

A Free Market Odyssey: Classroom Adventures with *Jonathan Gullible*

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Abstract

In *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible: A Free Market Odyssey*, a series of brief chapters form a book of fictional adventures to illustrate ninety lessons of free-market economics to a popular, international audience. Satire piques the interest of readers while circumventing censors. An explanation is offered for presenting controversial topics in a manner that provokes thoughtful contemplation and classroom debate. The story has also been adapted to theater for radio and stage. Performances have been conducted in universities across Africa, in high schools across Slovakia, and in elementary schools in Kazakhstan. Now published in eighty editions in fifty languages, the book introduces philosophical and economic material across borders.

JEL Codes: A20, A21, A22

Keywords: economic education, free markets, youth satire

I. Introduction

Throughout history and around the world, satire has been an effective means to circumvent bureaucratic resistance to ideas. While governments frequently oppose free markets and utilize government schools to undermine independent thought, a satirical approach has made gains in the most rigid of cultures.

In America, we turn to the likes of *The Daily Show* and the recently ended *Colbert Report* for news rather than turning to mainstream broadcasters. Why? Because people enjoy laughing as hosts like Trevor Noah, his predecessor Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert mock the “serious” establishment, exposing its irony and hypocrisy.

In the economics classroom, my book, *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible: A Free Market Odyssey*, offers a similar appeal to this spirit of rebellion. In the manner of a traveler, as in *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Little Prince*, the hero of this story finds himself stranded on a remote

Table 1. Table of Contents, *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible*

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4. The Food Police <i>A woman and her children tell a tearful tale.</i>	25. True Believer <i>A devout voter explains loyalty.</i>
5. Candles and Coats <i>Jonathan learns how to protect industry.</i>	26. According to Need <i>Jonathan observes a valedictory contest.</i>
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7. Best Laid Plans <i>Jonathan watches the destruction of a home.</i>	28. New Newcomers <i>Foreign workers are exposed and deported.</i>
8. Two Zoos <i>Twin fenced habitats face the law.</i>	29. Treat or Trick? <i>Elderly citizens bemoan their retirement.</i>
9. Making Money <i>Two types of printers are explained.</i>	30. Whose Brilliant Idea? <i>Lawyers explain the controlling use of ideas.</i>
10. The Dream Machine <i>A mysterious box causes trouble at a factory.</i>	31. The Suit <i>Jonathan learns a lesson in liability.</i>
11. Power Sale <i>Lady Bess Tweed encourages Jonathan.</i>	32. Doctrinaire <i>A physician explains the ownership of life.</i>
12. Helter Shelter <i>A young woman explains housing.</i>	33. Cash for Codgers <i>Jonathan witnesses retirement of the elderly.</i>
13. Escalating Crimes <i>Jonathan learns a horrible truth about crime.</i>	34. Vice Versa <i>A policeman lectures Jonathan on immorality.</i>
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16. The Special Interest Carnival <i>Jonathan witnesses a carnival.</i>	37. Loser Law <i>Jonathan stumbles across a gamble.</i>
17. Uncle Samta <i>Jonathan discovers an old tradition.</i>	38. Moral Hazard <i>Rules of a reckless game are explained.</i>
18. The Tortoise and the Hare Revisited <i>A grandmother's tale has an unfamiliar twist.</i>	39. The Democracy Gang <i>A fearful stampede causes Jonathan to flee.</i>
19. Bored of Digestion <i>Jonathan is warned about nutrient officers.</i>	40. Vultures, Beggars, Con Men, and Kings <i>A despondent Jonathan meets a vulture.</i>
20. "Give Me Your Past or Your Future!" <i>A thief takes Jonathan's money and gives advice.</i>	41. Terra Libertas <i>Jonathan returns home and discovers his life's work.</i>
21. The Bazaar of Governments <i>A dairy farmer sees options in governments.</i>	Epilogue <i>My Philosophy of Liberty</i>

Pacific island where he encounters bizarre practices that mimic those of contemporary society in a humorous and instructive way. It is a tale in forty-one brief chapters that takes this stranded young sailor on a series of curious encounters through the countryside, city streets, and eventually to wisdom and rescue.

II. What Makes *Jonathan Gullible* an Effective Teaching Tool?

When delivering any message, the key to audience acceptance is to avoid being preachy and dogmatic, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry established this style with his marvelous book, *The Little Prince*, making profound points about philosophy and life with simple scenes and questions. To have universal applicability and to let the readers make their own connections, the setting is neutral, intentionally a distant location and era.

Jonathan Gullible introduces more than ninety economics concepts, taking up issues such as the tragedy of the commons, farm policy, rent control, inflation, minimum wage, licensing, eminent domain, moral hazard, and manipulative taxes. Free trade and protectionism are explored through a retelling of the humorous stories of Frédéric Bastiat, the nineteenth-century free market French economist.

The book is structured to address issues of increasing complexity along the journey, reflecting a progression of analysis that occurs for students in an introductory economics course. At first, the book takes a pragmatic approach to the provision of goods and services. The second stage increasingly draws students into an examination of arguments about the value of individual rights and property rights. Ultimately, the story presents students with philosophical ideas derived from Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and others, contrasting democratic authority with personal choice and responsibility. To summarize the lessons in the book, Jonathan provides an epilogue, “My Philosophy of Liberty,” which is also available online as an eight-minute animated video that has been translated and produced in forty-four languages.

There are three basic formats of the book, suited to different audiences: (1) the colorful, hardcover, illustrated youth edition with audio CD; (2) the simple black and white paperback university edition; and (3) the extended educators’ commentary edition. All list questions at the end of each chapter, challenging students to contemplate the relationship of each episode to contemporary issues, ethics, and individual rights. In addition to commentary, the

educator's edition offers additional references to books and websites to assist with classroom preparation.

