CHICAGO JOURNALS

BOOK REVIEWS

Tuck, Richard. *Free Riding.*
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. 223. $35.00 (cloth).

Richard Tuck's *Free Riding* is an important contribution to the voluminous literature addressing collective action and free riding initiated by Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). Olson argued that it is irrational to participate in a collective effort because the personal cost of contributing will not be offset by the act's negligible effect on one's gain. In the common cases of deciding to pay trade union dues, or taxes, an individual's efforts will make a trifling difference to the collective outcome. Therefore, according to Olson, it is irrational to contribute because the personal cost of participating handily outweighs the negligible personal benefit one will receive as a result of one's effort. Tuck challenges Olson's conclusion and its widely accepted extension proposing that it is irrational to vote because one's ballot "does not count." In Tuck's analysis, not only is it rational to vote but also to argue otherwise is to deny the causal efficacy that each vote has in adding up to a potentially winning majority. Tuck directly presents reasoning for his position and draws on the history of political thought to show that late twentieth-century skepticism denying that individuals' efforts matter is a recent point of departure at odds with ancient and modern wisdom. Tuck observes that "the idea that collaboration was irrational even where the participants received clear individual benefits from the collaborative activity was not one that had yet fully occurred to anyone" prior to Olson's presentation of *Logic of Collective Action* (189).

Free Riding is an ambitious project levying copious arguments and revisiting well-known texts to challenge a mainstay of contemporary economic and rational choice theory that justifies the rationality of free riding. Part 1 focuses on theoretical arguments. Chapter 1 differentiates Olson's deployment of the "negligibility" argument from the game theoretic Prisoner's Dilemma analysis, pitched by Russell Hardin in *Collective Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). It is Tuck's novel insight that the two approaches are incommensurate: whereas in the Prisoner's Dilemma each actor unquestionably affects outcomes, Olson relies on marginalist economics to assert that no single actor can make an appreciable difference on outcomes. Tuck shows that Olson's causal negligibility rationale defending free riding is a recent construction arising from neoclassical economics. In contrast, Tuck accepts the "extremely old" pedigree of the Prisoner's Dilemma (22). He acknowledges the tendency to "simply stipulate (as Hardin . . . has done) that an Olsonian latent group is a limiting case of an *n*-person prisoners' dilemma—that as the relative effect of each participant's actions gets smaller, the situation tends to become closer to the Olsonian picture" (28). However, Tuck's "key point is that many distinctive features of the Prisoners' Dilemma disappear at the point at which the agents concerned begin

to treat their effect on one another as negligible" (28). Throughout his book, Tuck concentrates on rebutting a rationale for free riding predicated on the idea that each individual's contribution is causally superfluous.

In chapter 2, Tuck considers the difference between collective efforts with and without clear thresholds defining "success." He isolates the act of voting, characterized as irrational by Anthony Downs and William Riker, and specifies that it is a distinct phenomenon not discussed by Olson because elections have clear thresholds defined by a subset of actions causally determining the outcome (32–39). He tentatively proposes that "the existence of a threshold within a practice such as an election gives us reason to participate" (48). Given that the acknowledgment of a threshold demarcating the success of a participatory venture amply demonstrates the causal efficacy of the aggregation of individual actions surpassing it, Tuck shifts the burden of proof to those suggesting that single acts are devoid of instrumental force. He looks to the moral philosopher David Lyons, who formulated an antiskeptical position on the significance of singular acts amid a sea of acts. Obviously acts, singly and collectively, have causal effect; therefore it is difficult to discern any coherent basis for denying this foundational claim. Here Tuck considers the problem of "redundant causation" to provide a clue: perhaps the skeptical claim is built on the proposition that one cannot be certain that one's action will be a member of the efficacious set bringing about an outcome or if instead it will be one of the acts beyond the threshold fixing the outcome. For example, one could consider a standard execution squad with six gunmen, one of whom has a blank round. Although my brief discussion does scant justice to the nuanced quality of Tuck's discussion of causation and rational deliberation of purposive agents in complex multiparty interactions, the point is clear. Even if every ballot cast does not play a direct causal role in bringing about an electoral outcome, still each ballot could be a member of the efficacious set and cannot be considered redundant or inefficacious without being positioned directly in comparison to those ballots carrying the victory. Needless to say, if there were a recount, one's ballot could move from the inefficacious set to the efficacious set: otherwise no recount would be warranted.

