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### Introduction by Jasmine Chorley Foster, University of Toronto

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Daniel Bessner and Nicholas Guilhot have put together an exciting volume exploring a preoccupation that runs through much of their previous works individually and as collaborators: cynicism about popular sovereignty in liberal democracies. Bessner traced part of this current in his 2018 biography of Hans Speier and Guilhot most recently did so in a 2018 volume on the anti-liberalism of Realism in International Relations.<sup>1</sup> As Nils Gilman writes in his contribution to this roundtable, a book on this subject seems timely, when many intellectuals today distrust “the masses in Western democracies.” This volume offers a new story about decisionism, the democratic-skeptic philosophy of scientifically organizing the state under the complex demands of modernity.

*The Decisionist Imagination: Sovereignty, Social Science, and Democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* is a broad and ambitious project, as indicated by the subtitle. The stated primary objective of the project is to build a bridge between two ‘silos’ of the study of decision-making: the study of the interwar decisionism most closely associated with German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt and the study of postwar rational choice theory. Early decisionism (the editors do well to emphasize figures beyond Schmitt, such as political theorist Carl Friedrich, sociologist Karl Mannheim, and jurist Karl Lowenstein<sup>2</sup>) is a realist theory of sovereignty where conflict and existential threats (the stuff of ‘irrational’ politics) can only be made orderly by a decision itself, rather than the authority or the form thereof. The postwar ascendance of rational choice, where politics involves the consistent and transitive ordering of self-interested preferences, seems miles away from the sovereign decision. But what connects them largely is “an anti-catastrophist imagination: a search for tools of stabilization in a world of chaos and disorder,” as Nicholas Mulder writes in his review. Part of the social sciences’ turn to decision-making is attributed to a longing for their disciplines to become ‘scientific’ and produce ‘objective’ explanations of the political world. The ‘decision’ appeared to be an ideal event from which one could abstract, analyze, and predict behaviour in a ‘scientific’ manner. In both the interwar era and Cold War, Bessner and Guilhot argue, decisionists shared an obsession with the uncertain and the existential. How does one manage the unmanageable?<sup>3</sup> The question itself seemed to bar the possibility of collective, democratic deliberation.

Both Gilman and Hunter Heyck identify the breadth of ‘decisionism’ (encompassing the Schmittian decision, rational choice theory, systems thinking, etc.) as one of the volume’s virtues. Emily Hauptmann is less convinced about the connections drawn between interwar decisionism and rational choice. She wonders whether ‘decisionism’ describes a diffuse but hegemonic “mood” or a more active project, and where in this long arch of decisionism agency is located. Heyck too is left asking for more clarity about the relationship between pre-war decisionism and post-war decision-making. He also asks where the masses (the many masses) are in this story that tends to stay quite close to the ‘deciders.’

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017); I reviewed *Democracy in Exile* last year, see: Jasmine Chorley Foster, “Down with the Demos! Long Live Democracy!” Fellow Travelers (blog), 14 August 2018. <https://fellowtravelersblog.com/2018/08/14/down-with-the-demos-long-live-democracy/>.

<sup>2</sup> Lowenstein is the subject of Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Ian Zuckerman’s chapter, “Militant Democracy as Decisionist Liberalism: Reason and Power in the Work of Karl Lowenstein,” *The Decisionist Imagination* [hereafter *DI*], (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019): 64-84.

<sup>3</sup> Bessner and Guilhot, “Introduction: Who Decides?” *DI*: 1-25, here 6.

The political context and implications of decisionism are made clear in the volume: what may otherwise have been considered political decisions (with a democratic stake) are instead made into technical problems requiring management or solving by expert elites. Whether political legitimacy is “derived from supposedly “neutral” expertise and competence rather than values-based democratic accountability” is at the heart of this book, Gilman writes. He points out, however, that the book as a whole offers more “than a standard story of counter-democratic intellectual elitism” and invites us to question the totalizing character of the “decisionist matrix.”

Eglė Rindzevičiūtė’s chapter takes the postwar decision back across the Atlantic and into the Soviet Union (the subject of her own recent monograph), seemingly inverting the Bessner-Guilhot thesis by arguing that in the Soviet Union decisionism was a force that experts attempted to use to diffuse rather than concentrate authority.<sup>4</sup> In both the U.S. and the USSR, then, decisionist practices strongly contradicted hegemonic political forms. Why does this contradiction between practice and form occur? This is one example of where further dialogue between the authors could be productive. Likewise, both Bessner and Guilhot are typically concerned with ‘high politics,’ but I wonder how the volume might have benefited from including dedicated engagement with the sphere that has arguably been most subjected to the anti-democratic organizing logic of ‘decisionism’: the economy. For example, management studies are dusted throughout the volume, but it would be interesting to see the decisionism framework carried forward into consideration of the economy for a more complete picture of the political implications that animate so much of the book.

On a personal note, I read this volume while studying for a Political Science major field exam, and I marked up my copy with all kinds of notes on the poignant, clarifying, and at times unsettling insights that appear across the chapters.<sup>5</sup> I suspect that the scope of people who will find this volume similarly germane is wide and I hope that the extent of engagement with it reflects that.

### Participants:

**Daniel Bessner** is the Anne H.H. and Kenneth B. Pyle Associate Professor in American Foreign Policy in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He is the author of *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Cornell, 2018).

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<sup>4</sup> Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, “Unlikely Revolutionaries: Decision Sciences in the Soviet Government,” *DI*: 217–249; Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, *The Power of Systems: How Policy Sciences Opened Up the Cold War World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Along with those cited above, *DI* includes the following chapters: Stephen Wertheim, “Reading the International Mind: International Public Opinion in Early Twentieth Century Anglo-American Thought,” *DI*: 27-63; Kari Palonen, “Parliamentary and Electoral Decisions as Political Acts,” *DI*: 85-108; Nomi Claire Lazar, “Decision and Decisionism,” *DI*: 109-134; Philip Mirowski, “How Having Reasons Became Making a Decision: The Cold War Rise of Decision Theory and the Invention of Rational Choice,” *DI*: 135-172; S.M. Amadae, “Computable Rationality, NUTS, and the Nuclear Leviathan,” *DI*: 173-216; Jenny Andersson, “Prediction and Social Choice: Daniel Bell and Future Research,” *DI*: 250-271; Angèle Christin, “Predictive Algorithms and Criminal Sentencing,” *DI*: 272-294; and Bessner and Guilhot, “Conclusion: The Myth of the Decision,” *DI*: 295-301.

**Nicolas Guilhot** is research professor at the CNRS—Centre d'Etudes Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris (CRESPPA). His work focuses on the history of political concepts in political theory and in the social sciences. He is currently writing a book on the politics of conspiracy theory.

**Jasmine Chorley Foster** is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

**Nils Gilman** currently serves as the Vice President of Programs at the Berggruen Institute, an independent, non-partisan think tank which develops ideas to shape political and social institutions. An intellectual historian by training and the former Associate Chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley, he is the author of *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (2004).

**Emily Hauptmann** is Professor of Political Science at Western Michigan University. She is currently working on a book manuscript tentatively titled *Producing Knowledges: Private Philanthropies, Public Universities and the Making of Postwar Political Science*. Her work in this area has appeared in *The International History Review*, *The Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *The American Political Science Review*, and *Political Theory*.

**Hunter Heyck** is Professor and Chair in the Department of the History of Science at the University of Oklahoma. His research and teaching focus on the intersections between technology and society in the modern era. His first book was *Herbert A. Simon: the Bounds of Reason in Modern America*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2005. His second book is *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science*, also from JHU Press, published in 2015. His current project is a thematic history of technology, aimed at a broad audience, with the working title “The Chosen World.”

