

# Testimonial: Discovering John Komlos: My Journey Towards a Paradigm Shift

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## **Testimonial: Discovering John Komlos: my journey towards a paradigm shift**

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**Biographical notes:** Junaid B. Jahangir is an Associate Professor of Economics at MacEwan University. He is a recipient of three teaching awards and is interested in renewed perspectives on teaching undergraduate economics. He has also developed new courses including economics of religion, futures studies, and humanistic economics.

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I should have graduated with my PhD in Economics by 2007 but instead received it in 2011. Part of the reason was that while I was competent in meeting the technical requirements, I did not feel driven to read papers that made an extremely simple point based on intensely cumbersome mathematics. Equally, I was not passionate about work that hardly anyone read beyond the pay walls erected by academic journals. For my doctoral thesis, I felt that after going through years of data collection, counter-factual modelling, regression and simulation analysis, all I had shown was that the residential electricity price in Alberta had increased after the electricity market restructuring of 2001 (Jahangir, 2011). That conclusion was obvious to the consumers who paid exorbitantly high bills in the aftermath of market restructuring. They certainly did not need a sophisticated model to tell them what they had already experienced first-hand. That experience left me jaded.

I started my academic career as a lecturer in 2010 at MacEwan University where I was required to teach ten courses a year. With a family to support, I continued working part time at the University of Alberta as a contract instructor in economics to make ends meet. I thought I would eventually publish papers from my dissertation and so I kept updating my dataset until finally in 2017, I relinquished the idea of ever publishing those papers. Too much time had passed, and I realised that there would be no journal space for my work that had passed its sell-by date. On the other hand, I was always noted as an effective teacher save by a few students with a supreme sense of self-entitlement. Year after year, I would teach about opportunity costs, thinking at the margin, the merits of free trade, and the ills of government intervention at the ECON 101 level. At the intermediate levels, I would teach more of the same with algebra and calculus. But at the end of the day, students were more interested in learning about the financial crisis and other real-world events than the mathematics I was doing on the white board. Despite being recognised with three teaching awards, I felt that beyond solving stylised mathematical problems, I was not preparing my students to have critical discussions with their peers from sister social sciences and to really understand how the economy was impacting their lives in significant ways.

Around this time, I began receiving e-mails from Professor John Komlos. Trained in neoclassical economics and being familiar with popular books like the Freakonomics series, I dismissed his e-mails suspiciously as spam, as he would talk about the deficiencies in standard economics, which I believed was superior to the approaches undertaken by the less mathematical and therefore the less rigorous social sciences. After all, I was taught that economics was the queen of the social sciences. Generally, I had a stereotypical image of radical left-wing economics as non-rigorous, like something to be found in the local Earth's General Store. This was a place which to my mind was frequented by aging hippies who bought hemp products. I also had a bitter after taste of a discussion I had with a political science activist who worked for the local left leaning political party. He kept pulling case after case on the merits of rent controls whereas all I had to counter with my false sense of having the superior analysis was the supply demand graph with price ceilings. I have never felt so stupid in retrospect. The only other time I regret was when two of my former students joined the local Marxist Leninist party and I wish I knew then what I know now to have mentored them better.

Komlos kept sending his e-mails and I kept deleting them. I was concerned about the inability to comment on pressing economic issues based on abstract microeconomic theory. I also felt the pressure from the student union move towards zero-cost textbook options, as economics textbooks can be very expensive. A colleague in the department shared information on the online CORE textbook, which led me to online articles on the need to dismantle ECON 101. I came across the belated news on how students walked out of Mankiw's class at Harvard. For me, Mankiw was a God. Having taught the principles of microeconomics and macroeconomics based on his textbooks for over ten years, I had distilled his material on my fingertips. I would drill the 'big fat lessons' in macroeconomics that budget deficits crowd out private investment, inflation is a monetary phenomenon, productivity determines living standards, and so on. Thus, I felt a seismic shift when I learned that he would step down from teaching the principles of economics (McCafferty, 2019). My icon had fallen.

