The tools are in the saddle. The economist is not. As long ago as 1948, reviewing Samuelson’s *Foundations of Economic Analysis* when it first appeared, Kenneth Boulding (1948: 199) complained of ‘rapidly diminishing marginal productivity in the application of mathematics to economics’: ‘It may well be that the slovenly literary borderland between economics and sociology will be the most fruitful building ground during the years to come and that mathematical economics will remain too flawless in its perfection to be very fruitful’. Later on, at the very time that the students were revolting, Galbraith (1965: 38) was reiterating the message that the ‘slovenly’ was well suited to the ‘grubby’ and that the neoclassical mainstream was tuning out because reality was a bore: ‘It would be a mistake to identify complexity with completeness and sophistication with wisdom’. Still later it was the turn of Piketty (2014: 32): ‘The discipline of economics has yet to get over its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation, at the expense of historical research and collaboration with the other social sciences’. The heterodox knew that the orthodox held the commanding heights of path dependence, intellectual inertia, professional advancement and vested interest. They nonetheless believed that even a minority ought to make a stand.

Buchanan belonged to the minority who were trying to put economics back into economics. Proposing a personal manifesto entitled ‘Why I am Not an Economist’, he expressed his regret that equilibrium was taking the place of equilibration, comparative statics losing touch with market process. Instead of progress, he said, ‘I see a continuing erosion of the intellectual (and social) capital that was accumulated by “political economy” in its finest hours’ (WSED, 279). The ‘cross-disciplinary field’
(CW XVII, 20) of public choice is an integral part of his self-imposed mission to restore the wisdom of the classics to its rightful place.

Public choice is ‘a perspective on politics that emerges from an extension-application of the tools and methods of the economist to collective or nonmarket decision-making’ (CW XIII, 15). As a perspective rather than a cookery-book, it draws inspiration from a mix-and-match of organisational psychology, moral philosophy, social anthropology, economic history, strategic gaming, political sociology and market economics. It regards as especially fruitful the fresh insights into public policy that emerge from trespass at the borders of authority and exchange: ‘The student of economics can examine the working of a market system within a specified set of constraints; the student of politics can examine the organization and the processes through which social decisions are made. But the two must join in studying the effects of political or collective decisions on the economy’ (PF, ix).

The two must join and the blinkers must go: ‘We reject this set of blindfolds. We step back one stage, and we try to observe the political along with the economic process. We look at the political economy’ (AA, ix). An interdisciplinary synthesis alone can shed light on the workings of the whole. Social phenomena cannot be studied slice by slice. No one will trust a ‘bifurcated Rip Van Winkle’ (CW XIX, 162) who treats the disciplines as parallel lines that do not meet.

Exciting new lines of inquiry are opening up as a consequence of the tolerance of diversity and the interpenetration of perspectives. An ‘interdisciplinary communication network’ is developing within which a socially aware economist will find it easier to interact than he will with a symbol-crunching ‘dullard’ trained only to master routine regressions, with a ‘growth-model macroeconomist, with whom he scarcely finds any common ground’ (CW XVII, 20–1; WSED, 279). The homeless, rebelling against applied mathematics, are self-selecting their way into new networks of ‘specialized interdependence’ and new ‘movements towards professional institutionalization’ (CW XVII, 21). Public choice is a part of a general search for a macroscope that can pick out the broader picture.

Public choice is unique in that it makes free market search the axis of its wide-ranging quest. Buchanan states that ‘the perspectives of an economist are valuable in the discussion of basic issues of social philosophy’ (FCC, ix). They are valuable because they are bottom-up: ‘The more or less natural proclivity of economists is to look at individual behavior, at individual choice’ (CW XIII, 11). Public choice is individual choice. It is ‘An Individualistic Theory of Politics’ (CW I, 48).