

THE DEEDS OF MANCUR OLSON: A RIDE FROM PALMER HOUSE AND A MEETING IN LEFRAK HALL

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Mancur Olson used to say that interdisciplinary research is either very, very good, or very, very bad. His own contributions were beyond good and bad—they turned Olson into a classic during his lifetime. His name is widely recognized not just in economics but also in sociology and political science. Very few scholars have ever exerted a similar scope of influence.

Mancur was so well known that those who did not keep close tabs on such things commonly believed that he held the Nobel Prize in economics. Actually, he did not. No one, however, doubts that had he lived just a few years longer—Mancur was 66 when he died—he would have been awarded the Prize. Many of the Prize recipients have never enjoyed his fame or influence. In the social sciences Olson was unique.

Mancur had also a unique personality. For me it was never easy to separate Mancur, the man, from Mancur, the scholar, and maybe the two should not have been separated to begin with. Perhaps one would not exist without the other. This, I don't know. One thing I am sure about is that stories about Mancur should be told. We certainly owe it to him.

I usually remember people through a prism of interactions that my memory—for reasons I cannot know or explain—has chosen to retain. These interactions often tell more than I can describe in words. The following two are the stories of Mancur. I think that many similar stories can be told by others who knew him.

A Ride from Palmer House. When James Coleman was in the last stage of cancer, the University of Chicago awarded him the first Phoenix Prize. In presenting the award, Colin Lucas, Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, described it as follows: “This award is to be made only at rare intervals, to honor those who, over many years, have wrought fundamental changes in the way in which significant parts of the social sciences are practiced.” In addition to the award, the

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University also sponsored a conference on Coleman's work. The conference was meant to be a celebration of Coleman's life, a gathering of friends, colleagues and students who would share personal memories of Coleman and comment on his work and its significance.

When I was told about the Phoenix Prize, I shared this information by email with others who knew Coleman so they would have a chance to send him a personal note with congratulations. Mancur was in the group I had contacted. In fact, I told Mancur about the Phoenix Prize in person, as we would often run into each other on campus, and in his case, I thought that it was a more appropriate way of communicating the news about Coleman. As Mancur started asking me questions, my tongue must have slipped and I said something about the conference. I was invited to the conference but I did not think it was proper for me to talk about it to others since the event was meant to be by invitation. Mancur, in fact, was the only person I mentioned it to. I don't know why my tongue slipped when I talked to him but I do know that Mancur had that effect on people. The moment I mentioned the conference Mancur said, "I have to go. I have to see Jim. I have to." And so he did.

I knew that Mancur and Coleman had known each other for a long time, at least since their early involvement in the Public Choice Society. Olson was the Society's president in 1972-74 and Coleman in 1974-76. I was aware of all of that. I did not know, however, that there was a different source of their interactions. I was about to learn the story in a rather unusual setting.

After we had the conversation about Coleman, the next time I saw Mancur was on a taxi-van that was sent to take us from the Palmer House hotel in downtown Chicago, where the university had put us all up, to the Hyde Park campus of the University of Chicago where the conference was about to take place. It came to be a very memorable ride. Interestingly, as it turned out, all passengers in the van were connected in ways that none of them were aware of.

The four passengers in the van were Robert Merton, Mancur Olson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan¹ and I. For me it was an extraordinary company to share. I knew that Merton² was Coleman's mentor at Columbia University (Coleman was my mentor at the University of Chicago), but some new details of Olson and Moynihan's relations with Coleman were about to surface during the conversation we had on the way to the University of Chicago. More specifically, this is how the three were connected.

¹ Moynihan was a famous politician and social scientist once described as America's best thinker among politicians since Lincoln and America's best politician among thinkers since Jefferson.

² I should perhaps note that another famous Robert Merton—Robert Cox Merton to be precise—is a Nobel Prize winning economist. Robert Cox Merton is a son of the sociologist Robert K. Merton.

