

Positive Political Theory and Heresthetics: The Axioms and Assumptions of William Riker*

An Introduction to Positive Political Theory. By William Riker and Peter Ordeshook. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

The Theory of Political Coalitions. By William Riker. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

Liberalism Against Populism; A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice. By William Riker. (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1982).

Democracy in the United States. By William Riker. (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

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"The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science," By William Riker. *The American Political Science Review.* 76 (December, 1982), 753-766.

"Political Theory and the Art of Heresthetics," By William Riker. American Political Science Association Annual Meetings, September 2-5, 1982.

"The Future of a Science of Politics," By William Riker. *The American Behavioral Scientist.* 21 (September, 1977), 11-38.

The writings of any president of the American Political Science Association ought to be taken seriously by other political scientists. Election to the presidency is an important form of

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recognition of the contributions a scholar has made to our understanding of politics. In the case of William Riker, who was elected to the presidency of the A.P.S.A. in 1982, those contributions lie in the areas of game theory, positive political theory, and rational choice theory. He has also contributed significantly to empirical democratic theory and has been vigorous in attempting to redefine the focus of political science.

Most of the earlier work in game theory came from nonpolitical scientists, particularly from economists, but with his pioneering work in 1963 on political coalitions, Riker helped to provide the basis for political scientists to take formal theory seriously and use it profitably. There and in subsequent works, Riker introduced sophisticated methodologies to political scientists, employed logical analysis rigorously, and applied a variety of economic axioms and assumptions to political analysis. But Riker does not see himself primarily as the carrier of a new methodology; rather, he sees his work pointing to a new concept of political science, something he calls heresthetics, the study of strategic choice in politics.

This essay is primarily concerned with some of the claims and applications Riker has made for his work with respect to democratic theory and a new political science. Before moving to that discussion, it might be helpful to consider how Riker's work fits into the broader literature on game theory and rational choice theory which has supplied Riker with his major theoretical foundations and to which he, in turn, has contributed richly. The paper then deals with Riker's own works, with special attention given to his writings on voting and democratic theory and to the contributions he believes he offers to a reconstructed study of politics.

The Presuppositions

In both rational choice and game theory, rationality is treated instrumentally. From this perspective, rationality cannot tell us what is objectively good or evil, but it can assist us in finding ways to satisfy our desires or preferences. In his formulation of the rationality model in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Anthony Downs provides a clear and representative elaboration of rational choice model. Downs holds that "the term rational is never applied to an agent's ends, but only to his means. This follows from the definition of rational as efficient, i.e., maximizing output for a given input, or

minimizing input for a given output." This definition does not oblige us to rely exclusively on logical, conscious thinking but only on "a man who moves towards his goals in a way which to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output."¹

Game theory rests on many of the same assumptions. Von Neumann and Morgenstern entitled their pioneering work *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* and treated rationality as economic rationality, that is, as how to obtain maximum utility.² From this perspective, rational action moves us toward our preferences and irrational action away. Rationality, in other words, becomes synonymous with calculation, and as we interact with others, we calculate, like Hobbes' rational actor, to determine how others will help or harm us in our quest.

Now, such an approach simply cannot proceed without somehow accounting for individual preferences. The rational choice theorists establish a role premise for the players in games. Each player is given stakes and expected both to want to get as much as he can and to recognize that other players desire the same for themselves. In filling his role, the player is expected to be self-interested, maximizing, and prepared to bargain or fight to satisfy his preferences. If the role premise held that people were more concerned about the welfare of others, were prepared to give up some of the potential gains so that others might also benefit, or that fairness and equity considerations were consistently greater for each player than self-interest, we would not have a game. Such role-premises are more applicable to idealized family, club or cooperative interactions, according to game theory. The players are assumed to have self-interests which they wish to satisfy as best they can, given the constraints under which they find themselves. If they have no self-interest invested in the results of the game, they are, at most, observers, given no plays to make, no losses to sustain, and no winnings to enjoy.

Each of us carries our own set of preferences or desires, and what is important to you may be unimportant to me. As with Hobbes, desires are taken as a given in rational choice theory. The in-

1. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 5.

2. *Ibid.*

3. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947).

dividualistic formulation of desires has important implications for the role of rationality in politics. Can we tell whether some desires or appetites are good and others bad? Can rationality play a useful role here? According to the rational choice model, the answer to both questions is "No." Reflecting the general argument in the field, Riker and Peter Ordeshook hold that private goals "can appear as socially admirable (e.g., the obligation and self-restraint of a Cincinnatus) or as socially abhorrent (e.g., the paranoid sadism of a Hitler). Despite this diversity, such motivations must be understood as compromising an essential element of a theory of rational political action" (*Introduction*, 61). The importance of the relativity of values presented here is similar to one developed earlier by David Hume who insisted that "it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger." From this perspective, the role of reason is reserved for determining the most efficient strategies for achieving our desires, whatever they may be.

Rationality is also treated instrumentally in another way in rational choice and game theory. We are not interested in the many aspects of a human being but only in those goals of his that seem important to him *at that time*. According to Downs, "we do not take into consideration the whole personality of each individual when we discuss what behavior is rational for him. We do not allow for the rich diversity of ends served by each of his acts, the complexity of his motives, the way in which every part of life is intimately related to his emotional needs."⁵ This position becomes important for two reasons. In the first place, it makes analysis more manageable, and, as we shall see, rational choice and game theory require a manageable setting if rational strategies are developed. In the second place, the rational choice or game theory analyst need not introduce concerns into his investigation not considered by a player. If a player wants, for example, to include ethical considerations into his preference schedule, the analyst needs to take such values into account. But if the player excludes ethical considerations, the analyst is not obliged to include them.

