Obituary

In Memoriam, Mancur Olson
1932–1998

If one were to use the current standard for excellence in research in economics – articles published in major refereed journals – there would be few if any 6-year periods during his academic career in which Mancur Olson would have accumulated a sufficient number to obtain tenure at a university like the University of Maryland. There will be no multi-volume sets collecting Mancur Olson’s published articles.

If one chooses as one’s standard for excellence citations in other people’s articles, one obtains an entirely different picture, however. Mancur Olson has for many years been among the most frequently cited members of the economics profession, with an unusually large fraction of his citations coming from outside of economics. His research has profoundly influenced the research of others in all branches of the social sciences.

At one point when I was a boy, I, like so many boys, became a fan of Sherlock Holmes and devoured one Conan Doyle story after another. I later moved to S.S. Van Dine, a writer of mysteries who is less well known today, but who was very popular in the 20s and 30s. After reading a couple of Van Dine’s mysteries, one began to observe a pattern. A crime occurred. Five or six people had a motive for committing the crime, and became the main suspects. Among these, however, there was always one person who for some reason would not have been actually able to commit the crime. In the final chapter, Phylo Vance, the book’s hero-detective assembles all of the suspects and reveals how the person who could not possibly have committed the crime did in fact do so.

There was an element of S.S. Van Dine in Olson’s work. The rise and decline of nations begins by posing a paradox. World War II destroyed much of the manufacturing base of the Axis powers and a large fraction of their prime age work force, while both the United States and Great Britain were left relatively intact. Why then did the losers so dramatically outperform the winners during the first generation following the war? The typical economist begins to answer this question by rounding up the usual suspects – capital stock growth, technological change, education of work force, and so on. An atypical economist or noneconomist might turn to the inherent industrious-
ness of the Germans and Japanese, the strength of family ties among Italians, and other sociological causes. These would not, of course, constitute the main components of the Olsonian explanation.

After brooding over the paradox for a while, and considering the inadequacy of the standard answers, someone who was familiar with Mancur Olson’s earlier writings might begin to suspect that the resolution of this paradox would somehow involve the deleterious effects of interest groups, that just as Professor Moriarty would so regularly pop up in a Conan Doyle story, somewhere in Olson’s story that arch-societal villain, the free-rider, would appear. And so he did. But this lack of the element of surprise did not detract from the value one obtained from seeing just how Mancur Olson would bring in interest groups and free-riders and with their help resolve the paradox.

Mancur was a master at constructing a logical argument and marshalling evidence, even if sometimes of an anecdotal form, in its favor. No reader of Olson soon forgets the main elements of his logical argument and the implications of his analysis. (Alas, I cannot say the same for all too many articles published today in the major refereed journals.) That Mancur Olson published somewhat less than many of those of equal stature in the profession can be explained by the care which he took to ensure that he had gotten his argument “right”, that he had neglected no counterargument, and that he had chosen the most convincing evidence to persuade the most skeptical reader. This care and skill in writing explains the hundreds of citations his work receives each year.

I have attended two conferences devoted to discussing the content of a forthcoming Olson book – one devoted to The rise and decline of nations, the other to his most recent book, Capitalism, socialism, and dictatorship. On both occasions several of the participants were quite knowledgeable of specific topics and claims made by Olson. At the The rise and decline conference, for example, there were economists from Sweden, Switzerland and some of the other countries that Olson focused upon, at the Capitalism, socialism, and dictatorship conference there were experts on the Soviet Union. On both occasions some of these experts took serious issue with claims made by Mancur in the book. Almost every participant in the conferences probably thought that Mancur was wrong about this or that factual detail. Yet, I believe, every participant came away from the conferences believing that Mancur’s basic argument was largely right. With Mancur Olson’s work, again in stark contrast to much else that gets published, the value of the whole is always much greater than the sum of the parts. No one could ever accuse Mancur Olson of failing to see the forest clearly. Indeed, it was because he focused upon the most basic and important questions, and saw the answers to these