



Introduction

WHO DECIDES?

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All masters of decision are dangerous.

—Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*

In 1940, a reader of the *American Political Science Review* would have been hard-pressed to find a single article in the journal that discussed decision-making. A decade later, the same reader may have come across a couple of pieces on the subject, though these were most likely reviews of Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior*. By 1960, however, a political scientist could expect to discover a treatment of decision-making in every single issue of the discipline's flagship journal, including reviews of Richard Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin's *Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics*; papers on the decision process at national conventions; articles on judicial decision-making; and explorations of the relationship between decision-making and mass communication. Eventually, our aging reader would have been introduced to the formalism of various types of "rational choice" theory. Between 1940 and 1960, decision-making had migrated from the margins to the center of political science. This trend, moreover, was not merely statistical; on the contrary, it shaped the discipline's self-image. In 1962, rational choice theorist William Riker asserted, in no uncertain terms, that "the subject studied by political scientists is decision-making."¹ A few years later, Simon himself argued that decision-making was not just one topic among others, but was rather the "central core" of the discipline.²

The turn to decision-making in political science was just one instance of a broader trend evident throughout the midcentury social sciences. "To a historian," Judith Shklar noted in 1964, "the most interesting

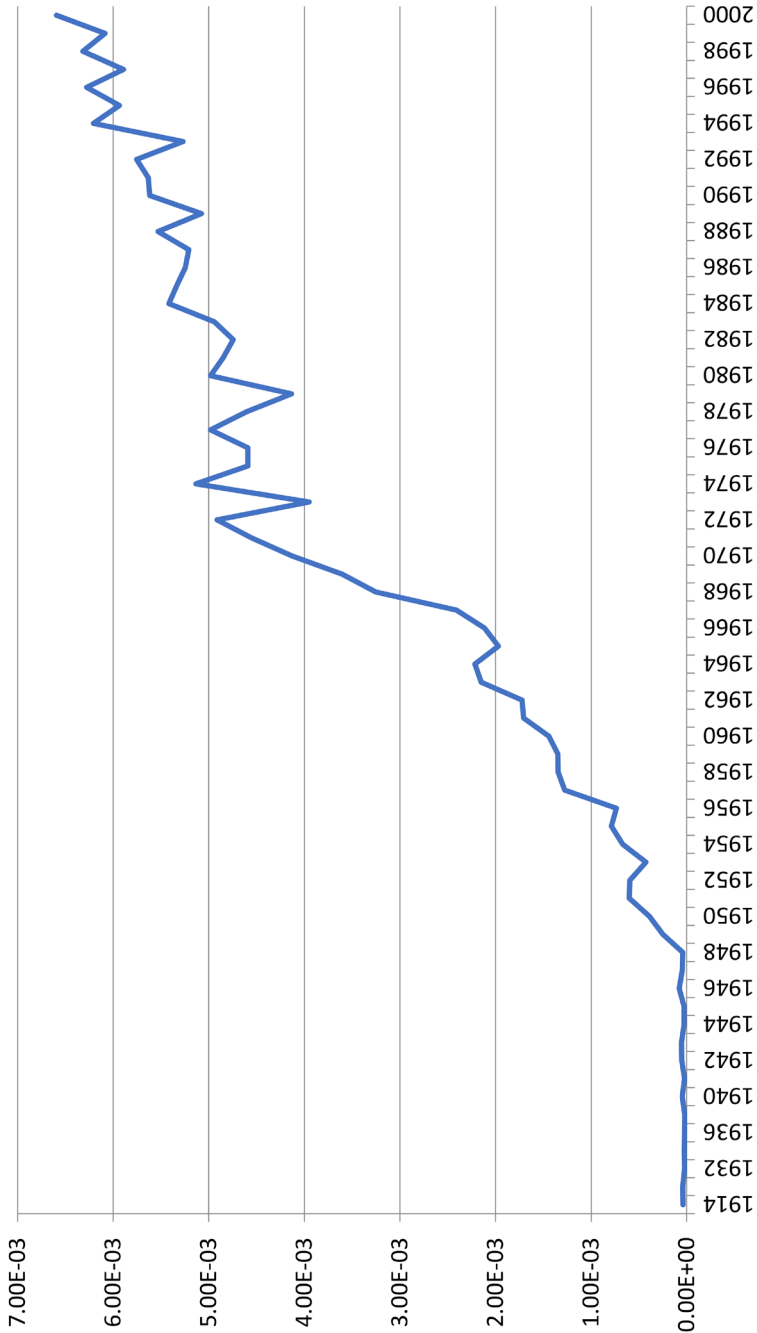


Figure 0.1: "Decision making" in US political science journals, 1900–2000. Source: JStor data for research. Figure created by the authors.

thing about decisions is the fact that everyone is talking about them."³ Decision-making became a central focus of the social sciences because the subject appeared to contribute to scholars' longing for their disciplines to become "true" sciences. Social scientists insisted that only by shedding their concrete determinations and by designating a formal mechanism that could arbitrate between different possible states of the world independently of social or historical context could they make their disciplines objective. The study of decisions appeared as a perfect means for social scientists to demonstrate that there were fundamental human behaviors that could be abstracted, analyzed, and, potentially, predicted. The result of this intellectual shift, as Paul Lazarsfeld once suggested, was that social scientists began to understand all choices, whether they centered upon choosing politicians or bars of soap, as essentially identical rational and content-independent determinations arrived at by working through coherent sets of preferences.⁴ Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, the analysis of political decisions contributed to the emergence of "rational choice," one of the most influential methodological innovations of the postwar social sciences.

