

WHEN DID POLITICAL SCIENCE FORGET ABOUT POLITICS?

Irrational Exuberance

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During the early '80s, Harvard University's James Q. Wilson was a role model for the political science profession: a leading specialist in organizational behavior and public administration and a bona fide expert on urban affairs, crime policy, and government reform. The winner of his discipline's most prestigious awards, he wrote several books that today remain standards for the profession--from *The Politics of Regulation* to his widely used textbook, *American Government: Institutions and Policies*. But Wilson was more than just a scholar; he was a public intellectual whose influence extended well beyond the gates of Harvard Yard. He served on several government commissions dedicated to addressing crime and urban problems; his byline was as apt to appear on some policy-related article in *The New York Times* (or *The New Republic*) as it was on a peer-reviewed paper in the *American Political Science Review* (*APSR*). Today, one has only to look at the introduction of community policing and zero-tolerance crime policy in New York City--reforms modeled in good part on an idea Wilson promoted in a 1982 cover story for *The Atlantic Monthly* called "Broken Windows"--to see his real-world legacy.

Of course, during the early '80s, Wilson was hardly unusual. At Harvard, he was emblematic of an elite group of scholars characterized by a broad interest in politics and motivated explicitly by their desire to change the world around them. Samuel Huntington, arguably his generation's most influential student of international relations, cofounded a foreign policy magazine and moonlighted as a government adviser. In the political philosophy wing, Judith Shklar would tell students that she decided to study political ideas because she wanted to understand the racist totalitarianism her family had witnessed firsthand in Eastern Europe--and to prevent its reoccurrence. Fellow theorist Harvey "C minus" Mansfield delighted in challenging liberal nostrums as much as he relished deflating smug undergraduates. Stanley Hoffman's grasp of language and history allowed him to span the nominally separate spheres of political theory, comparative government, and international relations; teach some of the most popular undergraduate courses; and still find time to write regularly for *The New York Review of Books*. And Richard Neustadt, whose classic book *Presidential Power* is said to have graced President Kennedy's night table at the White House, could speak from personal experience about what goes on in the senior levels of the federal government.



Today, this generation has nearly vanished from the scene. Shklar passed away in 1992. Wilson and Neustadt have retired (in Wilson's case, after leaving Harvard for the University of California at Los Angeles), with Hoffman, Huntington, and Mansfield likely to follow soon. Although a handful of younger faculty aspire to emulate these elder statesmen, the future of the Harvard Department of Government--and, quite possibly, the future of political science in general--lies in the hands of a different breed, which is epitomized by a man named Kenneth Shepsle.

Shepsle, too, is considered among his generation's leading scholars of American government; he is credited with advancing new theories about why Congress operates through a committee system, unlike the legislatures in other developed democracies. Yet if you look for Shepsle in the Lexis-Nexis database of newspapers and magazines, you will find not one quotation from him on a contemporary debate about congressional reform, let alone an op-ed or longer essay appearing under his byline. Shepsle, who majored in mathematics as an undergraduate and received his doctorate at the technically oriented University of Rochester, will proudly tell you that he is one of only a handful of political scientists elected to the National Academy of Sciences. But he has never served on a government commission, testified before one of the committees he's made a career of studying, or otherwise put his expertise to use in a public forum. Indeed, save for a brief stint advising the ABC News political unit more than a decade ago, his twelve-page curriculum vitae and his 30-odd-year career are devoid of any connection to current political issues. A visitor to his office, which is next to a computer lab in a hallway housing the Harvard-MIT Data Center, might look

at the shelves of neatly stacked technical journals and the white marker board on the wall and assume that he was a scholar of physics rather than of politics.

If that seems at all strange, then you haven't been keeping up with developments in political science over the past two decades. Shepsle is a leading proponent of a controversial intellectual movement called "rational choice" that spans several disciplines but has recently been making its greatest inroads in the study of politics. Rational choice scholars seek to identify universal explanations for political behavior--for example, voting in elections or logrolling in legislatures--by treating it the way physicists treat atoms and subatomic particles. They make assumptions about political actors' motives, derive mathematical models representing a predictive theory of how those motives will cause people to behave, and then determine whether the predictions hold true by plugging in data--data, in this case, meaning numbers representing such intangibles as one's likelihood to vote, one's place in the ideological spectrum, or, well, you get the idea.

