

Better than Ploughing

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1. Family origins

My title's description of an academic career is taken directly from Frank B. Knight, from whom I take so much. Nonetheless, my origins in the rural agricultural poverty of the upper south (Tennessee) in the United States, along with the sometimes pretentious efforts of the middle-class poor to impose social distinctions, are surely explanatory elements in any narrative account of my own history.

My family was poor, but, in the county, it was important. My grandfather, John P. Buchanan, was the county's only Governor of the State of Tennessee. He was a one-term phenomenon, having been elected as the nominee of the Farmers' Alliance party, one of the several successful Populist electoral triumphs in 1891. By 1893, the Democratic Party had put its house in order, and the Populists had seen their best days. But Buchanan's governorship established the family in the community. The local public school which I attended for ten years was named Buchanan School.

My father was the youngest of a large family, to whose lot fell the operation of the family farm after his siblings had departed. I grew up in a huge house on a hill, in varying states of disrepair, on a farm that had no owner. It was owned by "the Buchanan estate," which was not divided until the farm was sold in 1944, and long after I had entered military service. My father had no incentive for effective maintenance. He was a jack of all trades, a farmer, a sometime carpenter, veterinarian, insulator, and equipment operator. He was locally political, a community Justice of the Peace during all of my childhood. A handsome man, he had been a fine athlete (two years varsity football at the University of Oklahoma);

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and with a fine sense of humour, he was a favourite with the ladies. He was possessed by intense personal courage; he made no pretence to intellectual interests.

My mother was the best and the brightest of a family of deputy sheriffs and Presbyterian preachers which had toughly the same class standing as my father's. As was general in rural Tennessee in the early years of this century, both families were pure Scots-Irish. My mother, Lila Scott, finished high school, took teacher training, and taught for a decade before meeting my father. Hers was the most curious mind I have known; she devoured anything she could find to read, and she was not discriminating, with interests ranging at least from Latin grammar through calculus through Zane Gray westerns. She, too, assumed easily a leadership role in the local community, organizing the parent's association for the school, rising rapidly to county and regional offices. But, for this narrative, she was my teacher, and beyond the teacher that is in all mothers. She advanced me two grades by home instruction, and helped me in assignments through college years.

2. Early education

From my early years, I was assigned the role as family successor to my grandfather. I was to be the lawyer-politician, and Vanderbilt University (pre-law, then law) was understood as the final rung on my educational ladder. There were early family misgivings about my personality; I did not exhibit the behaviour of the exaggerated extrovert required for any budding politician. But law remained my career focus, and I was trained in public speaking. Economic reality destroyed this dream; Vanderbilt moved beyond the possible as the Great Depression moved in. College was what I could afford, Middle Tennessee State Teachers' College in Murfreesboro, which allowed me to live at home and to earn enough for fees and books by milking dairy cows morning and night for four years.

My college education was non-systematic and stochastic. There was waste in the requirements in formal education, and poor instruction in

biology, history, psychology, economics, and other subjects. But there was much of value in my exposure to Shakespeare, modern poetry, mathematics, and physics. When I finished, I had accumulated majors in three areas – mathematics, English literature, and social science, including economics. These college years were important as confidence builders; by the end of my second year my academic standing was the best in the college; the country boy more than held his own against the boys and girls from the towns.

Upon graduation in 1940, I faced three options – school teaching at \$65 per month; employment in a Nashville bank at \$75 per month, and a \$50 per month fellowship in Economics at the University of Tennessee. My career as an economist was settled by the dominance of the third opportunity, not by any desire to save the world. The 1940-1941 graduate year in Knoxville, Tennessee helped me meet the world beyond. I learned no economics during that year, but I did learn about women and whiskey, which, after all, are important parts of an education. There were few good economists on the faculty, but I was exposed to a genuine scholar, a man whose work habits were important in shaping my own. Charles P. White became my example of the research economist, who took his position seriously and conveyed to me the notion that there is, after all, a moral element in academic employment. It was White also who, despite his own self-acknowledged limits in these respects, strongly advised me to stick with economic theory as the basis for all applications.