Having differentiated Olson's collective action problem from both circumstances with thresholds and from Prisoner's Dilemma scenarios presupposing causal agency, in chapter 3 Tuck tackles the question of "Negligibility." Tuck quotes Olson's conclusion on trade unions: "It follows that most of the achievements of a union, even if they were more impressive than the staunchest unionist claims, could offer the rational worker no incentive to join; his individual efforts would not have a noticeable effect on the outcome, and whether he supported the union or not he would still get the benefits of its achievements" (65; Olson, *Logic of Collective Action*, 76). Tuck points to a "paradoxical quality" in Olson's argument holding that one's contributions to a joint effort are imperceptible and therefore inconsequential: we are confronted by the undeniable fact that an aggregation of acts not only has causal impact, but also that often in a joint venture the aggregate effect has more instrumental weight than were each act to be taken in an uncoordinated fashion.

Tuck turns our attention to a deep philosophical puzzle known to the Greek philosophers as the "sorites paradox," or the "paradox of the heap." Tuck en-

gages this skeptical paradox at a high level, proposing that it lies at the heart of Olson's collective action problem. In addressing the puzzle of at which point individual stones constitute a mound, Tuck refocuses our attention from group interactions to a single individual's decision of when enough stones have been placed in a pile to create a cairn. In the author's estimation, a failure to contribute to a collective enterprise due to a perception of agentive irrelevance is equivalent to falling prey to the sorites paradox. His solution, drawing on Herbert Simon's "satisficing," is pragmatic: in many individual and joint actions without clear thresholds defining success, paralysis is avoided through an intuitive sense that "enough is enough" (98).

Pulling the theoretical strands of part 1 together, Tuck makes the case that it is rational to voluntarily participate in collective exercises, with or without clear thresholds. There is an urgency to Tuck's conclusion for the double reason that, first, the political theorist proposes that the contemporary mainstream position maintaining the rationality of free riding is in error, and, second, that Tuck worries that contemporary social science is inculcating the norm that not voting, not paying taxes, and free riding on public transportation are instrumentally rational actions if no coercive sanctions are imposed on cheaters (115).

Again, his argument is multifaceted. To begin with, even Olson surely realized the causal impact of free riding, given that any argument for imposing sanctions on cheaters must acknowledge that defection matters: otherwise, there would be no point in preventing defection. Next, just as David Hume ultimately decided it is rational to act as if we believe in causation, Tuck maintains that, in collective action practices without a clear threshold, it makes sense to act as though there were one. In any event, we can definitely distinguish between a successful and a failed collective action. Once we accept the causal efficacy of individual acts and the existence of thresholds of necessary participation, even if somewhat vague, to insure the integrity of a group practice, it is possible to disarm the Prisoner's Dilemma analysis of the problem of free riding by realizing that we are instead confronted with a chicken game. Since we all are interested in the existence of the institution, even if we may prefer to free ride on it, the worst case outcome is the collapse of, say, banks or democratic government. In Tuck's estimation, as in the chicken game of two cars racing toward each other demonstrating the hopes of establishing each driver's superior nerve, both actors prefer being the loser of the contest to a head on collision. Tuck's point is that, once the argument that free riding is rational because one's acts are causally insignificant is dismissed, and if we presume that free riding implies preferring that collective practices and institutions exist rather than not, then most of us would choose to work toward establishing a sufficient number of necessary collaborators to sustain joint efforts, even if that requires that we ourselves contribute. Tuck goes on to discuss that many of us may also feel this way because we accept a moral responsibility for maintaining the institutions we rely on. Moreover, many of us seek to make a constructive impact on our social world.

In structuring *Free Riding* to challenge Olson's negligibility argument, and not Hardin's multiparty Prisoner's Dilemma analysis, Tuck prevails in raising significant doubts about assuming that individual actions in collective undertakings lack causal efficacy and therefore lack instrumental value. It is a strength of the text to divorce Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* from the Prisoner's Dilemma

because the two theories have become unreflectively entangled. However, it is a weakness of *Free Riding* that it does not directly challenge Hardin's approach. Certainly Tuck suggests that social theorists misapprehend collective action situations to be Prisoner's Dilemmas instead of chicken games and ignore the means by which causal negligibility may characterize the large-n multiparty Prisoner's Dilemma, but these observations are presented as asides without a critical engagement of Hardin's work (100, 28).

