

MORE ECONOMICS IN THE MOVIES: DISCOVERING THE MODERN THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY IN SCENES FROM *CONSPIRACY* AND *VALKYRIE*

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ABSTRACT

*This essay describes how the elements in the modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982), and in its application to the Nazi Holocaust (Breton and Wintrobe, 1986) and the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Adolf Hitler, can be integrated into the “Bureaucracy” portion of an undergraduate course in public choice economics using scenes from the movies *Conspiracy* (HBO Films, 2001) and *Valkyrie* (United Artists, 2008). In doing so, it builds upon the “economics in the movies” approach to pedagogy developed by Mateer (2004 and 2009), Dixit (2006), Sexton (2006) and Mateer and Li (2008).*

INTRODUCTION

This essay describes how the elements of the modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982), and its application to (1) the Nazi Holocaust (Breton and Wintrobe, 1986; Mixon, Sawyer and Trevino, 2004a and 2004b; Mixon and King, 2009; Mixon and Trevino, 2009) and (2) the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Adolf Hitler (Mixon, Sawyer and Trevino, 2004b), can be integrated, and in an innovative way, into the “Bureaucracy Theory” portion of an undergraduate course in public choice economics. Specifically, this article shows how the theory and its applications above are reconstructed in the movies *Conspiracy* (HBO Films, 2001) and *Valkyrie* (United Artists, 2008), respectively, and it suggests scenes from each movie that can be incorporated into classroom discussion of the modern theory of bureaucracy.

Given the paucity of specialized undergraduate textbooks in this genre of economics, an “economics in the movies” approach to pedagogy like that described in Mateer (2004 and 2009), Dixit (2006), Sexton (2006) and Mateer and Li (2008) could be quite beneficial. As Mateer and Li (2008: 303) point out, among the

pedagogical advantages to using short film scenes to introduce economic concepts are (1) increased student engagement, (2) an enhanced ability to critically analyze core content, and (3) the availability of an alternative to the lecture-discussion format. They also add that this new approach can, unlike some other pedagogical techniques, complement the traditional development of economic theory without sacrificing a significant amount of class time (Mateer and Li, 2008: 303).

This essay begins with a brief review of the relevant literature, including a summary of the modern theory of bureaucracy. This summary is followed by a description of how the theory has been applied to the Nazi Holocaust and other elements of the history of Nazi Germany. From there, some scenes from the movies *Conspiracy* and *Valkyrie* are presented as useful tools for teaching undergraduate economics students about the modern theory of bureaucracy.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

It is not often that a new way of approaching a subject is accompanied by an example as compelling as that Breton and Wintrobe (1986) used to illustrate the applicability of their modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982). The traditional theory of bureaucracy in Niskanen (1971) argues that government bureaucrats seek to increase their power, influence, and other job-related perquisites by engaging in the process of budget-maximization (Shughart, 2008; Olson, 2008).¹ In this formal model, bureaucrats are able to capitalize on the lack of technical know-how exhibited by those in the legislature who provide resources for the bureaucracy, and on what Downs (1957) characterized as the “rational ignorance” of voters (the electorate), who represent the other principals (along with legislatures) who might constrain the activities of bureaucrats and bureaus (Shughart, 2008; Olson, 2008). At the same time bureaucracies seek growth, there is a general consensus that they are inefficient and inflexible, a conclusion that stems partly from a lack of information they confront as a result of their output being indivisible and unmarketable (Olson, 2008).

Breton and Wintrobe’s (1982) modern theory of bureaucracy is based in large part on the ideas of “vertical trust networks” and “informal payments.” According to the model, subordinates within a bureaucracy provide top-level bureaucrats with “informal services” that are the result of their own enterprise and initiative, and that advance the aims of the bureaucracy’s leadership. The bureau’s subordinates also trust that the bureaucrats will later reward them informally by providing opportunities for more rapid advancement (promotion), better offices, travel, etc. These perquisites are all *quid pro quos* that are not part of formal

contracts between bureaucrats and a bureau's subordinates, and often result from trades that are described above as inter-temporal in nature (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982 and 1986; Mixon, Sawyer and Trevino, 2004a and 2004b). Use of such an informal payments mechanism allows bureaucrats to establish a competitive process in the promotion of the bureau's goal(s), and one which provides greater efficiency and flexibility.

