

Tyler Cowen, *Markets and cultural voices: Liberty vs. power in the lives of Mexican Amate painters*

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Tyler Cowen's *Markets and cultural voices: Liberty vs. power in the lives of Mexican Amate painters* is a little marvel of economic analysis, rhetoric, and subversion.

Like a Russian matrioska, it has many layers, nicely packed one into the other. The reader can choose which one to focus on, without any loss. Cowen describes the individual lives of a handful of amate (bark paper) painters from a small pueblo in Oapan, in the state of Guerrero in central Mexico. He describes their lives, successes, failures, joys, hopes, pains, and frustrations. He also describes how the wealth of the so-called first world countries allows the growth of art and tradition in less prosperous countries. It is through the wealth and support of the rich capitalist countries that very localized and traditional Mexican art forms survive and flourish, as well as through the great dynamism of a "cluster of creativity" generated by the proximity of the artists, both in their villages and, especially, under the wings of their patrons. Cowen describes how trade and globalization can benefit the poorest individuals in poor countries the most. Painters significantly improved their standards of living going from literally bare subsistence to, in certain cases, having a telephone. He describes as well how the new wealth allows for new technology, which in its turn changes the art forms produced. The art works are transported from the pueblo to main tourist centers, originally by burros on very bad roads, and now by bus on better roads. Originally, artists would produce pottery only for domestic use and would maintain themselves by working in the fields. With tourism, they would augment their income by painting amate for sale: pottery would break much more easily than paper on the way to the tourist centers. Eventually they went back to pottery, now for sale where the roads and the busses allow them to do so. The book also describes how government corruption threatens the less lucky and weaker artists who do not have the opportunity to sell

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their works where it would be more convenient and profitable because they cannot afford to bribe the policemen there.

Cowen is very careful about tempering sweeping generalization with the strictest qualifications. This is, in part, what makes this book work so well. While the book's underlying theory is a development model based on international commerce, Cowen qualifies his general statements with local examples, but without necessarily limiting them to this very specific context.

Cowen's book is also subversive. It is a radical challenge to economists and traditional economic methodology. Cowen, without mentioning it, briskly pulls away the carpet under the feet of development analysis based on macroeconomics or on aggregate data in general. All the deficiencies of this branch of the discipline are put in the spotlight and contrasted by the success of his analysis. Deliberately or not, the book screams: "the emperor has no clothes." It is possible to explain economic development by using the life of an individual, rather than regressing an anonymous dataset. And it is possible to learn more from that individual than from formal aggregate modeling. Furthermore, Cowen is not afraid to cross disciplinary borders and to run outside them. He does it with grace. With ease and humility, he masterfully draws from art, history, anthropology, and psychology as much as from economics. He integrates economics with other disciplines as well as with first-hand observations, having spent time in the Mexican village with the artists he describes. His *homo economicus* is thus transformed into a real man, with a name and a life to live. A standard economic model is unlikely to incorporate the effect of the death of a loved one or the problems of alcoholism. Cowen does. Yet, the rigor of the analysis of incentives remains intact, better, it is strengthened. The power of his economic analysis is astounding in the treatment of villages' centuries-long rivalry and in his stinging public choice analysis of the politics of the village where most of the artists he describes live. He is able to make sense of the "cargo system," a system of town government where the local officials are unpaid "volunteers," who, under pressure from the small community, give up personal time and money to serve the community. The analysis of incentives and of how principal agent problems are so creatively solved is pungent. To bring this alien political arrangement close to home, Cowen compares it to the functioning of an academic department and of the social security system. The parallels could not work any better. The temporary head of the pueblo, like the chair of a department, is usually a person who takes the position under social pressure, not out of desire for it. The elders, having served as head in their most productive years, will not allow the abolition of the system as they are now in the position to enjoy the benefits at small, if any, cost.

Historians, artists, collectors, anthropologists, economists, political scientists, and laymen alike can read, enjoy, and learn from this book. The depth of knowledge in all these fields is evident from the first to last page. And Cowen's ability to integrate them in a manner accessible to all, without loss of scientific rigor is a rare and admirable characteristic of his work.