

REVIEWS

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REVIEWS

William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973, pp. 387.

In seeking to pull together a comprehensive and integrated treatment of the very diverse and rapidly growing domain of work by economists, mathematicians, political scientists, and sociologists (which they embrace under the title 'positive political theory') Riker and Ordeshook exhibit a commendable ambition. *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* does a superb job in many areas, eg. an integrative treatment of the Prisoner's Dilemma along with a discussion of externalities and market failure, a comprehensive (although perhaps unduly technical) overview of the spatial modelling literature, an innovative examination of the conditions under which public regulation is desirable, a concise treatment of the size principle with an emphasis on its empirical applications, etc. It seems clear to me that *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* will be the basic textbook for political science courses in 'public choice' for some years to come. If, in what follows, I seem to be unduly critical of a book which is overall such an excellent one, I must reply that this is a tribute to my high expectations of these authors. Riker, in my view, has in the past decade had the greatest impact on the discipline of political science of any single individual – directly, through his own writing, and even more importantly, indirectly through the work of his students, work which now appears in the discipline's major journals with a regularity quite alarming to its more traditional practitioners; while Ordeshook has, together with a handful of others, following in the footsteps of Hotelling and Downs, helped create an extensive and important subdomain of political science – spatial models of electoral competition and choice.

As with any text which tries to cover a burgeoning and ill-defined field, *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* suffers from flaws (mostly minor) of omission and interpretation. As a textbook, it suffers from a failure to suitably define its intended audience. In the preface, the authors assert their aim is to introduce some of the recent work in positive theory to

"students at the junior-senior and graduate levels." For the most part (Chap. 9 is a major exception), the authors do succeed in relegating partial derivative signs, integrals, etc. to the footnotes. On the other hand, in many chapters the authors follow the strategy of first developing a theory largely in the abstract via symbolic notation before introducing more concrete examples or applications, a practice which I believe to be poor pedagogy for an introductory text. Also, in some cases (eg. the chapter on N -person game theory) mathematics is developed, political science applications for which are not shown.

More generally, *this book is model rich and data poor!* With rare exceptions (eg. on the size principle), the authors fail to deal with data about human behavior relevant to evaluating the descriptive/explanatory usefulness of the models being considered. This appears to be an explicit sin of commission rather than an inadvertent error of omission, since the authors do not even include data from their own well known article on voter turnout in U.S. Presidential elections as a function of perceived party differential and election closeness. I believe this omission of empirical evidence and the related failure to consider theories of human motivation which do not neatly fit a rational choice framework is an unfortunate one, in that it presents the reader with a one-sided view in which the innovativeness and comprehensiveness of the rational choice view are not really shown off to full advantage. The reader new to this material is less likely to develop an appreciation for its potential or a motivation to pursue it. Furthermore, though the book is very well written, its extensive use of symbolic notation and its very compact style of presentation make it very forbidding reading. I am skeptical that it can be used as a text at other than the graduate level except by students with reasonable mathematics or economics background.¹

Some Minor Caveats

(1) Riker and Ordeshook entitle their book *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*, and one might think that they had in mind a distinction between normative political theory and positive political theory similar to that commonly drawn by economists between positive economics (what is) and normative economics (what ought to be). This would be an error. On the contrary, in the authors' view, "the moral and the descriptive go ... hand in hand." However, although some mention is made of the views of traditional political philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau, insufficient context

is provided to permit the less sophisticated reader to be aware of the extent to which the approach advocated by the authors sheds new and important insight on traditional questions of political philosophy and democratic theory eg. "What is the proper role of the state? What holds society together? What constitutes the public interest?" etc. By blurring over the traditional "is-ought" distinction, the authors also blur over both the significance and the political science/historical context of some of the work on which they report.

(2) In the ethical sphere, the authors appear committed to a straightforward application of the Pareto principle in which 'fairness' norms (other than the sort posed by Arrow's conditions) do not enter. (See, however, pp. 110-111, 157-160, 231-239, 291-292, and 373). The term 'justice' does not appear as an index entry. This omission I regard as regrettable, even though perhaps inevitable in a work which is already almost four hundred, tightly written pages long.

(3) The authors have chosen to invert the usual order in which 2-person game theory is presented before N -person theory is developed. Since the presentation of the 2-person theory remains a standard one, I'm unable to understand the reasons for this order reversal.

(4) The literature on choice draws nourishment from a number of traditions, including economic models of consumer and producer choice (largely oriented to behavior under conditions of certainty), models of probabilistic inference and choice (rooted in Bayes Theorem and oriented to behavior under conditions of risk), welfare economics (concerned i.a. with the existence of Pareto optimal equilibria), and, last but not least, the theory of games (oriented to behavior under conditions of uncertainty where there is strategic interaction among volitional actors). Each of these traditions copes somewhat differently with the notion of 'rational' choice. Riker and Ordeshook have, in my view, come closer than anyone else in integrating these diverse approaches, but the seams often show, and there still remain some unreconciled elements. In particular, the authors fail in Chapter 2 ("The Assumption of Rationality") to satisfactorily interrelate 'consistency' notions of rationality with 'minimax' notions of rationality and with 'expected utility maximizing' notions.

(5) There are puzzling omissions in *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*, e.g. Farquharson's work on sophisticated voting is treated only cursorily (pp. 97-99, p. 366) and neither Rae *et al.*'s work on proportional representation schemes, Coleman's work on exchange models, nor Hirsch-

man's work on exit, voice and loyalty are discussed. Of course, we can expect to see some important, very recent work on spatial modelling, modelling of coalition formation processes, and minimax regret models of voter and representative choice incorporated into the next edition. There has also been a healthy growth in empirical work in the rational choice tradition the past few years, and we hope such empirical studies (on e.g. voter rationality, parliamentary coalition patterns and payoffs, and small group decision process) will be given a central place in the next edition of *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*. That there will be a second edition I have no doubt. In scope, clarity, and innovation in integrating diverse approaches, Riker and Ordeshook's work will not be easily bettered. The flaws I have pointed out are readily correctable in subsequent editions.

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NOTE

¹ More suitable as an introductory undergraduate text, although considerably less comprehensive or innovative, is Steven Brams, *Game Theory and Politics*, Free Press, 1975.

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