Breton and Wintrobe's (1986) application arrived through their article in the *Journal of Political Economy* titled "The bureaucracy of murder revisited," wherein they point out that the traditional theory of bureaucracy fails to explain how the Nazi bureaucracy formed as a conglomeration of competing agencies that (for a time) carried out the large-scale "Final Solution" to the "Jewish question" (Mixon, et al. 2004b). As Mixon et al. (2004b: 372) explain, the Breton and Wintrobe (1986) model is not only well-suited to explain how a quasi-government bureaucracy carried out the systematic murder of six million people in a relative short period of time, it is also adept at establishing the guilt of the bureau's subordinates who claimed (in judicial proceedings and interviews) to simply have been carrying out orders from superiors in the bureaucracy.² The Breton and Wintrobe (1986) story of the Nazi Holocaust is built mainly around that of Adolf Eichmann, the *SS-Obersturmbannführer* in Subsection IV-B-4 (Jewish affairs) of the Reich Central Security Office, who (for a time) showed significant enterprise and initiative in the promotion of the systematic murder of Europe's Jews throughout the early 1940s. As a result, Eichmann advanced from the 45th percentile of the Nazi Holocaust bureaucracy to the 65th percentile, all from 1938-1941 (Mixon, et al. 2004a: 863).

The following section describes how the elements in the modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982), and in its application to the Nazi Holocaust (Breton and Wintrobe, 1986; Mixon et al. 2004a and 2004b) and the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Adolf Hitler (Mixon et al. 2004b), can be integrated, and in an innovative way, into the "Bureaucracy" portion of an undergraduate course in public choice economics. Specifically, section 2 below shows how the modern theory of bureaucracy and its application are reconstructed in the movies *Conspiracy* (HBO Films, 2001) and *Valkyrie* (United Artists, 2008), respectively. In doing so, this article highlights scenes from each movie that can be incorporated into classroom discussion of the theory and its application to the Nazi bureaucracy of the 1940s.

THE MODERN THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY: A LOOK AT THE MOVIES

As stated earlier, there are few instances where an application of a model or theory is more compelling than that represented by the Breton and Wintrobe (1986) application of their own modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982) to events constituting the Nazi Holocaust. The kinds of bureaucratic entrepreneurship that give rise to informal services and payments that are part of vertical trust networks described by Breton and Wintrobe (1982) fit well into the “Bureaucracy” portion of an undergraduate course in public choice economics, and they are relatively easy to impart to students without the requirement that students acquire Breton and Wintrobe’s 1982 book.³ After such an exposition, Breton and Wintrobe’s compelling 1986 article on bureaucratic entrepreneurship in the Third Reich is accessible to, and appreciated by, students.⁴

Another option for integrating the Breton and Wintrobe (1982) modern model of bureaucracy in a public choice economics course is to employ a Hollywood adaptation of one of the more important aspects of the Nazi Holocaust -- the Wannsee Conference of 1942. That adaptation comes via HBO Films’ 2001 movie *Conspiracy*, and pedagogical use of a television movie adaptation of the 1942 Wannsee Conference follows the recent wave of using movies and television to teach undergraduate economics that is emphasized in Mateer (2004 and 2009), Dixit (2006), Sexton (2006) and Mateer and Li (2008).

Conspiracy was written by Loring Mandel, who won an Emmy Award for Best Writing, and it received 10 total Emmy nominations.⁵ Another of the 10 nominations turned into a victory for Kenneth Branagh, who received a Lead Actor Emmy for his portrayal of Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Central Security Office (RSHA) who “chaired” the 1942 Wannsee Conference. The role of Adolf Eichmann, the leading figure in Breton and Wintrobe (1986), is played by Stanley Tucci, an Emmy and Golden Globe Award winner for his work in the movie *Winchell*. Most of the Conference participants, and their *Conspiracy* counterparts, are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Wannsee Conference Participants as Portrayed in *Conspiracy*

Conference Participant	Bureau	Portrayed in <i>Conspiracy</i> by
Reinhard Heydrich	Chairman, Reich Central Security Office (RHSA)	Kenneth Branagh
Dr. Alfred Meyer	Reich Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories	Brian Pettifer
Dr. Georg Liebbrandt	Reich Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories	Ewan Stewart
Erich Neumann	Secretary of State, Reich Ministry for the Interior	Jonathan Coy
Dr. Roland Freisler	Secretary of State, Reich Ministry of Justice	Owen Teale
Dr. Josef Bühler	Secretary of State, Office of the Government General of Poland	Ben Daniels
Dr. Martin Luther	Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office	Kevin McNally
Gerhard Klopfer	Party Chancellery	Ian McNeice
Friedrich Kritzinger	Reich Chancellery	David Threlfall
Otto Hofmann	Race and Settlement Main Office (RuSHA)	Nicholas Woodeson
Heinrich Müller	Reich Main Security, Gestapo Chief	Brenden Coyle
Adolf Eichmann	Reich Central Security Office (RHSA, Subs. IV-B-4)	Stanley Tucci
Dr. Karl Schöngarth	SD Chief of the General Government of Poland	Peter Sullivan
Dr. Rudolf Lange	SD Chief of Latvia	Barnabay Kay
Sources: Mixon, Sawyer and Trevino (2004a) and HBO Films (2001).		

