

My rant about the editorial/refereeing process in economics

By Omer Moav

My 'cereal and states' paper (with Mayshar & Pascali) came out in the JPE this year, so now I feel comfortable having a little rant about the editorial/refereeing process in our profession.

Ex-post I've perhaps benefited from the hostility of referees, because after rejections from three journals - the first was in 2016 - we ended up with a better paper in the JPE. But I'm a tenured prof.

I think leading journals should be publishing papers that make a significant change to prior beliefs about an important research question. 'Important' is clearly a matter of judgment, but that is not the issue here.

Identifying a causal effect is helpful but neither necessary nor sufficient to change priors or to make an important contribution, even if identification is very clever or cute. Identification is the means not the goal, or at least that's how I think it should be.

Suppose a paper tests a hypothesis with one existing data set that was not created by a perfect RCT. Referees would obviously raise many concerns. The problem is that many referees focus on their concerns and neglect the big picture.

Authors can add a few independent data sets to make a more convincing case, as we did. Instead of a single data set that could provide identification at the standard of an RCT, we had several data sets, and all showed the same robust and consistent results.

Does the additional data, showing the same causal effect, support the paper's claim? Of course. But for some referees, this just makes the list of concerns longer. And with a long list of concerns, ignoring the big picture the paper is presenting becomes even easier.

I am grateful to the editors of the JPE who saw the big picture despite significant hostility from one referee, which brings me to the second part of my rant.

Very few papers in economics attempt to refute existing theories. But perhaps it's not a coincidence. It is the negative outcome of the hostile response and the long time lags in achieving publication when researchers challenge a theory.

As a discipline, we have made it too risky for junior researchers to challenge some established economic theories. But isn't refuting theories an important step in advancing scientific knowledge?

My JPE 2022 paper refutes the conventional theory about the emergence of states, which is basically: high land productivity farming → surplus → hierarchies and states. We explain why it is wrong and provide empirical evidence.

We present logical arguments and show empirically that it is 'appropriability' that matters, not land productivity. We explain why cereals are key because they are highly appropriable.

Colleagues suggested that we omit the refuting part and focus on the role of cereals, to avoid the hostility of referees who were committed to the conventional theory. We insisted, experienced hostility and several rejections and, at least ex-post, made the right decision.

Unfortunately, not all editors in the process overruled hostile referees. That's a bad outcome for research and advancing knowledge: I advise my students that as long as they are not tenured professors, they should not attempt to refute theories.

Here is an illustration of a hostile referee (not JPE). "Following the recent fashion of economists, spelling down some math and running some regressions are sufficient to dismiss the insights of centuries of thinking."

If you read the paper, you will discover that we explain in simple words, no math, the logical flaws in the conventional theory of the emergence of states. And of course, one can always dismiss any empirical work with "running some regressions".

Editors: you should have the guts to dismiss hostile reviews and their recommendations. The hostility is obvious at least in some cases. If you cannot, quit the role.

Finally, and unrelated to my rant above, I'll take the opportunity and ask you to think about the origin of institutions. The emergence of states, I hope you agree, is key for the emergence of the protection of property rights.

If so, our paper provides an important contribution to the literature on institutions, more than many very well-cited papers... It's a point we didn't emphasize but you shouldn't hesitate to cite it when you write about institutions. Thanks 😊