
Editorial: Why we made the economics rap video: *Fear the Economics Textbook*

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Biographical notes: Stephen T. Ziliak is a Professor of Economics at Roosevelt University and Faculty Adviser at the Angiogenesis Foundation. He is well-known for creatively bringing art and science together in pluralistic ways. His inventions include haiku economics, reenganomics, and economics rap, all published in the *IJPEE*. He is best known for his critically acclaimed work on statistical versus economic significance, which has been featured in the Supreme Court of the USA.

On the opening track of his *Black on Both Sides* CD, the hip hop artist Mos Def answers a frequently asked question, “People are always asking me, what’s going to happen to hip hop.... Well, hip hop won’t get better until the people get better.... If the people are smoked out, hip hop’s going to be smoked out.”

That is true about people and economics rap too. If the people are smoked out; if the economics students and professors and media are, for example, naively impressed by a slickly produced but false messaging economics rap video, then economics is smoked out too. One reason to make an economics rap video, then, is to prove that you are not smoked out on economic rhetoric of the slick kind – mere advertising. Economics – including economics rapping – will not get better until the people get better.

‘Better’ is not being speechless with admiration or ignorance after watching and ‘liking’ the popular but historically, factually, and morally flawed Keynes-Hayek rap videos, which have been viewed on YouTube some ten million times worldwide. ‘Better’ includes social justice, diversity, and the voices of actual students and history.

Thus, I felt called to reply to the Keynes-Hayek videos, just as rappers from Gil Scott Heron and The Last Poets to Eminem and Missy Elliott are called, and as my students felt called. In retrospect, I should have seen the possibility for making *Fear the Economics Textbook (Story of the Next Crook): A Rap Video*, back in January 2015.

On the first day of class last January, I asked each student to say something about themselves surprising and not predictable, like a trait or skill, for example, or an achievement or experience they had that most people simply would not guess about them. Answers typically in my classes ran the gamut, from the overused ‘I can’t think of anything’, to ‘I am fluent in Greek and Latin’ (as was announced several years by an African American economics major from the south side of Chicago: yes, like J.S. Mill and Edgeworth, he really is).

This was not any old class. For the past 8 years, I have taught a graduate and undergraduate course on Theories of Justice in Economics and Philosophy at Roosevelt University and at a number of leading universities in France, Belgium, and Turkey. It

draws ambitious students, and they say it's one of those 'life changing' courses you hear about in the magazines. And, with humility, I have to admit that I have heard and seen and read enough papers and emails to know that for a great proportion, it is true: the justice course changes them. Most economists believe and teach that efficiency is the first virtue of economics. But that is not true as my students learn: justice is the first and most sacred virtue of economics, just as truth is the first and most sacred virtue of scholarship.

I was delighted to find that making the video together, and under pressure, using our diverse wits, bodies and voices, proved the practical and social value of our dialogue on the great questions of justice and ethics in economics. There is the ideal of philosophy and then there is the practical decision whether to exchange Brandon's three syllable word for Eboni's two syllable word without loss of meaning. No time to lose. Rawls's two principles of justice as fairness helped us proceed democratically and fairly. Smith's impartial spectator kept our spirits and virtues high. Both philosophies fitted naturally in our collaboratively written lyrics for the *Fear the Economics Textbook* rap.

Fortune helped too. On the first day of class, I was astonished by the number of students who said their 'surprising' thing is they play a musical instrument, sing, dance, DJ, compose music, mix beats and what have you, from classical and jazz to house and hip hop (that's Chicago). Something like 18 of 21 students claimed competency in one or more musical skills, a virtual orchestra for theories of justice. Several students, we learned that day, are in bands, and one student, Maya Tatum-Lattimore, who raps verse two and is the main voice of the beautifully sung refrain, 'Took my last look at this textbook', was a voice major at the Chicago College of Performing Arts. Fabulous.

