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# Gordon Tullock's Legacy

## *An Introduction*

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Gordon Tullock was one of the founding fathers of the Virginia School of Political Economy. By consistently applying the insights and tools of economics to the questions of political science, his efforts have contributed significantly to political economy. In particular, the approach he advanced employs the assumption that actors are rational, self-interested, and goal oriented, whether they are acting as individuals in the private sector or in their capacity as voters and government officials, to understand the difficulty and importance of constitutional construction, the challenges of bureaucracy, the nature of regulations, the problem of rent seeking, and the limits of voting. Tullock's research also covers a range of topics beyond economics, including political science, law, biology, philosophy of science, and the public policy of income redistribution.

Trained as a lawyer at the University of Chicago and having spent considerable time in the military and the foreign service, Tullock was frequently able to glean aspects of the social world that other social theorists simply missed, and he almost always articulated his insights in a manner that set his economic writings apart. The most paradigmatic example of this, perhaps, is his discussion of government policies to promote safe driving. Rather than adopting policies such as mandating seatbelts or other measures that make "the inside of the car" safer for the driver, Tullock observed that "making the inside of the car less safe can increase the private cost to the driver of

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*The Independent Review*, v. 23, n. 2, Fall 2018, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2018, pp. 165-168.

having an accident” (McKenzie and Tullock 2012, 40). Policies that increase the likelihood that a driver will walk away unharmed from an accident will also increase the likelihood that drivers will be reckless. To drive the point home, Tullock asked the question, “Suppose the government were to require a dagger be mounted on the steering column pointed at the driver’s chest. Would the driver not be inclined to drive more safely?” (40). His conclusion was as surprising as it was logical. Moreover, it was consistent with his approach to political economy, which insisted that actors, regardless of setting and circumstances, are always self-interested creatures who weigh the costs and benefits of their actions.

The four papers in this symposium explore the legacy of Gordon Tullock. The paper by Peter Boettke and Rosolino Candela as well as the paper by Richard Wagner attempt to highlight the important features of Tullock’s approach. The papers by William Shughart and Randall Holcombe explore two of Tullock’s relatively understudied contributions to political economy: his critique of the common law and his work on the political economy of redistribution.

Boettke and Candela explore Tullock’s approach to political economy and argue that there were important links between his approach to economics and the approach advanced by Ludwig von Mises. They argue that whereas James Buchanan saw Tullock as a “natural-born economist,” he is more appropriately described as a “natural-born Misesian”: “Tullock, like Ludwig von Mises, understood *homo economicus* broadly as *homo agens*, or acting man, for whom choice is open-ended, rather than as a Robbinsian maximizer, for whom choice is a close-ended maximization of given means and given ends.” As Boettke and Candela note, Tullock’s first book, *The Politics of Bureaucracy* (1965), was inspired by his having read Mises’s book *Human Action* ([1949] 1966). In addition, as they highlight, there are various points of agreement between Tullock and Mises, including their shared recognition that all social settings are peopled with purposive, rational agents and their shared belief that it is the social scientist’s goal to explore how *homo agens* is influenced by the different institutional settings in which he is embedded.

Wagner attempts to disentangle Tullock’s approach to the economics of politics from James Buchanan’s approach. Although Tullock was a highly regarded thinker who was and is respected for his work in multiple fields, Wagner contends that he is still underappreciated. As Wagner suggests, at the time that Buchanan and Tullock wrote their most famous book *The Calculus of Consent* (1962), Tullock was very much Buchanan’s junior partner and, as a result, still remains somewhat in Buchanan’s shadow as a social theorist. According to Wagner, however, Tullock and Buchanan were not “invariant twins” (as we might sometimes imagine) but diverged quite dramatically. A key difference can be seen, Wagner suggests, in their books *The Limits of Liberty* (Buchanan 1975) and *The Social Dilemma* (Tullock 1974). According to Wagner, “Tullock theorized differently from Buchanan, and in several respects Tullock did not theorize from some *de novo* point of departure[, as Buchanan did]. Tullock always theorized from some actual and not imagined point of departure; he theorized in

medias res.” Whereas Buchanan theorized from east of Eden, beginning “from some abstract point of concord,” Tullock theorized from west of Babel, starting “from discord, with people having to find their way amid that discord.” The difference in their research programs, Wagner explains, is not widely noticed because Tullock’s research program was primarily implicit in his writings.

William Shughart outlines and critiques Tullock’s writings on the common law and the civil code. Tullock’s position on the common law is an outlier among the political economists we typically associate with him. Buchanan, for instance, has said positive things about the common law, at least about the common law’s facilitation of market activities. Similarly, Tullock’s views on the common law certainly run counter to F. A. Hayek’s views. Nonetheless, Tullock believed that the common law was inefficient relative to the civil code because of the common law’s reliance on the jury system, the adversarial character of common-law trials, and the common-law system’s rules of evidence. Each of these aspects, Tullock believed, make the common-law system vulnerable to corruption, errors of fact, errors of law, and rent seeking. But, as Shughart demonstrates, “any legal system administered by human beings over human beings” is likely to suffer from these defects. “What is true of Tullock’s criticisms of the common law,” as Shughart suggests, “also is largely true of Roman civil law.”

Finally, Randall Holcombe focuses on Tullock’s work on the political economy of redistribution and connects it with contemporary debates over inequality. Tullock argues that government efforts to redistribute income are generally inspired by a desire to receive transfers and are implemented because of the efforts by special interests. He explains that these programs usually fail to help the people they purport to help. Rather than helping the poor, for instance, redistribution schemes generally benefit the middle class. According to Holcombe, however, Tullock too quickly dismisses other motivations people might have for advocating redistribution schemes. Tullock does not, Holcombe notes, anticipate or address the arguments in favor of redistribution as a way to reduce inequality. Holcombe attempts to provide a response to the question of what to do about inequality that is consistent with Tullock’s approach.

The key theme throughout Tullock’s work is that economics is a tool that can be used to study and understand all human activity. Therefore, not surprisingly, his influence extends well beyond economics to include political science, law, biology, philosophy, and public policy. The papers in this symposium do not offer anything like a comprehensive survey of Tullock’s work, but, taken together, they highlight the uniqueness of his mind and speak to the range of topics he attempted to explore.

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