

## **A Hundred years of Solitude?**

**We are asked to think about political science – at least the part the Ken and I have been concerned – over a century. My worry is that positive political might easily become isolated and more or less ornamental rather than a vital part of political and social science. I think there are both internal and external forces leading in these directions. At least we can do something about the internal ones.**

**I agree with BDM's observation that there is growing group of well trained young scholars pursuing theoretical and empirical projects that are more sophisticated than what was possible half a century before. That is certainly a reason for optimism about how our subdiscipline will develop in the future. But I worry that this young cohort and its successors may be ghetto-ized as our own generation has been to some extent.**

**Part of the reason for this is the old one: people without technical training cannot really understand why they should hire someone whose work they can't understand. To some extent interdepartmental competition helped to resolve this issue: it has often been the case that a department on the make could speed its ascent by hiring a well trained young theorist. But, while a number of departments were able develop a critical mass in this way, this mechanism tends to stall at some point partly because the supply of young (and cheap) theorists is always limited and high quality talent tends to go to places that already have some young theorists. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency for technical specialists to oppose the hiring of "soft" versions. I guess this situation will continue unless someone has some good idea of how to break out of this "trap."**

**I have no general answer about how to do that but maybe it would be helpful to recall the situation when Ken (and I and a number of others) began our careers. Already, at Rochester, there had been forged a kind of alliance between students of legislatures and soft rational choice theory (let's call it the Riker-Fenno coalition). The Rochester approach to studying congress was, famously, ethnographic – based on close**

**observation (“soaking and poking) disciplined by the constant effort to “make sense” of what was being observed. The way that Dick Fenno – the dean of congress studies -- sought to make sense of his observations amounted to attributing goals and beliefs to his subjects in way that convincingly rationalized their behavior. In other words Fenno’s starting point was the assumption that the congressman is basically rational and the problem is to leverage that assumption into inferences about goals, beliefs and actions.... Obviously, there are identification issues everywhere in this project and so other assumptions are needed to resolve them. But close reading of Fenno’s work (and others at the time) showed them to be remarkable astute in introducing plausible identifying assumptions. This was even true for those who were ostensibly anti-rational choice theory (are you hearing me Nelson Polsby and Ray Wolfinger [my advisor], wherever you are?).<sup>1</sup>**

**The point of this story is that Ken and Mo Fiorina, and John Aldrich and Dick McKelvey, etc. were not tossed out into the world naked and forced to forage on their own. There was a wider community of people studying politics in various ways that was out there which had problems that could be studied and could be informed by analytical modeling. And, at least in some places some of those people were ready (more or less) to listen patiently to young rational choice theorists. This was of course especially true at Rochester. But this sense that there were others in the discipline who were open to strange technical approaches was invigorating to the Rochester students and I think it helped the spread of theoretically oriented scholars. I think it helped enormously that many of those young theorists (like Ken) were open to learning from empirical types and not merely preaching to them.**

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<sup>1</sup> There is much more to say about Fenno’s methodology and its ubiquity in various parts of Anthropology, Linguistics, Psychology and in the humanities as well. In all cases the assumption of some (high) degree of rationality is an embedded methodological assumption that is used to attribute mental states or dispositions either by observers or by agents interacting with each other. There is a separate question of how flexible the rationality assumption needs to be to support the attribution theory (ie. Can it be weakened substantially in the behavioral manner suggested by the work of Tversky and Kahneman, etc. and still permit informative attributions).

**For those of us outside of Rochester, things were a bit more isolating. My advisor at Stanford (Ray Wolfinger) was a brilliant man but hostile to “abstract” theorizing and especially to anything like rational choice theory. He forbade me to stick any of that into my thesis – at least in the text; I was allowed a few footnotes – saying he could not supervise what he could not read. I had taken courses also from Ken Arrow and Bob Wilson at Stanford and was excited to use the tools I learned there (and elsewhere at Stanford, which had great strengths in optimization theory, economics, and technical philosophy) to study politics. I recall that while I was writing my dissertation, I came across the manuscript of David Mayhew’s Congress: The Electoral Connection, and found it extremely encouraging. Mayhew was a traditional scholar who, while he practiced neither ethnography nor theory, managed to show that the disparate findings in empirical studies of Congress could be unified by a simple rational choice model. As Ken was at Rochester (or maybe he was at St. Louis by then) he may not have found Mayhew’s essays as affirming as I did.**

