JOHN FORREST KAIN

BORN: November 9, 1935
DIED: August 4, 2003

John Forrest Kain came to the Harvard economics department in the early 1960s as an Assistant Professor, received tenure in 1969, and retired to the University of Texas at Dallas in 1996. John was one of the first great urban economists, and he pioneered empirical research in economics on urban African-Americans. John Kain served Harvard in many ways: lecturing economics and Afro-American studies students in the college, single-handedly teaching an urban economics Ph.D. sequence, leading the city-planning program, and eventually chairing the economics department between 1988 and 1991. Supported by his wife, Mary Fan, who also gave much to Harvard, John Kain contributed greatly to this institution and to social science more broadly.

John Kain was born in 1935 in Fort Wayne Indiana. Many claim that his commitment to racial justice was the result of his early experiences traveling with his African-American football teammates in the Jim Crow world of the early 1950s. While John was a true social scientist, who never let his political preferences compromise his research, he spent the rest of his life working on topics that were inspired by outrage over the iniquities of American society.

John Kain received his Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley in 1961. He first taught at the Air Force academy, and was assigned by the Air Force to work with John Meyer, a young Harvard economist, at the Rand Corporation. Their joint project would eventually become "The Urban Transportation Problem," which is the seminal work of transportation economics. This book has taught thousands of economists that urban passenger rail is always dominated by buses or, as scores of Harvard Ph.D. students have repeated: "bus good; train bad." This work also began John's steady attacks—contained in papers with colorful titles like "Deception in Dallas"—on what he perceived to be wildly wasteful rail projects. John Kain had a thriving career as an international consultant on transportation issues and he argued against foolish rail extensions from Singapore to Alewife.

John Meyer brought Kain to Harvard, where as a Junior Faculty Member, Kain wrote "Housing Segregation, Negro Employment and Metropolitan Decentralization", which was to

be his most cited work. This paper, generally referred to as the "Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis," argued that unemployment among African-Americans was the result of housing market segregation, or a "spatial mismatch" between where African-Americans lived and where their jobs were located. Kain presciently argued that the suburbanization of employment would further exacerbate this problem in the years to come.

In 2005, when economists work on anything they feel like (for good or ill), it is hard to remember the bold innovation of Kain's early work. No economist before Kain worked on housing market segregation. Kain legitimized this topic for our discipline by emphasizing a particularly tangible aspect of segregation: the physical distance between African-Americans and jobs. Since "Spatial Mismatch" social scientists have been drawn to other, less "economic" costs of segregation such as role models and "neighborhood effects," but these more sociological theories would never have been accepted by economists in the mid-1960s. Kain's genius was to get economists working on ghettoes by making segregation research seem like traditional economics.

The "Spatial Mismatch" paper assumed that segregation was the result of centralized racism, and that neighborhoods were barred to African-Americans through violence and restrictive covenants. Others challenged this assumption and argued that segregation was the result of decentralized racism and the high cost of white neighborhoods. The key empirical distinction between centralized and decentralized racism is that if African-Americas face barriers to mobility then they will pay higher rents than whites, since minimizing rental payments subject to constraints always leads to paying higher rents. If segregation is driven by white preferences, then whites will pay more, since then it is whites who are minimizing subject to a constraint. Using the most detailed data on housing ever used to that point, in a seminal real estate article Kain and his student John Quigley showed that in St. Louis, African-Americans paid more for comparable housing than whites. This confirmed the importance of "centralized racism" and started a large literature.

In the 1980s, Kain became convinced that our school system was failing minority populations and he was determined to understand why. So he successfully managed the Herculean task of convincing bureaucrats in Texas schools to give him access to all of the data on children, their test scores, and their classes. This data collection effort eventually led to an important data center; it has served as the model for numerous imitators throughout the country.

Kain's contributions to Harvard went far beyond his research. He was a wonderful teacher and mentor. He mentored and inspired many distinguished economists, including John Quigley, Rick Hanushek and David Ellwood. Kain was particularly invested in the creating of a city-planning program, and he chaired the Department of City and Regional Planning between 1975 and 1981.

John Kain played a pivotal role in the reformation of the Afro-American Studies Department

since 1991. Not only was he on the oversight committee that hired Henry Louis Gates, Anthony Appiah and Randy Matory, but he moved part of his appointment into the Department, became a voting member, taught regularly, and advised Afro-American Studies students actively and attentively. John's project on the Impact of Minority Suburbanization helped to establish the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research as a research institute that never lost sight of the humanity behind numbers and data.

Kain's dedication to his wife Mary Fan, and to his daughters and grandchildren, was as remarkable as his dedication to research. Mary Fan was John's partner in serving the Harvard community and she provided comforting encouragement for students and junior faculty members. Harvard also owes her a considerable debt. John Kain set a high standard in combining prodigious scholarship with personal integrity and a dedication to finding solutions to some of the most important issues of our time.

Respectfully submitted,

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
John R. Meyer
Dwight Perkins
Edward L. Glaeser, Chair