**Nicholas Mulder** recently finished a doctorate in modern European and international history at Columbia University. He is working on a book on the early twentieth-century origins of economic sanctions and their role in the international order, international law, and the world economy between 1914 and 1945. He will be a Postdoctoral Associate at Cornell University as of July 2019 and begin there as Assistant Professor of Modern European History in the summer of 2020.

### Review by Nils Gilman, Berggruen Institute

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Edited volumes are always difficult to review, in particular when, as is the case for *The Decisionist Imagination*, the authors are neither entirely aligned with one another in their reading of the topic, nor clearly engaged in a debate with one another. Therefore, I am taking the liberty of not attempting to review *The Decisionist Imagination* comprehensively, but rather of pulling out one important theme that emerges from the book, namely why decision science came to the fore in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and the nature of the political implications of that move. This may also help illuminate why a book about decisionism seems timely today, in a moment when many intellectuals have growing doubts about the political trustworthiness of the masses in Western democracies.

In the American academy, the concept of decisionism is most closely associated with the thought of the conservative (and Nazi-supporting) German political theorist Carl Schmitt. One of the virtues of this volume is how it expands the concept away from the narrow Schmittian definition of decisionism, with its focus on the power of the sovereign to make law by fiat, and instead takes a broader view of how thinking about political decision-making changed during the last two thirds of the twentieth century, particularly among postwar Anglo-American intellectuals and social scientists. The basic thrust of these new ‘decision sciences’ was to routinize decision-making, rather than to base it, as in Schmitt’s work, on the power of the sovereign to define the exception.

One of the main contributions of this volume is to underscore the *political* context for the rise of decision theory, and specifically to question the common view that the emergence of nuclear weapons was the decisive factor. American historian Stephen Wertheim begins this assessment with an elegant intellectual history of the concept of “public opinion.” Before the rise of opinion polling, this term was invoked as an almost metaphysical concept to express “the collective opinion of enlightened men,” as divined by international lawyers who deemed themselves the “conscience of mankind” (31). Public opinion was something that existed beyond the reach of voters and their political representatives. This changed during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century when, under the influence of philosopher John Dewey, most progressive American intellectuals embraced the idea that elected political leaders were responsible for making decisions in response to “public opinion”; the public was thought to be educable and the role and duty of intellectuals was to do that educating.

In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the political mood among intellectuals began to swing against the cognitive capacities of masses. Events of these years—from volunteer soldiers marching to their slaughter in World War I to the Depression with its panics and bank runs—did little to instill confidence in the rationality of the public. Above all, as Wertheim notes, “the rise of totalitarian powers discredited international public opinion understood as an immanent harmony or civilized conscience” (48). The masses were no longer seen as educable but rather as inherently lazy, or gullible, or feckless, or inattentive, or emotional—in a word, not as ‘rational’ as elites. As Nicolas Guilhot and Daniel Bessner argue in their introduction to the volume, these concerns increasingly felt “existential” to many intellectuals—matters not that reasonable people could disagree about, but of political life and death. Led by intellectuals like Walter Lippmann, there emerged a widespread conviction among intellectuals “that too much freedom could impel democracy’s dissolution” (9). If the people were capable of supporting Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, or endorsing international Stalinism, then clearly the ballot box needed to have limits put on it. This cleared the path for intellectual elites to advocate that they take over the decision-making process in order to protect the political system from unreliable masses who could be so easily led astray.

Political theorists Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Ian Zuckerman dramatize this shift via a well-executed intellectual biography of German emigre scholar Karl Loewenstein. Writing in the United States in the wake of the Nazi rise to power, Loewenstein believed that the ‘emotionalism’ of the masses made them vulnerable to demagogues; the solution was what he called ‘militant’ democracy—that is, a ‘protected’ or ‘managed’ or

‘disciplined’ or ‘authoritarian’ democracy. Democracy had to be “redefined,” Loewenstein argued. “It should be—at least for the transitional stage until better social adjustment to the conditions of the technological age has been accomplished—the application of disciplined authority, by liberal-minded men, for the ultimate ends of liberal government.” Loewenstein argued explicitly that “citizenship should be seen as conditional on the individual’s loyalty to the democratic order.”<sup>1</sup> As Invernizzi-Accetti and Zuckerman conclude, “The notion of militant democracy allowed Loewenstein to advocate for straightforwardly authoritarian and decisionistic political forms as an instantiation of the logic prerequisites of democracy itself” thus succeeding “at providing a putative democratic legitimacy to fundamentally anti-democratic forms of decisionism” (74-77). As a practical matter, this meant transferring authority over important political decisions away from the masses, or their democratically selected leaders, and putting them in the hands of social scientific elites like, well, Karl Loewenstein.

In other words, what the interwar period bequeathed to the postwar period, before the advent of the Bomb, was a set of rationales for putting limits on democratic decision-making in favor of empowering social scientists and the systems they designed. As economic historian Phil Mirowski argues in his contribution to the volume: “Scientific distrust of the ability of the masses to reason is the prime motivation for the rise of decision theory from the mid-twentieth century,” and these concerns about the “the reasoning ability of the masses predated [the Bomb] by at least four decades” (143). At least in the United States, decisionism represented a way of holding on to the politically legitimating virtue of democracy while neutralizing the downsides of empowering the *hoi polloi*. Here then is the taproot of the “elite theory of democracy” which would become so popular in postwar America as developed by political scientist Robert Dahl and other leading American scholars. The role of the social scientists in this political model was, as Dahl’s Yale colleague Gabriel Almond would put it, “the containment of mass moods.”<sup>2</sup> If the decisionist view of democracy wasn’t quite the equivalent of “destroy the village in order to save it,” it at least entailed limiting democracy in order to save liberalism.

If these interwar political concerns set the stage for the postwar rise of the decision sciences, there is no question that after the war, the Bomb concentrated the minds of social scientists and policy makers on the importance of political decision-taking under conditions of epistemic uncertainty, organizational complexity, and insanely high stakes. The possibility that poor decision-making could lead to nuclear war raised the ‘existential stakes’ even above the concerns of the interwar years. As political theorist S.M. Amadae shows in her excellent contribution, “nuclear thinking” thereby became the breeding ground for several new intellectual technologies, including Monte Carlo experiments, political gaming, systems theory, scenario planning, and, most importantly, game theory and the concept of ‘rational choice.’ While each of these new technologies is now subject to a significant historiography of its own, the contribution of this volume is to emphasize not only the common political thrust, which was to “endorse a form of technocratic politics in which decisions were made by systems or equations, not people” (14), but also to emphasize that this model of politics remains central to a great deal of our contemporary political order, ranging in everything from the veneration of ‘independent’ central banks setting monetary policy to the fetish that ‘the market’ is a better information processing engine than democratic forms of governance, to the technical design of computer-based recommendation engines that guide everything from reading choices to criminal sentencing.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Loewenstein, “Militant democracy and fundamental rights, II,” *American Political Science Review* 31:4 (1937): 657-658.

<sup>2</sup> On “the elite theory of democracy” as cornerstone of American postwar social scientific thinking about the relationship between intellectuals and mass politics, see Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 47-53.

What all these things have in common is the tendency to move areas of choice that in earlier eras had been understood to be political decisions, which therefore in a democratic order ought to be decided by the people or elected representatives, into the domain of purely ‘technical’ solutions that were to be managed (if not quite controlled) by scientifically-trained elites whose legitimacy derived from supposedly ‘neutral’ expertise and competence rather than values-based democratic accountability. As historian Jenny Andersson discusses in her chapter on Daniel Bell’s turn to futures research in the late 1960s, the aim was to improve “the rationality of decision-making, which thereby made planning acceptable within the framework of liberal values” (255). To solve the conundrum of how to determine and order collective preferences (something the economist Kenneth Arrow had claimed was a logical impossibility),<sup>3</sup> Bell proposed a comprehensive system of social accounts that would enable social forecasting akin to that of technological forecasts. This was not about removing values from politics, according to Bell, but about applying techniques from operations research into order to clarify and realize collective wishes and desires.