The rational choicers believe their quest for universal and logically consistent theories makes them the only true practitioners of political science. As for all the other, more familiar approaches to studying politics--looking at case studies, digging into history and culture, poring over survey research--the rational choice theorists believe those constitute lesser forms of inquiry: "history," "literary criticism," or, worst of all, "journalism." Although most rational choice scholars tend to be cautious with their public pronouncements these days, their writings and their conduct within faculty departments suggest that they would like to relegate these other scholars to a greatly diminished role--if any--within the discipline. And, while rational choice theorists might not be the first group with such aspirations, they've been among the most successful at realizing them.

Today, the ascendancy of rational choice is evident in its domination of professional journals (one recent count put the percentage of rational choice articles in the *APSR* at about 40 percent), in the increasingly mathematical curriculum standards for graduate students, and in the respect rational choice scholars command in faculty hiring. When the University of Pennsylvania was planning an upgrade of its lagging political science department, for example, it concentrated its efforts on one rising star in rational choice--Stanford University's Keith Krehbiel, a scholar of Congress. Penn was prepared to pay Krehbiel an "astronomical" six-figure sum, according to professors familiar with the search, that would have put him among the highest-paid scholars ever to teach in the university's School of Arts and Sciences. (Krehbiel, who remained at Stanford, said his discussions with Penn were informal and would not discuss salary figures.)

If you ask Shepsle, Krehbiel, or their fellow rational choicers how they've gotten so far so fast, they will tell you it's simply because they are that good--and because they are the only ones in the field who carry out work that qualifies as science. "We're a handful of people," says Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, who also teaches at Stanford. "The reason it appears to be this dominant thrust is because the clarity of work attracts attention." But critics say it's the scholars' strong-arm mentality, not their strong scholarship, that has propelled rational choice this far. Even discounting for the usual academic backbiting, the terms these critics use for rational choicers are strong: "imperialists," "colonizers," "Leninists." Thinking back to the qualifications his generation brought to the university when they were junior professors, Harvard's Hoffman concludes: "I don't think any one of us would get tenure under the current conditions."

He may be right: The next generation of political scientists looks increasingly like Shepsle and less like Wilson. Whether this is good for the discipline depends in part on whether rational choice scholarship really succeeds on its own terms--whether it really helps us understand the elements of political behavior it purports to explain. But beneath that question lurks a second issue more important to those of us outside the academy: whether political scientists have an obligation to do work that is not merely interesting as an intellectual enterprise but also helps us govern ourselves.

In person, Shepsle presents an affable, unassuming face that hardly seems commensurate with his reputation as the Genghis Khan of the Harvard government department. But, if it's hard to imagine Shepsle as an intellectual marauder, it's easier to comprehend why so many political scientists hyperbolically call rational choice a "cult." Cults are notable for the almost hypnotic reverence that subsumes their members when they talk about their leaders and the histories of their movements. And it would be only a slight stretch to compare this reverence with the way rational choicers talk about their movement's founder, the late William Riker, and the intellectual compound he built at the University of Rochester. "Rochester is the

mother ship," Shepsle says. "Its founder ... was William Riker. 'Commander Riker,' as we like to refer to him. And 'Starship Rochester.'"

During the 1940s, Riker was just another Ph.D. candidate at Harvard exploring American politics the old-fashioned way. His dissertation was an unremarkable treatment of an unremarkable topic--a study of labor-union political activity based on historical case studies--and he continued on that intellectual path at Lawrence College in Wisconsin, where he landed his first job. But a revolution was afoot elsewhere. During the 1950s, a group of economists and political scientists from the new Rand Corporation were experimenting with using mathematics to explain social phenomena--in one early case, for example, a scholar developed a formula called a "power index" that measured the influence of legislators. In many cases, the scholars' models yielded sobering predictions about democratic government. The most famous of these was Kenneth Arrow's Possibility Theorem, which demonstrated that democratic systems don't always produce outcomes that conform to the wishes of the voters--since voters choosing from among more than two alternatives may be unable to consistently build a majority behind one. (Yes, it sounds like a blindingly obvious concept, particularly to anybody who followed, say, the 1994 health care debate. But in its day it was actually an important insight, as prior democratic theory held that democracies will reliably produce votes that match the interests of the majority of the public.)