Another fundamental premise in both rational choice and game theory models is that the framework for choice is relatively manageable. In other words, our environment should be relatively

4. David Hume, A *Treatise on Human Nature*, Bk II, Pt. 3, sec. iii.

5. Downs, *op. cit.*

stable, and our future is not totally unpredictable. The model depends on our ability to deal with a limited number of factors in deciding our choices and with our ability to calculate the consequences of potential strategies on our preferences.

Uncertainties in modern rational choice analysis are analogous to Hobbes' state of nature. Uncertainties about information create doubt, make us unclear about the costs and benefits of any given action, confuse us about the relationship between causes and effects, and preclude us from making reliable predictions about our efforts. "In a world of uncertainty," William Vickery notes, "the possibilities for irrational behavior are more numerous and subtle."⁶ Choices become manageable to the extent that many other potentially important concerns remain dormant or have already been satisfied and hence do not require us to make a variety of disparate, often conflicting choices simultaneously. Riker and Ordeshook follow this line of reasoning when they observe that there is little likelihood of error if there are only two alternatives, each with well-known consequences. But when "the range of alternatives is infinite and when the consequences of choosing each alternative are uncertain, it is likely that most choices involve error" (*Introduction*, 24).

Manageability not only increases the chances of certainty and predictability, it also enables us to rank order our preferences. As we attempt to pursue our various goals, one might conflict with another, and two or more preferences might not be able to be satisfied simultaneously. I cannot be in two places at the same time, and accordingly, I must decide where I would most prefer to be. In short, I must pick and choose. Now this selection of one alternative over another gives us our identity. In this regard, Riker and Ordeshook observe that "it is the preferential ordering of goals and outcomes that reveals the existence of purpose" (*Introduction*, 16).

Probably the strongest claim for rationality has been advanced by Riker and Ordeshook. Like other rational choice theorists, they hold that "rational behavior is, then, the choice of that alternative which maximizes expected utility." Having made that claim, they consider several objections, including a psychoanalytical one which holds that people sometimes wish to hurt themselves. According to Riker and Ordeshook, people who "frustrate and even kill themselves [are] utility-maximizing with respect to the goal. Such

6. William Vickery, "Economic Rationality and Social Choice," *Social Research*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter, 1977), 672.

behavior may be bizarre, but it does not violate the principle of maximizing expected utility" (*Coalitions*, 20-21). Such behavior is not only bizarre, it is also contrary to ordinary meanings of the term "rationality."

In his work, Riker accepts the fundamental axioms of rational choice and game theory regarding rationality. He treats rationality as individualistic and instrumental: reason directs each person to employ the most efficient means to achieve his or her personal desires or preferences. Everyone is assumed to have a schedule of preferences, and rationality is the common property of all human beings to achieve their most prized desires, whatever they may be. Riker's ontology and epistemology are those found in rational choice and game theory. Human beings are, axiomatically, defined as self-maximizing actors who try to get as much as they can in the most economical way. What they want varies from person to person, each being the author of his or her own schedule of preferences. We come to know individual preferences not by asking people what they want or what they would do in another situation but by examining their choices in actual situations, trying to understand how they will make the best use of their resources as they pursue their desired goals.

Conflict

Riker's politics, like games, are social phenomena concerned with distributive matters. Because of a need to take into account how others can help or hurt us in achieving our goals, game theory has described strategies which offer the best possible outcome for individuals depending on the framework of specific types of games. Sometimes this leads to coalition building, and at other times to a pure conflict, with the number of players and rules of the game pointing to the appropriate strategy. In two person, zero-sum games, conflict is essential because any gain by my opponent will result in a corresponding loss to me. It would be irrational for me to tolerate such a situation, and my rational strategy would be to engage in a conflict strategy which provides me with the best chance of gaining as much as possible for myself with the least possible risk of losses.

This concern about interests, conflict, and winning is summarized by Riker:

What the rational political man wants, I believe, is to win, a much more specific and specifiable motive than the desire for power. Furthermore, the desire to win differentiates some men from others. Unquestionably there are guilt-ridden and shame-conscious men who do not desire to win, who in fact, desire to lose. These are the irrational ones of politics. With these in mind, therefore, it is possible to define rationality in a meaningful way without reference to the notion of power. Politically rational man is the man who would rather win than lose, regardless of the stakes. . . . The man who wants to win also wants to make other people do things they would not otherwise do. He wants to exploit each situation to his advantage, and he wants to succeed in a given situation (*Coalitions*, 22).

In this and other writings, Riker presents a very broad notion of politics as winning, and he emphasizes the desire of the participants to control others and avoid being controlled by them. What is translated into game theory is the idea that each player exploits "each situation to his advantage." It is this emphasis that had led Riker to see politics as a game, that is, formal, rule governed behavior, in which each leader or potential leader attempts to maximize his own benefits at the expense of competitors.

