second World War” (p. 72). During this time, richer and more powerful countries employed protectionist strategies to grow “infant industries,” while imposing free trade on developing countries through “unequal treaties,” which “[deprived] them of ‘tariff autonomy,’ that is, the right of a country to set its own tariffs” (p. 71). This power dynamic persists today, Chang notes. Even with “formal equality” in the form of the World Trade Organization, rich countries can withdraw support from developing countries depending on their adoption of free-trade policies (p. 75).

Chang complements his commentary on free trade, a topic to which he dedicates three chapters, with a discussion of how countries increase their standards of living. He refutes the prejudice that “poor countries are poor because their people do not work hard” (p. 23). Using the coconut as a symbol for low-tech, cheap commodity-producing economies, Chang claims the opposite is true: workers in relatively poor countries tend to work much longer hours than their richer counterparts, but lack the technological advances that allow for rapid production growth. How do countries achieve those technological advances? The presence of natural resources could be one explanation, but exploitation of natural reserves historically has not been the harbinger for innovation and increased standard of living. Chang recounts the German invention of nitrogen fertilizer (and the consequential demise of the Peruvian guano market) to exemplify a country industrializing its way out of the “restrictions imposed on [it] by nature” (p. 37). He argues that this independence from natural resources—through capabilities wrought by industrialization and a strong manufacturing sector—is the foundation for long-term increases in the standard of living.

The book also includes intriguing discussions of care work, the welfare state, and equality. In examining these topics, Chang pushes the parameters of a typical economic discussion. He adds depth to the debate between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, noting that “Equality of opportunity is meaningless unless every member of society has the minimum necessary capabilities to make use of that opportunity” (p. 111). This flies in the face of both the left- and right-leaning positions, as both tend to ignore the needs and capabilities held by individuals, focusing instead on outcomes and opportunities. In a somewhat haphazard chapter titled *Rye*, he begins with a love letter to Agatha Christie novels and a short history of rye before describing the modern welfare state as “the most effective way of dealing with the inevitable insecurity that capitalism creates in its pursuit of economic dynamism” (p. 104).

Although a large majority of the book’s essays are tightly wound and have insightful and satisfying conclusions, some are more speculative. In the chapter titled *Carrot*, Chang offers no definitive solution to the current patent system. Chang lists potential options to consider, such as a prize system, forced licensing of necessary technologies, or shortening the lifespan of patents, but does not clarify what a successful patent system resembles in practice. In another essay, titled *Lime*, he blames the “myopia of the private sector” for exacerbating the intractable problem of climate change, before declaring that “individuals can truly change the way they live when their pro-environmental choices are enabled by government policies” (pp. 131–132). This is passable and warranted, but most readers will have already heard this point of view, and the chapter’s brevity makes it difficult to add anything insightful to the discussion.

*Edible Economics* is only nominally about food. The meat of Chang’s commentary is not meat at all, but an anti-neoliberal take on arguments and concepts many economists do not consider. For students studying food systems, the book offers a suitable foundation for development economics and provides important historical and cultural context for the discipline. Chang’s anecdotes about food are mouth-watering, but more impressive is his ability to make us hungrier for economics. 