Although Arrow's work would later win a Nobel Prize, few political scholars noticed it at the time. Riker did. Having become increasingly frustrated with the inherently subjective character of political science--based as it was on imprecise description in the form of reported observation and even less precise explanation in the form of prose--he began using the Rand material in his own courses and developing it further himself. In a proposal for a fellowship, Riker laid out his grand plan: "I visualize the growth in political science of a body of theory somewhat similar to ... the neoclassical theory of value in economics. It seems to be that a number of propositions from the mathematical theory of games can perhaps be woven into a theory of politics."

Of course, Riker was borrowing more than merely a method. He was also buying into a basic assumption about the nature of political behavior--namely, that political actors reliably act "rationally." If you were "rational," that meant you had a defined and ordered set of priorities, and usually the top priorities were for some form of personal gain rather than public good--for example, "I want to keep my job as a member of Congress, and, then, if I've accomplished that, I want to pass good laws." Second, rationality meant that you acted in a way that you believed (not necessarily correctly) would serve those priorities--say, "I will vote for this bill because it pleases my constituents and thus makes it more likely that I'll keep my job, even though I think it will make a bad law." By assuming rationality, Riker believed political scientists could predict and explain political behavior in the aggregate in much the same way that economists thought their assumption of rational maximization of utility could predict and explain behavior in the market.

Riker's work attracted the attention of administrators at the University of Rochester, which during the 1960s had the nation's third-largest endowment, largely thanks to grants from one science-oriented foundation (the Haloid-Xerox Corporation). Long known for its strong programs in math and the hard sciences, Rochester was eager to develop world-class social science departments, too, and turned its politics department over to Riker--who set about building a department that would train a generation of scholars to conduct the kind of inquiry he believed constituted the only true form of political science. Under Riker, courses stressed mathematics and logic. Rochester required all graduate students to learn a second modern language; Riker got the school to count statistics toward that requirement for political science students. Then Riker went about recruiting students and faculty who shared his beliefs. "It was an incredible place," recalls de Mesquita, who taught at Rochester for 13 years. "William Riker was incredible.... It was a place where you could walk down the hall into anybody's office and learn something. And it was a department full of camaraderie. Virtually every member of the faculty ate together every day, just because we enjoyed each other." (De Mesquita is the coauthor of a paper, titled "The Rochester School," that is the source for much of this history and shares the reverential tone toward its subject.)

An extraordinary teacher, Riker was no less adept when it came to promoting his program and his intellectual progeny. By 1970, the department--unrated by the American Council of Education (ACE) in 1965--had leaped to fourteenth place. Rochester was second only to Yale in job placement, landing nearly 60 percent of its graduates teaching posts at ACE-accredited departments. Still, the first wave of rational choice evangelists didn't initially shake the academic world. They mostly found their way into second-tier institutions, many of which were best known as engineering schools, such as Cal Tech and Carnegie-Mellon. "Harvard or Yale or Princeton wouldn't give us the time of day," recalls Shepsle, whose first job was at Washington University in St. Louis, a pre-med haven. "They weren't interested in us. We weren't

interested in them. So we ended up on minor tributaries.... It was big news if one of us landed a job at a major Big Ten university."

But the Rochester School's young scholars never strayed too far from one another in spirit. Folks at the American Political Science Association (APSA) didn't have the time-- or the skills--to figure out rational choice, so the rational choicers created an organization of their own: the Public Choice Society, which held its annual winter meetings in New Orleans or some other sunny locale. Almost without fail, members of the group attended, carrying on their intellectual repartee as if they were back in the Rochester lunchroom. "I don't think there was any grand imperialistic design," says Shepsle. "We were too young. We were all true believers, to be sure. But we didn't know the rest of the world was going to pay attention to what we were doing."

Though one finds references to "political science" as far back as the late 1700s, within a century the discipline was moving away from its scientific pretensions. Woodrow Wilson, who was president of the APSA before he was president of the United States, exhorted his fellow scholars to eschew the term "political science" and simply study "politics." In the Progressive era, the APSA, like professional societies in economics and sociology, was explicitly reformist (although, as it happens, rather racist). Throughout the first half of this century, students of politics assumed that pragmatic ideas to guide government were not merely happy by-products of their work; they were, in many ways, the whole point.

The years following World War II, however, saw this mentality change. One reason for this was the increasing professionalization of academia generally. This professionalization had cultural roots, but it also reflected the fact that foundations and the government were underwriting ever-larger shares of university research budgets in an effort to allow scholars to pursue truth without feeling obliged to conduct research that might be popular with corporations or private individuals. The impact of this was particularly acute in political science, where previously the only way to make any serious money had been to write books for popular consumption. Now, thanks to funding from such organizations as the National Science Foundation, political scientists could afford to indulge in less popular paths of inquiry--particularly if they could do so in the name of pure scientific truth.

