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The Intellectual Generosity of Gordon Tullock

I had the great fortune to have Gordon Tullock as my teacher and then as a colleague as we both moved back to GMU in 1998. In the decade in-between those, Gordon was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. When I published my book *Why Perestroika Failed,* Gordon sent me a letter congratulating me on what he saw as an advance in the literature on communist economic systems, but he quickly added, given the sad state of that literature, that wasn’t saying much. That was, as you know, Gordon’s way. Most people focus on his sarcasm and biting wit when they talk about Gordon --- to give one example Tyler and I were at a Liberty Fund conference in the early 1990s with Gordon and the legal historian John Phillip Reed, as we got in the cab to head to the airport on Sunday morning, Reed who was in the front seat looked back and said, “So I take it you guys knew this character Gordon before this weekend.” We both chuckled and said “Yes”. Gordon had been his irreverent best all weekend. This is a very common memory. I’d like to stress something slightly different and that is Gordon’s great intellectual generosity to students and colleagues.

As many of you have, I have siblings -- a brother and a sister, both older than me. My brother is 10 years older and my sister is 7, so I grew up as the youngest and from 10 years of age and onward as the only child in the house. To hear us talk about our childhood there certainly is a continuity to our experience, but also great discrepancies. I think the same is true with one’s teachers and mentors at the graduate student level. My experience with Gordon Tullock is probably wildly different than many of my classmates from GMU in the 1980s. It was an exciting time for us – the program was new, the program was different (radically so), the program sought to challenge the establishment on a methodological, analytical and ideological level, and Buchanan and Tullock were at the center of this. In my case, I was a student in the Center for the Study of Market Processes – the Austrian economics research and education group – and I had additional relationships with faculty at the Center for Study of Public Choice – Bob Tollison and Dwight Lee most notably, but also Viktor Vanberg (who was a bridge figure in the same way as Buchanan was). Tullock actually liked to engage the Austrian students – well, he liked to engage them in a form of intellectual ju-jitsu, that meant you rarely survived the match. But he liked our enthusiasm and commitment to ideas and argument. And he liked to see both in the classroom and out how we would react to his pushing on sore spots in Austrian arguments. Intellectual baptism by fire.

But in retrospect, I think this should be seen as his first act of great intellectual generosity to us. He actually was very generous with his time and was willing to discuss ideas and make suggestions on how to think about issues to students right from the start of their education. In my case, I will mention 3 such acts of intellectual generosity by Tullock that shaped my development --- first was the universal applicability of price theory. Tullock gave lectures in a price theory class I was taking, discussing ideas from The New World of Economics. I was intrigued so I would ask him questions and would walk with him from class to talk about the ideas. Those conversations had a huge impact on that way I came to think about economics. (Just a year ago I bought up copies from Springer of the new edition of The New World of Economics to give to select graduate students here at GMU). At the end of one of those walk-talks, Tullock gave me my copy of *Simon’s Syllabus* (which had published in 1983). As he handed me my copy he told me he only took one economics class and he had only read one economic book at that time – *Human Action*. I will come back to that point later.

The second act of intellectual generosity relates to thinking about spontaneous order. Once upon entering St. George’s Hall (now Carow Hall), I noticed Professor Tullock intensively observing the behavior of ants. I asked him what he was doing. He simply replied “Research”. I went into the Center. As I saw him later, he handed me a copy of an unpublished manuscript entitled “Cooperation Without Command” – it was his book on the economics of non-human societies. He told me that Hayek was interested in evolution and spontaneous order – and in particular the evolution of systems – and that I would probably learn a lot by studying non-human societies and the evolution of cooperation.

The third act of intellectual generosity was directly related to my subsequent career development. I was encouraged by my classmates to approach Tullock after the Wednesday seminar and ask him what he thought about an idea I had about the way to study the Soviet-type economy. Within earshot of everyone Gordon after hearing my pitch, responded “You aren’t that smart, but you are enthusiastic. Enthusiasm might take you far.” My friends laughed, but I was embarrassed. We parted, but the next morning I received a call to go see Professor Tullock at CSPC, which I did. He told me that if I was serious about the way I was thinking of approaching the study of the Soviet system, I needed to get in touch with the folks at Indiana University and the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis as they were developing a similar approach to the study of real existing socialist economies. Vincent’s polycentric order; Lin’s rules in use rather than rules in form; and in particular the work of Antoni Kaminski – whose work would later be published as *Institutional Theory of Communist Regimes* (1992) all would become critical to the way I thought about the issues that defined the first decade of my academic career. It was in developing this hybrid Austrian/public choice/property rights approach to the problems of communism, its breakdown, and the transition that Gordon so fundamentally influenced me. Even after he left to go to Arizona, we corresponded and he would ask me questions about this work at the annual Public Choice meetings. When I gave the first draft of my paper on a rent-seeking approach to understanding the real-existing Soviet economy (co-authored with Gary Anderson), Tullock was in the front row. His encouragement to reach out to the Bloomington folks led to presentations at the workshop and to my attempt to try to incorporate their ideas into a political economy framework and eventually led to several articles and my book on the Ostroms (co-authored with my colleague Paul Aligica).

So here I am a 20 something graduate students in economics, and it was Gordon Tullock’s amazing intellectual generosity that steered me in a certain direction to turn that passion into productive academic enterprise. And his encouragement of me and this research program continued when we ended up back at GMU together a decade later.

He asked questions and he ran arguments by you. He was committed to the engagement of ideas. Yes, he had a biting wit, but that was also his way of having fun with you and with the world of ideas.

Let me add a few things in closing that also reveal Gordon’s amazing intellectual generosity. In both the Hayek archives and the Buchanan archives which I have had the privilege of working in for some projects these past few years, Tullock’s intellectual generosity as well his curiosity is evident throughout. His letters and memos are about ideas, not people and not academic politics. His letters with Mises and Hayek and his discussion of their ideas is fascinating to someone with my interests. He often refers to the work of *The Calculus* as following Mises in the methodological individualistic approach to the sciences of man, and his correspondence with Hayek reflects his respect and admiration for Hayek’s work from his discussion of the Non-Sequitor of the Dependence Effect to Notes on Evolution of Systems. In one set of letters he asks Hayek to write the foreword to *The Organization of Inquiry*, to which Hayek had agreed to Tullock’s great pleasure. In other materials, he discusses the unity between Hayek and Mises’s project and the work in *The Calculus*. We tend to think of him as irreverent, but the archives reveal a generous and enthusiastic lover of ideas and those who shared ideas with him.

That is the Gordon Tullock I would like us all to remember today and to cherish. He was a man of ideas, he shared those ideas with great skill in writing, speaking and in informal discussion. He had fun doing so. What a life of the mind he lived, and how fortunate are those of us who were able to join him for the ride.

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