Foreword

In academia today, economists as a tribe care mostly about publishing journal articles, preferably in top journals based on international ranking lists that are worshipped religiously, with an academic death sentence for those who do not publish accordingly. This is an unhealthy development. It promotes the feeling that we no longer devote ourselves to science for the sake of science itself. In fact, we risk turning science into a kind of sport where one displays success or muscular prowess. Brain pulp is sacrificed and offered to these journals in order to secure profitable returns such as promotions, recognition, or awards. The problem is that journal articles only produce spare parts, and we need scholars to build machines with or without these spare parts, as we have always been a tool-making species. A good Handbook should aim to construct a machine such as a new motorcycle that is ready for us to ride so that we are well equipped for our odyssey into the future. I admire scholars like Mustafa Erdoğan who take the time to organize such a Handbook, as well as those who contribute to it by writing chapters – in this case, 23 in total. To embark on a synthesis of facts and theories is a venture worth undertaking. The edifice of knowledge would have never grown to its present dimensions without such contributions. Obviously, a Handbook will also face the dilemma of incomplete knowledge in the present moment. This is okay as long as we openly acknowledge or introduce expressions of incertitude and provide an honest portrayal of partial knowledge. Nevertheless, a masterpiece of a Handbook can guide us in how we feel, think, and perceive, and can also work to prepare us for the future. Single contributions may be seen as performing disorderly motions, similar to atoms. However, we know that in the co-operation of a large number of atoms, statistical laws of orderly behaviour start operating and the same happens to a good Handbook. The quality of contributions may vary, as does a droplet that sinks depicting a Brownian movement. A Handbook is a large affair, similar to a production in which the orchestra and actors may have a different idea of speed, expression, and volume. But each Handbook has its particular average gravity in which all the pieces dance around an equilibrium pole directed by the editor in charge who, like a conductor, controls these different forces – aiming to create beauty and perfect harmony.

I see several familiar faces in this Handbook; scholars who have had a deep impact on my research and education. I was not only awed by their achievements but also motivated and mentally stimulated to contribute. I see dear friends and coauthors and others that I am eager to get to know or to read. I see scholars that have the gift of bringing magically alive the very topics that many others perceive as too boring to contemplate. But even those lost souls not able to be converted to the beauty of public finance will willingly admit that this topic lies at the heart of a civilized society. We still need to learn a lot and it is wonderful to see that the exploration of the MENA region has such a dominant role in this Handbook. An understanding of public finance requires an emphasis on the links between economic analysis and political issues, and several of the experts in this Handbook have carried out important work for
national and international organizations. Whispering in the ears of princes is a challenging endeavour: it requires an innovative scholar on the frontline, ready to get dirty and to face the mine-fields. These scholars are well aware that knowledge must continually be renewed by ceaseless effort if it is not to be lost. With their knowledge they help to maintain and extend statues of sand that stand close to the shoreline, continuously threatened not only by the shifting sand but also by the ongoing rising tides that resemble political life cycles. Their brave hands of service must ever be at work in order that the statues continue to shine in the sun for us.

Enough, it is a foolish thing to make a long foreword. Let’s read what these 23 contributions have to say!

Benno Torgler
Queensland University of Technology, Australia, & CREMA – Center for Research in Economics, Management and the Arts, Switzerland