This was also the time when behaviorism, a new methodological approach to social science, appeared on the scene. Behaviorism sought to take advantage of newly available survey-research tools in order to provide a more detailed portrait of how political life actually transpired. Much as rational choice would decades later, behaviorism represented a radical break with the past. For the first time, political science became highly quantitative--issues of the *APSR* were filled with numbers, survey tables, and regression charts. The behaviorists eschewed advocacy and, more generally, any scholarship that sought to make value judgments. They focused on "is," not "ought"--arguing, not unreasonably, that excessive editorializing could undercut the intellectual integrity of the field.

Typical of academic fads, behaviorism eventually ran its course; after it yielded a few big insights into the nature of politics, further research necessarily focused on increasingly esoteric topics, simply because the tools of the behaviorists were useful in only a limited array of subjects. For example, behaviorism contributed genuine insights into the formation of voting habits--i.e., why people become Democrats instead of Republicans--but it couldn't tell you much about, say, why democratic governments in multiethnic societies break down into anarchy. Traditionalists, never comfortable with the statistical nature of behaviorism, managed to compartmentalize the field back into its own little corner of the profession.

But, even with the decline of behaviorism, there remained great interest in making the study of politics more closely resemble a hard science, and this was in no small part because the entire discipline of political science had developed a severe inferiority complex during the intervening years. While political science was spinning its wheels in the 1950s and 1960s, its scholarship caught in the cross fire between the traditionalists and the behaviorists (and, for a time, the Marxists, as well), economics was gaining ever more prestige for its increasing reliance on mathematics. Such prestige brought perks--particularly when it came to issues of department funding--and, increasingly, political scientists were jealous. Hitherto, political science had been more a clearinghouse united only by a subject; economists used to joke that while they had the "wealth of nations," political science had merely a "wealth of notions." Such criticism stung, and in the minds of many it merely confirmed the need for political science to find some methodological unity, too.

Into this environment entered Riker and his minions, who promoted a method of scholarship that explicitly embraced the scientific method of deductive reasoning and, as luck would have it, borrowed its

mathematical techniques directly from economics. By the 1970s, the Rochester School seemed to have proven its mettle by developing a few key insights--much as behaviorism had done during its infancy. In addition to hammering out Arrow's Possibility Theorem for voting schemes, for example, Riker and his followers had given flesh to the so-called median voter theorem, which holds that, in an electoral system with two parties, the two platforms tend to merge until they nearly meet at the interests of the median voter. (One could, for example, look at the current ideological affinity of the Democrats and the Republicans and conclude that this theorem is right on the mark.) Rational choice scholars also developed intriguing theories about the paradox of collective action, also known as the "free-rider" problem: that is, the tendency of people to seek the benefits of membership in a political group without sharing the burdens.

In 1974, Riker became one of the first political scientists elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences followed shortly thereafter. Such recognition was crucial not only because it impressed fellow political scientists but also because it gave the Rochester School broad credibility with other disciplines closer to the hard sciences. Appointments at top universities often required the recommendation and assent of experts from other fields; insofar as deans, provosts, and other administrators came from economics and the hard sciences, many of them recognized rational choice as something close to their own ideals of legitimate scientific research. It wasn't long before rational choice began to crack walls at elite institutions--the University of Michigan, Stanford, Princeton University, and Harvard.

Naturally, there were objections from the get-go. Many traditionalists didn't like the math. Political theorists had little patience for a theory that they believed reduced all human behavior to a set of interests and preferences independent of things such as values, culture, or history. And many more pragmatically oriented scholars questioned whether rational choice, by focusing so heavily on universal laws of politics, disregarded important aspects of the discipline that were inherently idiosyncratic. For example, the work on the paradox of collective action offered a nice explanation of why people join AARP or AAA--because those groups offer membership perks. But rational choice was at a loss to explain the popularity of more idealistic organizations--why, for example, middle-class white kids from states such as Vermont joined the Freedom Riders in the 1960s at great personal risk.

