

A trajectory of dissemination of ideas of public choice

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The biographies of intellectuals who, throughout their lives, are dedicated to making known a set of ideas that they deem important for society are getting increasingly rare. An analysis of Professor Jorge Vianna Monteiro's curriculum shows an academic who has consistently dedicated himself to the study, research, and dissemination of the contents of a school of thought –public choice – that has profoundly influenced the studies of economics, political science, and public management in recent decades.

A small and remarkable publication, “Dimensões do Setor Público”, dated from 1984, authored by Professor Jorge Vianna Monteiro, was edited by the Fundação Centro de Formação do Servidor Público (FUNCEP), a predecessor of the National School of Administration Public Administration (ENAP). His first book – Fundamentals of Public Policy – had been published two years earlier by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA).

Criticisms dominated the economic debate at that time. The so-called “czar” - minister Delfim Netto – was the central protagonist of the economic scene. The country's attention was focused on disputes associated with re-democratization and external debt negotiations. The political struggle conflagrated the academic world. Few schools had cadres who had had the opportunity to study abroad. Brazil had been closed for many years and paid a tribute for this lack of the integration with the rest of the world in several areas, including academic training for master's and doctoral programs.

The ideas associated with public choice did not penetrate the public sector - perhaps because of its defensive instinct - despite its increasing popularity in academic centers, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Interestingly, in Political Science, this set of

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approaches was well received first in the late IUPERJ, which hosted the first generation of doctors trained abroad in the best universities in the United States and later by the political scientists.

In the world of Economic Sciences, the challenges, first of macroeconomic stabilization and, later, of fiscal balance, were dominant for a long time, to the point of inhibiting other areas of study that would only gain their own space from the 1990s onwards. The arrival of economists in areas such as education, health, and poverty took a long time. Still, the field of public sector economics continued to be relegated to the background. Public finance was dominated by “practitioners” with little interaction with the frontier of discussions inspired by Public Choice theoretical developments.

Professor Jorge Vianna Monteiro’s publications show his itinerary that included the search for influence in the complex national debate via the application of an analytical and sometimes disconcerting look in the conceptual modelling of national challenges. It has made a difference in the analysis the efforts to introduce rational behavior of protagonists within the premises of researchers.

This can also be quite uncomfortable. After all, it illuminates conflicts, something always challenging in the context of political dispute within the government or even in the expanded public arena, including the Legislative and the Executive - in addition to the special guests who are now part of the Brazilian national ‘institutional soap opera’: the Federal Court of Accounts and the Public Prosecutor.

Some hot topics in Public Choice tradition are now not so uncommon among us. Rent-seeking, budget maximization, voting-with-the-feet, political transaction costs, political business cycles, agency theory, among others.

It is worth recording the language issue in this conversation. The strength of these ideas is greater in English, whether through their incorporation into the common language or the capacity of Anglo-Saxon societies to face conflicts more openly. The existence of few classic school authors translated into Portuguese adds to the difficulties associated with language.

Another element of diffraction of the ideas associated with public choice in Brazil is the political-ideological issue. We are a country full of historical misunderstandings in the assimilation of ideas originating in other contexts. The attempt to identify the Public Choice approach with normative views of the world like the classical liberal or conservative thoughts deprived the political center and social democracy of powerful tools for analysis and appropriation of reality.

Finally, there is the legal establishment. Few expressions carry the weight of the “public interest” in administrative Law. The advancement of public choice theorists on the world of Law, especially Constitutional Law, is a radical threat to every normative tower built around basic, but not untouchables, principles. By illuminating the bowels of Law from its perspective, public choice produces significant contributions to our better understanding of the role of Law - and of the Rule of Law - and its impact on society’s welfare.