

Introduction

In the Eighties and Nineties, Game Theory became one of the most dynamic fields of economic theory. Its extraordinary success can also be appreciated by considering the widespread diffusion of notions that are now part of everyday language, such as “zero-sum,” “games,” or even the “prisoner’s dilemma.”

In the words of one of its early historians, E. Roy Weintraub, the simplistic view of the history of Game Theory in economics can be summarized as follows: “[...] von Neumann wrote a paper in the late Twenties on two-person games and minimax. Borel claimed priority but this claim was rejected as mistaken. Then von Neumann and Morgenstern got together in Princeton, wrote their book in 1944, and the word went forth. The story goes on to tell us that, unfortunately, economists were slow to see the importance of the theory. Thus although two-person theory was solved early on, the interesting issues became those of n -person cooperative theory. These problems took a long time to solve, but finally the core emerged as a good solution idea for economics and helped to unify topics in general equilibrium theory. Subsequently information problems emerged in microeconomic theory which could be studied by attention to the nature of the Nash equilibrium theory of non-cooperative games, and this is the area of current work in game theory in economics.” (Weintraub 1992, p. 7) However, more than thirty years of historical research have shown that this narrative is superficial and misleading, and that Game Theory struggled significantly before entering the economists’ toolbox.

This work aims to further contribute to the history of Game Theory by showing how the Theory of Games crossed the disciplinary boundaries of economics and entered political science. This process was largely driven by the American political scientist William H. Riker. Although trained as a traditional political scientist, in the second half of the Fifties Riker became deeply committed to game theory and to the development of a formal (that is, mathematical) political science. His activities were pivotal in shaping a subfield of contemporary political science now known as “Positive Political Theory.”

Moreover, Riker’s activities were not limited to advocating the use of Game Theory. He was also an exceptional “intellectual entrepreneur;” whose efforts ranged from providing game-theoretic analyses of political phenomena to actively promoting his research program within political

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science as an established discipline. This was made possible by Riker's role in founding and developing a department—most notably a Ph.D. program—at the University of Rochester (NY), explicitly devoted to analytical models of politics and to the recruitment and training of scholars working within this framework.

Riker is the central figure of this research, and it will be therefore devoted extensive attention to his life and his position within postwar American political science, a field that underwent profound transformations in both scope and methodology. However, I will largely overlook Riker's early work as a "traditional" political scientist, as well as his important contributions to the study of federalism (Riker 1953; for an overview of Riker's theory of federalism, see Filippov 2005). In addition, there will be only a brief mention of what are perhaps Riker's most well-known contributions among political scientists: his political theory of liberalism versus populism and his theory of "heresthetics," namely the strategic manipulation of political agendas and voting outcomes (Riker 1982).

In short, this work is neither an intellectual biography of Riker nor a comprehensive overview of his scientific output.¹ Nor is it a review of the many epistemological, methodological, and philosophical critiques directed at rational-choice approaches to politics. Rather, it is a history of contemporary economics and political science centered on a specific issue: the entry of Game Theory into the toolbox of political science.

Over the past thirty years, no scholar has probably devoted more effort than Weintraub to reflecting on how the history of economics can and should be written. He identified several approaches to the historiography of economics (Weintraub 2002, 256 et ss.). The first assumes that economics, like other sciences, progresses cumulatively, allowing for a rational reconstruction of how ideas evolved from primitive analyses to more advanced ones. This view is clearly naïve, and its shortcomings are only partially addressed by what Weintraub calls "critical rationalism." This approach rejects a fully cumulative account of scientific development, yet still focuses on "exemplars of good science." "Good science" can be falsified (in the Popperian sense) or can constitute a "progressive research program" (following Imre Lakatos), while "bad science" is characterized as a "regressive research program." Kuhnian notions of "scientific revolutions" similarly generate narratives of progress and decline. As Weintraub observed in the case of economics, these approaches provide "a sense of vitality of economic science" (Weintraub 2002, p. 260). Nonetheless, they continue to grant centrality to the idea of science as a cumulative enterprise. From a historical perspective, a more comprehensive view is offered by the so-called "science studies approach," whose aim is to develop "a perspective based not on asking of science how it should be done, but rather how it was and is done" (Weintraub 2002, p. 267).