If this were where the volume landed, it would be a useful contribution to the literature, but would remain a rather conventional political account of elitist intellectuals coming up with rationalizations for truncating democracy in various ways. However, the book as a whole makes two additional political assessments which turn out to be quite a bit more interesting than a standard story of counter-democratic intellectual elitism. First, two of the authors question whether in fact we live in a decisionist political matrix at all. Political scientist Kari Palonen doubts whether the rise of decisionism really characterized the postwar period, at least insofar as the latter is understood as antithetical to democratic deliberation. Parliaments, he argues, have continued to be spaces where policies are debated and developed according to long-standing norms that privilege evidence and reason. Likewise, political theorist Nomi Claire Lazar emphasizes how the persistence of procedural norms undermines the claim that a transition to decisionism was really so, well, decisive.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me that rather than assume we are or are not living today in a decisionist matrix, it is worth specifying how decisionistic processes have come to colonize more and more of the political world, handing decisions over crucial matters to politically unaccountable technocratic elites or systems, and progressively shrinking the space over which the people or their elected representatives have control. While traditional deliberative democratic practices continue to be the form in which many policy decisions take place, there are two important caveats. First, certain kinds of decisions have clearly been hived off from democratic decision-making, notably over when/how to use nuclear weapons, but also over such economically crucial matters as monetary policy.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, therefore, the most important political questions concerning both military force and economic management are no longer subject to democratic control. Second, the categories and frequency

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth J. Arrow, “A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare,” *Journal of Political Economy* 58:4 (1950): 328–346.

<sup>4</sup> Consider Brexit. Whatever one makes of Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May, it is hard to characterize their performance as decisionistic—despite the fact that the choice over whether and how Britain should exist in the European Union seems indubitably an existential matter. Conversely, in the United States, while it is certainly fair to suggest that President Donald Trump has attempted to rule in decisionistic terms, his actual success in pushing through his decisions has been limited: the effective autonomy of various parts of the bureaucratic and governmental apparatus have instead led to howling about ‘the Deep State,’ the ‘Witchhunt,’ ‘Presidential harassment,’ and ‘obstructionism’ on the part of the opposition party. The major contemporary leader who has been most successfully decisionistic (as opposed to merely personalistic) is Chinese President Xi Jinping.

<sup>5</sup> Quinn Slobodian’s *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), reviewed for H-Diplo at <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT20-27> has documented how the creation of financial authorities largely exempt from democratic accountability was a half-century long project for central European economists emerging from the wreckage of the Great War, seeking to ensure that private property would be safe from political expropriation. Connecting this history to decisionism remains to be explored.

of ‘exceptional’ events representing ‘existential crises’ capable of authorizing the unchecked exercise of executive power have also expanded. The reason why the Schmittian ‘politics of exception’ has become such a popular framework for assessing contemporary politics is that the scope of such exceptions has in fact increased.

Even more interestingly, sociologist Eglė Rindzevičiūtė tells the less familiar story of the rise of cybernetic methods in the 1960s Soviet Union, where the political implications of moving decisions away from the formal political echelon and toward social scientists and experts had very different implications than similar intellectual moves in the West. In the Soviet Union, decision sciences could “be understood as a response to informal, personalist decision-making and an attempt to limit this practice by ensuring the participation of scientific experts in policy process” (224). In the Soviet political context, in contrast to the Western one, the field of decision sciences “was conducive to a more liberal governmental imagination that underscored the principle of self-regulation, limited central control, and governance at a distance” (219). Soviet decision scientists saw what they were doing as “an antidote to bureaucratic fragmentation and narrow-minded ‘technocratic’ decision-making” (229). In other words, if in the context of democracy, decision science was counter-democratic, in an authoritarian state, it could be pluralizing, “serving as an antidote to a volatile, personalist decision-making” (224).

In sum, our normative view of what it means for the decision sciences to arrogate authority to technical experts depends greatly on the authority from whom that authority is being taken. If the people being deprived of political authority are personalistic authoritarians, few will shed a tear; but it is a dicier proposition if those being deprived of political authority are ‘the people’ or their duly elected representatives. In the end, decisionism is perhaps best understood as being a discursive field designed to move the political locus of decision-making – away from people exercising discretion (be they elected politicians, or judges, or dictators) and toward technocrats or algorithms. How one feels about that displacement depends mainly on how one feels about the decision-makers who exercised the previous discretion. Communications scholar Angèle Christin’s discussion in chapter nine of contemporary debates over “algorithmic sentencing” offers a case in point: many people have expressed deep misgivings about the way that ‘algorithms of oppression’ may end up replicating the social biases which are baked into the data sets upon which the machine learning is built; but even if this is the case, and it may well be, the relevant question is whether these algorithms are more or less biased than the human judges whose human judgment they are displacing, and on this point the evidence is far from clear. Ultimately, our judgment of any particular instance of decisionism must take place not in a vacuum of abstract ethical reasoning, but in light of a clear-eyed assessment of the actually existing available alternatives.



### Review by Emily Hauptmann, Western Michigan University

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Nicolas Guilhot has a remarkable capacity for analyzing how ideas are deployed in a variety of political settings. While some intellectual historians might prefer tidier stories, Guilhot enjoys taking his readers around the twists and turns of the often bizarre political histories of ideas. Whether his subject is human rights or realist theories of international relations, Guilhot captures the multiple incarnations of these ideas without losing sight of their family resemblances.<sup>1</sup> Now, along with Daniel Bessner, author of a sweeping new study of Hans Speier as the consummate Cold War “defense intellectual,”<sup>2</sup> Guilhot tackles the strange career of “decisionism,” arguing that this set of ideas most closely associated with the German jurist Carl Schmitt is still with us.

Of the many themes developed in this volume, I focus here on the connections the editors and a number of contributors draw between interwar European decisionism and postwar U.S. social science. I am particularly interested in whether these connections are presented as an active project of particular agents or as something more diffuse, like a mood or an echo. I then consider the implications of these themes for the critical aims of the volume.

As its editors make clear in their opening chapter, this volume aims to present “decision-making as an intellectual problem...running through the twentieth century, from Weimar-era *Staatslehre* to postwar American social science.” By connecting these “apparently disconnected” intellectual orientations, the editors intend to prompt a revisionist history of the postwar U.S. social sciences (5). Making these surprising connections involves both muting a contrast and stressing a continuity. First, the editors and several contributors (Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Ian Zuckerman as well as Philip Mirowski) offer a range of reasons for muting the apparently stark contrast between the ‘anti-rational’ features of Schmittian decisionism and the centrality of rationality to postwar decision theory. Along with muting this contrast, the editors and several other contributors stress a continuous and pervasive anti-democratic elitism stretching from interwar European decisionism through postwar rational choice theory. This is especially true of Stephen Wertheim’s discussion of early twentieth century conceptions of public opinion in both Europe and the United States. As a result, the fundamental continuity at the heart of this volume stands out more vividly: the overriding importance of the decision.

Some contributions to this volume do the work of connecting the apparently disconnected by tracing the intellectual migrations of particular people associated with interwar European decisionism. This is the primary concern of Invernizzi-Accetti and Zuckerman’s fascinating account of the German émigré Karl Loewenstein. The authors examine Loewenstein’s late-1930s argument for “militant democracy” (64; 70-77), which they read as an attempt to turn Schmittian decisionism to anti-fascist ends. Beyond arguing that democracies must defend themselves against internal enemies, Loewenstein also participated in U.S. government projects that put his ideas into practice. Most notably, as a member of the World War II-era Emergency Advisory Committee for Political Defense (CPD), Loewenstein “played a significant role in designing the CPD’s program” that “eventually interned and deported nearly ten thousand Latin American nationals” deemed politically suspect (75). For me, Loewenstein stood out in this volume as an important early connector of different elements of the decisionist imagination. But as the chapter devoted to him is confined to a small

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<sup>1</sup> Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Guilhot, ed. *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

portion of his career, one wonders how and to what degree Loewenstein's ideas were picked up and carried forward by others. That is, how much credit do his ideas deserve for sustaining decisionism in U.S. social science beyond the first decade of the postwar period?