Table 2. Index of Concepts: *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible: A Free Market Odyssey* (arranged by chapters, not page numbers)

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The story opens with a lesson about the conflicting interests of innovation and change. When Jonathan is shipwrecked on a strange island, he discovers a woman in distress who is being dragged through the jungle by several burly men. He learns that the woman is being arrested for the crime of threatening the employment of workers with her invention.

On the island, tree workers are employed to knock down trees with sticks. In this manner, it might take a hundred men a month to knock down a good-sized tree. The overseer on site complains about the woman's creation and use of an ax. "That woman came to work this morning with a sharp piece of metal attached to the end of her stick. She cut down a tree in less than an hour—all by herself! Think of it! Such an outrageous threat to our traditional employment had to be stopped."

Some students see new technology as an obvious step toward greater productivity, wealth creation, and alternative employment. Other students think of technology as a threat to existing jobs, cultural traditions, and the environment. This story allows students to further explore and perhaps reexamine those beliefs.

A subsequent encounter takes up the issue of trade protectionism. The story encourages students to consider whether low cost goods and services from outside the country benefit or harm the economy. Some students worry that employment in competing industries is jeopardized. Other students talk of consumer benefits and alternative employment opportunities, such as using the labor saved to build things.

A woman asks Jonathan to endorse a petition to protect the jobs of candlemakers and coatmakers. When he asks her how a petition can accomplish this goal, the petitioner informs him that she proposes to restrict free light and heat from the sun. She says that a tax on windows will force citizens to purchase more candles and coats from local producers.

Later, the book encourages students to consider the economics of drug policy as a part of market activity. Drug policy involves sensitive civil liberties concerns that are often taboo in classrooms, but surveys at the end of the semester indicate that these chapters are always the most popular with students.

The approach to this topic is not to preach about what should be, but rather to indicate contradictory and hypocritical public policy stances. Some students consider drug prohibition necessary for public health, and others consider drug use a matter of personal

choice. Frequently, both sides see the contradictory behavior of public officials who use other substances that may be legal, but which are harmful.

For instance, Jonathan is lured into a room where two undercover police officers talk about arresting citizens who consume illegal “merryberries” to feel good. At the same time, these officers, Mary Jane and Doobie, indulge in legal substances: tobacco, alcohol, various prescription medicines, and unhealthy foods. They do this to feel good, even if such behavior may also be addictive and harmful to their health.

While student attitudes about drugs are sometimes carefully monitored in the classroom, the fictional setting of the story has allowed the topic greater expression without censorship. Of eighty published editions in fifty languages internationally, this chapter has been the one most frequently used in classroom skits to raise debate about the market. Even the mullahs of Iran allowed the Farsi edition to be published intact and without interference.

Because they originated as ninety-second radio commentaries for an all-news station in Honolulu, chapters of *Jonathan Gullible* are concise, repeating key points through the questioning and wrapping up with a comic twist. Such short scenes are conducive to the classroom, where students act them out, face off with Jeopardy-style games, and create new chapters.

III. Jonathan Gullible around the World

The story serves as the basis for theatrical adaptations in high schools across Slovakia and in universities across Africa. The African play, *A Letter from Jonathan Gullible*, was performed by a cast of members of African Students for Liberty (ASFL) before audiences totaling more than 2,000 university students. ASFL member Olumayowa Okediran wrote about the performance: “Thirty pro-liberty individuals armed with a liberty advancing play and a bus took off for a two week tour of five schools . . . The hospitality of the students in Ghana was amazing and many of them pointed out the timeliness of the presentation in respect to the coming elections in Ghana.”

Pavel Koktyshhev and Lyudmila Melnikova have produced a musical play in Russian and Kazakh for middle schools in Kazakhstan. The performance is now on CD for distribution to the Commonwealth of Independent States and was performed at a European competition in Finland.

Melnikova explained how various grade levels came together in the school auditorium to enjoy performances, especially when the action was stopped in order to play off student reactions. In one scene, characters in the play are told that test grades will be reversed in order “to take from each according to ability and to give to each according to need.” Therefore, the best students will be given the worst grades and the worst students will be given the best grades.

The student audience erupts in objection, protesting the unfairness. In the heart of Kazakhstan, economics scholars are still teaching and studying Marxian theories, while the elementary children see better than their elders the effects of such policies.

In another scene, one character in the *Jonathan Gullible* musical is vastly superior at delivering mail—she is fast, efficient, and friendly. But her slothful rival puts her out of work by obtaining the king’s permission for a monopoly on the delivery of all mail in the kingdom. The youthful audience becomes outraged that the better letter-carrier is put out of business by an official decree. Thus, middle school kids in the heart of Central Asia are boldly objecting to the unfairness of a government monopoly in postal services.

IV. Conclusion

What lessons can be drawn from this approach to global free market education? Satire is an excellent means of circumventing official censors and grabbing the attention of insightful, rebellious youth. Everyone enjoys humor, especially when directed at public policies that affect the community’s general well-being. Laughter reduces tension when there is potential conflict and allows people to see the deeper issues underlying the political manipulation of markets.

The general populace can sometimes be turned off by too much theory. People are busy and often have short attention spans. Thus, a concise, nondogmatic approach of curious questioning can quickly and effectively introduce free market principles to the uninitiated. This kind of introduction can also spark greater exploration of ideas through the retelling of jokes and humorous incidents.

Free market economics education is well suited to a lively mix of pedagogic and theatrical applications both inside and outside the classroom. Students frequently like to interact with others while digesting new concepts both visually and intellectually through skits, plays, games, and media. The *Jonathan Gullible* tales are conducive to the use of such activities as teaching techniques.