Plans were open beyond the one-year until I secured a fellowship in Statistics at Columbia University for the 1941-1942 academic year. But before I could take up this appointment, I was drafted into military service, and found myself in the United States Navy by August 1941.

I had an easy war. After officer training in New York, and a special stint at the Naval War College, I was assigned to the operations staff of Admiral C.W. Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet. Aside from a six-weeks experience gathering tour at sea during one of the island invasions, I worked throughout the war at Pearl Harbor and at Guam, at fleet headquarters control deep in the bowels of the earth. I enjoyed the military, the colleagues, the work and the setting; and I was good at the job. For the first and only time in my life, I worked closely with men who

were important in shaping the lives and destinies of many others. I saw these military leaders as ordinary mortals, trying to do their job within the constraints they faced, and burdened with their own prejudices like everyone else. This experience has helped me throughout my academic career; I have been able to relegate to the third order of smalls the sometime petty quarrels that seem to motivate professors everywhere, both in their roles as instructors and as research scholars.

In one sense my only career choice involved the decision to leave the navy and return to civilian life. This decision was not easy; I knew the important persons, who urged me to stay; I had enjoyed the four years. But I made the correct choice, and was discharged in late 1945. With the GI government subsidy for further schooling available, and with a new wife for partial support, I considered alternative graduate schools. Columbia University no longer beckoned because New York City had not made me want to return. I knew nothing about the competence or the ideological makeup of the University of Chicago economics faculty. But a teacher from my undergraduate days at Middle Tennessee, with a Chicago Ph.D. in political science, conveyed to me the intellectual excitement of the place. Off to Chicago I went in late 1945, along with the many others who were just returning from military service.

3. Chicago, Frank Knight, and Knut Wicksell

Had I known about the ideological character of the Chicago faculty I might have chosen to go elsewhere. I was not overtly political or ideological in my salad days; emerging from the family populist tradition, I grew up in a solidly Democratic setting, with Roosevelt emerging as the popular leader in the 1930s. I was basically populist and pacifist. But officer training school in New York radicalized me. Along with many others, I was subjected to overt discrimination based on favouritism for products of the eastern establishment universities. This sobering experience made me forever sympathetic to those who suffer discriminatory treatment, and it forestalled any desire to be a part of any eastern establishment institution.

When I reached the University of Chicago, I was what I now best describe as a libertarian socialist. I had always been anti-state, anti-government, anti-establishment. But this included the establishment that controlled the United States economy. I had grown up on a reading diet from my grandfather's attic piled high with the radical pamphlets of the 1890s. The robber barons were very real to me.

At Chicago, I found myself no different from my graduate student colleagues, almost all of whom were socialist of one or another stripe. But within six weeks after enrolment in Frank Knight's course in price theory, I had been converted into a zealous advocate of the market order. Frank Knight was not an ideologue, and he made no attempt to convert anybody. But I was, somehow, ready for the understanding of economic process that his teaching offered. I was converted by the power of ideas, by an understanding of the model of the market. This experience shaped my attitude toward the use and purpose of economic instruction; if I could be converted so could others.

Frank Knight was *the* intellectual influence during my years at the University of Chicago, and his influence increased over subsequent years, enhanced by the development of a close personal relationship. Knight became my role model, without which I wonder what turns I might have taken. The qualities of mind that Knight exhibited were, and remain, those that I seek to emulate: the willingness to question anything, and anybody, on any subject anytime; the categorical refusal to accept anything as sacred; the genuine openness to all ideas; and, finally, the basic conviction that most ideas peddled about are nonsense or worse when examined critically.