Riker's most important early contributions to rational choice and game theory came from his work on coalitions. Coalitions and the cooperation that characterizes coalition partners are not ends in themselves but one of the strategies available to players as they seek to maximize their self-interest (*Introduction*, 120). As Harsanyi remarked, "each player's only aim" in forming coalitions "is to strengthen his bargaining position against those of the other players." Coalitions then are instrumental or strategic choices that may or may not help me and should be judged on their utility for me.

Because strategic considerations about my self-interests in a conflict situation dictate my decision to enter a coalition, it becomes impossible to consider coalitions in two-person zero-sum games.⁸ If I think I will win, there is no incentive to share my winnings with the other player; nor does he, if he thinks he will win.

Riker's major contribution to coalition theory is his theory of minimum winning coalitions. "*In social situations similar to n-person, zero sum games with side payments, participants create coalitions just as large as they believe will ensure winning and no*

7. John C. Harsanyi, *Social Behavior and Bargaining Equilibrium in Games and Social Situations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

8. Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *op. cit.*, 220.

larger" (*Coalitions*, 32-33). To put the matter less technically, Riker's theory holds that when more than two players are in a conflict situation in which the participants can bargain among themselves on how to divide the winnings, the coalition will be no larger than what is required for forming a winning combination. Rationality should tell us that very big coalitions require the winners to split their proceeds among more participants and so those constructing a coalition have an incentive to keep their coalition large enough to win but small enough to keep as much as possible of the winnings for themselves.

To demonstrate his position, Riker reaches back into history, including three cases where one American political party seemed to have an overwhelming majority: the "era of good feeling," the disappearance of the Whigs in 1852, and the dominant position of the national Republican party in 1872. "Reviewing the three instances of the substantial disappearance of the minority," he observes, "it appears that, regardless of the reasons for the existence of an overwhelming majority or grand coalition . . . the leaders of each maximal coalition behaved in some way that minimized it" (*Coalitions*, 62). But in minimizing the coalition, the politicians in the dominant coalition miscalculated. In the 1850's, for example, the leaders sought to "change the base of the alliance, which of course, involved letting people go." But too many went, and a new majority won (*Coalitions*, 62). Further studies of winning coalitions in the Napoleonic wars and among the allied nations following the two World Wars indicate the quick disintegration of alliances. For someone as analytically rigorous as Riker, history does not serve as the springboard for theory, but provides "evidence" where theoretical propositions can be tested.

What emerges from Riker's discussion of coalition building and maintenance is a theory of disequilibrium. Here Riker acknowledges the contributions of Duncan Black and R.A. Newing (*Liberalism*, 182) and concludes from both their work as well as his own that "majority rule equilibria must be very rare" and that therefore it is important to study disequilibrium (*Liberalism*, 186). Riker holds that an equilibrium is not stable "unless the individual preferences are highly similar-so that all winning coalitions are similar" (*Liberalism*, 199). But individual preferences are not highly similar and losers are always ready to try strategies which break up the present winning coalition and forge a majority favorable to themselves. Politics is in a state of flux, and this becomes the subject matter of

politics for Riker.

His claims for studying the causes of disequilibrium are extensive. Riker holds out the hope that "from a scientific point of view, " we might understand the "abstracted process" of disequilibria and "might then predict political outcomes" (*Liberalism*, 199). He also believes that "knowledge of equilibria is therefore knowledge of the future and carries with it the power of the seer" (*Liberalism*, 199).

Equilibria continually change because preferences, or what Riker calls tastes, differ and can be manipulated. Accordingly, Riker insists that the key to understanding disequilibrium and hence politics is the study of "the political mobilization of tastes." He goes on to argue that "it is exactly this mobilization that is the center of political life, the very thing that *political* theories should explain" (*Liberalism*, 198). Riker here complains that "a vast number of supposed explanations of politics (economic, technological, ideological, astrological, and others) are simply irrelevant to politics. They explain the origin, not the operation of tastes Now, however, we can explain the mystery, the perpetual flux of politics, in terms of the mobilization and amalgamation of tastes" (*Liberalism*, 198). As we probe deeper, we find that "the force for evolution is political disequilibrium, and the consequence of disequilibrium is a kind of natural selection of issues."

It is important to notice what Riker is attempting here. It is nothing less than a redefinition of the subject matter as well as the methodology of politics. Riker's claims for his work and the appropriate subject matter of political theory are important for several reasons. Most obviously, he rejects other approaches as inappropriate, particularly when they concentrate on the subject matter of what he calls "tastes." According to Riker, justice, obligation, and rights are manifestations of certain tastes by various political actors at different political periods. Tastes (or values) cannot be a proper subject for a science, and Plato, Rousseau, Locke or Marx have little to tell *us* about politics or what should be in politics from Riker's perspective. What they have to say is akin to a justification of some kinds of tastes: Their contributions lie in the area of political rhetoric or ideology, not with Riker's definition of political theory.

Moreover, Riker assumes that every coalition is theoretically negotiable. Today I may be in alliance with you because you offer me more, but tomorrow I may ally with your enemy because he offers me more. Now it would clearly be misreading of Riker to assume that the rewards or sidepayments exchanged in the coalition-making

process are exclusively material. More than money may be exchanged and promised: ideological or value preferences may be traded as well. Indeed, according to Riker, this very desire of winning is what carried the abolitionists and Lincoln to office. Values are simply one of many different kinds of political commodities. Riker might observe that this is an unpleasant truth for some and what he has promised us is not pleasantness but the truth. But is it?