Part 2 of *Free Riding* contextualizes Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* in two separate but intersecting literatures, those of the utilitarian tradition and those of neoclassical economics. Chapter 4, "Rule and Act Utilitarianism," provides evidence that, prior to Olson's study, no philosopher presented an argument that free riding is rational or prudent "as long as it was the case that the collaboration would indeed be effective at securing the goals of the participants" (205). According to Tuck, Olson's predecessors' greatest challenge was to defend the rationality of universal collaboration given that, once the threshold of success is passed, it may not be instrumentally rational for the remaining participants to contribute. Over time, this concern led to the formulation of "rule utilitarianism." In these pages, we encounter numerous moral theorists, including Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, William Whewell, Francis Edgeworth, Henry Sidgwick, David Lyons, G. E. Moore, and John Rawls, among others.

The final substantive chapter, "Perfect Competition, Oligopoly and Monopoly," although technically demanding in its comparison of the Cournot equilibrium with perfect markets and the multiparty Prisoner's Dilemma, makes an important point that is a terrific help in understanding how the causal negligibility argument Olson used rose into prominence. We generally are aware of the ongoing puzzle in economic theory over whether competition or collusion is the rationally superior course of action. Tuck emphasizes that, throughout classical and neoclassical economics, it was assumed that individuals would cooperate whenever possible for the reason that this would bring about superior outcomes. The 1799 and 1800 Combination Acts in Britain prohibited the voluntary combination of factory workers, presenting clear evidence of this widely held conventional wisdom: far from requiring coercion to occur, laborers' combination only desisted due to legally threatened sanction (160–61). Although this chapter is replete with insights, its keystone is the appreciation that the marginal economists' calculus derived fiction of "perfect competition" paved the way for internalizing the abstract idea that individual acts may have no causal effect. Specifically, it is the condition of perfect competition that all parties are "price takers." This stipulates that each individual entering the market, despite personal or corporate contributions to productivity or consumption, does not exchange a sufficient quantity of goods to have a causal impact on prices. Of course, this assumption is violated in imperfect instances of competition characterized by cartels or monopolies. Olson draws on this marginalist analysis in his argument that the size of groups determines their ability to achieve cooperative outcomes without the imposition of coercive sanctions. Tuck's assertion is that, as documented throughout *Free Riding*, the causal inefficacy of single acts was not accepted until Olson utilized the abstraction of perfect competition to suggest that, like price

takers in a free market, individuals' contributions or lack thereof in a collective action are inconsequential to the benefits received.

Upon completing *Free Riding*, the reader may well be convinced that individual actions matter in large-scale endeavors. Still, the Prisoner's Dilemma lurks in the interstices of the text, leaving the concern that it may yet be rational to free ride because agents could make a strategic choice to gain from collective ventures without contributing. Tuck's admission that the Cournot equilibrium, which may be stated as an n-person Prisoner's Dilemma, tends toward perfect market competition as the number of competitors increases, adds confusion (170–71). Perfect markets are defined by securing Pareto-efficient solutions, yet even as n increases, Prisoner's Dilemmas are notorious for yielding suboptimal outcomes. It is unexplained how the Cournot equilibrium can both represent the competitive Prisoner's Dilemma, as opposed to opportunistic collusion characterizing cartels, and yet result in a Pareto optimal outcome. Perhaps a further insight here, clarifying the relationship between Olson's and Hardin's large-n models, could connect the dots between the marginalist insistence on agentive insignificance in perfect competition and the game theoretic paradigm emphasizing individual's strategic impact.

Richard Tuck's compact volume is not an easy read, but it is a mandatory read for all following or participating in research on collective action. It invites theorists to rethink whether Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* and the numerous texts it inspired are in final analysis cogent. Tuck's *Free Riding* has the potential to rescue the rationality of voting from its demotion to the status of an expressive act at odds with the Enlightenment view that citizens' electoral participation is the instrumental means giving rise to democratic government. Moreover, Tuck accentuates that "what I have been arguing in this book is that it is at least theoretically possible to treat all collaborative enterprises as if they contain appropriate thresholds for participation, and that if those thresholds can be reached . . . , then collaboration up to that point makes sense for the individuals concerned" (208). However, Tuck's benign reluctance to plainly articulate the implications of his position on the Prisoner's Dilemma–inspired explanations of free riding leave grist for the mainstream rational choice mill maintaining that modern institutions require a Leviathan and his sword to provide incentives to individuals who would otherwise find it rational to defect.

S. M. AMADAE
The Ohio State University