Conspiracy is rich in instances wherein aspects of Breton and Wintrobe's (1982 and 1986) competitive model of bureaucracy – one which provides greater efficiency and flexibility than that depicted in earlier models of bureaucracy – are superbly reconstructed in the story of the Nazi bureaucracy's goal of genocide. Several instances have significant pedagogical value, such as the scene in the movie

wherein Heydrich reads aloud a memo which is believed to have been penned by *himself*, but was actually *signed* and *sent* to Heydrich by German *Reich Marshall* Hermann Göring, authorizing a “solution” to “the Jewish question.” The memo authorizes a solution involving “emigration or evacuation in the most favorable way possible” of the Jews living in the German sphere of influence within Europe.

As Breton and Wintrobe (1986) state, one indicator of competition among bureaus (bureaucrats) or within bureaus concerns the imprecision of orders from higher echelons within the bureau or bureaus (Mixon et al. 2004a: 858). In *Conspiracy*, Heydrich and the other Wannsee Conference participants wrangle with the lack of precision in the term “evacuation,” which Heydrich takes to mean the “cleansing” of Europe’s Jews, itself an imprecise term. As Mixon et al. (2004a: 866) point out, the fact that Heydrich had to interpret (for others) a memo that he penned himself is itself interesting; that Heydrich’s interpretation was also *imprecise* remarkably supports the Breton-Wintrobe thesis that *vague* and *imprecise* directives motivate would-be bureaucratic entrepreneurs into devising innovative and enterprising initiatives that assist the bureau in achieving a goal.⁶ These ideas are reinforced through some of the pre-Conference conversations portrayed in *Conspiracy*. It is in one of these that Josef Bühler, the Secretary of State in the Office of the Government General of Poland, who is portrayed in *Conspiracy* by British actor Ben Daniels, offers dialogue that supports the discussion above concerning Heydrich’s memo. In a pre-Conference conversation scene Bühler says “. . . we will soon discover what new concepts our SS friends have in mind [for addressing ‘the Jewish question’] . . .” It is through statements like this one that enterprise and initiative in putting forward “solutions” to “the Jewish question” included new and innovative ideas, concepts, initiatives, and policies (Mixon et al. 2004a: 866).⁷

Once the framework for bureaucratic competition and entrepreneurship is established, as it was with the Nazi’s Wannsee Conference of 1942, the role of vertical trust networks, with the attendant informal payments and informal services that are discussed above, take over the process of achieving the Nazi Holocaust bureaucracy’s goal of genocide. The benefits of these relationships to the Nazi bureaucracy’s superiors, and their attendant trades, are not seen in *Conspiracy*. However, pre-Conference vertical trust networks, along with some of the *concepts* used in the genocide of Lithuania’s Jews (during the fall of 1941), are described by Mixon et al. (2004b: 374-376) in a way (i.e., non-technical, brief) that allows public choice economics instructors to supplement scenes from *Conspiracy* with passages and tables from some of the historical episodes.⁸

The antithesis of vertical trust networks in the Breton and Wintrobe (1982) model are “horizontal trust networks.” These are networks that exist between

officials who operate at roughly the same level of a bureaucracy's management structure. They are seen as being inefficient, in a large numbers setting such as in the Nazi Holocaust bureaucracy, from the leadership's perspective because cooperation among similarly-situated subordinates often works to thwart the goals of the bureau's leadership (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982 and 1986; Mixon et al. 2004b). According to Mixon et al. (2004b: 376), "[t]he history of the Nazi regime provides an insightful example of an extreme form of horizontal network inefficiency: the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Adolf Hitler." In just a few pages, Mixon et al. (2004b: 376-378) provide details of the plot as an example of horizontal trust networks in a way that both generalizes and supplements Breton and Wintrobe's essay on the Nazi Holocaust bureaucracy and Adolf Eichmann's role in advancing it. In that way, Mixon et al. (2004b) can be integrated into the bureaucracy discussion of a public choice economics class relatively easily.