Philip Mirowski's wide-ranging contribution identifies several other émigré scholars in addition to Loewenstein who ushered differing versions of decisionism into U.S. social science: Oskar Morgenstern and Friedrich Hayek. For one, Mirowski sees an enduring Schmittian influence in the conception of the decision at the heart of John von Neumann and Morgenstern's well-known *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944). Posited as "relatively free of context and prior reason," this foundational exposition of game theory made people's decisions "'rational' by fiat" – a variation on the Schmittian decisionist claim that legal and normative bounds depend on a leader's making decisions outside of them (152).<sup>3</sup> Mirowski's reading of Hayek as a transmitter of varieties of decisionism is more complex, especially since it spans decades of Hayek's variegated intellectual career. Despite Hayek's having changed his mind on many matters, Mirowski argues that Hayek's skepticism about human rationality along with his reverence for decisions remained constant (157-158).

I found the discussions of these particular figures illustrative, I do not think, for reasons I discuss more fully below, that this volume means its readers to focus primarily on particular émigrés as crucial to the survival of decisionism.<sup>4</sup> Compare, for instance, how John Gunnell highlights the influence of particular European émigrés—Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and others—who were deeply critical of U.S. political culture and its political science.<sup>5</sup> Though they were warmly received in some parts of the U.S. academy, Gunnell argues that the most important consequence of their intellectual migration was the strong, oppositional reaction it provoked. The Straussian critique of liberal democracy and scientism won some intellectual space in American political science; but it had to coexist with what Gunnell reads as the militant reassertion of a distinctively American empiricism it sparked. The intellectual success of these European émigrés, therefore, was of a markedly different kind than those who are the subject of this volume. Strauss, Voegelin and others won intellectual legitimacy in the United States by insisting that their ideas were distinctive rather than by reinventing them.

In contrast, the editors of this volume sometimes suggest that decisionism slipped into U.S. academic discourse in so cloaked or modified a way that it provoked no immediate counter-reaction. Only in hindsight—and with their help—can we recognize it for what it really was. Along these lines, at the end of their conclusion the editors enjoin their readers to look at contemporary social science more closely: "Scholars must develop a familiarity with decisionist thought and train the eye to identify its contemporary – and often obscure – embodiments" (299). This, they tell us, is no easy task, given that during its successful shape-shifting career, decisionism in U.S. social science has been "versatile" and "protean." Curiously, the editors write as if the theories themselves performed these acts of protean virtuosity: "rational choice [and] decision theory....extended and transformed the decisionist mystique...." (295); "decisionism succeeded because it rebranded itself as *the* 'rational' approach to politics" (296; emphasis in original). And, most disturbingly: "new decision technologies...smuggled the authoritarian edge of decisionism into the Western social sciences" (296).

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<sup>3</sup> I found Nomi Lazar's summary of Schmitt's ideas on this issue (110-115) especially helpful.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Speier, the subject of a recent book by one of this volume's editors, should be included in this group though his work is not extensively discussed here. See Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*.

<sup>5</sup> Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

In contrast to the portions of this volume discussed above that highlight the roles of particular émigrés, here the editors avoid presenting the postwar U.S. reinvention of decisionism as the work of identifiable people. They do this, I think, to underscore not only how protean decisionism turned out to be but also how pervasive. To that same end, the editors also suggest that European interwar decisionism was far broader and present in more disciplines than a focus on Schmitt's authoritarian version alone would suggest (297-8). Though they take the pervasiveness of decisionism as established, the editors concede that the work of “grasp[ing] the diversity of channels through which decisionism permeated the postwar social sciences” remains to be done (297).

Of all the possible such channels that might be investigated, I expect that other contributors more well-versed in diplomatic and military history than I might discuss how decisionist approaches flowed into the U.S. national security state. Theories informing U.S. nuclear war fighting strategies bear a resemblance to interwar European decisionism; but making that connection or channel explicit does not appear to be the focus of any of the chapters in this volume, including S.M. Amadae's thorough critique of game theory's reduction of decision-making into “intentionless action” (175). Bessner's recently published book on Hans Speier addresses this issue more explicitly.

Ultimately, I wonder how well the conceit of the “decisionist imagination” captures the transmission and modification of a set of European ideas in the postwar United States. Perhaps the similarities between interwar European thought and postwar U.S. social science that are analyzed throughout this volume are no more than faint echoes or expressions of a diffuse mood. Nomi Lazar's compelling argument for narrowing the bounds of what we label “decisionism” reinforced these doubts in my mind. I agree with the editors that scientific veneers polished to a high gloss work to disguise the stubbornly anti-democratic strain in recent U.S. social science. After having thought about many of the contributions to this volume, I now see how the scientism that pervades more recent examples of “the decisionist imagination” can cloak their anti-democratic qualities. I am still not convinced, however, that discerning the persistence of the decisionist imagination offers so promising a critical perspective on the anti-democratic strains in U.S. social science. But travelling along the s-curves of argument in this volume is a fun and exhilarating ride.

### Review by Hunter Heyck, University of Oklahoma

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In *The Decisionist Imagination*, Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot have brought together a fine group of scholars to explore ‘decisionism’ in twentieth-century social science, with social science before WWII being defined rather broadly so as to include the works of certain major political thinkers in addition to social scientists. The essays explore “decision-making as an intellectual problem that cut across temporal, disciplinary, political, and national boundaries” (5). In keeping with this frame, the chapters range from explorations of what national leaders in the 1910s and 1920s thought of themselves in relation to public opinion (they believed they were better arbiters of what the public thought than any poll ever could be), to explorations of various interwar readings of and reactions to political theorist Carl Schmitt’s decisionism, to a series of insightful analyses of the postwar decision sciences, especially game theory and operations research, but also including Soviet systems science and the present-day use of various algorithms to inform (or constrain) judges in sentencing decisions.

Schmitt’s decisionism plays a particularly important role for the editors, especially his image of the leader as the one with the sovereign authority to make the ‘decision on the exception’—the fundamental decision, made in exigent circumstances, as to whether ‘the rules’ apply. That decision on the exception, in Schmitt’s framing, becomes the unmoved mover for all political authority.

The editors argue that there were continuing connections between the interwar crisis of democracy, of which Schmitt’s thought is but one influential example, and the postwar fascination with decision-making. These connections range from the direct to the diffuse, with perhaps the most persuasive link being that, in the permanent crisis of the Cold War, a vast range of political decisions became decisions on the exception—decisions made in the context of existential threats.

It certainly is true that the postwar social sciences were fascinated with decision-making, which was later redefined in economics/operations research/game theory as ‘rational choice’ or, in cognitive psychology, as ‘problem-solving.’ The various chapters in this volume show some strong, interesting continuities in the discourses about decisions and decision-making over this period, as well as some revealing transformations.

The most notable continuity, as I read this volume, is that decisions and decision-making lie at the nexus of power and reason: that is, ideas about decisions and decision-making are always ideas about power and sovereignty at the same time that they are always ideas about the role of reason in human affairs. The book makes me think of a Venn diagram with two intersecting circles, one of ‘power’ and the other of ‘reason,’ with ‘decision’ as the area of overlap.