But these critiques never seemed to catch on. Rational choicers could dismiss those put off by the math as mere Luddites. After all, if the theories had merit, wasn't it the critics' problem if they couldn't be bothered to take courses in calculus and probability? As for the more philosophical objections, the rational choice theorists could always demand that their critics come up with an alternative methodology. There was none--at least, there was none that satisfied the criterion of being a universal theory of political behavior provable with rigorous mathematical logic. And so, having committed itself to the proposition that it was a hard science, the study of politics was stuck--for better or worse--with the methodology that seemed most closely to resemble that of hard science.

Indeed, during the years that followed, the small but determined minority of rational choice scholars managed to transform the face of the entire discipline--often over the objection of hapless traditionalists who lacked the cohesiveness or savvy to stand in the way. One of the advantages of rational choice scholarship was that it lent itself so easily to new research projects: in effect, all you had to do was come up with a complication that confounded some existing rational theory and then derive a new, more complex equation to answer it. As a result, Rochester School research exploded into the literature to the point where the *APSR*, with its pages of laboriously derived equations, began to resemble a calculus text. At one point *APSR*'s editor suggested, not unreasonably, "There is some danger of turning this journal into the 'William H. Riker Review.'" This prominence gave the movement even greater credibility within the profession; it also padded the resumes of scholars who were coming up for tenure.

Equally important, the Rochester School disciples managed to preserve a unified front as the years wore on. They cited each other's papers, even if they didn't all agree on the conclusions, and preached a common gospel that their method was not merely the best method of political science--it was the only method of political science. Within fragmented faculty departments, their ability to stick together and agree on criteria for success allowed them to alter curriculum requirements for graduate students and establish litmus tests for faculty hiring: Did the scholar have a formal model? Had he or she used the scientific method to deduce a theory? Increasingly, it seemed to the rest of the discipline, the basis for intellectual judgment was not the result of scholarship but the method by which the scholarship was conducted. "Because they are not as broad-minded, they had the advantage," says one senior scholar at Harvard. "They'd support any candidate who did rational choice, oppose any non-rational-choice scholars." Although to this day prominent rational

choice scholars call such description caricature, most everyone else in the discipline says essentially the same thing.

Then, in 1994, an intellectual counteroffensive began to take shape. That was the year two political scientists from Yale, Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, published *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*. Green and Shapiro raised no objection to the math, and they didn't even quibble with the Rochester School's goal of trying to find scientific truth in politics. But, if the goal of rational choice is to be more scientific, Green and Shapiro argued, quite reasonably, then it should pass the basic test of all true scientific theories: it should work in practice. Since Green and Shapiro were fluent in the mathematics, they were equipped with the tools to test this proposition. And they discovered that, lo and behold, rational choicers made the same series of mistakes over and over again--all of them rooted in dubious assumptions and oversimplifications calculated to make political behavior conform to neat mathematical formulas.

In one vivid argument from their book, Green and Shapiro examined a great rational choice "insight": the paradox of collective action as it applies to voting. In a typically dismal diagnosis, rational choice theory holds that people should not vote in elections. The reason? Since the chances of one vote changing the outcome of an election are so slim, no rational individual would find it worthwhile to invest time in, first, deciding how to vote and, second, going down to the polling place. This is a lovely theory that can be proven, quite conclusively, with relatively simple calculus.

Unfortunately, it happens to be incorrect. Voter turnout may be distressingly low in America, but tens of millions of people actually do vote in presidential elections, not to mention in congressional and local elections, too. Riker and his disciples were aware of this small glitch, of course, and they tried to account for it in various ways. And that's where Green and Shapiro busted them: Each rational choice explanation for the paradox of voting ended up undercutting the whole philosophy of rational choice by nullifying its core assumptions about human behavior, reducing its explanatory power to the most trivial of phenomena, or simply ignoring inconvenient facts. It was a classic case of the most basic of rational choice's internal contradictions--research being excessively driven by the need to validate the rational choice method rather than by the need to coherently explain real-world phenomena--and it had produced some unintentionally hilarious results.

For example, one of the earliest pieces of rational choice literature--coauthored by Riker and Peter Ordeshook--explained away the paradox by arguing that voters were indeed rational: they were voting because it gave them "psychic gratification." They then painstakingly derived an equation that took account of this; when the "psychic gratification" level was high enough, people actually voted, and the model worked. To this Green and Shapiro rightly responded: Tell us something we don't know. All Riker and Ordeshook had done was demonstrate that people vote when it makes them feel good or when they feel morally obligated to do so. A more significant question for scholars--indeed, the one traditionalists have been puzzling over for generations--is why people feel those obligations or incentives in the first place. Is it owing to inspiring candidates? Lofty causes? Concern for their country's future? Good civics classes in high school? At least, this is the question that matters if you're trying to figure out how to make democracy work better. Not surprisingly, it is a question that rational choice is ill-equipped to answer.

