

MY REMEMBRANCES OF MANCUR¹

Jac C. Heckelman*
Wake Forest University

Mancur Olson taught the very first graduate course I ever took – Macroeconomic Theory. It was quite unlike the Microeconomic Theory or Econometrics courses I was also immersed in that semester, and bore no resemblance to the Macroeconomics Theory classes taught by other professors in the second half of the fall, and the spring semesters. For that, I am grateful.

When I began the graduate program in economics at University of Maryland in the fall of 1989, the macroeconomics coordinator, who would normally have taught the first half-semester, was on leave and Mancur took his place in the classroom. We were assigned a standard macro textbook, Branson (1989), but he scarcely, if ever, made reference to it. Instead of developing the standard tools of macro, we learned about *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982), and his off-and-on again project for moving “beyond the measuring rod of money”.²

I came into the program at Maryland with a strong background in mathematics but a weak comprehension of traditional economics. So when I arrived at Maryland, I could follow all the proofs in Micro Theory but had little understanding of why they were important. Olson’s Macro class, in contrast, focused on ideas rather than tools. Whereas lectures from the other macro professors during my first year were dry (and to my perspective, sometimes pointless), Olson’s were always interesting. No one would become a great modern macro theorist taking Olson’s class, but looking back, I did learn to appreciate the importance of ideas. I’ve tried to incorporate this appreciation into my own work.

A few incidents involving Mancur stand out after more than 25 years. First, because he had assigned his own book (*Rise and Decline*) as part of the macro course, Mancur did not want to take advantage of this power and wrote individual checks to every student in the class for reimbursement of the royalty portion of the price of a relatively inexpensive paperback book. If I recall, the check amounted to just under \$2. I felt silly cashing the check and never did. I think several of my classmates felt

* Jac C. Heckelman, Wake Forest University; email: heckeljc@wfu.edu

¹ I extend thanks to Keith Dougherty and Dennis Coates for their comments.

² Ideas related to this (money and property rights) would eventually become part of Clague et al. (1996, 1999).

the same. I wonder how many students over the years fouled up his checking account balances by never cashing checks he wrote.

Olson's well-known absent-mindedness was often amusing at the time, but occasionally only in hindsight. As an example of the latter, consider my mid-term (or final?) exam for which I wrote so much that I went into a second blue book. When I later went to retrieve my grade from Mancur's secretary, I was informed that he only had one of my blue books and must have misplaced the other. My final grade for the semester ended up as a B++ (something I think was invented just for me), but since the University of Maryland was not on a plus/minus system, I wound up officially with a B. I never did ask Mancur what I could have done to instead earn an A-.

In my third year of graduate school, I became his research assistant. My main tasks were comparing capital to labor ratios for developed and developing dyads, and assisting on manuscript editing for clarity and page length considerations for journal submissions. Apparently, Mancur would later become confused on some of these projects. For example, I am thanked in a footnote for my research assistance on his Distinguished Lecture to the AEA published in *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Olson 1996), but do not recall ever working on that (at least not directly) – perhaps the absent-mindedness is my own. Also, at one point Mancur gave me two of his other books (he knew I already had *Rise and Decline* from taking his class): *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) and *How Bright are the Northern Lights?* (1990), the latter of which applied the ideas of *Rise and Decline* to Sweden and had just been published. Being gracious, Mancur had signed both of the books but did not pay very close attention to what he was doing. In the book on Sweden, the signature simply notes “To Jac Heckelman – Mancur Olson Oct 25, 1991” whereas he signed the *Logic* as “To Jac Heckelman with thanks for good help and criticism – Mancur Olson Oct 28, 1991”. So as I like to alert students in my own public choice classes, their professor is apparently so insightful that I was able to help develop and critique a book that was published two years before I was even born.