A second Chicago event profoundly affected my career. Having finished my work, including the German language examination, I had the leisure of a scholar without assignments in the Harper Library stacks during three months of the summer of 1948. By sheer chance, I pulled Knut Wicksell's 1896 dissertation on taxation from the shelves, a book that was untranslated and unknown. The effect on me was dramatic. Wicksell laid out before me a set of ideas that seemed to correspond precisely with those that I had already in my head, ideas that I could not have expressed and would not have dared to express in the public finance

mindset of the time. Wicksell told us that if economists really want to apply the test of efficiency to the public sector, only the rule of unanimity for collective choice offers the procedural guarantee. If we seek reform in economic policy, we should change the rules under which political agents or representatives act. Economists should, once and for all, cease and desist proffering advice to non-existent benevolent despots. Wicksell's were heady words, and from that day, I was determined to translate Wicksell's contribution into English.¹

Visitors to my office know that photographs of only two economists grace the walls, Frank Knight and Knut Wicksell. I consider them co-equals, Knight in his influence on my attitudes toward the world of ideas generally, and Wicksell in his influence on the specific ideas that have come to be associated with my work in public choice and constitutional economics. Both of these influences were embedded in my psyche when I left Chicago in mid 1948.

I entered the highly competitive world of American academia with no conscious sense of intellectual direction. In one of my first articles, based in part on the Wicksell exposure and, in part, by reading a translation of De Viti De Marco, I called for a tie-in between the theory of the state and norms for taxation. The point seemed so simple, indeed obvious, yet so locked in was the utilitarian mind-set of orthodox public finance that the article was widely cited as seminal. In 1951, Kenneth Arrow published his widely heralded book on the general impossibility theorem. For three years, I was bemused by the failure of reviewers and critics to make the obvious point that the whole Arrow construction was inappropriate for a democratic society. Why should the social ordering satisfy consistency norms if individual values and preferences generated inconsistencies? I published a review article in 1954 that few economists understood then, or understand now. Almost as a footnote, I published a second short article comparing individual choice in voting and in the market. Again, the points made seemed simple, but surprisingly no one had made such a basic comparison. In those two papers, there were

¹ My translation of the centrally important part of the book was published in *Classics in the Theory of Public Finance* (1958).

elements of much that was later to be developed in my contributions to public choice.

The two 1954 papers were published in the *Journal of Political Economy*, under the editorship of Earl J. Hamilton, who deserves special mention in this narrative. I had not taken his courses at the University of Chicago, and only in my last few months there did I get to know him personally. But we did establish a friendship, and from him I got the advice that one major key to academic success was to “keep the ass to the chair,” a rule that I have followed and that I have passed along to several generations of students. But Hamilton’s influence was not primarily in this piece of advice. Through his editorship of the journal, he encouraged rather than discouraged me as a potential author; he was a tough editor, but his comments/reactions were never wholly negative, and it was only after several submissions that the two 1954 pieces were hammered into acceptable shape. Negation at that stage of my career might have been fatal.

4. The Italian year

Hamilton was also influential in encouraging me to keep up with the languages, and I commenced to learn to read Italian. I wanted to go to Italy for a year’s reading in the classical works in public finance theory. I got a Fulbright grant for the 1955-1956 academic year, which I spent in Perugia and Rome. This Italian year was critical in the development of my ideas on the importance of the relationship between the political structure and the positive and normative theory of economic policy. The Italians had escaped the delusions of state omniscience and benevolence that had clouded the minds of England and German language social philosophers and scientists. The Italians had long since cut through the absurdities of Benthamite utilitarianism and Hegelian idealism. Real rather than idealized politics, with real persons as actors – these were the building blocks in the Italian constructions, whether those of the cooperative-democratic state or the ruling class-monopoly state. Exposure to this Italian conceptualization of the state was necessary to

enable me to break out of the idealistic-utilitarian mindset that still imposes its intellectual straitjacket on many of my peers in social science. The Italian year was also important in the more general sense of offering insights into the distinctly non-American historical-cultural environment.