Despite the enormity of this transformation, neither social scientists nor historians have analyzed it as a consistent phenomenon. As yet, there has been no attempt to connect the prewar history of decisionism as an important paradigm in political and legal theory with decision theory in the postwar social sciences; there has likewise been no attempt to explore the rise of "rational choice" in its various guises as a form of political theory.⁵ Instead, the study of decision-making remains siloed in different disciplinary specialties: at first glance, after all, nothing seems more different than interwar constitutional doctrine, in which decisionism emerged as an important issue, and the notion of rational choice, which defined the postwar social sciences.⁶ Bridging this divide is the primary goal of this volume.

In the last decades, legal and political theorists have devoted an enormous amount of energy to examining the thought of Carl Schmitt, with whom the notion of "decisionism" is associated. For Schmitt, decisionism was only one aspect of the analysis of law that placed the emphasis not on legal norms or on the underlying social order from which they stemmed, but on the decision that created law in the first place.⁷ Decisionism, in other words, was a theory of sovereignty that pointed to an authority that is not itself established by, or justified on the basis of, law, but is rather established on a pre-legal, pre-rational, and absolute basis. It considers political decisions, as Kari Palonen puts it in this volume, "a *fait accompli* that forever alters the conditions of political action."⁸ In this perspective, law could not be understood

without bringing into focus the concrete decision upon which it is fundamentally premised. According to Schmitt, only with political modernity—indeed, with Hobbes—was the decision properly recognized as a *terminus ab quo* that put an end to chaos and conflict, instead of as an entitlement embedded in a preexisting order. As Schmitt affirmed, “pure decisionism presupposes a disorder than can only be brought into order by actually making a decision (*not* by how a decision is to be made).”⁹ Initially an extension of a Weberian intuition about the effective reality of the law, decisionism became in Schmitt an organizing concept highlighting the primordial political choice upon which existing institutional orders are premised.¹⁰

While the resurgence of interest in Schmitt has resulted in significant intellectual gains, it has also come at a steep price. Namely, decisionism has become conflated with its most famous proponent, which obscures the fact that thinking about politics in terms of decision was historically a concern of scholars across the political and disciplinary spectrums. In addition to Schmitt, a number of contemporaneous German political theorists like Carl Friedrich, jurists like Karl Loewenstein, and sociologists like Karl Mannheim adopted decisionistic perspectives on politics. By this, we mean that they saw politics as essentially grounded in sovereign, decisive authority, and not in the regularity and rationality of law or in the deliberative mechanisms of parliaments. For these thinkers, decisionism underlined a foundational dimension of politics that could not be countenanced by positive legal science: politics started where reason, or rationality, lost its grip. To take one example, for Mannheim politics did not refer to the routine affairs of state, which he called “administration,” but to a sphere of unique events that was “irrational” because it was not organized or codified according to rules. In the “rationalized sphere ... of routinized procedures,” Mannheim affirmed, everything is a matter of applying preexisting rules or following predetermined courses of action. The modes of behavior executed within this rational framework are “merely ‘reproductive,’” and they “entail no personal decision whatsoever.” “Conduct,” he continued, “does not begin until we reach the area where rationalization has not yet penetrated, and where we are forced to make decisions in situations which have as yet not been subjected to regulation.”¹¹

A number of thinkers who came of age during the Weimar Republic (1918–33), where political decisions first became a self-contained notion detached from the traditional mechanisms of collective will-formation, analyzed their development. For instance, in his masterful *Behemoth* (1942), Franz Neumann examined the ways in which the

Reichstag was increasingly dispossessed of its decision-making powers in favor of the governmental cabinet, which led political decisions to emanate mysteriously from the depths of an impenetrable ministerial bureaucracy.¹² Neumann's colleague Otto Kirchheimer, who had himself been a student of Schmitt, developed a similar critique of Weimar's *Rechtsstaat*, offering as a counter-example the concrete political decision behind the Marxist notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat in what was probably the first version of Left-Wing Schmittianism.¹³

A sociological or realistic approach to law thus developed out of Weimar-era legal philosophy and influenced an entire generation of scholars, not least those who later played a crucial role in the development of a realist theory of international relations.¹⁴ But decisionist perspectives were also influential in philosophy. Heidegger, for example, made decisionism a central element of his thought. It also influenced postwar existentialism, as well as the work of the theologian and philosopher Jacob Taubes.¹⁵ The current obsession with Schmitt therefore obscures the much wider conceptual and political space in which the question of sovereign decision-making was raised.

Analyzing decisionism as a phenomenon that straddles the inter- and post-war periods suggests that, against much of the literature on the history of the social sciences, 1945 was *not* a *terminus ab quo* for the disciplines. The official story of the social sciences asserts that after World War II, scholars sought to break with the more speculative approach that characterized prewar social science by developing more "scientific" or systematic theories of politics. The persuasiveness of this tale relies upon the supposed overlap between the behavioral social science movement and the Cold War, with the latter having become the unquestioned background of the former to the point that the expression "Cold War social science" is almost a pleonasm.¹⁶ In spite of this story's neatness, however, recent research has questioned its chronological boundaries and begun to explore the interwar origins of Cold War social science generally, and political thought in particular.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the pushback against the Cold-War periodization of social science research developments has often deepened the extant fragmentation of the various intellectual projects examined.

The essays collected in this volume contribute to the "new history of the social sciences" by examining decision-making as an intellectual problem that cut across temporal, disciplinary, political, and national boundaries. By piecing together "the decisionist imagination" running through the twentieth century, from Weimar-era *Staatslehre* to postwar American social science, the essays reveal the linkages between apparently disconnected approaches to the question of political

decision-making and integrate the history of the postwar social sciences into a coherent historical narrative.