Weintraub's taxonomy parallels more traditional historiographical dis-

¹ A definitive, though introductory, appraisal of Riker's academic career and impact on political science is provided by Maske and Durden 2003, which also includes a citation analysis of his work and commentaries by colleagues and students.

tinctions, particularly Joseph Schumpeter's famous dichotomy between "analysis" and "vision," and Lakatos's distinction between "internalist" and "externalist" histories of science (Schumpeter 1987; Lakatos 1978). In brief, Schumpeter's history of analysis and internalist approaches aim to reconstruct the internal content of theories, whereas externalist histories focus on the intellectual, institutional, and social contexts—journals, universities, research centers—that shape scholarly work. Schumpeter's notion of "vision" instead refers to the "preanalytic cognitive act that supplies the raw material for the analytic effort" (Schumpeter 1987, p. 39).

During the same period (roughly the Fifties to the Sixties) in which Game Theory struggled to gain recognition among economists, it attracted the attention of other social scientists, including political scientists. Part of this story is well known, particularly the application of Game Theory to international relations and military strategy. Substantial attention has also been devoted to the role of game theory in the context of "Cold War rationality" and to the institutions that shaped it, such as the RAND Corporation (Amadae 2003; Erickson et al. 2015). By contrast, less attention has been paid to how Game Theory diffused within political science and how this diffusion reshaped the discipline's methodological canon through its interaction with emerging subfields such as Public Choice, Political Economy, and Positive Political Theory.

It is precisely this latter story that exhibits a number of features worthy of closer examination.

The label "Positive Political Theory" was coined by Riker in the late Fifties and referred to what he regarded as the superior descriptive power of political theories grounded in Rational Choice and Game Theory. In his view, these methods finally allowed political science to move "from the purely inductive to include the deductive as well" (Riker and Ordeshook 1973, p. xi). Riker embraced a positivistic conception of political science as a progressive enterprise aimed at developing a "genuine science of politics." Deductive, axiomatic theory, he argued, made it possible to define political phenomena more precisely and thus to subject them to systematic empirical investigation capable of yielding meaningful predictions, in a manner analogous to postwar economics.

As this work will show, however, such a bold vision was beset by substantial theoretical and epistemological difficulties. A more contemporary and less heroic definition of Positive Political Theory is therefore the following: "Positive political theory is concerned with understanding political phenomena through analytical models which, it is hoped, yield insight into why political outcomes look the way they do and not some other way" (Austen-Smith and Banks 1999, p. xi).

This work seeks to explain why Riker's original conception was problematic, or at least overly optimistic, with respect to the actual explanatory and predictive power of Game Theory. As long-standing debates in the philosophy of economics have shown, the primary strength of Game Theory lies in its capacity to provide powerful modeling tools, rather than in offering strong normative guidance or robust predictive claims (see Reiss 2013; Rubinstein 2007). This more modest understanding is clearly reflected in

the latter definition of Positive Political Theory.

The analysis also includes a discussion of the formal aspects of Riker's work. Notably, Riker relied primarily on cooperative game theory rather than on non-cooperative approaches, thereby drawing directly on the original framework developed by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. This work argues that, for Positive Political Theory, a much closer theoretical and institutional affinity existed with the von Neumann–Morgenstern tradition than with the later Nash-based revolution. Non-cooperative Game Theory would exert a substantial influence on the study of politics only much later, beginning in the late Seventies and early Eighties, roughly coinciding with its broader acceptance within economics.

At the same time, Riker's analysis was mathematically flawed. Setting aside biographical considerations, most notably Riker's limited formal training in mathematics, it is offered an epistemological account of how Riker employed Game Theory and how this usage differed from that of economists.

Closely related to these issues is the controversial notion of "economic imperialism." The question of whether the extension of economic analysis beyond its traditional domains constitutes a legitimate intellectual endeavor has often been used to assess the epistemological coherence of rational choice and game-theoretic approaches when applied to disciplines such as sociology, political science, and history.

Methodologically, this work provides a historical reconstruction of Riker's early work, with particular emphasis on *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962). It combines both internalist and externalist elements without fully committing to either approach. It is internalist insofar as it examines Riker's specific use of Game Theory and offers critical assessments, beginning with his conception of rationality. At the same time, it relies heavily on historical sources, including archival material and interviews, and seeks to reconstruct the external forces that supported Riker's efforts to institutionalize Positive Political Theory.

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