

Samuelson P. A. *Economics*. New York: McGraw-Hill. (1948) 1980. 861 p.
[Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA]

Economics has sold four million copies in 25 languages. It set the pattern for postwar economics textbooks. Both applauded and attacked in its early years for its Keynesian macroeconomics, its dozen editions evolved eclectically with mainstream economics and helped define the channels of that stream. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this book has been cited in over 1,040 publications since 1955.]

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My 1948 introductory textbook, *Economics*, was born under a lucky star. It soared up the best-seller list immediately and brought me fame and fortune. Surprisingly, through many editions and over nearly four decades, the book continues to command worldwide attention and has been translated and retranslated into some two dozen languages.

There is only one kind of fortune: bankable dollars. But the kind of fame a textbook brings a research scholar like me is quite different from the fame we seek to earn from our fellow-workers at the frontier of science. So to speak, *Economics* was a pure bonus quite unrelated to prizes, medals, and professional presidencies that go with the usual academic territory.

My mail reflects the difference. Back in 1967, my seventh edition preface¹ carried the lines:

When the election of 1984 rolls around, and the issues of the protective tariff and public debt are being seriously debated, all the hours that the artists and editors and I have spent in making the pages as informative and authentic as possible will seem to me well spent if somewhere a voter turns to the old book...for a re-reasoning of the economic principles involved. That is this author's Walter Mitty dream of glory. (p. vii)

Well, 1984 did roll around and more than one person wrote to say: "Yes, I did clarify the issues by rereading *Economics*." That didn't make my day; it made my year—my 1984, not Orwell's.

A college president who used to attend my MIT classes went during his graduate

study to a summer program at the London School of Economics. His classmates were a diverse lot from all over the world. Though they didn't even share a common language, one thing he found they did share: most had learned their political economy from Samuelson's *Economics*—and he found his ego boosted when he could give definitive interpretations for the idioms with which my breezy pen had peppered the text. My ego was bolstered when I learned that portions of my prose were used in language classes for students hoping to become proficient in English.

Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery. One durable best-seller is known as the poor man's Samuelson, and a sizable plagiarism suit against another work was dismissed by the judge with the dictum: "...most of the textbooks are variants of Samuelson anyway."

Not that it's all been love. Back in the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy, my book was denounced as dangerous Keynes-Marx radicalism. William Buckley, Jr., made his first stab at fame by writing *God and Man at Yale*.² I hope his theology was more accurate than his economics, but in any case such criticisms in the end built up the book's use and sales. Displeasing Buckley though is not enough to please the left. A Danish four-volume work, entitled simply *Anti-Samuelson*, denounced me as an arch-apologist for capitalism.³

Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Chinese, and other translations have appeared in communist countries. The Russian edition sold out immediately and, like books on sex, is available in libraries only to a narrow circle of approved readers. A Harvard savant made much fun of the translation's gaps and bowdlerizations. But, as I told my good friend the late Alexander Gerschenkron, he was probably aiming his shafts of wit at the most intelligent of the Soviet specialists, who were able to import findings of Western science only by paying the price of ritualistic disclaimers.

In science and scholarship nothing is forever. But it is lots of fun—and well-paid work—to write so that people will want to cite your work.

The book is now in its twelfth edition,⁴ but this time under joint authorship with William D. Nordhaus of Yale University.

1. Samuelson P. A. *Economics*. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1967. 821 p.

2. Buckley W. F. *God and man at Yale: the superstitions of academic freedom*. Chicago, IL: H. Regnery. 1951. 240 p.

3. Linder M. *Der Anti-Samuelson*. Erlangen: Verlag Politladen. 1974. 4 vols.

4. Samuelson P. A. & Nordhaus W. D. *Economics*. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1985. 960 p.