

MEMORIES OF MANCUR: A STUDENT REMINISCES

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All of the graduate students at the University of Maryland knew Mancur Olson, even political science students like myself. Olson gained celebrity status with his two books, *The Logic of Collective Action* and *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. Not only did we all know him, it seemed like he knew all of us. He had endless energy and a positive demeanor, affectionately greeting everyone when he walked down the hall.

Mancur was a happy and inquisitive person who had insights about big pictures that technicalities could never derail. *The Logic of Collective Action* and *The Rise and Decline of Nations* were certainly like that. They made bold claims that motivated researchers to go further. For example, *The Logic of Collective Action* provided new insights into the free-rider problem and a number of eye-catching hypotheses about group behavior that researchers tried to confirm, refute, or refine for decades, including claims about the relationship between group size and group success, the exploitation of larger actors by smaller ones, and the importance of selective incentives in group formation. *The Rise and Decline of Nations* argued that interest groups will eventually find rent seeking profitable, which will squeeze an economy through institutional sclerosis. Comparative political scientists and economists have since discovered cases supporting his claim, as well as cases better explained by alternative hypotheses.

Both books were so well written that I still read them again and again just to think about how I might organize my own thoughts or write a good conclusion. Olson's application of economic methodology to subjects that were traditionally in the realm of political science helped break political science out of its mid-twentieth-century rut, which spent too much time on the history of ideas and often assumed individuals would work towards their collective interests. By applying economic methodology to politics, political scientists could create valid assertions of their own and more cleanly apply them to cases that could be tested. In this way, Mancur became part of a movement that helped the social sciences proceed more scientifically.

I have three memories of Mancur that stand above the rest. The first was his incredible ability to think on his feet. One year, in the mid-1990s, the Department of Agricultural & Resource Economics invited Amartya Sen to speak on campus. For

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some reason, no one notified the faculty in Economics or Political Science, perhaps because our departments were in a different college than Agricultural & Resource Economics. The format for the event was an interview style with the moderator asking questions of Sen on a stage. Unfortunately, the moderator fell ill on the day of the event and could not attend. Those organizing the session did not have a list of pre-arranged questions and did not know what to do. So they called Mancur to fill in. Of course he said yes. The auditorium was packed and Mancur performed brilliantly, like no one I had ever seen before. Mancur asked Sen engaging questions about his latest research on development and managed to work the interview back to topics like the “measuring rod of money,” a concept Mancur had been refining *at least* since the publication of *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (see Olson 1982, p. 249, n. 21). Soon Sen’s interview developed into a dialogue between two great minds, thinking out loud about a number of topics largely unrelated to Sen’s latest research. Sen was not annoyed. He loved the spontaneity of Mancur’s exchange. It was one of the most engaging and interesting talks I had ever witnessed, and in the end Mancur may have stolen the show. A typical member of the audience may have thought it was planned that way, a conversation between two great minds.

My second memory of Mancur was his ability to simplify messages in ways that everyone could understand and remember. Along with the “measuring rod of money,” Mancur created epigrams such as the “first blessing of the invisible hand” and “the logic of collective action.” Mancur would slightly sing these phrases when he spoke them, as if he wanted to provide the right emphasis to make them stick. Mancur was shorter than average and usually hunched slightly forward. When he said phrases like “the logic of collective action” he would straighten his back and wave his hands in a circular motion, as if he was conjuring up something magical. He drew out the “I” in logic and slowed down as he articulated “collective action.” I tried to imitate him at more than one party. I sounded like the lucky charms leprechaun more than I sounded like Mancur, but it conveyed the right idea. Mancur’s cadence was more like the cadence of someone from a prairie-state, but the leprechaun image has always endured in my mind. Nevertheless, I have retained many of his teachings because he used mnemonic techniques like these. His excitement for ideas kept us engaged and his theatrics helped carry his ideas into the next conversation. I have always thought one could learn a lot about marketing ideas from Mancur.

My third and fondest memory of Mancur was his treatment of graduate students like equals. Mancur wanted to get the theory right, but he never had an ego that needed to be stroked nor did he look down on those beneath his station. Our paths crossed on the way to the doctoral graduation ceremonies in 1997. I was getting hooded. Mancur was hooding someone else. Somehow Mancur and I got caught in the basement of the building where the procession would stage and the ceremonies would ultimately

take place. The two of us wandered through that building for about thirty minutes, hopelessly lost in a series of narrow corridors. At most corners, Mancur would smile and ask “now which way do you think we should go?” He never got frustrated. He just laughed and pondered the best way to solve our problem objectively. When we were not making much progress, Mancur faded back to his first love of academics and asked me about my dissertation. It applied his theory of collective action to state cooperation under the Articles of Confederation. Mancur was more interested in the intellectual aspects of our journey than how we might get out of our maze. After a while, he left the wonderings to me and the ponderings to himself. He was trying to understand my ideas and politely take them to the next level. As we were just about to find our way out of the warren, Mancur very supportively said he liked my dissertation and thought I should publish it as a book. That was perhaps my greatest memory of Mancur because it came from someone I truly admired, who did not praise everyone, even though he supported us all.

I asked Mancur if he would join my dissertation committee a year or two earlier, but he was too busy and initially turned me down. A month later I received a memo from him on letter head with a single sentence written about a third of the way down the page. It read something like “I have read your prospectus and would be happy to serve on your committee as a caboose, but not as an engine.” He signed the letter and stuffed into campus mail. At that point, I already had five people on my committee and turned down his late offer to avoid a sixth. This explains why he did not know my dissertation when we were lost in the tunnel. It also demonstrates, yet again, his endless generosity.

Although Mancur was incredibly gracious with his time and treated all of us as one of his many students, he never read a complete version of my manuscript. He died in February 1998 at a loss to his students and to the social sciences. He had a great mind full of bold ideas. But he was also someone who could create fond memories in us all. For that, we posthumously offer him our sincerest thanks.

REFERENCES

Olson, Mancur. (1982). *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. New York: Yale University Press.

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