At the end of the first day of class, another economics student and former cello major whom, like Maya, I had known from a previous course on The Ethics of Adam Smith raised her hand and proposed that "instead of a final exam suppose we play a concert for you dealing with themes of social justice". We all had a good laugh. I said "I'll keep that in mind, Erika".

For the next 12 weeks 'the Justice League' (as I call them) soldiered on, making close textual readings of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and Hayek's *Mirage of Social Justice*, making arguments, models and claims against utilitarian philosophy in economics after Bentham, and against the welfare economics that passes as ethics in economics after Pareto. (I was amused by a critic in the *National Review* (May 2015) who convinced himself by assumption that I had not even read Hayek's *Mirage*, let alone required my students to do so. He is mistaken: I have been teaching – and rejecting – the Hayek 'mirage' for 8 years in a row with no reason to stop. Ironically, a question I posed in the rap, verse 5, is: "Does he even teach his students Rawls's difference principle?" The *National Review* did not answer.)

But back to class, and to how the video came about. End of week 12, early one Saturday morning, it hit me: We had 4 weeks remaining in the term, final exam week included, and it was time to announce the content and protocol for the final exam. Early that morning I was overcome with a great excitement, "This is the time. This is the class. Let's make a rap video. Let's make a 'Roosevelt reply' to the Keynes-Hayek videos. If any class is uniquely ready, this is it. This is the one."

It was not the first time I had thought about making a rap video. For several years, I had mentioned now and again to select students that we ought to reply to the

Keynes-Hayek videos which – while being amusing and well produced – leave me and many others feeling unmoved and even irritated by the intellectual errors and surplus of artifice. For example, ‘the battle of the century’ was not in reality between Keynes and Hayek, misleading millions of YouTube viewers and students of economics. In *The General Theory* Keynes battled against Pigou and Marshall, not Hayek, who hardly figures. And after the Second War and the tepid/ice-cold reception by economists to Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (which likewise does not battle against Keynes) Hayek himself stopped doing economics and devoted most of the rest of his life to political philosophy – a nearly 50 year long retreat from battle. Ironically, much of the media and blogosphere has concluded that ‘Hayek won’.

I have been a fan of rap and hip hop from the beginning. I may be the only economist who can claim to have seen Tupac, Public Enemy, and other ‘O.G.’s’ (that is hip hop speak for ‘originals’) live in concert back in the 1980s, or who’s mentioned The Last Poets in an economics article (‘Haiku economics’, *IJPEE*, 2009). In the 1990s and 2000s, I began to listen to so called conscious hip hop, and admired the dialogical, justice oriented, and social realistic approaches to lyrics taken by artists such as Mos Def, The Roots and others, including cross-overs from reggae and dancehall such as Damien ‘Jr. Gong’ Marley and his older brother Stephen.

Thus the fictional history of economic thought, combined with the outside actors and artificial and white bread casting of the Keynes-Hayek videos – featuring not economists or students or real rappers but instead two professional Caucasian male actors, both of them wearing absurdly painted on false mustaches – was in my opinion cliché, ultimately forgettable, and probably unjust.

When Monday arrived I could hardly wait to see the students to propose making a rap video. It took less than 3 minutes for them to agree. What happened next was as magical and scary and fun (and at times nerve wracking) as one might imagine. What were our lyrics going to be about? What is our story? Who could film? Who would act and who would rap? How would we divide our labour? How could we do everything in three weeks’ time, leaving enough days to invite others in the community to attend our ‘World Premiere’ screening?

In 20 years of teaching, I have never seen as much participation, creativity, imagination, lack of ego, cooperation, team work, devotion, independence, benevolent thinking, and positive attitude as I did in those three or four weeks of planning, writing, recording, and editing the video. Students worked twice as hard as normal for the final exam preparation, but I never heard a complaint. Not once. Perhaps our example will inspire others.