Mancur was gracious in other ways as well. I received a departmental dissertation fellowship for my fourth year and then taught for the first time in my fifth (final) year. Mancur did not serve on my dissertation committee so I did not have any more direct involvement with him after year three. Yet he continued to look out for me. I proceeded to strike out on the regular economics job market, getting only three interviews (one academic) at ASSA that year, and no fly-outs. Word eventually must have gotten around to Mancur who put me in touch with Bryan Jack, a former student of his at the Pentagon (I had met him once before – we overlapped by a single year in the program) who was willing to offer me a position but by that time I had just accepted a one-year visiting position at Wake Forest University.

I next saw Mancur at my graduation the following winter. I ran into him at the auditorium after the ceremony and he insisted on meeting my parents. Knowing I would eventually need to go back on the market, Mancur offered me a position at his IRIS (Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector) Center. IRIS was launched just before I began at Maryland and quickly flourished, largely funded by USAID and various developing country contracts. Several students and recent graduates (from University of Maryland and elsewhere) were now attached to IRIS projects. Mancur explained my “opportunity” to join IRIS would entail a two-year stint in Khazakstan. My mom was aghast. I declined.

I struck out once again on the academic market, but eventually was recruited to a position at Joint Warfare Analysis Center (US Department of Navy). Still, Mancur kept track of my career. After sending him an early draft of a paper (Heckelman 2000a), Mancur invited me to a conference sponsored by the Collective Choice Center at University of Maryland. And later, after I had returned to Wake Forest on a tenure-track position, Mancur offered to come to our department the next time he was visiting at University of North Carolina (about 90 minutes away). (That trip ended up being canceled.) Attached to a letter from him dated December 4, 1997 was a working paper he was particularly excited about, which would become Olson et al. (2000). Little did I know at the time that it would represent his final journal publication.

Early in the morning on February 20, 1998 I received a call at my office from Suzanne Gleason, another former student who was connected to IRIS. She told me of his death the previous day from an apparent heart attack while walking up the stairs to his office. It didn't seem all that long ago that I had been encountering Mancur in the hallway of the economics department during my graduate school days, him walking briskly toward me, slightly hunched over, bottom lip curled over his lower teeth, animated and smelling of coffee. Somewhat ironically, in my public choice class that day we were to discuss Mancur's work on collective action.

Mancur's passing forced me to reflect on him as a person and teacher-mentor--something I wish I had done more of while he was still around. Mancur's impact on my scholarship was indirect, rather than overt. I also came to realize that although he was very influential in how I approached various problems, I never worked on anything directly connected to *Logic* or *Rise and Decline*. I immediately set out to correct that with a short paper detailing an econometric problem in the literature relying on weak proxies to test Olson's theory of institutional sclerosis (Heckelman 2000b). Another former student from University of Maryland, Dennis Coates, contacted me after reading that paper and suggested we collaborate on a related idea. This has since become a new specialty of mine. I have now written more papers related to Olson's *Rise and Decline* than to any other specific topic.

Mancur's impact continued after his passing. In addition to individual retrospectives of Mancur's work (e.g. McLean 2000, Hinich and Munger 2004), special issues dedicated to Olson appeared in various journals, and Dennis and I were invited to contribute to one of them (Coates and Heckelman 2003). We also invited several of Mancur's former colleagues, coauthors and students to contribute to a volume (Heckelman and Coates 2003) centered on his life works, for which we received enthusiastic support from them. We later co-edited a symposium issue for *Southern Economics Journal* in 2007 commemorating the 25th anniversary of *Rise and Decline*, and I am currently editing a symposium issue of *Public Choice* commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Logic*. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to play a small role in encouraging continued appreciation of Mancur's ideas to a new generation of scholars. No doubt *Logic* will remain important when it reaches its 100th anniversary.

Although I only had Mancur as an instructor for one-half semester, and he did not serve on my dissertation committee, I nonetheless consider myself a student of Olson. So in the best Olsonian tradition, I have peppered this remembrance with various gratuitous self-citations.

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