At the empirical and historical levels we need to wonder why some political societies are stable over time, why the movements of coalitions in some societies are truly marginal, bringing incremental changes, but in other societies, the changes are significant. Not all change is interesting if what we want to do is insist that disequilibrium is the foundation of politics. Should we consider changes in a Swiss coalition to be as intellectually important as the disequilibria in Russia in 1917 or in Germany in 1933? Might not the subject matter of "tastes" make some kinds of changes important and others not? To answer in the affirmative means that we have a standard we can bring to judge political changes, but no such standard is available in Riker's science of politics. It is a study of politics that is empty at its core.

Riker's Democratic Theory

From his earliest to his most recent writings, Riker has been concerned about the democratic process. In his first major work, *Democracy in the United States* (1953) he examined five central documents in the democratic tradition: Pericles' Funeral Oration, the Agreement of the People produced at Putney in 1648, the American Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. These statements all share an ideal of democracy and the democratic method, even though they may differ in content and emphasis. "They are like five proofs of the same geometric theorem: they proceed by a variety of routes, some devious, some direct; but since they are really proofs, they all end in the same place" (*Democracy in the U.S.*, 14). Riker finds that all hold that democracy is rule by the people (and to be contrasted with elite rule), that democracy and liberty or freedom are intimately related; that democracy depends on some form of equality, and that "there is an implied connection between democracy and a willing obedience to the law" (*Democracy in the U.S.*, 14-18).

Many of the ideals of democracy, Riker reminds us, are not exclusive to democracy. Self-respect, for example, can be found as a positive goal in many nondemocratic theories. What is truly distinguishing about democracy is its method. "The method is government responsible to the people. Hence, the essential democratic institution is the ballot box and all that goes with it" (*Democracy in the U.S.*, 28). In pursuing the vote as the central feature of the democratic method, Riker examines suffrage in America and the mobilization of voters in political parties. He also studies the constitutional arrangement in the United States and ways government may be made more accountable.

In his early discussion of democracy Riker is concerned that government is perhaps not as accountable as the democratic ideal suggests. To repair that damage, it is necessary to "transform parties from things local, incoherent, and irresponsible into national, rationalized, and obedient servants of the people" (*Democracy in the U.S.*, 338-339). Moreover, Riker tells us, "We need a Greater Schoolmaster," and "the charisma of a democratic hero" (346-349), in short a strong president who has "an interest in nationalizing and strengthening political parties" (349). These concerns became less central in Riker's later discussions on democracy, but there is an even more pronounced change between his early and later writings. In a work published almost thirty years after *Democracy in the United States*, Riker emphasizes the importance of democracy as a method which allows voters to throw out officials they dislike and keep those they like and claims that there is no inherent imperative in democracy to pursue the good, however defined by philosophers or the public (*Liberalism*). Yet in his first extended treatment of democracy, Riker revealed that "one major assumption beneath the argument of this study is that government can make men good Good men, therefore, are made when a democratic constitution disciplines their propensity to pride, when it will not let them disfigure their souls with servility, when it encourages them to express their fullest dignity and manhood" (*Democracy in the U.S.*, 363).

Despite all of the subsequent differences, there is much continuity between the early and later works of William Riker. First and foremost, he has consistently focused on voting as the distinguishing and most important feature of democratic governments. In addition, he has repeatedly insisted that the rules of the democratic process are of critical importance. In his descriptive works, attention is

given to the constitutional rules which are seen as structuring the democratic process and giving appropriate roles to government. In his highly analytical writings, such as on coalition formation, the rules are those of the game, providing players with information, opportunities, constraints, and some limited resources.⁹ Without rules there can be no game, but also, without rules, there can be no constitutional democracy.

Finally, Riker sees the democratic process as continually besieged by problems internal to democratic societies. Initially the difficulties were thought to arise from decentralized parties and weak national leaders (*Democracy in the U.S.*), but later were thought to come from the very success of the expansion of the democratic franchise as new voters demand more than the system can afford ("Democracy"), and, more recently from a populist/Rousseauian construction put on democracy (*Liberalism*).

A summary statement of some of Riker's more recent concerns in democratic theory can be found in "Democracy," a short article he contributed to the *Academic American Encyclopedia*. Popular participation and other freedoms, we read, are "gained as a result of factional disputes within oligarchical governments." As factions grow in size, protected rights are extended to more and more people until they become the staples of contemporary democratic governments. However, factions within democracies cause considerable strain on the system. Riker sees democratic politicians under constant pressure to promise more and more and this represents "the worst defect of democracy." Politicians promise more because they need to attract marginal voters and they believe that by offering more than their political competitors, they can win the votes required for electoral success. Ironically, this can happen only because democracy has been successful in expanding the franchise and making participation theoretically universal for all adults. Contemporary competitive democracies must attend to a variety of interests, some competing but all expensive. "Because everyone is a member of some special-interest group, all special interests eventually tend to get some kind of advantage, and the sum of these advantages may be more than the society can afford" ("Democracy," 98).