Perhaps the most notable transformation revealed here is a reconceptualization of reason as rational choice, a thin thing of rules and procedures, something that can and should be rendered systematic and machinelike. This vision of reason is described in several recent works on the history of the postwar social sciences, three of which the authors of this volume draw on frequently to frame their analyses: Paul Erickson, Lorraine Daston, et al., *How Reason Almost Lost its Mind*; Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams* (whose chapter in this volume is both smart and cutting); and my own *Age of System*.<sup>1</sup>

The result is that *The Decisionist Imagination* makes several important contributions. It focuses attention on decisions and decision-making as crucial objects of study, which is valuable in itself. In addition, the book

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Erickson, Judy Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael Gordin, *How Reason Almost Lost its Mind: the strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Hunter Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

highlights the fact that ideas about decisions and decision-making were deeply political, and that they remained so even as they grew ever more technical. It connects ideas about decisions and decision-making to the mid-century ‘crisis of reason,’ which is an important context for understanding much social science from that time. It shows the multiple ways that these, often quite abstract, ideas mattered quite materially, in realms from nuclear grand strategy to the sentencing of prisoners. And the book shows how much a product of their national contexts these ideas were, both in substance and in the meanings attached to them. Here Eglé Rindzevičiūtė’s chapter on Soviet systems science is especially welcome, as it shows that systems science appealed to intellectuals who wished to liberalize the Soviet regime, a very different political valence than that attached to game theory in Philip Mirowski’s or S.M. Amadae’s chapters.

The book does raise some questions that it does not answer—or, more precisely, that have pieces of answers in different chapters that are not quite made into a whole. The first of these questions is, how are we to understand the relationship between the prewar interest in various forms of decisionism, which was all about who makes the ultimate decisions that set the rules, and postwar work on ‘decision-making,’ which was all about the rules themselves—and which appears so uninterested in ‘who decides’ that the decider could be almost anything capable of following well-defined rules, be it a person, an organization, or even a machine?

As I see it, the story is one of both continuity and change. Perhaps the biggest change was that the postwar decision sciences tended to take as a given that ‘who decides’ is a kind of ‘universal man,’ not a unique world-historical figure. The assumption that the ‘everyman’ is a decider fit well with democratic beliefs, but it must be said that the ‘everyman’ was not a neutral figure. Rather, the universal Everyman had some rather specific qualities—to be blunt, he was a white Euro-American male of at least middle class means and education.

Indeed, the language of both decisionism and of decision science presumes a certain form of masculinity in its subjects: rational and self-regulating, active and creative/generative, controlling nature rather than controlled by it, autonomous and therefore empowered to make meaningful choices. This set of assumptions is so powerful that those to whom society denies such rational, active, autonomy appear not only as powerless but as very nearly unthinking and unthinkable. A history of decisionism and the decision sciences that explicitly made gender a central category of analysis might have much to teach us.

Similarly, the ‘masses’ that are so frequently contrasted to elites (or experts) in theories of decision are typically undifferentiated, while one of the basic realities of our world is that the ‘masses’ are many, not one. Minority groups and colonized peoples don’t appear in this history, even as foils for elites, which is startling, given their ubiquity in discourses about rationality. It reveals much about the concerns of the political thinkers and social scientists discussed in this volume that the book’s index has no entries for topics related to race, colonization or decolonization, civil rights, women, or women’s rights. It is harder to analyze an absence from the historical record than a presence in it, but this absence looms very large. Perhaps a third circle, that of identity, needs to be added to our Venn diagram, with decision at the intersection of power, reason, and identity.

While the Everyman decider isn’t really every man but a particular set of men, even that is a far larger set of people than a unitary Leader. The shift from one to many Deciders was a big step, even if ‘the many’ were quite similar to each other along a number of dimensions. Several significant changes went along with this broad shift in who decides. Most notably, as I have argued elsewhere, attention shifted from the chooser to the choice, from the Decider to the decision process.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Heyck, “Producing Reason,” in Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, eds., *Cold War Social Science* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

With these shifts from the chooser to the choice came a series of related changes in ideas about how decisions are made, how they should be made, what the role is of the organization vs. the individual in making decisions, and what the role of creative intelligence is in the decision process, with creative problem-solving being opposed to rule-following on the one hand and ungovernable acts of will on the other. Indeed, if everyone is a decider, then the leader must not be ‘the’ decider but the one who chooses the options for the machinery of choice to act upon. In that case, it is not so much the ‘decision on the exception’ that reveals or incarnates power, it is the ‘decision on the creation’—the creative act of formulating options from which others choose. This is the direction that many in cognitive psychology went with decision theory—toward a notion of the individual as a creative problem-solver, not an algorithmic rule-follower. This vision, described astutely by Jamie Cohen-Cole, is of a ‘creative American’ who was less a cog in the machinery of rational choice than an intellectual entrepreneur.<sup>3</sup>

While there are echoes of the sovereign decision in the creative destruction of problem-solving, this decision on the creation was, like all decisions, something that postwar social scientists hoped to rationalize, regularize, and produce on demand. In addition, the Decider as prime mover acted not only prior to reason but also prior to morality; both were creations of the primal sovereign decision. Postwar systems for producing rational decisions were designed to side-step moral questions as well (a point S.M. Amadae and Angèle Christin bring home forcefully in their chapters), but in a quite different way: the system that produces decisions is not prior to morality but rather is parallel to it—morality is not produced by the decision process but compartmentalized beside it

The other big question this book raised for me is, how are we to understand the temporal dimensions of decisions and decision-making? Here I’d like to suggest that one of the most notable, yet least noted, aspects of postwar social science is that high modern social science cast humans as fundamentally forward-looking prediction machines rather than as past-governed stimulus-response machines or creatures of habit, instinct, or drives. The past still matters to decision-making, but in a new way: it informs our expectations—the futures we imagine—rather than determining our behavior or saddling us with half-remembered traumas.

In this view, we are prediction machines: organisms that use mental representations of the world to generate predictions about future states of that world, especially states that are contingent upon our actions. We live, always, at that magical moment when the branching trees of past and future meet in a singularity, where our choices in the eternal present select not only the options for our descendant selves to choose among but also simultaneously decide who will be the ancestors of our decisions out of all the infinite possible influences upon them.

To see the human as a decision-maker (or problem-solver) was to see him/her as a creature continually engaged in making predictions about the future; since the future hasn’t happened yet, those predictions must be grounded in mental representations—models—of a world that can never be fully known. Indeed, even the present and the past that are the basis for making predictions about the future cannot be known in full, meaning that understanding how the ‘past to now’ is modeled in the mind, how that model is extrapolated to future states, how those states can be evaluated despite the inherent uncertainties in every step in the process (from perception to representation to prediction), and how that mental picture is transformed into action all become new subjects of study.

Even more, we are *finite* prediction machines in an infinite world. Our mental representations of that world, therefore, *must* simplify that world, and since we have neither perfect knowledge nor perfect cognitive abilities nor unlimited time, our fundamental state is one of uncertainty. Whereas traditional conservative views of

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<sup>3</sup> Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

human capabilities long have tended to emphasize our limits and fallibility and traditional liberal views, our powers and perfectibility, this high modern view saw our very limits as the keys to our power and the path to our progress, if never quite our perfection.

Thus, wrapped up in this basic model of ‘man’ the finite problem-solver, or uncertain decider, are many of the distinctive features of high modern social science, American style: a fascination with modeling and symbolic representation; a preoccupation with how to make good decisions in an uncertain world; an intense interest in feedback and its role not just in learning but in all ‘teleological systems’; the idea of the mind as being an adaptation machine—a tool for changing the world and oneself, not just a rule-governed device.