Other rational choice scholars had basically thrown up their hands and admitted that voting doesn't work particularly well in the rational choice framework, since it is a "low-cost," "low-benefit" affair. But, Green and Shapiro asked, since people in other countries have been known to vote despite the risk of death as a consequence, how can it be said to be "low-cost"? For that matter, if there is a standard equilibrium point (as there always is in formal political theory) for voter turnout, why does turnout vary so much from election to election and from country to country?

Green and Shapiro then proceeded to apply their critical framework to other major works of rational choice theory on American politics. Time and again they came to the same conclusion: If rational choice theorists had bothered to conduct even rudimentary empirical testing of their elegant theories, they would have discovered that the theories simply don't describe the real world of politics.

Controversy over the book began as soon as it was in galleys. Members of the Rochester School strategized ways to counter the offensive, and they packed a symposium at the 1995 APSA convention in New York, at one point whooping it up with tomahawk air-chops (it was right around the time when the Atlanta Braves baseball team was making one of its play-off runs) as one of their own laid out a point-by-point critique of the Green-Shapiro tome.

But the remarkable thing about the response was how much intellectual ground it conceded. In a symposium that subsequently appeared in the journal *Critical Review*, some Rochester acolytes objected--with at least some validity--that Green and Shapiro had overlooked a recent wave of rational choice scholarship that was more empirically grounded. But several other rational choicers basically acknowledged that much of their work didn't accurately describe much of what it purported to theorize about. This simply wasn't much of a problem, they said. They noted that rational choice theory was still young--as it continued to develop, they suggested, it would become more sophisticated and thus would better approximate real-world politics. More important, these scholars said, the point of their method was to pursue scientific truth; scientific truth lay in universal theories; universal theories require simplifying assumptions that may distort reality, at least in the early stages of development; ergo, even if the relation of rational choice theory to the real world is imperfect, it's better than the alternatives. "A theory cannot be rejected because of disconfirming facts," wrote Northwestern University's Dennis Chong. "It can only be supplanted by a superior theory."

For all their acrimony, then, both the practitioners and the critics of rational choice theory seemed to agree on a crucial piece of information: the theories didn't really offer a complete picture of how politics work, at least not yet. Throw in the fact that most rational choicers chose to study only the phenomena that lent themselves to the rational choice brand of analysis in the first place--a restriction that left out many of the previously dominant issues of political science--and a reasonable observer could boil the debate down to a simple question: Could an elegant and intellectually stimulating theory be the basis for an entire discipline even though it didn't address many of the big questions in politics and gave flawed answers when it did?

Whether or not Green and Shapiro's book was the catalyst, rational choice critics have begun to fight for political science's soul in the last few years. Shapiro himself recently became chairman of Yale's political science department, and he proudly declares that, in a current search for several senior faculty posts, the criterion for the search is subject area--not methodology. This spring, Stephen Walt, formerly of the University of Chicago and now of Harvard, published an article in the journal *International Security* called "Rigor or Rigor Mortis?" that essentially applied the Green-Shapiro treatment to rational choice scholarship in international relations, with similar results. Within departments, rational choice scholars have increasingly lost the backing of middle-of-the-road professors who once supported them in the interests of methodological pluralism. Two years ago, for example, Harvard's government department took up the tenure bids of two outside scholars in international relations--both of them rational choicers. It was the last year of Shepsle's term as department chairman, and many professors believed that Shepsle had stacked the three-member search committee in favor of the rational choice approach. Others worried that, with Huntington and Hoffman nearing retirement, the international relations wing of the department would be almost entirely devoid of traditionalists. While other factors were certainly involved, these two perceptions helped drive moderates who were otherwise sympathetic to rational choice into the camp of the hardened critics. The tenure bids were rejected.