In his most recent work on democracy, *Liberalism Against Populism*, Riker continues to find that democracy and liberty are in-

9. Nathan Leites, *The Rules of the Game* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

timately linked, and that the two are tied to justice. However, he does not continue his discussion about the role of factions or interest groups in politics. Although democracy is said to serve justice, Riker does not define justice, but simply tells us its ideal is self-realization and self-respect. To achieve these goals, we must consider both the ends of justice and the means whereby justice is achieved because both "parts, the ideal and the method, are necessary" (*Liberalism*, 2). The problem with earlier theories of justice, and here Riker singles out Plato and Marx as examples, is that they are not only unattainable but, in the case of Plato, "seem internally contradictory and quite unlikely to achieve the intended effects even if they could be carried through" (*Liberalism*, 4).

The elements of democracy are identified as participation, freedom, and equality. Participation cannot be merely formal, as in one-party states, but "must be surrounded with numerous institutions like political parties and free speech, which organize voting into genuine choice" (*Liberalism*, 5). Now the purpose of voting is both to restrain oppressive rule and to take "full responsibility for oneself"; hence, participation is "an end in itself as well as a practical method" (*Liberalism*, 6). Democracy also requires liberty which is not only instrumental to democratic choice but is also an end in itself because "it generates self-control and facilitates self-respect." In addition to the basic civil liberties we have grown to associate with competitive democratic regimes, Riker includes economic freedom, by which he means private property operating in free markets. Finally, he holds that democracy must include equality. By equality, Riker is willing to accept "equal education or economic opportunity or even equal shares of the wealth of the world." He goes on to argue that "serious inequality" would "deny to some people the chance to the self-control and cooperative management involved in democratic justice" (*Liberalism*, 8).

Riker's very brief theoretical discussion of the subjects of justice, democracy, participation, liberty, and equality (they cover only six pages) might seem to provide the basis for some Rawlsian notion of justice or at least for some policy recommendations that are to the left of center. Riker is willing to have policy recommendations read into his work, but he does not structure his argument to call for more state intervention. Indeed, he betrays considerable suspicion of such policies. The conclusion Riker wants the reader to take from his work is that popular majorities cannot justify state action. What they express in their votes is misleading, often manipulated, and

never certain.

To explain why votes or, more especially, majorities cannot be morally determining, is the major analytical task Riker sets for himself in *Liberalism Against Populism*. His argument is not the traditional one against majority rule—that the many may be mistaken and vote for inherently unjust policies or that they might vote against their own best interests. What Riker wants to demonstrate is that we do not know what voting results mean. In an elaborate analysis, he shows why one system of voting may produce much different results than another system of voting. If different procedures of voting lead to different kinds of majorities, then majority rule cannot produce normative certainty. What one voting procedure produces will not necessarily be what another voting procedure would produce. For example, plurality voting frequently produces different results than proportional or weighted methods of voting. This does not mean that one system is fair and another is unfair: according to Riker, "every method is in some sense fair." From the variability of results under different methods of voting and from the assumption that no system is inherently normatively superior to any other, Riker concludes: "Outcomes of voting cannot, in general, be regarded as accurate amalgamations of voters' values. Sometimes they may be accurate, sometimes not; but since we seldom know which situation exists, we cannot, in general expect accuracy. Hence we cannot expect fairness either" (236).

But this is not the only problem with voting, according to Riker. He argues that "outcomes of any particular method of voting lack meaning because often they are manipulated amalgamations rather than fair and true amalgamations of voters' judgements and because we can never know for certain whether an amalgamation has in fact been manipulated" (*Liberalism*, 238). In practice, this means that the voice of the people, in the populist model, cannot be the voice of God, as William Jennings Bryan had claimed. If it is subject to manipulations, the real preferences of each voter can never be clear. But voting is the only way we know to identify majority preferences, and there is no other available method of discovering the popular will which will satisfy the democratic conditions of participation, freedom, and equality.

For these reasons, Riker wants to see a limited view of democracy and rejects what he terms "the populist" model. Populist democracy is traced back to Rousseau, with his emphasis on the general will and community interest. These ideals are used, Riker insists, to restrict

individual choice in the name of a morally determinant majority.

To decide that voting should be normatively limited in legitimizing public policies preferred by the majority does not mean that democracy is conceptually bankrupt. It would be, from Riker's perspective, if we had only an expansive, populist version available to us. But there is another model, the liberal model, which Riker believes can overcome what he considers to be the defects of populism and escape the normative ambiguities of voting and manipulation.

The function of voting in the liberal model "is to control officials, and no more" (*Liberalism*, 9; emphasis in original). Riker goes on to argue that the "quality of popular decision, whether good or bad" is not the issue in the liberal model. Good government is expected to follow from elected officials who fear that if they abuse their office, they will be replaced by the voters.

In his discussion of liberal democracy, Riker acknowledges the normative tentativeness of majority votes in liberal democracies. Riker also recognizes that the voter might be manipulated in liberal democracies, but that is permissible in his model. All that is required is that voters have a chance to reject officials they dislike or consider offensive. "Liberalism requires only that it be possible to reject a putatively offending official, not that the rejection actually occur" (*Liberalism*, 243). From this, Riker concludes that "since social decisions are not, in liberal theory, required to mean anything, liberals can cheerfully acknowledge that elections do not necessarily or even usually reveal popular will. All elections do or have to do *is permit* people to get rid of their rulers" (*Liberalism*, 224; emphasis mine).

