



Anthony Downs (1930–2021)

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One of the originators of the spatial theory of social choice has died. Anthony Downs’s dissertation thesis, written under the supervision of Kenneth Arrow at Stanford, was published as *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957). The book has been cited nearly 4,000 times in the professional literature and was cited by Bernard Grofman (2004) as one of the “Public Choice Pentateuch,” the ur-texts of the approach. (Just as an example, it has been cited hundreds of times in *Social Choice and Welfare* alone.)



There were many remarkable aspects of “Tony’s” career. One salient feature is his breadth, as he had substantial achievements in economics, political science,

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organization theory, and urban economics. Taken singly, his work in any one of those fields would have been impressive; taken together, the work forms one of the most important bodies of intellectual work in the second half of the twentieth century.

Downs joined the Rand Corporation in 1962, and was appointed a Senior Fellow at Brookings in 1977. He was ideologically ecumenical, invited to serve on the Board of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, but also appointed by Republican HUD Secretary Jack Kemp to the Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing. He published more than 20 books, and well over 500 articles and monographs, and appeared often as a speaker, expert witness, or commentator.

But a number of commentators, ranging from the *Washington Post* to Tyler Cowen, have been led to ask why Downs was not even *more* recognized, given the range of his accomplishments. I expect that it was precisely his range that was the explanation: academic recognition requires categorization. Downs's contributions defied easy categorization, and always will.

Tony was aware he was an intellectual chameleon, and poked fun at himself on that score. (He loved jokes and anecdotes, and had in his library more than 200 books on humor and wisecracks). When I was President of the Public Choice Society, in 1998, I invited Tony to give a plenary session at the meetings in New Orleans. He graciously accepted, and said that he regretted having lost touch with Public Choice, given what he knew to be the importance of his early work to the founding of the Society.

Tony began his Public Choice address by laughingly noting that many young people were surprised that Paul McCartney had been in a band before "Wings." Now, I should note that that was 1998; today most young people would ask, "Who is Paul McCartney?" Still, the point is that Tony had the same "lost in time" feeling, but had the good grace to laugh about it. As he told it in his Public Choice speech, he had been giving a speech at a public administration conference, based on his well-known works *Inside Bureaucracy* (Downs 1967) and *Stuck in Traffic* (Downs 1992). One assistant professor at the conference had been honestly surprised to learn that Tony had "another book."

Being unaware of that "other book," *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957), really is something like missing the Beatles. Down made three separate contributions in his thesis, each of which founded a subfield in social choice. The first was the "median voter theorem," or a version of it. (Downs was considering two parties or "teams" of candidates, and did not recognize the need for single-peaked preferences as a condition for the existence of equilibrium for three or more candidates, a result demonstrated by Black 1948, 1958). The full-information, two-candidate, one-dimensional spatial model Downs spelled out in the first four chapters is what is now, unfortunately, referred to as the "Downsian" model.

But in fact Downs himself was quite clear that that full-information model was a throwaway, a caricature. The whole point was to emphasize the importance of imperfect information, specifically a form of uncertainty wherein the future actions of candidates were unpredictable, and in which voters recognized that their single

vote had little chance of influencing the outcome. Given this problem of “turnout,” voters were likely to remain ignorant of the specifics of the political choices presented. This notion of “rational ignorance” and problems of turnout became the second major subfield that Downs created.

Those two innovations would be quite enough for most books, particularly for books derived from a graduate student’s dissertation thesis. But one more discovery was in store: the fact that ideology might stand in for full information in political contests. That is, ideologies are a solution to the need for economizing on the costs of gathering detailed information about likely candidate positions in n -dimensional policy spaces. The tradition in political science had been to assert that ideologies were coherent, integrated philosophies for generating policy choices, but Downs argued that we should think of ideologies as simplified statements of core principles and emotional values. Such mechanisms are far from perfect as guides to candidate behavior, but given that the alternative is near-total (and rational!) ignorance of political positions, ideologies may be best we can expect. Along with Melvin Hinich, I found that aspect of Downs’s theory provocative enough, and suggestive of further possibilities, to write an entirely Downsian version of “ideology as spatial theory” in multiple dimensions (Hinich and Munger, 1994).

A close reading of Downs (1957) reveals that it was the *connection* among the three elements—spatial theory, turnout and ignorance, and ideology—was really the point of the book. As he put it:

Our reason for stressing uncertainty is that, in our opinion, it is a basic force affecting all human activity.... Coping with uncertainty is a major function of nearly every significant institution in human society.... (13)

As soon as uncertainty appears, the clear path from taste structure to voting decision becomes obscured by lack of knowledge.... [Some voters] are highly uncertain about which party they prefer.... (83).

Looking back much later, Downs seemed bemused by the way that scholars had willfully lost sight of the centrality of uncertainty, or ‘information costs,’ in his work.

I personally believe that the way information costs are treated [in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*] is perhaps the most important contribution. It is more important than the spatial analysis of parties, although the latter has become more famous. (Downs 1993)

The breadth of Anthony Downs’s contributions in multiple fields is partly a product of being at the right places at the right time. The spatial model of politics, the problem of incomplete information, the institutional analysis of bureaucracy, and an equilibrium analysis of traffic, had all been proceeding along on their own, and would have developed in some form without him.

But each body of knowledge was touched in a specific, substantive, and enduring way when Downs turned his lucubrating intellect in that direction. As I have emphasized, any one of these contributions would have been a career in full.

Overall, Tony was a remarkable man; in our current age of hyper-specialization I doubt we shall see his like again.

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