**I believe that similar coincidences must have happened elsewhere. I think something like it happened in security studies in international relations, maybe beginning with Bob Axelrod’s work and continuing when BDM and Jim Morrow were at Hoover and Jim Fearon was a graduate student at Berkeley who came down to take some courses. I am not sure that there was the same kind of receptive audience in IR that Ken and I found among congress scholars but I am sure that (partly because of BDM’s proselytizing) work done by these people spread outside the technically oriented community. I think, to some extent, Barry Weingast managed to create something like the same phenomenon at Stanford by building a community of young receptive comparativists. And certainly Bob Bates’s career is a testament to the same phenomenon among developmental scholars.**

**The point is that, as important as it is to do serious and disciplined science (wherever it leads), it is also important to connect to other parts of the discipline and to other disciplines not only to find an audience but also**

by finding common explanatory projects. I think this has to be a two way street and is not merely marketing.

In my experience there are two areas of potential that have not yet been exploited sufficiently. Both of these areas are engaged in normative projects, something which students of positive political theory have often tried to stay away from (though our public choice brethren have never been so reticent; and neither was Bill Riker). I think it is somewhat ironical that positive theory was more or less born during the “behavioral revolution” which preached a strict separation of norms and facts. And that many practitioners came to accept the same underlying positivist stance. But a core question of PPT, from the beginning, was a normative one: is it possible to an institution that is both “good” in some sense and “democratic.”? That question arose first in welfare economics but Arrow showed that it was deeper than most welfare economists had thought. Indeed, it did not assume a welfarist ethics at all, as Arrow recognized that welfarism might well be incoherent. Arrow (and other social choice theorists) never rejected normative analysis and theory. And, at least in some of his writings, Bill Riker didn’t either. I think it will be time, sometime in the next 50 years, for young theorists to accept that Positive theory has something to contribute to normative thinking and will not shy away from making those contributions.

One area where positive-normative connections are already being made is in parts of public law where there is a longstanding and continuing concern with the design of institutions and procedures. There has been positive theory in the area for a long time – especially in what have been called (a bit misleadingly) separation of powers models and delegation. This work has become pretty familiar in those law schools that teach a course in the administrative and regulatory state. Part of the thrust of that work was to see how internal congressional practices and institutions impact on the structures and practices of the administrative and regulatory state institutions. And some has sought to explain aspects of the structural constitution.

**Much of the positive political theory in the area attempts to be descriptive and explanatory, but law is a normative discipline and the use of this work in law has generally been to use it to criticize, evaluate and reform existing institutions (partly through judicially enforced doctrine). There is a market there for our students and a willing audience of young law professors. New theoretical developments may well contribute to re-thinking law in this area at both the administrative and constitutional level.<sup>2</sup>**

**Another normative area that seems underexploited is the frontier between normative and positive theory in political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Historically, of course, the two have normally been closely linked. Read a bit of Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau or Rawls and positive claims about what people will do or believe, or how governmental institutions will function, in various situations are right on the surface. But the positive theory in these studies tends to be quite casual and it seems likely that their normative recommendations could change substantially if the underlying positive theory were improved in various ways. Admittedly, jobs in the political theory or philosophy do not pay as well as those in law but the intellectual payoffs may be greater.**

**The basic point is this: the notion that science can be strictly separated from normative issues seems both superficial and unnecessary. Normative issues have always at the core of our theoretical and empirical projects. We want to know what it is rational (ie. Best in some sense) for a person or a group to do or believe. At the same time we want to design empirical studies (or experiments) in ways that best (ie rationally) answer research questions (in other words we want to know what “we” should rationally believe or do).**

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<sup>2</sup> Recent developments in judicial doctrine and law have generally been more favorable to presidential control of administrative agencies and willing to upset statutory deals that delegate authority. But much of this evolution has been done without much positive theory or based on very simplified models.

<sup>3</sup> There are some very good people working in this area both in political science and philosophy (and in law as well) but still it seems that there is much to be done and the potential significance seems enormous.