When the electoral process in Riker's liberal democracy becomes void of content, where does this leave democracy and its three constituent conditions of participation, freedom, and equality that seemed so important in the opening pages of *Liberalism Against Populism*? The answer is: not where we found them earlier when we were told that freedom generates self-direction and self-respect, that participation promotes "taking full responsibility for oneself" (*Liberalism*, 6) and that serious inequalities that denied "to some people the chance to the self-control and cooperative management" were contrary to "democratic justice" (8). In the conclusion, participation is said to be important because "it can engender that self-direction and self-respect that democracy is supposed to provide because candidates, trying to construct winning platforms in the face of that potential veto [by the majority] also try to generate ma-

majorities, at least momentary ones" (245). This passage constitutes Riker's entire discussion of participation, self-respect, and self-direction offered in the conclusions. How the construction of platforms (which may be manipulated according to Riker's earlier discussion) can add to self-respect and self-direction is not immediately apparent.

Riker's conclusions about democracy are part of a broader tradition that saw the rule of the people as protective of their interests and the business of voting as the method of rewarding some candidates and punishing others. That is the argument of Joseph Schumpeter and a variety of British and American political scientists who believed that the public realistically and effectively participated in complex, mass democratic societies only intermittently, on election days. Schumpeter and his followers based their conclusions both on observations of minimal participation and the complex structures and crowded agendas of modern democratic regimes which precluded continued, mass public participation. What Riker has added is the argument that when popular majorities do more than reward or punish candidates, voters are attempting more than can be justified: popular majorities simply cannot be morally determinant.

Riker's position is not a novel one, it is also one which invites some serious difficulties. If majorities cannot be used to justify some positions, is there any way to justify public policies? What standard does the public use when it judges the conduct of public officials? Is the one they use, one we would recommend? By acknowledging that slavery was always "an evil," Riker suggests that there are certain standards we might use to evaluate public policies and officials. But how do we know?

One answer that presents itself is that political philosophy helps us to demonstrate the evils of slavery and also provides a justification for a government to abolish slavery. Such a reading of political philosophy suggests that it may have an important contribution to make to contemporary political analysis because it can say of certain kinds of action, and policies, and regimes, that they might be just or unjust.

For Riker, to know that popular majorities are not morally determinant does not lead him to conclude that democracy is unimportant. He goes to great lengths to insist that his liberal model can provide a check on elected leaders. But someone might be suspicious that the voters in a mass democracy can ever move much beyond

their own interests or fall prey to the manipulations of politicians who hunger for their votes. Such a reading is current today, and one which Riker might readily accept. But it is important to remember that in his earliest major work on democracy, the virtue of the citizen was seen as important, while habits and institutions were recommended which promoted that virtue. What Riker touched on in his earlier work and rejected in his later works is a subject that has preoccupied some of the most energetic and committed of the democratic theorists and that is the character or moral fiber of the democratic citizen. To talk about a democratic character is to talk about the content of character. A Locke or Rousseau might think differently about the ideal character of the people, one emphasizing natural law and rationality, and the other civic virtue and the community, but it is clear that this concern with character is important in the political teaching of each. (True, Riker wants to promote self-restraint and self-respect, but how this is defined or achieved is left largely unattended.)

Riker concludes *Liberalism Against Populism* with a justification and a plea. He tells us that the "liberal interpretation of voting, however much it admits of 'unfair' voting methods, manipulation, cycles, and the like, still contains the essential elements of democracy," that is, we have the chance to throw the rascals out. We should protect that chance, something which is embedded in the American constitution, and this can be done, according to Riker, only if we see populism as a risk to democracy, maintain the constitutional limitations we now have, make the citizens "aware of the emptiness of the populist interpretation of voting," and disseminate "the discoveries of social choice theory" (*Liberalism*, 253).

Where are we left when we finish Riker's discussion of liberal democracy? In many ways we conclude that liberal democracy is to be supported because it seems to have the best chance of limiting government, that is, of seeing that public authorities do not abridge our rights to free choice. Rights, it turns out, are traditionally defined and thought to be supportive and compatible with one another. However, if the problems of a growing state presence can be better traced to interest groups than voter preferences, then Riker's liberal model of voting may not save what Riker wants saved. The trouble with western politics is not that the state has become a huge welfare institution trying to reflect a Rousseauian general will but that the state has become the victim of a thousand

slashes, with little policy preferences going to one group, and bits of policy preference going to a second, and so on. Robert Dahl and Mancur Olson¹⁰ have both insisted in their most recent works that the democratic system has become populated with unequal interest group participants and that some actors can veto or promote policies that advance their interests at the expense of the rest of the public. The organized groups come from business and labor, from the cities as well as the farms, they represent the rich and the poor, the employed and the unemployed. American politics is increasingly becoming the politics of the organized at the expense of the nonorganized or poorly organized. Voting may still maintain its properties of equality, but group bargaining is no longer characterized by equality. One membership and one group are not equivalent to another membership or another group in terms of access, influence, or power. And Riker's democratic theory addresses itself in no way to the fundamental problem of organizational inequality.

Riker's most recent democratic theory is a content-free political process. Not only the people are without character and moral standards, so are the leaders. Not only are the people seeking their narrow interests, however defined, so are the leaders (cf. "Two-Party System").