As in the case of vertical trust networks described above, the academic literature on horizontal trust networks in the Nazi Holocaust bureaucracy (i.e., Mixon et al. 2004b) can also be supplemented with scenes from a movie. In this case that is the motion picture *Valkyrie*, released by United Artists in 2008, and starring Tom Cruise as German Reserve Army Colonel Claus Schenk Graff von Stauffenberg, the central figure in the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Hitler.

Table 2: Conspirators in July 1944 Plot to Kill Hitler as Portrayed in *Valkyrie*

Conspirator	Position in Nazi Hierarchy	Portrayed in <i>Valkyrie</i> by
Claus Schenk Graff von Stauffenberg	Colonel, Reserve Army	Tom Cruise
<i>Military/Intelligence Conspirators</i>		
Ludwig Beck	Colonel General, Chief of General Staff (retired, 1939)	Terence Stamp
Wilhelm Canaris	Admiral, Head of Counterintelligence	
Friedrich Fromm	General, Commander of Reserve Army	Tom Wilkinson
Adolf Heusinger	Colonel General, Operations Chief of the Army High Command	Matthew Burton
Erich Höpner	Colonel General (dismissed, 1941)	
Günther Hans von Kluge	Field Marshall	

Table 2: Conspirators in July 1944 Plot to Kill Hitler as Portrayed in *Valkyrie*

Conspirator	Position in Nazi Hierarchy	Portrayed in <i>Valkyrie</i> by
Friedrich Olbricht	Colonel General, Reserve Army	Bill Nighy
Hans Oster	Major General, Counterintelligence	
Erwin Rommel	Field Marshall	
Karl Heinrich von Stülpnagel	Colonel General, Military Government of France	
Henning von Tresckow Major General	Kenneth Branagh	
Erwin von Witzleben	Field Marshall (retired, 1942)	David Schofield
<i>Diplomatic Corps Conspirators</i>		
Hans Bernd Gisevius	Diplomatic Office, Switzerland	
Christian von Hassell	German Ambassador to Italy (retired)	
Adam von Trott zu Solz	German Foreign Ministry	
<i>Political/Civil Conspirators</i>		
Carl Goerdeler	Lord Mayor of Leipzig (former)	Kevin McNally
Wolf Heinrich von Helldorf	Chief of Berlin Police	Waldemar Kobus
Julius Leber	Member of Reichstag (former)	
Johannes Popitz	Prussian Finance Minister	
Sources: Mixon, Sawyer and Trevino (2004b) and United Artists (2008).		

As Table 2 points out, Cruise is joined in *Valkyrie* by Kenneth Branagh who portrays Henning von Tresckow, and by Tom Wilkinson, Bill Nighy, and Terence Stamp, who play German Reserve Army Commander Freidrich Fromm, German Reserve Army Colonel General Freidrich Olbricht and retired Chief of General Staff Ludwig Beck, respectively. Directed by the critically acclaimed Bryan Singer, each of these actors performs solidly in their respective roles.

The scenes and dialogue also provide a portrayal of the concept of horizontal trust networks found in Breton and Wintrobe (1982 and 1986). Though *Valkyrie* is more of an action movie than *Conspiracy*, one critical scene in *Valkyrie* depicts Stauffenberg meeting, for the first time, the plot's original conspirators. To set the scene, Stauffenberg has only recently recovered from wounds suffered during the German retreat in North Africa, and he is, at the time of the meeting scene described earlier, an officer in the German Reserve Army. Stauffenberg (Cruise) is urged to meet the original conspirators by Olbricht, and after being received at the meeting by von Tresckow, and he is impressed by what he learns about the lofty positions the conspirators hold (or once held) in various branches of the larger Nazi (German) bureaucracy. The positions fall under the military/intelligence, diplomatic, political and civil corps of the Nazi (German) bureaucracy, as pointed in Mixon et al. (2004b) and in Table 2.⁸ After hearing how the original conspirators appear to have all of the bases covered for building a new, post-Hitler Germany, Stauffenberg questions his presence in the room to von Tresckow and the others, and attempts to exit. Though sympathetic to the cause, by military rank Stauffenberg does not necessarily fit into the horizontal trust network that he is being introduced to in this scene. However, he is convinced that the act of tyrannicide has to be carried out, and that, given his inclinations and position in the Reserve Army, he might have the means and opportunity to assist.

