

Reading Samuel Bowles

August 11, 2009

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How do you expect an advanced textbook on Microeconomics to begin? Probably not like this:

Like the overnight train that left me in an empty field some distance from the settlement, the process of economic development has for the most part bypassed the two hundred or so families that make up the village of Palanpur. They have remained poor, even by Indian standards: less than a third of the adults are literate, and most have endured the loss of a child to malnutrition or to illnesses that are long forgotten in other parts of the world. But for the occasional wristwatch, bicycle, or irrigation pump, Palanpur appears to be a timeless backwater, untouched by India's cutting edge software industry and booming agricultural regions. Seeking to understand why, I approached a sharecropper and his three daughters weeding a small plot. The conversation eventually turned to the fact that Palanpur farmers sow their winter crops several weeks after the date at which yields would be maximized. The farmers do not doubt that earlier planting would give them larger harvests, but no one the farmer explained, is willing to be the first to plant, as the seeds on any lone plot would be quickly eaten by birds. I asked if a large group of farmers, perhaps relatives, had ever agreed to sow earlier, all planting on the same day to minimize losses. "If we knew how to do that," he said, looking up from his hoe at me, "we would not be poor."

That's from Samuel Bowles' unorthodox economics textbook, *Microeconomics: Behavior, Institutions, and Evolution*. We were talking about it over in the comments on [Crooked Timber](#) and one thing led to another and we've decided to start a reading group to go through it.

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If you're still not convinced, check out [this review](#):

...all the relevant issues are presented in their complexity, nothing is swept under the carpet, and what makes this book in particular commendable is the way in which information from anthropology, psychology and the social sciences is woven into the 'story'. The

contrast with the ridiculous assumptions and the unrealistic or simply false simplistic models of standard neoclassical textbooks (like for example that of Mankiw) is striking. [The difficulty] is mitigated somewhat by Bowles' clear writing, and sometimes he also takes the trouble (which unfortunately few economists do) of specifically explaining what the mathematical formulas mean, for people who have difficulty with somewhat advanced equations and the like. In any case, he relies quite correctly more on empirical arguments regarding problems of the common, of evolution of institutions, the workings of altruism, prisoner's dilemmas, and so on than on any kind of math (although these things can be expressed in math, often).

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