Riker's Science of Politics: Heresthetics

To place Riker's view of political science in perspective, it is helpful to see the continuities of his views from his early writings to his later work. What emerges is a claim by Riker that he is not engaging in merely another methodology but in a scientific enterprise which will change the nature and study of politics. In *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, Riker wrote of his "hope . . . that this book will . . . serve as an example of the possibilities of a genuine political science" (ix) suggesting that we have not reached that stage. His more recent works have developed this point further. "The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay in the History of Political Science" was offered as an alternative to the "belles lettres, criticism, and philosophic speculation" that Riker

10. Robert Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy; Autonomy vs. Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

sees in political science today and which is very distinct from science. He is concerned that political science is said to have no history as science, and many of his colleagues are said to be so dispirited about this lack of a scientific history that "in despair they are inclined to abandon the search for scientific generation. (This despair is, I believe, the root of the movement toward phenomenology and hermeneutics and other efforts to turn political science into a belles-lettristic study)" (753).

To overcome this tendency, he believes it is necessary to show that political science is a science and that there is an accumulation of scientific knowledge. According to Riker, Duverger's law enables him to show that "a history does exist." Duverger had held that "the simple-majority single-ballot system favors the two party system" and claimed that this generalization had the status of a law. Riker examines the claim and presents some interesting efforts at formulating such a proposition in the three quarters of a century before Duverger's work in 1963, thereby demonstrating that "a history does exist." In the process, Riker also modified Duverger's law, abandoning "its deterministic form" to come up with a revision which reads, "Plurality election rules bring about and maintain two-party competition except in countries where (1) third parties nationally are continually one of two parties locally, and (2) one party among several is almost always the condorcet winner in elections" ("Two-Party System," 760-761).

What becomes important in evaluating Riker's work is not to ask whether he is right about Duverger's law or coalitions. He probably is. What is more to the point is his claim that the business of winning and losing is the subject matter of political science and that this subject can be studied scientifically. In this respect, Riker's political science is reminiscent of Machiavelli's new study of politics. Machiavelli, after all, wanted to disbar the philosophical tradition from contributing to the study of politics because it had missed, from his perspective, one of the essential aspects of politics which was how to win and how to avoid losing. But Machiavelli introduced his own normative view of politics, one which attempted to justify and promote the republican ideal of public order, a society where civic virtue overwhelmed the narrow pursuit of self-centered goals." Riker could claim, and rightly so, that there are significant

11. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

differences between him and the Florentine. Their methodologies and their preferred end-states are significantly different. Nevertheless, they share a common concern about winning and losing and both profess this is the central element in the study of politics.

Nowhere is Riker's project of developing a science of politics based on winning and losing made in more sweeping terms than in his paper to the 1982 American Political Science Association meetings. He complains that "in political science, the meaning of 'theory' has been corrupted" (1). What has passed for political theory has frequently lacked coherence and consistency. Moreover, it is not scientific, that is, it does not consist "of the inference of empirically specified theorems from the axioms of a theory" (1). According to Riker, rigorous theory began to emerge only in 1948 with the publication of Duncan Black's work on the paradox of voting ("Heresthetics," 2; *Liberalism*, 1-2). Because of the subsequent scholarship that emerged out of Black's original efforts, "political theory, properly so-called, came of age" ("Heresthetics," 1). For this reason, Riker wants to drop the modifiers that have been used to describe his form of theory, such as "non-normative theory," "empirical theory," "formal theory" or "positive theory." He wants to restrict the term "political theory" "analogically to the usage in almost all other scientific fields, to a deductively related system of general sentences that purport, with more or less empirical justification, to describe political events" ("Heresthetics," 2).

It is at this point that heresthetics emerges as critical to Riker's science or theory of politics. According to Riker, heresthetics "is a study of the *strategy* of decision" and "has to do with choosing and election" ("Heresthetics," 15). He tells us he uses "a Greek-like word because it is a branch of knowledge that would have been, but was not, invented by Athenian philosophers and sophists" ("Heresthetics," 15). Riker claims the Greeks did not develop a systematic science of heresthetics even though they knew the importance of strategic choice. Both Thucydides and Demosthenes, we are reminded, used examples of "coalition building," "false presentation of an issue" and "agenda control" ("Heresthetics," 21. Cf. *Liberalism*, 173-174 for a discussion of Pliny the Younger and his efforts at agenda control).

"Unfortunately," Riker laments, a heresthetical tradition "never developed." The reason is largely that attention was given by the Greeks to rhetoric which Riker sees as a technique of winning through persuasion. Heresthetics is also concerned with winning,

but "conviction is at best secondary and often not even involved at all. The point of an heresthetic act is to structure a situation so that the actor wins, regardless of whether or not the other participants are persuaded" ("Heresthetics," 24). Riker makes the point that a rhetorician uses a dilemma to show an audience that if an opponent cannot solve the dilemma, he is "intellectually weak." Turning to heresthetics, we find "the dilemma-maker succeeds because he forces his opponent into a choice of alternatives such that, whichever alternative is chosen, the opponent will alienate some of his supporters and lose" (25). But today's losers may become tomorrow's winners. To achieve this, they try to generate new issues and build new coalitions. For this reason, the "motivation for change" lies with the losers (29). For Riker, heresthetics is to become the scientific basis for political science. Derived from game theory, social choice theory, and rational choice theory, it answers "questions about the origin, manipulation, and modification of tastes" (14) and promises to produce results "as helpful as the law of demand has been in economics" (13).