In 1966 Martin Lipset, who was Coleman's advisor at Columbia University, ran into Moynihan at Harvard faculty club and asked if he heard about the finding of the Coleman study (see Moynihan's speech in Clark, 1996, pp 376-77.) Moynihan did not. The study of educational equality commissioned by the US Department of Education was the largest social science study in history with more than 650 thousand students in the sample. Its finding, described in what was to be known as Coleman's Report, was politically explosive: School funding turned out to have little effect on student educational achievement. Money, in short, was not a solution to the problem of the equality of educational opportunity. The next day, Moynihan called the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare to tell him that Coleman's finding was about to be released.

At that time the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, a person who was indirectly involved in the study and interacted with the scholars who ran it, was none other but Mancur Olson. This is when Coleman and Olson got to know each other. All of this took place during an often overlooked period in Olson's life, a two year stint at the Department of Education, between his time on the faculty at Princeton and the University of Maryland.

This is how the paths of Coleman, Olson and Moynihan crossed. At the conference we were all heading to, Olson and Coleman were about to say their final goodbyes.

A Meeting in LeFrak Hall. When I joined the faculty of the University of Maryland in 1989 I felt somewhat humbled in the presence of Mancur. (I saw myself more like a graduate student³ than a faculty member; Mancur, on the other hand, was one of the most famous social scientists.) Mancur, of course, never gave me any reason to feel that way, as he always treated me as his equal. I did not know it then but he treated everyone that way. This, in some cases, had some difficult-to-predict consequences.

At some point I was contacted by Bjørn Lomborg. I believe Lomborg was still a student at this time at the University of Aarhus in Denmark where he subsequently became a faculty member. He could have been visiting the US on some student exchange. Lomborg must have seen my research on evolutionary Prisoner's Dilemma since he contacted me by email and offered to present a talk about the results of his computer simulations on the subject.⁴ I was glad to talk to someone working in the same area so we set up a date and Lomborg came to the University of Maryland to give the talk. Following his talk, we went to my office, in LeFrak Hall, to talk more. When we exhausted the points of mutual interest, Lomborg asked me whether I thought it would be possible for him to meet Mancur Olson. I knew that Mancur was terribly

³ I got my PhD about a year earlier.

⁴ This research has been later published in the *American Sociological Review* (Lomborg 1996.)

busy⁵ and it was most unlikely that he would agree to meet an undergraduate student who had no institutional ties or substantive significance to him, especially that late in the day. The least I could do, however, was to try. And so, I did. I called Mancur at his office, which was in a different building and in some distance from LeFrak Hall, and told him about Lomborg and his wish to meet him. I added that we were both in my office. To my surprise Mancur replied with “Just wait for me, I’ll stop by.”

Not only did Mancur walk over from his office to LeFrak Hall, but he showed up really soon. He came in, introduced himself, sat down and started asking Lomborg about his research. Lomborg was visibly enchanted and kept giving Mancur long and exhausting answers. I became a silent and somewhat uninterested participant of this exchange since I went over all of the points with Lomborg before Mancur showed up. When, to my relief, they exhausted the subject of Lomborg’s paper, I thought that Mancur would conclude and leave. I held this hope, not because I did not enjoy the company, I certainly did, but the time was getting really late and my basic needs made it difficult for me to continue. My two guests took space between me and the door to my office so I was effectively trapped. What happened next I did not quite anticipate. Lomborg asked Mancur about his research and Mancur began going over several projects of his in a pretty comprehensive manner. All this was very interesting but seemed to last forever. I don’t really remember how long it lasted, but it felt very, very long. One thing I do recall clearly, though, is that at some point, Mancur glimpsed at his watch and jumped to his feet in the same instant. He had a look of a terrified man. He excused himself promptly and the meeting was suddenly over.

Life wrote an ironic postscript to this story. Lomborg became a notorious campaigner against the Kyoto Protocol and cutting carbon emissions, sort of a poster child for the right wing anti environmentalists. His book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Lomborg 2001) brought him infamy in academic circles and fame with the right wing organizations. Mancur did not live to see Lomborg’s gaudy adventures, but if he did we both would have had some good laughs. I am sure Lomborg kept a warm memory of Mancur—like many other people who were lucky to meet him.

⁵ Olson was running IRIS Center at the University of Maryland and working on *Power and Prosperity* (Olson 2000.)

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