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Collective Decision Making: Views from Social Choice and Game Theory,

(Milton Keynes: Springer, 2010, ISBN 978 3642028649, 266 pp., £90.00 hb.)

The study of decision-making processes lies at the heart of the social sciences, and political sciences in particular. From Montesquieu to Condorcet, from the federalists, to the elitist school, how decisions are taken was the leading question for scholars studying power and human societies in the past centuries. In the second half of the 20th century the seminal works of Kenneth J. Arrow (*Social Choice and Individual Values*, 1951) and Robert Dahl (*Who governs?*, 1961) revived this field, and still represent the two opposite paradigms about the study of decision-making – the logical-deductive and the empirical-inductive. This field then reached its apogee in the '70s and the '80s, where authors like Theodore Lowi and Charles Lindblom consolidated the field of public policy analysis, and, with it, the theoretical debate about actors, decisions and decisions' outcomes. In the '90s and in the new millennium, however, this kind of studies suddenly declined.

Since then political science has taken a different path: the current mainstream approach, in fact, sees structural factors and institutions as the core elements of the analysis, and this led in turn to a corresponding growth in the literature of econometric models based on regression analysis. As a consequence, the study of decision-making –which is also and foremost the study of the actual actors taking decisions– have been neglected and regarded as an ideographic exercise, whose validity is questionable: the predominance in the analysis of institutional determinants, imply the irrelevance of who is acting in a specific setting.

Game theorists and social choice theorists, though, continued studying the patterns of decision-making, with an approach directly derived from the economic reasoning, following the path trodden by Arrow. As a consequence utility-maximising players and their mutual interactions became the foundations of a vast literature centred on decisions. Still, the shift operated by these scholars from the classical approach to the study of decision-making is sharp.

First of all, the specificities of the actors involved tend to be overlooked in favour of more abstract, but clearly quantifiable, pay-offs. Second, the institutional rules governing the interaction are not a stake in the process, a core assumption of public policy analysis, but are exogenous to it. Third, the aim of this literature is highly normative, more than descriptive. Finally, accepting the premises of the economic analysis, these scholars adopt a logical-deductive approach, more than an empirical-inductive one. This results also in a predominantly formalized literature, where the logic-mathematic notations oust the thickness of descriptions. It is not questionable that game theory and social choice has given a priceless contribution to the social sciences, but the more formal and abstract it became the less transferable are its findings, since they lack an apparent and immediate link with empirical observations.



The book *Collective Decision Making* belongs to this latter stream of literature, and it consists of 16 different articles covering social choice and game theory. This contribution is a collection of papers written by members of the Social Choice Theory Group, a network of scholars, predominantly based in The Netherlands, founded by the mathematician Harrie de Swart (to whom the book is dedicated). The book is intended to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the formal creation of the Group.

The range of topic covered in the 16 chapters is impressive. Some chapters address the classical issues of social choice literature: the Arrow's Theorem is addressed in the first chapter, one of the most interesting in the book, while chapter two and five deal with the probabilities of having a Condorcet winner in different situations and chapter three covers an aspect of spatial voting studies. Other chapters deal with more recent, yet crucial for modern social sciences, topics: exceptionally fascinating are the discussion about networks in chapter 13 and 14. The former, in particular, is worth reading for all social scientists interested in network analysis. In fact, it is not only an extensive overview of the influence among actors in complex decision-making situations, but it also sets a number of future research plans. Chapter 11, *Voting Weights, Thresholds and Populations Size: Member State Representation in the Council of the European Union*, tries to link formal analysis and empirically observable situations in a specific setting, while the following chapter, *Stabilizing Power Sharing*, tries to give a highly abstract explanation of power sharing agreements adapting the mathematical explanation of duels. Virtually all other relevant topic of social choice literature about collective decision-making are covered in the remaining chapters. Yet, this is by no means a comprehensive book about the topic, as it is a patchwork of advanced discussions about these themes.

What can we say about this book? The first, general, annotation is that we hardly find a reason to publish such kind of books. In fact, as it is increasingly popular, the chapters of the book are loosely related one to the other. They are, indeed, very interesting and qualitatively outstanding, but they do not consist of different views about one topic, which would make the publication of an edited book more comprehensible: they simply cover different topic with a similar approach. In this case, the reason to publish this book is the tenth anniversary of the creation of a work group, as we have seen, but there is no compelling coherence in the contributions collected. In the end it looks like a journal, more than a book.

On the other hand, the content of the book is particularly interesting on two respects: first, the approach adopted links the elegance and thriftiness of logical-mathematical reasoning, to the richness of social sciences. Second, it studies the mechanisms of social interactions, an increasingly neglected field, which has been abandoned in favour of more simplistic causation relations, as we tried to underline in the first paragraphs of this review.

However, for social scientists the critical point of this approach lies in its strong formal nature: how much can we learn from this? Considering the premises, usually quite strict, of this literature, can we really use these studies to investigate social reality? Or, on the contrary, do we risk creating sterile logical-analytical exercises with no usable relation to empirical research? Of course, there is no single answer to these questions.

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