Riker's vision of and claims for heresthetics need to be approached at several levels. First of all, we need to wonder whether this is as new as Riker insists. As I suggested earlier, there is a striking resemblance to Machiavelli in the emphasis and subject matter of Riker's work, even though their methodologies obviously differ significantly. But beyond Machiavelli, we can wonder how different Riker is from his immediate predecessors in American political science. Is his work merely a sophisticated variation on the behavioral, pluralist conception of politics, best understood as an effort to correct some inadequacies in the earlier models? Riker emphasizes conflict and disequilibrium while the pluralists consider consensus and equilibrium as being at the heart of politics.¹² Nevertheless, both Riker and the earlier behavioralists shared assumptions about human nature, human motivation, interest and rationality. They agree about some fundamental conceptions about what should constitute the subject matter of politics. Actors, whether they are in Robert Dahl's New Haven or in William Riker's losing coalitions, are seen as rational, self-interested, and maximizing. From both the behavioral and rational choice perspectives, politics remains the same: which self-interested actors get what and how.

12. David Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1958).

A second question that needs to be asked about Riker's work is its status as a science. This is not the place to ask whether any social science can ever become a science in the strict sense. It is good enough to accept the proposition that economics can claim to be a science and recognize that Riker believes that the future prospects of political science as a science lie in it moving closer to the rigor and axiomatic reasoning found in economics ("Future"). But that is not the only science he uses. From his earliest through his most recent work, Riker also relies on Darwinian evolution to explain politics and change. He tells us "an election can also be regarded as a Darwinian process, a process in which inefficient candidates are displaced in the long run or on the average by those who adopt equilibrium strategies." This includes presidential candidates who "are selected by a 'survival of the fittest' process" (*Coalitions*, 372-373). The Darwinian selection process is also central in Riker's discussion of Duverger's Law in telling us why politics is unstable, why winners become losers, and why losers sometimes become winners ("Two-Party System").

Evolutionary processes also are used to explain why some tastes win and others fail to attract voter appeal. According to Riker, the outcome of the political process is "not entirely due to wit and persistence of the losers." We must consider the effects of external factors, the "underlying values, the constitutional structure, and the state of technology and the economy" in determining why some losers win but others continue to lose. The choice of which ones do succeed is partially determined by these external circumstances. "This is the significance of the process of natural selection" (*Liberalism*, 213). Indeed, one of the reasons Riker examines the slavery issue in the United States is to show "how the natural selection of issues occurs in the gross social world in rough analogy to natural selection in the gross organic world" (*Liberalism*, 214).

Natural selection is used here in a very special way and, one could argue, in a nonscientific way. The Darwinian process helps to account for changes that rational choice and game theory cannot inherently explain. Natural selection is used to fill in the blanks of positive theory. We do not really know how natural selection works or how natural selection can be theoretically joined to positive theory of heresthetics. We know the results of "natural" selection but little more.

The third question about Riker's work concerns some of his assumptions about human nature. Riker insists that people have dif-

ferent desires, some leading to "self-interest, altruism, love, hate, envy, or sexual gratification" ("Future," 30). He claims that the "rational choice model . . . merely requires the scientists to acknowledge that any or all of these motives are possible" ("Future," 30). What this means in practice is that we are all fundamentally Hobbesian in our desires: each one of us defines what is most important and acts on those desires. This approach returns us to the axiomatic basis of game theory and rational choice theory discussed at the beginning of this essay.

But Riker also holds that the goals that people hold "are inherent . . . in the logic of the role they occupy" ("Future," 31). If this is so, we might want to argue that the structure of political life is important, and a structure that promotes roles that emphasize fear, self-interest and inequity will develop "motives" that reflect these characteristics. If we wish to promote moderation, cooperation, and justice, we should turn to a different set of institutions to provide different roles and, hopefully, different motivations. But this approach takes us back to a tradition begun by Socrates in *The Republic*.

Roles are not spontaneously developed but grow out of the institutional framework and culture of any society. And one of the tasks of political science may well be to consider the kinds of citizens we value and the kinds of institutional arrangements that will promote that kind of citizen. In this sense, it becomes important to think both about political philosophy to help us answer the first part and political institutions to help us with the second part.

Riker's new political science is not especially interested in these matters. And this raises the final question about Riker's work: what should be the subject matter of political science? Riker wants to make the study of heresthetics the centerpiece of the discipline. But heresthetics and its allied studies of winning and losing are applied knowledge, more akin to engineering than science. Indeed, heresthetics becomes a practical art rather than a science.

Moreover, heresthetics and rational choice theory can ignore other intellectual contributions only at their own peril. Political philosophy is not a "belles-lettres" enterprise but has been at the center of political analysis for centuries for a very simple and good reason. However much as we have our own desires to pursue, we also think that there is something more important than our own interests. Matters such as justice are not mere ornaments in the community but provide the community with its sense of purpose and its

citizens with a moral identity. Justice provides a way of thinking about distributions but also about social relations. Now, many of the claims to justice (or rights or obligations) are obviously flawed and part of the task of political science and political philosophy is to examine those claims as well as institutions and practices in order to strengthen what is good and criticize what is not. This is an argument that Riker's form of political science which has much to contribute to our understanding of politics is not the only contribution to be made, and that if it were, political science would be incomplete as *a* field of knowledge.

University of Maryland

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