Science and Democracy in Twentieth-Century Decisionism

The rise of decision-making as an object of scientific analysis was the most visible aspect of a tectonic reorganization of the relationship between science and politics that emerged as one of the most distinctive features of post-World War II modernity. While interwar political thinkers equated politics with the “irrational” area of human conduct characterized by conflict, uncertainty, and existential threats, in a puzzling reversal, postwar theorists associated politics with rationality, a concept that referred to nothing more than formal consistency in the ordering of subjective preferences. For postwar thinkers, rationality did not exist independently from decision-making—each structured the other. As the economist Thomas Schelling declared, “defining ‘rational,’ ‘consistent’ or ‘noncontradictory’ for interdependent decisions is itself part of the business of game theory,” the most influential decision theory after 1945.¹⁸ Unlike prewar decisionism, in which political conduct was understood as strategic behavior in the face of doubt, postwar decision theory redefined politics as a manageable activity.

The *prima facie* contrast between anti-rational decisionism and rationalist decision theory, though, risks obfuscating the continuities that connected these two intellectual programs. For example, as the political scientist Karl Deutsch noted, the assumption of transitivity in game theory was similar to absolutistic models of politics that posited that “the political decision system of each country must be transitive.”¹⁹ Game theory, Deutsch argued, implied “the notion that in every political system there ought to be one sharply defined place of ultimate decision.” This claim resonated uncannily with Carl Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty as a specific, crucial, yet often invisible feature of constitutional orders.²⁰ Such observations highlight the overlooked family resemblances between prewar decisionism and postwar rational choice theory. Indeed, the post-conflict contexts in which both programs emerged were strikingly similar, and were likely the reason decisionists across time and space were obsessed with existential threats and uncertainties.

Postwar rational choice methodologies in particular developed around what Schmitt termed “decisions upon the exception,” which involved absolute enemies or existential threats. In the Cold War, the primary decision upon the exception that occupied social scientists

was the decision to fight or avoid a nuclear war. Social scientists, in short, called upon rational choice theories in order to manage the highly uncertain, “non-rational,” and concrete dimensions of politics that prewar decisionism declared unmanageable. Despite social scientists’ best efforts, however, the concrete and nonformal dimensions of the decision were never fully expelled from postwar decision theory. As Schelling admitted, game theory was defined by mathematized formalism as well as unforeseeable contingencies and concrete contents that thwarted formalization.²¹ Similarly, in *Essence of Decision*, the most influential study of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Graham T. Allison suggested that decision-making could be understood only through incommensurable analytical frameworks and, for this reason, was ultimately unfathomable.²² Simply put, postwar attempts to rationalize politics, and hence decision-making, never fully succeeded.

Prewar decisionism and postwar decision theory were both concerned with defining the decisive political authority. The question of “Who decides?” was initially formulated in the context of the interwar crisis of democracy, and decisionism bears the antidemocratic burdens of this moment. Beginning in the 1920s, manifold thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic began to doubt the capacity of democratic publics to make wise political decisions. Specifically, World War I, the Great Depression, and the collapse of the Weimar Republic compelled the gradual unraveling of the mystique of a judicious public—previously considered the fount of democratic decisions—and propelled decision-making onto the center stage of the modern social sciences. In other words, political decision-making became thematized as an object of social–scientific inquiry at the very moment that intellectuals started to question whether liberal democracy as traditionally imagined was a viable political form. The various traumas of the twentieth century’s first decades led many political theorists to argue that, no matter what, the public could not be the sole, or even the most important, decision-maker in a democracy. As we chart below, this legacy decisively shaped the postwar decision sciences.

A Decisionist History of the Twentieth Century

Recovering the history of decisionist thought makes it possible to explore how intellectuals’ understandings of governance, democracy, and collective choice changed over the course of the twentieth century. Until World War II, American social scientists largely ignored the problem of decision-making. Throughout US academia, intellectuals

insisted that political decisions emerged naturally from the democratic process. In terms of domestic policy, American scholars believed that an enlightened and informed public could generate an opinion that provided the basis for legitimate decision-making, either through representation or consultation. Similarly, in the field of foreign affairs a vaguely defined, and likewise enlightened and informed, global public opinion was supposed to be the ultimate sanction behind international law. As Stephen Wertheim shows in his contribution to this volume, “public opinion” was a master concept of *fin de siècle* internationalism, one that assumed a “collective rationality” and a harmony of interests running through an ill-defined world public that transcended national boundaries.

American scholars thus offered the public as the answer to the question of “Who decides?” Of course, intellectuals did not naively adopt a sanguine view of public opinion’s wisdom. Many, most prominently the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, admitted that the public was not yet as informed and sophisticated as it needed to be. Nonetheless, before World War II, Dewey and the majority of social scientists trusted that the public *could* be enlightened, and considered it their duty to serve as the educators, interpreters, and executors of the public will.²³ What Wertheim reveals in Chapter 1, however, is that even this Dewey-style invocation of public opinion was tied to a form of decisionism that “elevated the ineffable discernment of leaders,” who bestowed upon themselves the role of authorized guides and translators of the public.

