John Meadowcroft: James M. Buchanan

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This is book number 17 in a series on major libertarian and conservative thinkers. Meadowcroft, who is the series editor in addition to being the author of this volume, notes in the series introduction that Buchanan has explicitly rejected the conservative label. Nevertheless, he argues that “… conservative and libertarian thought cannot be fully understood without some knowledge…” of Buchanan’s intellectual contributions. The book is divided into four chapters: (1) Buchanan’s Intellectual Biography, (2) Buchanan’s Ideas, (3) The Reception and Influence of Buchanan’s Work, and (4) The Continuing and Future Relevance of Buchanan’s Ideas.

Chapter 2 is the strongest chapter in the book. Meadowcroft does a nice job of summarizing Buchanan’s published work, dividing Buchanan’s ideas logically rather than chronologically and showing how his ideas relate to each other. Meadowcroft subdivides Buchanan’s work into seven categories: (1) the methodological individualism that underlies all his work; (2) Buchanan’s analysis of democratic decision-making, including why people would choose to leave a state of nature to enter into political arrangements; (3) the role of rights; (4) the “constitutional moment” in which people enter into political arrangements, with an emphasis on the importance of unanimous agreement; (5) public goods and post-constitutional decision-making; (6) Buchanan’s normative commitment to democracy; and (7) the political problems people face in a post-constitutional setting. Meadowcroft’s taxonomy of Buchanan’s ideas is not the only possible one, but it seems like a good one, and someone wanting to get an overview of the general ideas in Buchanan’s large body of work would find Meadowcroft’s framework a good way of organizing those ideas.

Chapter 3 discusses the influence of Buchanan’s ideas by referencing the ideas explained in the previous chapter rather than citing the literature that builds on those ideas. This chapter also looks at Buchanan’s critics and defends Buchanan’s ideas against those critics. Meadowcroft makes no concessions to the critics, concluding (p. 157) “… these critiques have not been successful and have tended to demonstrate a failure to fully appreciate the nuances
of the public choice approach…” The chapter closes by talking about the public choice community, including the Public Choice Society and the journals Public Choice and Constitutional Political Economy.

Chapter 4 on the future relevance of Buchanan’s ideas spans only six pages and speculates that growing discontent with government will increase the influence of Buchanan’s ideas in the future.

The entire book references Buchanan’s work heavily, so in most cases if the reader wants to see where in Buchanan’s work Meadowcroft’s conclusions are supported, the citations are there to do so. The same is true of Chap. 1, which is an intellectual biography of Buchanan. Meadowcroft draws from a number of Buchanan’s works to put together this chapter. It is not a summary of Better than Plowing, or any other autobiographical work, but rather a compendium of Buchanan’s reflections on his intellectual history from various sources, all written by Buchanan. It might have been interesting for Meadowcroft to include some perspectives from others close to Buchanan’s intellectual enterprise, but it seems acceptable to write Buchanan’s intellectual biography as Buchanan himself tells it.

While most of Chap. 1, like the rest of the book, is heavily referenced so one can trace Meadowcroft’s discussion back to Buchanan’s own reflections, in a few cases Meadowcroft offers biographical details that are not entirely accurate. In Chap. 2, where Meadowcroft is summarizing Buchanan’s ideas, this may be acceptable and a matter of interpretation, but in a biography one would hope to get all the facts correct. In one place where the facts are not quite accurate, Meadowcroft (p. 17) mentions that Buchanan’s first book “… co-authored with colleagues Clark Allen and Marshall Colberg [was] an elementary public finance textbook that provided ample opportunity to explore the foundations of orthodox public finance scholarship.” Actually, Allen et al. (1954) was a textbook designed for a two-semester introductory course in economics, not a public finance textbook.

In the series introduction in the front of Meadowcroft’s book (p. iv), he defends including Buchanan in the series on conservative and libertarian thinkers, despite Buchanan’s (2005) book, Why I, Too, Am Not a Conservative. Meadowcroft might have referred to Chap. 34, the final chapter, of Allen et al. (1954), which is titled “Free Markets and Free Men,” to bolster his case. They defend the market allocation of resources over government intervention, saying (1954: 373) “Ultimately, therefore, the essential defense of the competitive system lies in its political as well as its economic aspects. It solves the economic problem without undue governmental direction of individuals or firms.”

Another inaccuracy, perhaps more significant, is Meadowcroft’s statement (p. 15), “Buchanan left Chicago in 1948 with the award of a PhD for his thesis, Fiscal Equity in a Federal State, supervised by Frank Knight…” In fact, Frank Knight was the second reader on Buchanan’s (1948) dissertation, and Roy Blough was Buchanan’s dissertation supervisor. This would be an easy mistake to make, because anybody who has spent time around Buchanan knows that he never simply refers to Frank Knight, but always adds two words to say “my teacher Frank Knight.” Further, there is no doubt that of all his professors, Knight had by far the biggest influence on Buchanan, and Buchanan (1992: 77) says Knight “… corrected my dissertation grammar in great detail,” perhaps creating the impression (though Buchanan does not say it) that Knight was the supervisor of his dissertation. A further difficulty in verifying Buchanan’s dissertation supervisor is that his dissertation in the University of Chicago library has no signature page and contains no acknowledgments. The identity of Buchanan’s dissertation supervisor is, perhaps, a small issue, but because Knight is identified as Buchanan’s dissertation supervisor in this biography, and I know of no other place (besides this review) that says in print who supervised Buchanan’s dissertation, this error is likely to be repeated, with Meadowcroft as the source, until this minor bit of history is rewritten.