5. Public debt and opportunity cost

The Italian research year was indirectly responsible for one strand of my work that may seem to represent a side alley, namely, my work in the theory of public debt, which was less successful in convincing my economist peers than other work in public choice and public finance. At the very end of the Italian year, I suddenly ‘saw the light.’ I realized that the whole conventional wisdom on public debt was simply wrong, and that the time had come for a restoration of the classical theory, which was correct in all its essentials. I was as excited by this personal discovery as I had been by the discovery of the Wicksell book almost a decade earlier. Immediately on my return to America in 1956, I commenced my first singly authored book, *Public Principles of Public Debt* (1958).

In my overall assessment, the work on public debt was not a digression. This work was simply another extension or application of what can be discerned as a central theme in my efforts from the very first papers written. I have been consistently reductionist in that I have insisted that analysis be factored down to the level of choices faced by individual actors. The orthodox theory of public debt that I challenged embodied a failure to treat relevant choice alternatives. My reasoning, once again, was simple. National economies, as such, cannot enjoy gains or suffer losses. The fact that making guns ‘uses up’ resources in years of war tells us nothing at all about *who* must pay for those guns, and *when*. The whole macroaggregation exercise that had captured the attention of post-Keynesian economists was called into question.

My work on public debt stirred up considerable controversy in the early 1960s, and I realized that the ambiguity stemmed, in part, from an absence of clarity in my initial challenge. Confusion centred around the conception of opportunity cost, and I laid my plans to write a short book,

which I consider my best work in economic theory, narrowly defined. This book, *Cost and Choice* (1969), again emphasizes my central theme, the reduction of analysis to individual choice settings, which, in this extension, implies the necessity of defining cost in utility rather than commodity dimensions.

6. Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*, and Public Choice

I first encountered Gordon Tullock in 1958, when he came to the University of Virginia as a postdoctoral research fellow. I was impressed by his imagination and originality, and by his ability to recognize easily the elements of my own criticism of public debt orthodoxy. Tullock insisted not only that analysis be reduced to individual choice but, also, that individuals be modelled always as maximizers of self-interest, a step that I had sometimes been unwilling to take, despite my exposure to the Italians. Tullock wrote his seminal paper on the working of simple majority rule, and we decided to collaborate on a book that would examine the individual's choice among alternative political rules. We more or less explicitly considered our exercise to be an implicit defence of the Madisonian structure embodied in the United States Constitution.

The Calculus of Consent (1962) was the first work in what we now call 'constitutional economics,' and it achieved the status of a 'classic' in public choice theory. In retrospect, it is interesting, to me, that there was no sense of 'discovery' at any point in that book's construction, no moment of excitement akin to those accompanying either the discovery of the Wicksell book or the insight into public debt theory. Tullock and I considered ourselves to be applying relatively simple economic analysis to the choice among alternative political decision rules, with more or less predictable results. We realized that no one had attempted to do precisely what we were doing, but the exercise was essentially one of 'writing out the obvious' rather than opening up wholly new areas for inquiry.

We were wrong. Public choice, as a subdiscipline in its own right, emerged in the early 1960s, in part from the reception of our book, in part from our own organizational-entrepreneurial efforts which later emerged

in the Public Choice Society, in part from others' works. Once the whole complex web of political decision rules and procedures was opened up for economic analysis, the range of application seemed open ended. Public choice, in the 1960s was both exciting and easy; it is not surprising that graduate students in our program at Virginia were highly successful and that budding economists and political scientists quickly latched onto the new subdiscipline.²

My own work does not exhibit a dramatic switching to public choice economics from standard public finance. As I have noted above, from my earliest papers I had emphasized the importance of political structure, a conviction that was strengthened by my exposure to the Italians. Immediately after my excursion into the theory of public debt and before collaboration with Tullock on *The Calculus of Consent*, I wrote a long survey essay on the Italian tradition in public finance and published this essay, along with other pieces in *Fiscal Theory and Political Economy* (1960). Considered as a package, my work over the decade 1956-1966 involved filling in gaps in the taxonomy of public goods theory along with various attempts to factor down familiar propositions in theoretical welfare economics into individualized choice settings. The paper "Externality" (1962), written jointly with W.C. Stubblebine, was an amalgamation of strands of argument from Wicksell, Coase, and Pigou. The paper "An Economic Theory of Clubs" (1965) was a filling in of an obvious gap in the theory of public goods.