I looked into the online CORE textbook and found it overwhelming. Those of us who grew up with hardcopy textbooks and later used them to teach in a structured format, and who project themselves as masters of their craft, found it difficult to navigate the myriad links in the CORE textbook. As a teacher, I want to hammer the basic foundational concepts repetitively instead of inundating students with information overload. I am also concerned about diluting educational standards by delegating students to do all the work of exploring online sources and videos. This is because students are there to learn from me and not online resources. I also perceived a loss of control and structure with the CORE online textbook. I inquired from my former economics professor about CORE and he mentioned that while he uses the novel approach to teach students, he also falls back to the traditional lecture method. All of this pushed me to consider Komlos a tad more seriously. So, one day I decided to pay closer attention. The extended title of the 2nd edition of his 2019 book piqued my interest: *What Every Economics Student Needs to Know*.

I e-mailed him about his book. His responses were lightning quick. I decided that I would order his book and read it cover to cover. I could do this much as opposed to straining my eyes online with the CORE textbook. The book arrived and I took out my pencil to read his book carefully by underlining and scribbling words. For me, it was a revelation. There are people who claim that their eyes were opened when they read the Qur'an and so they adopted the Islamic faith. For me, Komlos showed me economics

beret of the mathematics but one which engaged with the standard economics textbooks. Just as there are multiple ways of understanding the scriptures and the Qur'anic text, as evident in progressive Muslim circles, I learned that there were alternate ways to understand standard economic theory and models. The approach was rigorous, and I became a believer. Whereas my thesis supervisor retired, and I lost contact with him, Komlos became my mentor. I coloured myself in his colour. This was it. I had found the way ahead in my teaching and research career.

Transitioning to a new approach is never easy and not always abrupt. It is gradual and so I started pairing up Mankiw with Komlos comparatively. I ended up writing a paper, with Komlos suggesting various journals. I followed up with the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education (IJPEE)*. That led me to Jack Reardon, another extremely kind and compassionate human being. This is important because I have found that many academics, despite any claims of academic freedom, are not always receptive to opposing viewpoints. Regardless, I found a whole new world of dissident economists. However, I found myself at the intersection of neoclassical and heterodox economics. Thus, I lose the heterodox audience if I mention any leaning towards neoclassical economics. Similarly, neoclassical economists balk at the very mention of heterodox perspectives. My non-binary approach was accepted by Reardon, and he decided to publish my article on pairing Mankiw with Komlos (Jahangir, 2020). This was extremely encouraging, and I found another mentor in him. Both Komlos and Reardon inspired me to pursue reading more about economics that was critical of the mainstream, and I ended up developing a research career in teaching undergraduate economics.

This research includes book reviews, developing teaching plans on pressing economic issues including climate change and economic inequality, connecting Disney animations with economics principles, and so on (Jahangir, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g). It informs my teaching and I eventually ended up introducing a new topics course at my department. Titled ECON 357: Humanistic economics, I assigned the 2nd edition of the Komlos textbook. The course was well received, and I received rave reviews from students. It was as if they were waiting for such a course to be introduced on campus. One of them left the following comment in my student evaluation:

“This was the best course I’ve ever taken in economics, and it has reinvigorated my interest as a field of study, and I really can’t emphasize either of those points enough. All the questions and all the grievances that build up in any reasonable person taking micro and macro theory classes are finally answered, I finally got to learn real economics and about the real economy (instead of abstractions of abstractions of abstractions (seriously think about the concept of units of utility on a utility curve)). What’s sad is that this class is an exception, a rare glimpse of the truth. What this class highlights is the need for the improvement of other economics courses, with stale theory and sedimented philosophical assumptions that most economists (even top ones like Mankiw) don’t engage with. As you can tell I believe the content of this class is of vital societal importance or at least a step in the right direction for teaching economics. So, the great strength of this course is its contents.”

Such comments allude to the significance of Komlos’ work and confirm my decision to continue exploring economics that is critical of the mainstream. It is in this spirit of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) that I began reviewing Komlos’ 3rd edition of his *Foundations of Real-World Economics* textbook that was published recently. Initially, I thought that it was three additional chapters on populism, racism, and the pandemic stacked on to the 2nd edition of his book. However, on closer reading, it

seemed that Komlos had revamped the whole textbook with a list of questions at the end of each chapter and updated the text in various chapters to include material on populism, racism and the pandemic. This must have taken a lot of patience for having written a book myself, I know that I do not have the fortitude to follow through such painstaking work. Given that he has opened a vista of knowledge for me and guided me through my research, it is only appropriate that I highlight the salient ideas from his book as a tribute to this indefatigable thinker, mentor and academic.

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## Notes

- 1 Editor’s note: see this issue’s Book Review section for Jahangir’s review of the 3rd edition of John Komlos’ *Foundations of Real-World Economics*.