Here are the lyrics to *Fear the Economics Textbook (Story of the Next Crook): A Rap Video*, by Stephen T. Ziliak and the RU Ready 4Justice Collective. Here is a link to the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWv_YSIXkNU (note: These lyrics do not reflect the views of the IJPEE Board of Editors or of Inderscience).

[Refrain]

I took my last look, at this textbook,/

Invisible hand, /story o’ tha next crook,/

I took my last look, at this textbook,/

Invisible hand, /story o’ tha next crook,/

So proud, so game, so orthodox,/
But ch'yer head's in the sand, Prof./
don't blame the Nash box./

We read, we think, we write about it,/
But ch'you're standin' there lecturin',/
n' we're worryin' about it.

Took my last look, at this textbook,/
Invisible hand, /story o' tha next crook,/
We read, we think, we write about it,/
But ch'you're standin' there lecturin',/ n' we're worryin' about it.

[Verse 1]

Readin' Greg Mankiw, /
Queue the conservative man's view/
Supply, demand, invisible hand too / Following these Ten Commandments he
hands to you / Hey kids, you understand what Econ really can do? / These ain't
the pearly gates, Mr. Mankiw/ Just preachin' efficiency and Max U/
But where's the vertical mobility?/
Masses are enslaved in poverty/Millions for your fat pockets see/
This poverty of nations ain't so efficient/
Mainstream economists are mentally deficient/
Monotonous lectures despite student resistance/What works on the Blackboard
but not with existence/ Your crackpot theories plot all the wrong axes / If you
are the state we-Uber-killin' all your taxis /

[Verse 2]

Yo I say that with gritted teeth/ Admittedly, when it comes to justice and
liberty/ You Ivy leagues just can't compete, I pity thee/ So tell New Jersey fans
we gonna need new Jersey's man/ Cause you just stand in the stands lookin'
white wan/
Invisible hand doin' nothing but hurting me/
Burnin' me, doesn't matter if it's third degree/
Cause your economic policy causing nothing but poverty/ Death n' destruction
are all that I can see/ We need wealth for society, stop with the perjury/
You cheat, you steal, you lie through your pearly teeth/But today's a new day
and there's a brand new lesson to teach/

10 *S.T. Ziliak*

We're turning over Ivy leaves as we stomp our feet . . . /

[Pause]

Yo, I'm like Steve Nash, so watch this sweet pass/

[Repeat refrain]

[Verse 3]

Lesson one, it starts in a sympathetic fashion/
Government spendin' can stop markets from crashin'/
You askin', "where's the money comin' from?"/
It's C+I and G and then we're done /
You see, it's really not that complicated/
But steppin' on the little guy ain't the right way to make it/
You fake it, we take it, but it's time to unionize/
Get ourselves organized, give the capitalists a surprise/
And begin the journey toward a social compromise/
Where the poor get more and the rich standby/
We fly, get high, and soar towards the sky/
Where moral sentiments replace demand and supply/

[Verse 4]

Clearly your markets are free of justice/
Looks like your supply curve needs some readjustments/
We need benevolence and sympathy in the mix/
These textbooks are corruptin' our moral sentiments/
We need the O.G.s, like Smith, Marx and Lerner/
Heterodox economics is the real table turner/
Get back to the real world, no catallaxy/
Spontaneous order, can't put me in a Cadillac, see?/
Check Ferguson, Garner, Rodney King too
People can't work when they face black n' blue!

[Verse 5]

Dude from George Mason had a lot to say/
Not a whole lot o' substance at the end o' the day/
His message n' beats are false an' predictable/
Does he even teach his students Rawls's difference principle?/
We come from Roosevelt, yo, n' we are the Lakers/
Let's get back to class now n' forget all these fakers/

[Repeat refrain]

[Refrain, with fade out . . .]

I took my last look, at this textbook,/
Invisible hand, /story o' tha next crook,/
Took my last look, at this textbook,/
Invisible hand, /story o' tha next crook,/