In giving his assistance to the plot, Mixon et al. (2004b: 377) explain that Stauffenberg, and others at his level, or a lower level in the larger Nazi bureaucracy, contributed "vertical loyalty" (i.e., they formed a vertical trust network) to assist those in the horizontal trust network presented in Table 2. Though not as rich in the quantity of scenes and dialogue with pedagogical value as *Conspiracy*, the particular scenes from *Valkyrie* described above really hit a mark with regard to capturing part of the Breton and Wintrobe (1982 and 1986) concept of horizontal trust networks in bureaucracy.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The recent wave of using movies and television to teach undergraduate economics, emphasized in Mateer (2004 and 2009), Dixit (2006), Sexton (2006) and Mateer and Li (2008), is potentially most beneficial in those economics courses for which the publishing industry has yet to produce a specialized textbook. That is the case with an undergraduate course in public choice economics. Here, some instructors adopt books of readings, supplemented by a reading list containing published journal articles, while other instructors simply opt for the latter.

This article provides some guidelines for integrating “economics in the movies” into a part of a public choice economics course. Various scenes from the HBO Films (2001) production of *Conspiracy*, and at least one key scene from the United Artists (2008) production of *Valkyrie*, offer avenues for using movie scenes to explain critical aspects of the modern theory of bureaucracy (Breton and Wintrobe, 1982). Given the benefits of an “economics in the movies” approach like those described in this essay, its use to cover some of the bureaucracy theory portions of an undergraduate course in public choice economics might make for a successful pedagogical enterprise.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The author thanks two anonymous referees of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. The usual caveat applies.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In Niskanen’s (1971) formal model, the bureaucrat’s power, influence, job-related perquisites are an increasing function of the bureaucracy’s size or budget (Olson, 2008).
- 2 As Breton and Wintrobe (1986) indicate, it is more difficult to establish the guilt of subordinates using earlier theories of bureaucracy.
- 3 As many public choice scholars are aware, there is no specialized textbook for undergraduate courses in public choice economics. As a result, instructors often choose to assign (require) books of readings that generally contain published journal articles. Given the limited use of original source materials (e.g., Niskanen, 1971; Breton and Wintrobe, 1982) in any one portion of a semester-long public choice economics course, particularly those in book form, instructors may find it difficult to justify having students purchase those materials.
- 4 Given the lack of public choice economics textbook options noted earlier, instructors often use reading lists containing various journal article publications from the genre. Though which articles to require (or recommend), if any, in each portion of the course is often a matter of personal preference, I have found that students show interest in the Breton and Wintrobe (1986) application of the modern theory of bureaucracy.

- 5 *Conspiracy* consists almost entirely of the dialogue from the Conference, which is generally recognized as the origin of earlier-used terms such as “Final Solution” and “Jewish Question.”

- 6 *Conspiracy* contains other examples of imprecise language regarding the “Final Solution” that are not included in *Mixon et al. (2004a)*. At the beginning of the Conference, Heydrich is shown stating that “We have a *storage problem* in Germany with these Jews,” and that “I have been asked to direct the *release* of Germany and all of Europe from the Jewish stranglehold, and I believe that together we will.” Emphasis has been added to the quotes above to highlight the other uses by Heydrich of *imprecise terms* that are hoped by him to motivate competitive behavior on the part of the Conference attendees and the branches or divisions of Nazi Germany that they represent. Heydrich’s last line above, that he believes the group can *together* accomplish *something* with regard to the *evacuation* of the European Jews supports the Breton and Wintrobe (1982 and 1986) notion that a new or modern kind of bureaucracy was motivated to action in this case. Finally, it is interesting that in the movie Heydrich is pressed by the Conference attendees to judge some of their interpretations of “evacuation” and the other imprecise terms. At one point the movie portrayal of events even has Heydrich specifying his own preference for interpreting the term(s).

- 7 At points in the movie Eichmann relays to attendees the preliminary results of various applications of “concepts” and “initiatives,” such as mobile gassing vehicles and the infamous furnace systems that would ultimately used in the death camps. It is also worth noting here that *Conspiracy* portrays some of the perquisites that Nazi Holocaust participants might expect as a result of their successful “concepts” and “initiatives.” Heydrich is shown stating to some Conference attendees how he is fond of the Wannsee mansion where the Conference was held, and that he expects it to become his post-war home.

- 8 One lesson from *Mixon et al. (2004a and 2004b)* is that the “solutions” implemented by *Einsatzkommando 3* in Lithuania in 1941 were inadequate for achieving the Nazi bureaucracy’s ultimate goal of the “cleansing” of Europe’s Jews (*Mixon et al. 2004b: 375*). For that the Nazi bureaucracy turned to another *initiative* developed in 1941, the construction of death camps like those at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka (*Mixon et al. 2004a: 861*).

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