During the early 1960s, my work specifically shifted toward an attempt to tie two quasi-independent strands of inquiry together, those of orthodox public finance and the theory of political decision structure. The result was a relatively neglected book, *Public Finance in Democratic Process* (1967), which contained implications for normative theory that remain unrecognized by modern research scholars.

The research program embodied in elementary public choice theory developed almost naturally in a sequence of applications to the theory of economic policy. The whole of the Keynesian and post-Keynesian theory of macroeconomic management (including monetarism) depends

² For two volumes devoted largely to applications, see Buchanan and Tollison (1972; 1984).

critically on the presumption that political agents respond to considerations of ‘public interest’ rather than to the incentives imposed upon them by constituents. Once these agents are modelled as ordinary persons, the whole policy structure crumbles. This basic public-choice critique of the Keynesian theory of policy was presented in *Democracy in Deficit* (1977), written jointly with Richard E. Wagner. I have often used the central argument of this book as the clearest example of the applicability of elementary public choice theory, the implications of which have been corroborated in the accumulating evidence provided by the regime of quasi-permanent budget deficits.

7. Between anarchy and Leviathan

Through the middle 1960s, my analysis and interpretation of the workings of democratic politics were grounded in a relatively secure belief that, despite the many political failures that public choice theory allows us to identify, ultimately the governing authorities, as constrained by constitutional structure, respond to and implement the values and preferences of individual citizens. This belief in the final efficacy of democratic process surely affected my analysis, even if unconsciously, and allowed me to defend the essential ‘logic’ of political institutions in being against the sometimes naive proposals made by social reformers.

This foundational belief was changed by the events of the late 1960s. I lost my ‘faith’ in the effectiveness of government as I observed the explosive take-off in spending rates and new programs, engineered by self-interested political agents and seemingly divorced from the interests of citizens. At the same time, I observed what seemed to me to be a failure of the institutional structure, at all levels, to respond effectively to mounting behavioural disorder. The United States government seemed to take on aspects of an agent-driven Leviathan simultaneously with the emergence of anarchy in civil society.

What was happening, and how could my explanatory model be applied to the modified reality of the late 1960s and early 1970s? I sensed the necessity of plunging much deeper into basic political philosophy

than heretofore, and I found it useful to examine more closely the predicted operating properties of both anarchy and Leviathan. I was fortunate in that I located colleagues who assisted and greatly complemented my efforts in each case. Winston C. Bush formalized the anarchy of the Hobbesian jungle in terms of modern economic theory. Bush's independent and foundational analysis provided me with the starting point for the book that remains the most coherent single statement of my research program, *The Limits of Liberty* (1975).

Although chapters in that book raised the threat of the Leviathan state, I had not worked out the formal analysis. Again I was lucky to be able to work with Geoffrey Brennan in pushing along this frontier of inquiry. We commenced the exciting project that emerged as *The Power to Tax* (1980). That book explored the implications of the hypothesis that government maximizes revenues from any taxing authority constitutionally granted to it. Such analysis seems required for any informed constitutional calculus involving a grant of taxing power to government. As reviewers noted, the result of our analysis here was to stand much of the conventional wisdom in normative tax theory on its head.

8. Constitutionalism and the social contract

As I noted earlier, *The Calculus of Consent* (1962) was the first explicit contribution in the research program that we now call 'constitutional economics' or 'constitutional political economy.' Gordon Tullock and I were analyzing the individual's choice among alternative rules for reaching political decisions, rules to which he, along with others, would be subject in subsequent periods of operation. Such a choice setting is necessarily different in kind from that normally treated by economists, which is the choice among end objects within well-defined constraints. In a very real sense, the choice among rules becomes a choice among constraints, and, hence, involves a higher-state calculus of decision than that which most economists examine.