The prewar dominance of the Deweyan perspective must not obfuscate the fact that many on both sides of the Atlantic doubted its veracity. In the United States, the Progressive journalist Walter Lippmann wrote *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) to rail against what he considered the simple-minded belief that the contemporary public retained the capacity for enlightenment.²⁴ Lippmann argued that modern industrial society was simply too complex for an ordinary person to understand. It was therefore impossible, he insisted, for the public will to guide decision-making—even in a democracy like the United States. Instead, Lippmann desired for intellectual and political elites to accept that they must work together to make the best decisions for the ignorant masses. Meanwhile, in Weimar Germany, Carl Schmitt published *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1926), which attacked liberal parliamentary democracy as a utopian project that transformed the state into an economic organization unable to make existential decisions. Through minority positions in the 1920s, such critiques of democracy began to enter the mainstream of US social science in the 1930s and beyond.

Between 1929 and 1933, US scholars witnessed several events that seemed to prove Lippmann—most were not yet familiar with Schmitt—correct. Most crucially, the Great Depression and the collapse of democracy in Germany began to shatter US intellectuals' faith in the righteousness and efficacy of public opinion. To contemporary observers, the Depression, with its panic movements and bank runs, illustrated the irrational nature of the public. Similarly, the success of Nazism, which enjoyed widespread popular support, indicated that "the people" could not be trusted to defend democracy. Informed by these dramatic episodes, the nascent social sciences increasingly painted a portrait of a modern public whose rational capacities were easily swayed by demagoguery, propaganda, and other forms of political manipulation. From the influential post-Weberian sociology practiced at Heidelberg University (which was transmitted to the United States by the cohort of intellectual exiles forced to flee Nazi Germany) to the behaviorist and Freudian psychology that permeated the North Atlantic, modern social scientific research seemed to confirm the suppositions of earlier theorists of mass society that ordinary people were prisoners of economic status, genetic inheritance, unconscious psychological drives, and collective moods.²⁵ For this reason, the long-standing faith in traditional democratic theory, at the center of which stood an informed public, was slowly replaced with the conviction that too much freedom could impel democracy's dissolution. This belief eventually became the basis for studies of decision-making. As Philip Mirowski argues in Chapter 5, the "'scientific' distrust of the ability of the masses to reason [was] the prime motivation for the rise of 'decision theory' from the mid-twentieth century" onward.

As suggested above, Americans' steady embrace of Lippmann was bolstered by the arrival of a remarkable generation of German intellectuals who fled Europe for the United States between 1933–41.²⁶ Many of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century, including Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Hans Morgenthau, Hans Speier, and Leo Strauss, arrived in the United States during this short period. In their first years of exile, manifold émigré intellectuals argued that Weimar fell because ordinary Germans turned *en masse* toward a National Socialist regime that capitalized on the nonrational drives of the multitude. Several émigrés, including Morgenthau and Speier, embraced aspects of Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy and sought to establish an intellectual and political elite disconnected from politics and able to make wise decisions for the people.²⁷ Likewise, Carl Friedrich, a self-avowed former decisionist who had immigrated to the

United States before the Nazi takeover, defended a restricted conception of democracy in which authority was ultimately vested in enlightened administrators.²⁸ Even Marxists like Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer doubted workers' willingness to take on Nazism. As physical reminders of democracy's weakness, bearers of a political theory skeptical of parliamentarianism, and inheritors of German academic traditions esteemed by Americans, the exiles lent intellectual credence to the Lippmannite position.

Trends in the funding sources of US social science further encouraged American intellectuals to embrace Lippmann's skepticism of democracy. In the 1920s, officials working for the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation—two of the largest private foundations in the United States—insisted that the methods of rational organization that had allowed for the management of large organizations such as industrial conglomerates should be applied to a variety of social institutions, from universities to government bodies. They thus supported social scientists who promoted rationalistic visions of governance and associated forms of technocratic expertise. Throughout the interwar period, foundation officials and their chosen intellectuals worked to establish an expert elite capable of solving the manifold management problems posed by industrial society. Embedded in this philanthropy-funded technocracy was a subtle disregard for the democratic process and a belief that the liberal consensus could be maintained absent public political engagement.

The discussion between Deweyan social scientists who desired to educate the public and Lippmannite social scientists who desired to manage it was largely suspended once the United States entered World War II in December 1941. For the duration of the war, social scientists, many of whom joined the wartime government, focused on the immediate exigency of helping the United States defeat the Axis powers. Between 1945 and 1953, however, five atomic detonations quickly refocused intellectuals' attentions on the problem of decision. In August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; four years later to the month, the Soviet Union detonated its own bomb, ending the US nuclear monopoly; then, in 1952, the United States detonated a hydrogen bomb, with the Soviets following one year later. If any potential historical event ever approximated the Schmittian notion of a pure "decision upon the exception," it was the decision to fight a nuclear war and potentially eradicate humanity.²⁹ In a very real way, nuclear strategy placed decision-making at the center of political debate and academic research. The question of "Who decides?" again became as important as it was in the interwar years,

when the United States confronted the existential threats of depression and fascism. Unlike in the 1920s and 1930s, though, a younger generation of American social scientists, whose foundational political experiences had been the Great Depression, the crisis of democracy, and World War II, rejected Dewey's vision in favor of Lippmann's.

Atomic arsenals influenced the study of decision-making in three distinct ways. First, they engendered attempts to tame uncertainty. Nuclear weapons were wholly unprecedented. Not only were there no historical examples or legal frameworks for informing or regulating their deployment, but also the extent of the devastation they could wreak remained unknown down to the very day of use. Moreover, in the hypothetical case of a nuclear confrontation, the reaction of the opponent remained unpredictable. The decision to use nuclear weapons, if it was ever to be taken, had to be confronted without the comfort of historical precedent, past wisdom, battlefield experience, accurate intelligence, or reliable scientific data. Nuclear strategists such as Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn, to name just two prominent thinkers, struggled with the need to codify the decisional process, reduce the vertiginous uncertainty any nuclear decision-maker would face, and bring the decision to deploy a nuclear weapon under some semipredictable logic. Unsurprisingly, nuclear strategy was the original breeding ground for several technologies—including Monte Carlo experiments, political gaming, system theory, and game theory—meant to facilitate or even enable decision-making in highly complex and uncertain situations. In unique ways, each of these approaches was developed to address the problem of decision-making in a nuclearized international environment.

