

Jonathan Gullible: Battling State Ogres With 1000 Blows of Satire

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According to *The Economist* magazine, there is a crisis in the economics profession. Wrote the editors:

Why has economics not done better? Economists tend to blame others for being too lazy or too stupid to understand their textbooks. There is doubtless something to this. Economics is hard to teach well. To the uninitiated, its basic principles often seem surprising or odd...

But the economics profession itself also deserves much of the blame. Crucial ideas about the role of prices and markets are the first ideas that politicians and the public need to grasp if they are to think intelligently about public policy, and the fact is that they are not widely understood....

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* conveyed this sense that the market, for all its failures, is a marvel. Today precious few textbooks even try to guide their readers to any such inspiration.¹

There has been some success in remedying this problem with the new, revised edition of *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible: A Free Market Odyssey (JG)*. The book is now published in 24 languages with an additional 20 translations in progress, has been endorsed by Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, and has won awards for economic education from the Foundation for Economic Education and the

¹*The Economist* magazine, "The Puzzling Failure of Economics," 8/23/97, p. 11.

Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge. The book has also been adopted for use by twelve international economic research institutes such as the Inter Region Economic Network (Nairobi, Kenya); The Ludwig von Mises Institute of Romania, (Bucharest, Romania); and Instituto Liberal (Porto Alegre, Brazil) because of the appropriateness of the medium and the message for their economies.

The last mentioned, Instituto Liberal of Brazil, even selected this book as their November 2001 Book of the Month.

Sample episode

What kind of message is this? An example is in the newest edition with a chapter entitled, *The Tall Tax*. When Jonathan encounters people who are walking on their knees, his offer of help is rejected.

"No, thank you!" said the man, wincing in pain. "I can walk okay. Using knees takes some getting used to."

"You're okay? But why don't you get off your knees and walk on your feet?"

"Ooooh!" moaned the man, squirming in discomfort. "It's a minor adjustment to the tax code."

"The tax code?" repeated Jonathan. "What's the tax code have to do with walking?"

"Everything! Ow!" By now the man settled back on his heels, resting from his torturous ordeal. He pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and mopped his brow. He shifted his balance to massage one knee, then the other. Many layers of worn-out patches had been sewn on at the knees. "The tax code," he said, "has recently been amended to level the field for people of different heights."

"Level the field?" asked Jonathan.

APlease stoop over so I don't have to shout,@ pleaded the man.
AThat's better. The Council of Lords decided that tall people have too many advantages.@

AAdvantages of tallness?@

AOh, yes! Tall people are always favored in hiring, promotion, sports, entertainment, politics, and even marriage! Ooooh!@ He wrapped the handkerchief around the newest of many tears on his gray pants. ASo the Lords decided to level us with a stiff tallness tax.@

ATall people get taxed?@ Jonathan glanced sideways and felt his posture begin to droop.

AWe're taxed in direct proportion to our height.@

ADid anyone object?@ asked Jonathan.

AOnly those who refused to get on their knees,@ the man said.

AOf course, we've allowed an exemption for politicians. We usually vote tall! We like to look up to our leaders.@

Jonathan was dumbfounded. By now he found himself slouching, self-consciously trying to shrink. With both hands pointing down at the man's knees he questioned incredulously, AYou'll walk on your knees just for a tax break?@

ASure!@ replied the man in a pained voice. AOur whole lives are shaped to fit the tax code. There are some who have even started to crawl.@

AWow! That must hurt!@ Jonathan exclaimed.

AYeah, but it hurts more not to. Ow! Only fools stand erect and pay the higher taxes. So, if you want to act smart, get on your knees. It'll cost you plenty to stand tall.@

Certainly everyone can identify with the point that people are constantly being manipulated by the tax code to change their behavior. A variety of issues are raised by a series of questions at the back of the book. Should a free society have a neutral government that lets people make their own decisions? Or is it better to have politicians shaping people's behavior? Are politicians morally superior to others in the making of wise decisions? Is it proper for governments to attempt to control >fairness= in life with the use of force?

Circumventing censors

James Shikwati, Director of the Inter Region Economic Network (IREN), which serves Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, has compared this book in approach to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. A team from IREN has just completed the Kiswahili translation of *Jonathan Gullible* and the students of Moreno University in Kenya have just completed a theatrical production based on seven chapters of the book. The play, entitled *The Trials of Jonathan Gullible*, is about the trial of a person who was arrested for expressing free market ideas ... significant and pressing concern under the harsh censorship laws in Kenya.

In many countries of the world, the study of free market economics carries with it philosophical underpinnings that are simply prohibited. Satire is not only a means of penetrating lethargy, it is sometimes the only path through censorship. This explains much of the interest in this book in many parts of Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia.

Publishers in Hong Kong have increasingly felt the need to disguise their critique of official policies since the transfer of rule from the United Kingdom to the Peoples Republic of China. When the book ran for three-quarters of a year as a series of 149 articles in *The Hong Kong Economic Journal*, the editor, Joy Shan Lam, wrote to say:

Our company has two publications, the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, a Chinese business daily catering to professionals, investors and the intelligentsia and the *Hong Kong Economic*

Journal Monthly, a magazine on politics, economics and culture.... It has the highest credibility ranking of all media in HK and has the most educated as well as affluent readership. I guess I could give you a lot of reasons why we chose your book to translate, but it all boils down to the owner thought it was a wonderful book!@

Of course, it isn't only in communist countries where satire is useful in getting around the censors. Wardens of the politically correct university or community in America also need to be circumvented in order to convey the free market message. Such hot topics as government controlled education and postal services, government funded art and libraries, and government generated pollution and violence are all topics that would raise eyebrows and obstacles if not for the subtitles of satire.

For Valerija Dasic of Belgrade, Serbia, her appreciation was expressed in this manner:

AMy notions of education previously consisted of threadbare textbooks, stern and cold teachers, of sweating... I have realized that this book is the best textbook I have ever come across. Having read it at a stretch in a few hours I have learnt more about free market, private property, free flow of ideas, people and goods, than during the whole of my studies, both at high school and now at the university. @