We were initially influenced to analyze the choice among political rules by at least two factors that I can now identify. First, we were

dissatisfied by the apparent near-universal and unquestioned acceptance of majority rule as the ideal for collective decision processes. Secondly, we were influenced by our then colleague, Rutledge Vining, himself an early student of Frank Knight, who hammered home to all who would listen that economic policy choices are not made among allocations or distributions, but are, necessarily, among rules or institutions that generate patterns of allocations and distributions. Vining's emphasis was on the stochastic nature of these patterns of outcomes and on the necessity for an appreciation for and understanding of the elementary theory of probability.

How does a person choose among the rules to which he will be subject? Vining took from Knight, and passed along to me, a fully sympathetic listener, the analogy with the choice of rules in ordinary games, from poker to basketball. The chooser, at the rule-choosing or constitutional stage of deliberation, cannot identify how any particular rule will precisely affect his own position in subsequent rounds of play. Who can he know how the cards will fall? The choice among rules is, therefore, necessarily made under what we should now call a 'veil of uncertainty.' *The Calculus of Consent* was our straightforward extension of this nascent research program to the game of politics.

In constitutional choice there is no well-defined maximand analogous to that which describes garden-variety economic choice. The individual may still be modelled as a utility maximizer, but there is no readily available means of arraying alternatives. The formal properties of choice under uncertainty, properties that have been exhaustively explored during the middle decades of this century, did not concern us. But we did sense the positive value of the uncertainty setting in opening up the potential for agreement on rules. If an individual cannot know how specific rules will affect his own position, he will be led to choose among rules in accordance with some criterion of generality rather than particularity. And if all persons reason similarly, the prospects for some Wicksellian-like agreement on rules are much more favourable than prospects for agreement on political choices to be made within a defined rules structure. In my own interpretation, in *The Calculus of Consent*, Tullock and I were shifting the Wicksellian unanimity norm for

efficiency in collective choice from the in-period level, where its limits are severe, to the constitutional level where no comparable limits are present.

This construction in *The Calculus of Consent* was essentially worked out independently of the comparable construction of John Rawls. But discovery of his early paper on “Justice as Fairness” during the course of writing our book served to give us confidence that we were on a reasonable track. As early as the late 1950s, Rawls had spelled out his justice-as-fairness criterion and had introduced early versions of his veil of ignorance, which was to become universally familiar after the publication of his acclaimed treatise, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). The coincidence both in the timing of our initial work and in the basic similarity in analytical constructions has made me share an affinity with Rawls that has seemed mysterious to critics of both of us.

The subject matter of economics has always seemed to me to be the institution of exchange, embodying agreement between or among choosing parties. The Wicksellian extension of the exchange paradigm to the many-person collective has its most direct application in the theory of public finance, but when applied to the choices among political rules the analysis moves into areas of inquiry that are foreign to economists. At this research juncture, the disciplinary base merges into political philosophy, and the exchange paradigm becomes a natural component of a general contractarian theory of political interaction. Almost by definition, the economist who shifts his attention to political process while retaining his methodological individualism must be contractarian.

As noted earlier, my emphasis has been on factoring down complex interactions into individual choice components and, where possible, to explain and interpret such interactions in terms of cooperation rather than conflict models. Interpersonal, intergroup, and inter-party conflict can scarcely be left out of consideration when we examine ordinary politics within defined constitutional structures. The contractarian or exchange program must shift, almost by necessity, to the stage of choices among rules. The contractarian becomes a constitutionalist, and I have often classified my own position with both these terms.

I have continued to be surprised at the reluctance of my colleagues

in the social sciences, and especially in economics, to share the contractarian-constitutionalist research program and to understand the relevance of looking at politics and governance in terms of the two-stage decision process. A substantial share of my work over the decade 1975-1985 involved varying attempts to persuade my peers to adopt the constitutional attitude. In two volumes of collected essays, *Freedom in Constitutional Contract* (1978), and *Liberty, Market, and State* (1985), as well as in a book jointly with Geoffrey Brennan, *The Reason of Rules* (1985), I sought to defend the contractarian-constitutionalist methodology in many applications.