Second, the existence of nuclear arsenals encouraged scholars to examine structures of command-and-control. The geographic distribution of atomic weapons, the interservice rivalries between the Army, Navy, and Air Force for custody of the bomb, and the contingency plans designed to be implemented following a surprise nuclear attack all necessitated a high level of coordination in the United States' decision process. Yet almost immediately after atomic weapons were developed, social scientists recognized that the chain of decision surrounding their deployment would be subject to flaws and potentially uncoordinated or unauthorized decisions. Thinkers therefore began to argue that the capacity for human error and duplicity necessitated that the decision to use nuclear weapons be made via processes that removed discretion from the decisional equation. The entanglement of nuclear strategy and decision theory provides the focus of S. M. Amadae's chapter (Chapter 6), which points to the key role military

planning played in establishing the legitimacy of game theory, the most influential decision technology of the postwar period.

Last but not least, nuclear weapons compelled social scientists to return to the problem of authoritative decision-making in a democracy. While the atomic bomb forced strategists to “think ... the unthinkable,” as Herman Kahn famously declared, it also led some social scientists to think about the “constitutionally” unthinkable. Namely, anxieties about nuclear war encouraged intellectuals to devise and promote alternative modes of governance capable of ensuring swift and efficient decisions before, during, and after a nuclear conflict. For example, the political scientist Clinton Rossiter avowed that were a bomb to be detonated on US soil, “some form of executive-military dictatorship” must emerge to manage the nation’s defense.³⁰ Similarly, when the exile sociologist Hans Speier learned that the Soviets had gained atomic capabilities, he affirmed that “a point has been reached in world history where some American leaders should consider themselves to be called upon to sacrifice secretly their own cherished values [i.e., they should ignore public opinion] in order to enable their counterparts to live with these values in the future.”³¹ Nuclear wizardry summoned back into relevance antidemocratic theories of decision from the interwar era. Specifically, the notion that it was crucial during a period of existential crisis to secure an authoritative decision-making capacity unconstrained by democratic niceties became popular amongst mid-century social scientists. Rossiter, Speier, and many of their colleagues were convinced that elites needed to “sacrifice” democratic norms to ensure western civilization survived its potentially world-ending conflict with the Soviet Union.

These antidemocratic perspectives fed on immediate and concrete historical experiences. American military government in Germany was an especially formative experience for a number of postwar intellectuals that seemed to demonstrate the positive relationship that could exist between democracy and dictatorship. Carl Friedrich, for instance, insisted that military dictatorship was a constitutionally legitimate form of governance to the extent that it protected constitutionalism.³² Even less enthusiastic supporters of centralized authority like Franz Neumann admitted that the relationship between dictatorship and democracy was not one of symmetrical opposition, but could rather accommodate many nuances.³³ Over the course of midcentury, “military government,” “constitutional dictatorship,” and “emergency government” became almost interchangeable notions that highlighted the perceived need to take exceptional measures exempt from democratic strictures in order to save democracy.

Yet what distinguished these musings about prodemocratic dictatorship from earlier historical or legal thinking was a sustained concern for its “rationality.” Schmitt had already foreshadowed a distinctly modern understanding of dictatorship when he wrote in 1921 that it was premised on “rationalism, technicality and the executive.”³⁴ In the 1960s, Friedrich, an erstwhile disciple of Schmitt’s, built upon this intuition in order to justify making authoritative political decisions absent democratic participation.³⁵ Simply put, Friedrich claimed that the authoritative decision, taken in the face of emergencies, time constraints, and high uncertainties, represented a concentrated form of rationality and was hence legitimate. As Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Ian Zuckerman show in Chapter 2, which examines the liberal intellectual exile Karl Loewenstein, the framing of authoritarian decision-making as rational had a rich history dating back to the Weimar period. In particular, Loewenstein’s concept of “militant democracy” was an effort to “neutralize—or at least tame—the presumptively ‘irrational’ element of politics associated with decisionism through the appeal to a countervailing conception of ‘legal rationalism.’” Nevertheless, as the authors highlight, the impossibility of elucidating an incontrovertible criterion distinguishing between democrats and antidemocrats ended up requiring a capacity for arbitrary decision-making that did not operate according to strict rules. Despite what Friedrich and Loewenstein desired, the tensions between democracy and authoritarianism could not be easily overcome with appeals to rationality.

The emergence of “rational choice” in the postwar social sciences must be situated in the broader context of discussions about rationality and authority, not least because these provided a new form of legitimacy for decisions that circumvented or delegitimized any kind of democratic process. Understanding this political function of “rationality” requires stepping back from the traditional disciplinary histories that confine rationality to economics and obfuscate the connections between rational choice and decisionism. Normally, the political history of rational choice is organized around a *de rigueur* reference to neoclassical economics as the putative birthplace of decision theory. But, as Philip Mirowski shows in Chapter 5, neoclassical economics was premised on a model that was lifted from physics and in which there was no room for anything resembling a psychological “choice.” While the exact pathways through which a self-standing and authoritative “decision” was detached from its social context and reintroduced at the heart of economic rationality still have to be fully explored—Mirowski suggests that the exile economist Oskar Morgenstern was the main conduit for this translation—there is no

doubt that rational choice rested upon a form of decisionism. As Mirowski notes, “early game theory bore the marks of the German decisionist temperament in that it still reified the decision as relatively free of context and prior reason.” Indeed, rational choice shared a number of formal attributes with Schmittian decisionism, beginning with its complete break with any prior sequence of causes, reasons, and norms. To quote Mirowski again, “in America, ‘The decision’ was ... extracted from the dire state of exception to become the essence of mechanical choice.”