Of the many ways in which that ingenious tool worked to simplify the world, one of the most important was to channel an infinite array of possible responses into a small set of discrete choice options; another was to group and categorize the world according to a mental shorthand so that one thing (a symbol, a metaphor, a model) could represent many similar-but-not-the-same things; a third was to use heuristics rather than exhaustive algorithms to guide one’s search for options; a fourth was to look for the first satisfactory result rather than the perfect one (to ‘satisfice’ rather than to ‘optimize’); and a fifth was to develop a combination of special purpose mechanisms that would be triggered automatically by common situations and general purpose response mechanisms for dealing with everything else. Our depiction as time-bound, finite creatures could lead to both ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ descriptions of choice and reason, depending on which mode of simplification one embraced and on whether one saw the goal of a science of decision as being to create models that were just complex enough to be instructive or just simple enough to be comprehensible.

Perhaps a fourth circle, that of the time-bound self and the frame it provides for both cognition and action, is needed to illuminate that vital nexus where it overlaps with the circles of power, reason, and identity. There we may find the decision—an elusive but compelling quarry.

### Review by Nicholas Mulder, Cornell University

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The essays collected in *The Decisionist Imagination* span different fields ranging from political theory, international law, and nuclear planning to neoclassical economics and operations research. Their unifying theme is a distinct decisionist paradigm in the social sciences, broadly conceived. The book succeeds impressively as a work of recovery, synthesis, and analysis in intellectual history, and the editors deserve credit for bringing together such a wide array of scholars across fields. My response is thus not so much a criticism of the book as a set of observations about the intriguing questions of theory and praxis that it raises, with some suggestions about how they might be expanded.

As far as ideas go, the stakes of those discussed in *The Decisionist Imagination* are high: not every intellectual paradigm encompasses questions as hefty as the use of omniscient destructive power, the ability to plan advanced economies, and the accountability of elites in democratic societies. An intellectual history of a theoretical paradigm focused on *decisions* thus raises the question: how much did these political, legal, economic, scientific, and military doctrines drive decision-making at key historical moments? If so, what conditioned their appropriation and use by actors that transformed the world in various ways? It would therefore be particularly fruitful to connect the intellectual history of decisionism first, to the study of how theories succeed and fail to shape policymaking, and second, to the political analysis of judgment in history. The essays collected in *The Decisionist Imagination* offer many promising avenues for doing so.

What was decisionism? There were essentially two kinds, an interwar and a post-war strand, which were different in character. The first was a predominantly legal and political school of thought concerned with the importance of a founding decision to the creation of political and constitutional order. Although it had origins in eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideas—from Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès’s *pouvoir constituant* to Romantic notions of voluntarism, expressed famously in Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s line in *Faust* that ‘In the beginning was the deed’ (*Am Anfang war die Tat*)—in the early twentieth century its most famous exponent was German legal theorist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt. By contrast, the second kind of decisionism was a larger, more varied, more broadly influential phenomenon. It was concerned above all with the rational and axiomatic foundations of decision-making by the individual policymaker, state, and economic actor.

The rise of decisionism in the interwar years was bound up with a perceived crisis of reason. It was precisely the profound recognition in the early twentieth century that most people were *not* rational in their behavior that forced a reconfiguration of reason as a stabilizing force. Enlightenment reason had tended to dissolve old hierarchies and doxas. Yet after the Great War, many people felt that reason should be set a more modest task: to contain and insulate modern society from its own irrational impulses. In a sense the ‘decisionist imagination’ was above all an anti-catastrophist imagination: a search for tools of stabilization in a world of chaos and disorder.

An overarching theme of the collection is that over the course of the twentieth century, decisionist theory became strongly anti-democratic in character. Bessner and Guilhot’s own work has explored how the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and the émigré experience of Weimar political and legal thinkers translated into a body of theory that emphasized the destabilizing effects of mass society.<sup>1</sup> As Stephen Wertheim’s essay shows, at the turn of the century, mass politics were already perceived by elites as a major problem to be managed. His most important finding is that in its early twentieth-century guise, ‘international public opinion’ was a top-down projection of values by those in power, not an independent external constraint on them. Vehement interwar disputes about decision-making concerned public policy within a national context, most

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).



famously the debate between the U.S. public intellectuals John Dewey and Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. These domestic and international domains of decision-making had come together in a calamitous cocktail during the July Crisis of 1914. Indeed, the Great War was the most catastrophic system failure that had ever been experienced; the resulting question in the interwar years was whether this breakdown should be blamed on the nationalism of the masses or the machinations of small unaccountable elites.

Decisionism therefore spanned the domestic and international arenas, and this continued in the decades after World War II. As the great essay by S.M. Amadae makes clear, Cold War game theory served a dual function, both “grounding nuclear deterrence and rethinking the intellectual bases of democratic governance and free markets” (75). Amadae shows that the upshot of the spread of game theory has been a particular view of governance in which subjects lack intention and elites can manipulate them by finagling with incentive structures. Indeed, an influential line of technocratic thinking shaped by behavioral economics focused on ‘nudging’ does precisely this. Shaping what these behavioral decisionists call the ‘choice architecture’ of the world has become even more important to modern consumption and social life due to enormous advances in computing power, machine learning, and self-improving algorithms. Together these techniques have been harnessed by major corporations to create a ‘surveillance capitalism’ in which individual user data has become a prime commodity, extracted by private actors who wield tremendous unaccountable power.<sup>2</sup>

But we should not confuse the discourse of technocrats and tech entrepreneurs trying to remake the world in their image with the world itself, which is very much marked by intentionality and the drive to render things intelligible—what David Kennedy calls “people pursuing projects.”<sup>3</sup> What would a more embedded history of decisionism look like? How would the discourse of interwar decisionist political and legal theory and the postwar decision sciences appear when we asked questions about the concrete effects of these ideas on policymaking and real-world outcomes?

Kari Palonen’s essay on Max Weber is exciting in this regard, not least because of the fact that Weber was himself a major participant in the parliamentary debates in imperial Germany whose functioning and electoral composition he so adeptly theorized. The German debate about whether to unleash unrestricted submarine warfare in 1916-1917 was one of major importance; the decision to do so brought the United States into World War I on the side of the Entente, defeating any chance that the Central Powers would have had of winning or surviving the war. Moreover, Weber understood clearly that the essence of politics as a decisional activity was the inevitable confrontation of political actors with the consequences of their actions. It was this realization which contributed to his prudential case for an ‘ethic of responsibility’ (*Verantwortungsethik*) as a guide to political action in modernity.<sup>4</sup> But Weber’s commitment to combining both qualitative and quantitative judgment was abandoned in the much drier rationalist social science of the mid-century.

That post-World War II transformation is the subject of Phil Mirowski’s illuminating essay on post-war decisionism. This chapter demonstrates how a very blinkered caricature of rational choice theory came to stand in for economists’ concern with rationality tout court—an intellectual-historical oddity, since most early twentieth-century economists cared more about utility and equilibrium than rationality to begin with. But Mirowski’s genealogy also questions the importance of the Cold War as an impetus to the decision sciences.

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<sup>2</sup> Shoshanna Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> David Kennedy, *A World of Struggle: How Power, Law, and Expertise Shape Global Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 56-58, 269-273.

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, eds., *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, [1919] 2004): 32-94.

The appeal of game theory and its adjacent decisionist theories is generally portrayed as an effect of the Cold War's symmetrical threat of nuclear warfare and its ultimate manifestation in mutually assured destruction (MAD). But this view, which Bessner and Guilhot describe as the "nuclearized international environment" of the postwar decades, actually takes as a description of reality what was in fact a theoretical presupposition of the still incipient field of nuclear theory in the 1950s and 1960s (11).