9. Academic exit and Virginia political economy

Both in response to the demands of the series of autobiographical essays in which this paper appears and to my own preferences, I have, aside from the first two background sections, concentrated on the intellectual record, on the development of the ideas that have characterized my work, and on the persons and events that seem to have affected these ideas. I have deliberately left out of account the details of my personal, private experiences over the course of a long career. My essay would, however, be seriously incomplete if I should neglect totally the influences of the academic-intellectual environments within which I have been able to pursue my work, including the stimulation I have secured from colleagues, staff, and students, whose names are not entered in these accounts.

I cannot, of course, test what ‘might have been’ had I chosen academic settings other than I did select. I feel no acute sense of high opportunities missed, nor do I classify any choices made as having been grossly mistaken. I have exercised the academic exit option that the competitive structure of the United States academy offers. In so doing, I have reduced the ability of those who might have sought to modify the direction of my research and teaching efforts, while, at the same time, I have secured the benefits from the unintended consequences that shifts in location always guarantee.

This much said, I would be remiss if I did not include some form of

tribute to the three academic settings within Virginia that have provided me with professional breathing space for almost all of my career. Mr. Jefferson's 'academical village,' the University of Virginia, where I spent twelve years, 1956-1968, allowed Warren Nutter and me full rein in establishing the Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy. This Center, as an institution, encouraged me, and others, to counter the increasing technical specialization of economics and, for me, to keep the subject matter interesting when the discipline, in more orthodox hands, threatened to become boring in the extreme. Virginia Polytechnic Institute, or VPI, where I spent fourteen years, 1969-1983, allowed Charles Goetz, Gordon Tullock, and me to organize the Center for Study of Public Choice, a center that became, for a period in the 1970s and early 1980s, an international haven for research scholars who sought some exposure to the blossoming new subdiscipline of public choice. Finally, George Mason University, to which the whole Center shifted in 1983, insured continuity in my research emphasis and tradition, even beyond that of my active career.

10. Retrospective

Other contributors to this series have discussed the influences on their developments as 'economists.' I am not at all sure that I qualify for inclusion in terms of this professional or disciplinary classification. I am not, and have never been, an 'economist' in any narrowly defined meaning. My interests in understanding how the economic interaction process works has always been instrumental to the more inclusive purpose of understanding how we can learn to live one with another without engaging in Hobbesian war and without subjecting ourselves to the dictates of the state. The 'wealth of nations,' as such, has never commanded my attention, save as a valued by-product of an effectively free society. The ways and means through which the social order might be made more 'efficient' in the standard meaning – these orthodox guidelines have carried relatively little weight for me.

Neither have I considered myself a 'pure scientist' and my work as

‘pure science.’ I have not been engaged in some exciting quest for discovery of a reality that exists independently of our own making. I have sensed acutely the exhilaration in ideas that is shared by all scientists in the broader meaning, but the ideas that capture my attention are those that, directly or indirectly, explain how freely choosing individuals can secure jointly desired goals. The simple exchange of apples and oranges between two traders – this institutional model is the starting point for all that I have done. Contrast this with the choice between apples and oranges in the utility-maximizing calculus of Robinson Crusoe. The second model is the starting point for most of what most economists do.

If this difference between my foundational model and that of other economists is recognized, my work takes on an internal coherence and consistency that may not be apparent absent such recognition. The coherence was not, of course, a deliberately chosen element of a research program. I have written largely in response to ideas that beckoned, ideas that offered some intellectual challenge and that had not, to my knowledge, been developed by others. I have rarely been teased by either the currency of policy topics or the fads of academic fashion, and when I have been so tempted my work has suffered. The coherence that the work does possess stems from the simple fact that I have worked from a single methodological perspective during the four decades that span my career to date, along with the fact that I have accepted the normative implications of this perspective. The methodological perspective and the normative stance are shared by few of my peers in modern social science. This location of my position outside the mainstream has the inestimable value of providing me with the continuing challenge to seek still other ideas and applications that may, ultimately, shift the frontier of effective agreement outward.

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