Still, while the tide may finally be turning against rational choice, it's hard not to survey the discipline and wonder what damage its proponents have wrought. Graduate students and young professors now assume that fluency in rational choice is a de facto requirement for tenure, and at most schools that may be correct. Although there are signs that rational choice literature is increasingly empirical, critics say the new scholarship is prone to the same pathologies as the old--the insights it produces are either flawed or trivial. "The ideal study in political science today would be the comparative study of health regulation of noodles in one hundred and fifty countries," says Hoffman. "In this way you have a sufficiently large mass of material to reach generalizations, and you don't ever have to have eaten a noodle--all you need is that data." The impact of rational choice is also manifest in undergraduate education, as elite institutions must increasingly hire outside instructors to teach the broad, politically relevant courses that tend to attract college students--the kinds of courses that, a generation ago, inspired many of these students to pursue graduate studies. "If you want to teach undergraduates, which is supposed to be what we do, and explain how the courts work, it's increasingly difficult to find people who do that, because these people don't study these things," says James Q. Wilson. "They don't read Supreme Court decisions or history. They just sit around and make models."

What's more, even as it retreats elsewhere, rational choice is opening new fronts. Already ubiquitous in American politics and highly influential within international relations, the most recent battleground of rational choice is comparative politics. Once, this subfield of political science was dominated by area specialists--people who developed expertise in particular countries or regions by studying language, culture, and history, often with extensive fieldwork. Because it implicitly treats different parts of the world as, well, different, area studies is at odds with rational choice's demand that political science pursue universal laws of politics. And so a group of rational choice crusaders led by Harvard's Robert Bates has undertaken to make over this

field. In a 1996 newsletter article, Bates declared that "within the academy, the consensus has formed that area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge." Although he didn't call for purging area studies scholars, he did call for their "mutual infusion" with rational choice--which many in the discipline interpreted as academese for establishing a hierarchy in which area studies specialists essentially operate as the research arm of the only real theorists, the rational choicers.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Bates's critique of area studies out of hand. Most sober-minded political scientists outside the field agree that area studies has become far too parochial, that it focuses on local idiosyncracies to the near-total exclusion of broader theoretical issues--ignoring, say, the ways in which the dynamics of politics in Northern Ireland have resembled the dynamics in a place such as South Africa. (Area studies, especially Latin American studies, was also the subfield most infested with Marxism, making it even more in need of a shake-up.) Yet the pendulum can swing too far in the other direction, too, particularly if you believe political science should be of some practical value to society. Putting aside the fact that so many rational choice theories remain empirically suspect, too much emphasis on rational choice would leave political scientists ill-equipped to provide insights about other parts of the world--which would, in turn, deprive policymakers of an important source of guidance. After all, it might be intellectually rewarding and mildly informative to know that there were some parallels between the Serb massacres in Kosovo and the Hutu massacres in Rwanda. But if you're trying to figure out what the United States should do in Kosovo, that information would be a lot less useful than knowledge about the history of Serb militancy, the peculiar dynamics of Balkan governments, and other pieces of practical advice that only someone with expertise in the region can give.

Ironically, although Bates has probably done more than any other rational choicer in recent years to inflame the rational choice controversy, he also epitomizes a middleof-the-road ideal: a compromise for the discipline. Strictly speaking, he is not a member of the Rochester fraternity; he got his degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And he started out as an old-fashioned area specialist, earning his academic stripes through years of fieldwork in Africa. This fieldwork is what led him to rational choice--he found most of the prevailing theories about developing countries laughably out of touch with reality. So, while he has become a true believer in rational choice and thinks it should be required learning for all political scientists, in his own work he has always kept an eye toward reality and empirical testing. He still does extensive work in Africa, and his own motivations stem from his concern about inequality and about the economic health of developing nations--concerns that are apparent in his work. Even those who bitterly oppose his rational choice crusade acknowledge that Bates is one of the leading Africanists in political science.

Yet just as Bates would not be Bates if he couldn't draw upon the work of rational choice theorists, so he could not have accomplished what he has without the Africa specialists who came before him. And that's the rub. There is an opportunity cost to any new direction in political science. Graduate students have only so much time to get their degrees. Departments have only so many tenured posts. Universities have only so much money to finance research. Journals have only so many pages. The trouble with rational choice is not that it exists within the profession alongside other methodologies; the trouble with rational choice is that it is dominating the profession and displacing those other methodologies. If critics such as Green and Shapiro demonstrated anything, it's that the only way to understand politics is to embrace a variety of methodological approaches that can compensate for the complications of personality, culture, history, beliefs, and pure chance inherent when human beings vie for power. This may not satisfy the discipline's desire to emulate the hard sciences by discovering one grand, universal theory of politics--but, when you think about it, maybe that is just as well.

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