It would be foolish and irresponsible to downplay the moral urgency of the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of multiple states, two of which were locked in ideological struggle for several decades after 1947. But the catastrophist imagination of the decisionists should not hide the fact that nuclear capabilities were highly specific and unevenly distributed. Military and strategic reality was not quite what game-theoretical 'realism' made it out to be: a world of atomized individual states fighting for existential survival in an environment of profound epistemic opacity. For much of the 1950s the United States was in fact not in existential danger of nuclear attack—its nuclear predominance over the USSR, even after the latter developed hydrogen bombs in 1954, was overwhelming. What mattered was that the nuclear strategists *believed* that the threat of a surprise attack should be taken seriously, and that this allowed them to outline an entire landscape of difficult decisions that notional policymakers had to face in the course of an imminent nuclear war.

Even at high levels in the Eisenhower Administration, talk of a 'bomber gap' in the mid-to-late 1950s was understood to be an Air Force talking point to secure more funding, just like the 'missile gap' some years later was largely a rhetorical effort by the campaign by John F. Kennedy to discredit against President Dwight Eisenhower. Scholars of the Cuban Missile Crisis disagree on many things, and much remains unclear about the confrontation in October 1962. But it is clear that the United States possessed real nuclear predominance throughout the standoff, and that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev folded because, at some level, he recognized this.<sup>5</sup> In this context, decision-making was about how, and how hard, Washington should push from a position of strength, in the knowledge that the results could escape control and become catastrophic. This was no doubt a serious problem of judgment and negotiation, but as a condition it is rather different than the neat existential symmetry of MAD. As Amadae points out in her eye-opening essay, the actual policy stance of the United States has usually been Nuclear Utilization Targeting Selection (NUTS)—"the U.S. preparedness to engage in all levels of nuclear combat regardless of the risks of error, accident, cyber hacking, proliferation, and escalation" (183). The point is that during the Cold War, U.S. elites could project to their own population a certain understanding of how the world worked, and what its 'objective' constraints were, based on theories which misrepresented actual power distributions in the wider world. Though these ideas contributed to changing that world, at the operational level the value of decisionism was always limited by preparations for nuclear warfighting that would overwhelm the enemy. U.S. military hegemony was largely erased by the theoretical structure of post-war decisionism, which nonetheless depended on that large asymmetrical global power to attain its influence.

The overarching intellectual critique developed by the book—that decisionism is anti-democratic—is thus only one way to respond to the 'who decides?' problem. Another approach is to examine the different forms of decisionism as elite praxis at work in history, and to evaluate instances of successful stabilization and ruinous error as events that both express and influence decisionist theories. Some such episodes of embedded judgment are highly compressed periods of high-stakes decision-making like the July Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, while others involve moments of real political and intellectual openness, and were ended suddenly by a decision that selects one path forward and closes off others: the origins of the Cold War in

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 10:1 (1985): 137-163; "Commentary: New Light on the Cuban Missile Crisis?" *Diplomatic History* 14:2 (Spring 1990), 241-247. Surveying more recent scholarship, including declassified Soviet sources, in 2012, Sergey Radchenko notes that "new evidence has shown that Khrushchev had blinked even earlier than it seemed at the time." Radchenko, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Assessment of New, and Old, Russian Sources," *International Relations* 26:3 (2012): 327-343, here 339.

struggles among the Potsdam powers over the governance of Germany in 1947; or the dramatic way that the deflationary economic force of the Volcker Shock of 1980 ended the debate about what kind of new international and domestic political-economic arrangements were possible for both industrial and developing countries.

Bessner and Guillot finish their introduction with a plea to “move beyond the decisionist imagination”, which in their view has ‘excised from democracy one of its most fundamental purposes: the making of *collective* decisions” (19). It is precisely for this reason that it is useful to highlight the limits of decisionism as an elite practice. Showing how often basic decisionist assumptions, such as iron-clad rationality, inescapable incentive structures, and ethical vacuity clash with the real-world effects of policies inspired by them is an alternative way to reclaim from elites the right to collective decision-making. The systematic exclusion of the public from the power theorized by the decisionists is one issue. But perhaps it is equally powerful, and important, to show that elites often fail by their own lights, and precisely because of the simplified and erroneous theories of human conduct that they expound. By showing the limits of decisionism as a form of praxis, the authors clarify why certain ideas catch on among experts regardless of their explanatory or predictive value in relation to policy. It should not be surprising to find many cases where doctrines derive their popularity in part from the flattering role that they give to the dominant classes themselves.<sup>6</sup>

One possible outcome of focusing on praxis is that it revises ‘ideas-first’ approaches to major societal transformations in interesting ways. Sociologist Monica Prasad’s study of the interaction of ideology, politics, policy, and public opinion at the time of the Reagan Administration’s tax cuts in the 1980s is a powerful example of such work.<sup>7</sup> As she has argued, “careful reading of the tax-cut episode leads to the suspicion that no one is in control...Despite our councils of wise men and women, our razzle-dazzle technology, our impressive social coordination, we have very little understanding of the capitalist economic system that rules all of our lives, of what causes it to fail or to revive, or of how to control it, if it can be controlled. One almost wishes it were a conspiracy.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the most powerful way to rebuke decisionist hubris may be to show that in many historical events it is impossible to find a single clear moment and locus of decision-making on which everything hinges. ‘In the beginning was the deed’ is a nice origin story—and perhaps a necessary one—but it no longer captures how complex history has become in the thicket of modernity.

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<sup>6</sup> Nils Gilman, ‘Modernization Theory Never Dies,’ *History of Political Economy* 50:1 (2018): 133-151.

<sup>7</sup> Prasad shows that the Reagan tax cut of 1981, often held to be the moment that neoliberal economic policy arrived in the center of the American demos, began as an improvised experiment by Republican strategists to find ways of building an anti-New Deal political bloc. Tax cuts were a policy in search of an agenda rather than the means to implement some finely thought-out anti-statist ideological program. See Prasad, *Starving the Beast: Ronald Reagan and the Tax Cut Revolution* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Monica Prasad, “The Popular Origins of Neoliberalism in the Reagan Tax Cut of 1981,” *Journal of Policy History* 24:3 (2012), 351-383; 375-376.

### Authors' Response by Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot

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We are extremely grateful to the four reviewers for their generous reading of the volume we had the privilege to edit and to Jasmine Chorley Foster for her helpful introduction.

As all the reviewers point out, *The Decisionist Imagination* is the first attempt at mapping some—certainly not all—of the lineages that lead from interwar decisionism, which was centered on political decisions *tout court*, to a wide range of postwar social sciences in which decision-making figured prominently as a subject of methodological innovation. It is also an attempt to tease out the political implications of the translation, and in some cases transformation, of decisionism across time and space.

In doing this, as Emily Hauptmann correctly notes, we are “muting a contrast and stressing a continuity.” As in every such instance, the question becomes whether the contrast offsets the continuities to such an extent that the insistence on designating the various phenomena under scrutiny as “decisionism” engenders a deceptive *trompe-l'oeil*. Understandably, this question surfaces in several of the reviews gathered here. Simply put, the reviewers ask whether the decision sciences, with their equations, systems, and models, still bear enough of a resemblance to Schmittian political theory to identify a transwar sensibility we dub the “decisionist imagination.”

This is a thorny question. But to state our argument clearly: while we admit that decisionism changed—and changed substantially—over the course of the twentieth century, we maintain that its purpose of preserving an instance of sovereignty shielded from external oversight has remained constant throughout history. This idea—that for society to function, there must be a space for sovereign, unaccountable decisions—forms the core of the decisionist imagination and, we believe, a significant amount of post-World War II social science.

Hauptmann asks whether it is possible to specify better the pathways connecting decisionism to American social science beyond the case of émigré jurist Karl Loewenstein, who is analyzed in Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Ian Zuckerman's essay.<sup>1</sup> Following John Gunnell, she suggests in particular that a substantial contingent of European émigrés brought with them ideas that did not blend into the postwar social sciences. This is certainly the case for the intellectuals she mentions, such as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, who helped define the field of ‘political theory’ against so-called ‘political science.’ However, a number of other émigrés had a major impact on the latter, and among them figures such as Hans Morgenthau, Hans Speier, and Carl Friedrich—who are not covered in this volume but who we analyze extensively in our other scholarship—can definitely be associated with a decisionist approach to politics.<sup>2</sup> Speier, in particular, provides a stunning example, linking a rather conventional decisionism with methodological—and, interestingly, anti-scientific—innovations such as political gaming.