American social scientists’ embrace of the notion that choice was a mechanical phenomenon was encouraged by the fact that a significant number of them refused to accept Speier’s claim that ignoring the public was a “sacrifice” that indicated the reluctant approval of some form of authoritarian elitism. Instead, US social scientists attempted to resolve their distrust of the public with their hatred of authoritarianism by, in Judith Shklar’s apt phrase, “de-ideologiz[ing] politics entirely.”³⁶ As Mirowski puts it in his chapter, “the rise of decision theory was first and foremost an expression of a conscious rejection of a charismatic construction of leadership and rationality” in favor of algorithmic—and thus potentially liberal and democratic, or at least not explicitly antidemocratic—versions of them.

Generations of postwar social scientists endorsed a form of technocratic politics in which decisions were made by systems or equations, not people. Because social scientists assumed that what made Nazism and communism “totalitarian” was their inherently ideological character, a de-ideologized politics was, if not exactly democratic, certainly not authoritarian. In the 1950s and beyond, systems theory, cybernetics, game theory, and rational choice methodologies appealed to intellectuals partly because they seemed to offer nonideological languages of sovereign decision that eschewed the need for democratic decision-making at the same time that they promised to make decision processes as efficient as they could possibly be. In his chapter, Mirowski highlights the various intellectual and disciplinary pathways through which the decision of the postwar decision sciences was gradually hypostasized and elevated to the status of a supra-individual entity. By the 1970s, “rationality” was reified in the general operation of The Market, which was understood as an information processor superior to democratic forms of governance that could attain rationality on its own or through the corrective intervention of enlightened and authoritative elites.

Mirowski wonders why rational choice, which always lacked empirical validation, permeated the postwar social sciences. One possible

reason for its popularity may be that rational choice appeared well suited to an age that was widely described as post-ideological, in the sense that the decisions Western society required were supposedly technical rather than political. In particular, the sociologist Daniel Bell's famous 1960 declaration of an "end of ideology," which was echoed by a number of intellectuals, underlines an important cultural context for the evolution of decision theory in the 1960s and 1970s. As Jenny Andersson discusses in Chapter 8, by assuming that "the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved," the end of ideology discourse accelerated decision theory's displacement of politics by transforming social problems into purely technical ones. Once social scientists concluded that all basic political questions had been answered, they sought to refine a technical rationality about "*where* one wants to go, *how* to get there, the costs of the enterprise, and some realization of, and justification for, the determination of *who* is to pay."

The end of ideology discourse shored up the old Lippmannite notion that the simplistic and chaotic processes of representative democracy could not manage the complexities of (post-) industrial society. For example, *The Crisis of Democracy*, the 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission, averred that the decision-making systems of western governments were overloaded, undermined by the operation of democracy itself, and needed to be replaced with technical rationality.³⁷ But intellectuals struggled to differentiate this technocratic program from an authoritarian, undemocratic one. All these issues come to the fore in Andersson's chapter, which explores Daniel Bell's efforts to bring "algorithmic judgment" to bear upon decision-making through new technologies of forecasting. The kind of rationality Bell wanted to integrate into politics aimed at displacing "interest politics" with a higher form of rationality in which an elite of experts would play a decisive role in shaping social futures. At the same time, however, Bell sought to accommodate the liberal bedrock of American politics by emphasizing the ability of forecasting technologies to preserve and even enhance freedom of choice. Eschewing Marxist models of centralized planning, Bell intended his forecasting technologies to operate as "facilitators" rather than prescribers of social change. Through her analysis of Bell's work on forecasting, Andersson illuminates the dilemmas that plagued attempts to develop specifically liberal planning efforts that charted a middle path between centralized planning and the formidable obstacle raised by Kenneth Arrow's "impossibility theorem," which posited the impossibility of achieving collective rationality on the basis of free choice. Bell, Andersson notes, believed

that “future research could solve Kenneth Arrow’s problem of social choice” by preemptively rationalizing individual preferences through an analysis of their future consequences. “Rationally prioritiz[ing] different social programs,” he insisted, would overcome the conflict of values that Arrow identified. Nonetheless, Angèle Christin demonstrates in Chapter 9 that forecasting technologies similar to those championed by Bell did not solve the problems he hoped they would and could often have quite illiberal effects. Specifically, Christin shows that predictive algorithms intended to rationalize judicial sentencing regularly lead to harsh and unjustified criminal sentences, increasing human misery rather than alleviating it.