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<sup>1</sup> N.B.: Loewenstein did have and still has a major influence on judicial thinking about such issues as ‘militant Islam’ in the context of the European Court of Human Rights. See András Sajó, ed., *Militant Democracy* (Utrecht: Eleven International Publishing, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, “How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism,” *International Security* 40:2 (Fall 2015), 87-118; Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nicolas Guilhot and Alain Marciano, “Rational Choice as Neo-Decisionism: Decision-Making in Economics and Political Science After 1945,” in Uskali Mäki, Adrian Walsh, and Manuela Fernández Pinto, eds., *Scientific Imperialism: Exploring the Boundaries of Interdisciplinarity*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 117-139; Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

It is always difficult to trace the progress of a set of ideas as they circulate across oceans and decades. In the final analysis, it seems to us that determining intellectual continuities necessarily involves margins of error that preclude categorical conclusions.<sup>3</sup> More often than not, the best one can do is recover clues—telltale signs, citations, echoes, buzzwords (such as Judith Shklar’s description of systems analysis as a new form of “decisionism”<sup>4</sup>)—that imply underlying continuities. *The Decisionist Imagination* provides readers with a first, not a definitive, set of converging indications. However, as such indications increasingly reinforce each other, the burden of the argument shifts to the skeptic.

In their penetrating reviews, both Hunter Heyck and Nicholas Mulder ask how the decisionist imagination operated in practice. The question of the historical embeddedness of decision-making is an important one, so much so that, due to lack of space, we deliberately ignored it in *The Decisionist Imagination*. Nevertheless, we feel confident in affirming that the superior rational decision-making process that the postwar decision sciences purported to deliver never materialized in actual history. Rule-following never proved a conclusive method for actual political decisions, not least because the choice of the relevant set of rules was itself a decision unbound by rules. Moreover, as manifold histories of the Cold War have demonstrated, in real historical time decision-makers rarely abided by a prescribed set of processes and preferences.<sup>5</sup> As this suggests, the decision sciences did not generate better decisions nor did they transcend the need for ‘judgment’ in decision-making. Instead, the postwar social sciences obfuscated the points at which judgment intervened in decisional processes while devaluing it as a form of competence in favor of a techno-rational literacy.

Our focus on ideas, theories, and models rather than on actual decisions was further motivated by the fact that, as Heyck points out, the postwar social sciences were more interested in the formal characteristics of decisions than in who made them. Indeed, this concern helps explain the turn to system thinking that Heyck chronicled in his *Age of System*.<sup>6</sup> In other words, we agree with Heyck that the movement “from the chooser to the choice” is absolutely central to the story of social science after 1945, which is why our collection does not address at length the (assumed) racial, gender, and class identities of imagined choosers. Nevertheless, Heyck is correct to draw attention to these issues and their importance to the decision sciences. Historians of science, for example, have detailed how the tedious calculi required in the insurance industry were made by a largely female workforce before being entrusted to algorithmic devices, highlighting the centrality of a gendered division of labor to modern social science.<sup>7</sup> We look forward to future scholarship that analyzes how sublimated masculinist, racist, and classist ideologies informed the history of decisionism.

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<sup>3</sup> See the classic essay by Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 96-125.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Shklar, “Decisionism,” in Carl Friedrich, ed., *Rational Decision* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1964), 3-17.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Hunter Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer S. Light, “When Computers Were Women,” *Technology and Culture* 40:3 (July 1999): 455-483; Lorraine Daston, “Calculation and the Division of Labor, 1750-1950” (31<sup>st</sup> Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., 9 November 2017).

All four reviews discuss the relationship between the two forms of decisionism we identify: political decisionism, which concerns who sets the rules, and technical decisionism, which concerns how the rules are designed. One of the primary arguments in *The Decisionist Imagination* is that, in the western context, the decision sciences provided a technical language of rule-making that masked political decisions by locating their legitimacy not in the identity of a political subject but in the formal properties (“rationality”) of the decision itself. The design of technical systems and decision-making rules is not itself rule-governed (as Heyck notes), and for all practical purposes, a design decision is formally similar to a constitutional decision (it is an unaccountable decision about the structure and rules of decision-making). The postwar era, in fact, saw a number of political decisions parading as technical ones, as Nils Gilman reminds us in referencing Quinn Slobodian’s work on the neoliberal influence on European Union integration; one could make a similar argument about the waning influence of parliaments over foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> Put another way, the valorization of technical decisionism allowed properly political decisions to be kept in the hands of a supposedly meritocratic elite who justified their authority with reference to their technical expertise. As this suggests, the two forms of decisionism are intimately connected and scholars cannot understand one without the other.

The postwar emphasis on technical decisionism created a world in which it was increasingly difficult to assign decisions to identifiable persons or groups. As decisions became diluted within ever wider socio-technical networks, they became ever more mysterious, which engendered a search for the true movers of politics. After World War II, Karl Popper developed the notion of a “conspiracy theory of society” to designate the belief that everything that occurred was the result of decisions taken by hidden powers.<sup>9</sup> In the last several decades, conspiracy theories have focused in particular on two issue areas where decision-making has been handed over to technical elites or ‘constitutionalized’ at the supranational level: the economy—in which people fret over shadowy bankers, globalists, and George Soros—and international relations—in which people worry about Manchurian candidates, foreign meddling in elections, and new world orders.

In our own political moment, two decisionist phenomena—the hiving off of political decisions to nebulous and highly technical processes of ‘governance’ and the constitutionalization of prior yet opaque decisions—have impelled a transnational populist insurgency. This suggests that entrusting “enlightened” meritocrats with decision-making powers is not, as the émigrés who transmitted the decisionist imagination to the United States at midcentury imagined, the way to tame popular politics. Ironically, if the “sovereignist” movements disrupting traditional politics subscribe to all kinds of conspiracy theories, it is because they cannot imagine politics beyond the decisionist framework: everything is the result of a decision, and everything can be decided upon, always.

The recent right-wing resurgence, embodied in the victories of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orbán, and others, has encouraged some liberal intellectuals to reach straight for Carl Schmitt. On one hand, there are those who advocate a return to a political decisionism that would contain the masses; on the other, there are liberals who promote new technological fixes (or ‘nudges’) to shore up extant institutions, norms, and ideologies. Aware that the political authority associated with technical expertise is presently threatened, liberal thinkers have doubled-down on their commitment to decisionism. (Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* is a salient example of this position<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>8</sup> Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjecture and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1963), chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018). See the review by Nicolas Guilhot on H-Diplo: <https://hdiplo.org/to/CR1>.

Instead of embracing decisionism, however, what those of us troubled by the emergent right must do is abandon the decisionist imagination and its attendant mythologies of sovereignty altogether. The absolute political decision is a myth. Anyone who has worked in democratic politics knows that reaching a decision is the result of painstaking non-linear effort. The same person also knows that in a democracy there is something fundamentally wrong with separating the identity of the decider from the process of decision. Taking a decision on a given issue includes the ongoing construction of a political subject that comes into being through the decision process itself: decision, in other words, is subjectivation. Today, the most pressing issue is not to find new instantiations of sovereignty in mystifying identities such as ‘the people’ or to create new socio-technical systems; rather, we must establish venues of political participation where concrete processes of subjectivation can take place. The authoritarianism of Trump and his ilk will be defeated only if we participate in the rough-and-tumble of democratic politics and, through collective effort, organize novel political formations centered on the interests and will of the many and not the few.