The 1960s and 1970s were defined in large part by the paradoxical search for forms of governance that would ignore or manipulate the public without being authoritarian. In essence, intellectuals hoped that technocratic rationality would compensate for the insufficiencies of democracy. The dilemma, as the political scientist John Steinbruner noted in 1974, was how to “achiev[e] effective performance without stumbling into some new form of tyranny.”³⁸ This framing of the problem largely explains the remarkable intellectual success of cybernetics, the “science of command and control,” during this period. Social scientists embraced cybernetics because its impersonal and mechanistic patterns, feedback loops, and rejection of anything resembling intentionality made it possible for them to think about governance in a way that did not rely upon either the public or a centralized and authoritative decision-maker. By embracing cybernetics, intellectuals believed they had transcended the antidemocratic elitism of Lippmann and his supporters while answering the latter’s criticisms of democracy’s deficiencies. Systemic representations of political processes tended to disaggregate decision-making into articulated, nonlinear circuitries replete with embranchments and feedback loops. In these elaborate political schematics, “decisions” did not exist as such. Instead, a cybernetic “decision” was in actuality the outcome of multiple, interdependent inputs and complex sociotechnical networks naturally endowed, it was maintained, with superior rationality. Cybernetics engendered a transformation of the decisionist imagination away from top-down and centralized models toward horizontal mechanisms in which the very notions of hierarchy and power were erased.

These deconcentrated visions of power tended to be associated with neoliberalizing projects. This was true even in the Soviet Union, where, as Eglė Rindzevičiūtė shows in Chapter 7, the decision sciences of the 1960s and 1970s helped legitimate new representations of Soviet society and governance that moved away from linear,

centralized planning models. Meanwhile, in the United States, the sciences of complex systems encouraged the transition from classical models of government to depersonalized, system-centered notions of governance. In these latter frameworks, neither the public nor some unaccountable elite made decisions. Rather, it was the disembodied system itself, *ultimately controlled by no one*, which generated the important choices. Cybernetics and other systems methodologies made it possible for social scientists to analyze political processes while eliding the central question of twentieth century political theory: "Who decides?" Scholars could thus reconcile their skepticism of democracy with their commitment to liberalism. Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, the international relations theory that swept through political science departments in the late-1970s and 1980s, provides a case in point. In neorealist theory, state behavior was not explained with reference to individual decision-makers or domestic political structures, but rather through an international "system" in which there was ultimately no sovereign power.³⁹

Despite their claims of neutrality, cybernetics and systems theory were often used to promote politically conservative goals. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of new social movements, such as the Black Power, Chicana/o rights, women's rights, gay liberation, antinuclear, and environmental movements, which expressed novel interests and identities and asserted unique forms of autonomy and self-governance. To some degree, social scientists employed the new decision sciences to delegitimize these movements as irrational, unrealistic, and damaging. Waltz's neorealism, the sociology of Niklas Luhmann, and the emerging consensus surrounding The Market's ability to rationalize the preferences of diverse populations were all intellectual trends that dismissed identity-based claims for democratic participation in decision-making by obfuscating the locus of decisional power and diluting it in the supra-human netherworld of complex and autonomous systems. Furthermore, social scientists regularly claimed that for these systems to work, they could broker no resistance of the type expressed by the new social movements. Whether or not their advocates intended them to, cybernetics and systems theory often functioned as reactionary methodologies that bolstered the claims of political conservatives.

Continuing a trend initiated by Lippmann in the 1920s, the embrace of systems thinking shifted power away from the sphere of traditional politics toward a new intellectual technostructure whose members were allegedly more rational than policy-makers and the demos precisely because they were insulated from the pressures of the democratic process.⁴⁰ Just like Lippmann, who called for expert

advice to replace the public will, the policy intellectuals of the 1970s called for the establishment of a new cadre of technocrats endowed with the ability to exercise decisional power above and beyond politics. Ironically, a cybernetic turn intended to transcend elitism wound up bolstering it.

Nevertheless, two contributions to this volume make clear that there are ways to think about the relationship between political decision and democracy that expand beyond the “authoritarian neoliberalism” described above. In their chapters, both Nomi Claire Lazar (Chapter 4) and Kari Palonen (Chapter 3) delineate alternative genealogies and intellectual traditions in which the concept of decision is democratically articulated. Lazar’s chapter explores the question of whether all authoritative, sovereign decisions taken in a liberal constitutional context fall under the category of “decisionism.” Decisionism, she argues, may be considered a coherent doctrine only as long as it artificially isolates the concrete moment of decision from the thicket of norms, events, and causes that surround it. In fact, Lazar suggests that the blending of decisionistic elements with liberalism, which characterized much of postwar political theory, may ironically conceal liberalism’s longstanding capacity to govern during moments of exception without invoking sovereign power. Derogations to rights and “police power,” Lazar argues, are part of the normative and administrative arsenal that liberal states may legitimately deploy to deal with emergencies. As she puts it, the power “to make exceptions to quotidian rights protections to serve the public good is part of the organic fabric of every liberal democracy.” In his piece, Kari Palonen similarly underlines the limitations of decisionism as a means to understand actual liberal democratic politics. The contingency and uncertainty that are associated with decisionism, he declares, also define freedom of choice. For this reason, Palonen maintains that the limitation of rationality that accompanies decisionism should not be understood as antithetical to democratic deliberation and will formation. He further asserts that the same is true of the time constraints under which sovereign decisions are made. “All politics,” Palonen emphasizes, “operate with limited times.” Surveying the Westminster parliamentary tradition, he shows how parliamentary procedure and rhetoric addressed time constraints and the need to make authoritative decisions. Far from being defined by the endless chatter denounced by authoritarian decisionists and democratic skeptics, Palonen demonstrates that parliaments are spaces in which forms of truly “political” thinking—in the sense of thought having a concrete relationship to contingency and time—occur.

From the 1920s until today, the decisionist imagination was shaped by a pessimistic sensibility in which liberal democracy was considered an ineffective form of governance whose representatives were incapable of making existential decisions. Before World War II, decisionism sought to contain politics within a sphere insulated from the processes of rationalization and democratization characteristic of modernity. The postwar social sciences, however, recast decisionism along scientific lines. After 1945, the social sciences provided the testing ground for new versions of decisionism that sought to salvage liberalism while legitimizing robust forms of unaccountable, and hence more “rational,” decision-making. “Rational choice” emerged within this context as a scientific and “liberal” form of decisionism. Indeed, over the course of the twentieth century, decisionists of all stripes were remarkably successful in convincing people that they had a monopoly on the true understanding of political decisions. As Lazar and Palonen remind us, however, decisionists were wrong to assume that modern democrats had lost—or never had—the capacity to think and act politically. Moreover, the essays contained in this volume suggest that decisionists naively ignored the ways in which their doctrine deracinated political decisions from the ethical, economic, normative, social, and cultural contexts in which they were actually made, which severely restricted the utility of their perspective. Perhaps most tragically, decisionists presented the decision as an isolated moment in the life of political communities, which excised from democracy one of its most fundamental purposes: the making of *collective* decisions. In an era when Western democracies have increasingly inflated executive power while simultaneously depriving their publics of the capacity to make truly political choices, it might be time to move beyond the decisionist imagination.

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the Politics of Global Order (Columbia University Press, 2005); and *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

Notes

1. William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 11.
2. Herbert A. Simon, "Political Research: The Decision-Making Framework," in *Varieties of Political Theory*, ed. David Easton (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 15.
3. Judith N. Shklar, "Decisionism," in *Rational Decision*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Atherton Press, 1964), 3.
4. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "An Episode in the History of Social Research: A Memoir," *Perspectives in American History* 2 (1968): 279.
5. See, however, S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and S. M. Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason: Game Theory and Neoliberal Political Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
6. The term "rational choice" refers loosely to a set of methods, including but not limited to game theory, statistical decision theory, and systems analysis, which permeated the postwar social sciences. Simply put, rational choice theory is postwar decision theory.
7. Carl Schmitt, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, trans. Joseph W. Bendersky (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).
8. Palonen, "Parliamentary and Electoral Decisions as Political Acts."
9. Schmitt, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, 62.
10. On this "generalized decisionism," see the excellent analysis by Augustin Simard, *La Loi Désarmée. Carl Schmitt Et La Controverse Légalité/Légitimité Sous Weimar* (Québec: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2009).
11. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936), 101–2.
12. Franz L. Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 23–29.
13. Otto Kirchheimer, *Politics, Law, and Social Change: Selected Essays of Otto Kirchheimer*, ed. Frederic S. Burin and Kurt L. Shell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).
14. Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also Bernhard Schlink and Arthur J. Jacobson, eds., *Weimar: A Jurisprudence of Crisis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); and Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism*

- and *International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
15. Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
 16. See, for instance, Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, eds., *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Mark Solovey, *Shaky Foundations: The Politics-Patronage-Social Science Nexus in Cold War America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013). For a discussion of the Cold War paradigm in the history of the social sciences, see David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and, in particular, Philip Mirowski, "A History Best Served Cold," in *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, ed. Duncan Bell and Joel Isaac (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61–74.
 17. Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
 18. Thomas C. Schelling, *Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Economist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 215.
 19. "Transitivity" refers to logical coherence in the ordering of preferences. Simply put, it means that if one prefers A to B and B to C, then one also prefers A to C.
 20. Karl Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 54–55. See also page 209: "If all important decisions are concentrated at one point, and if decisions made at that point tend to override all decisions made elsewhere in the system, the performance of the system may resemble the situation of concentrated sovereignty, familiar from the absolute monarchies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe." For a discussion of Schmitt's decisionistic understanding of sovereignty, see Simard, *La Loi Désarmée*: 93–103.
 21. Thomas C. Schelling, "The Strategy of Conflict: Prospectus for a Reorientation of Game Theory," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 3 (September 1958): 203–64.
 22. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).
 23. John Dewey, "Public Opinion: Review of *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippman," *The New Republic* 30, no. 387 (3 May 1922): 286–88; John Dewey, "Practical Democracy: Review of *The Phantom Public* by Walter Lippman," *The New Republic* 45, no. 374 (2 December 1925): 52–54; John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, GA: Swallow Press / Oxford University

- Press, 1954); Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10–11.
24. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1993); Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2010).
 25. Edward A. Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973); Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate Over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*, chapter 3.
 26. Jewett, *Science*, chapter 11.
 27. Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, “How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz’s Neorealism,” *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 87–118.
 28. Greenberg, *Weimar Century*, chapter 1.
 29. Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
 30. Clinton Rossiter, “Constitutional Dictatorship in the Atomic Age,” *The Review of Politics* 11, no. 4 (October 1949): 395–418.
 31. Hans Speier, “Comments on Current Policy Requirements,” November 21, 1949, 6, Folder 32, Box 9, Hans Speier Papers, German and Jewish Intellectual Émigré Collection, M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY.
 32. Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe and America* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Company, 1950), 588–96.
 33. Franz L. Neumann, “Notes on the Theory of Dictatorship,” in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*, ed. Herbert Marcuse (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 233–56.
 34. Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2014), 9.
 35. Carl J. Friedrich, “On Rereading Machiavelli and Althusius: Reason, Rationality, and Religion,” in *Rational Decision*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich, *Nomos* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 180.
 36. Shklar, “Decisionism,” 15.
 37. Michel Crozier et al., *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, The Triangle Papers (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 12–16.
 38. John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 7.
 39. Bessner and Guilhot, “How Realism Waltzed Off.”
 40. Sidney Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality in Models of the International System,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 93–117.

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