

# Setting the Stage for Disciplinary Transformations: the Case of the University of Rochester in the 1960s

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- The University of Rochester represents an interesting case study to investigate the role of the local dimension in developing a transformative approach in social sciences
- Rochester is perhaps mainly associated with the name of Political Scientist William H. Riker (1920-1993) and his establishing "Positive Political Theory, namely the study of political science through mathematical modelling, rational choice and game theory
- Riker reshaped the study of political science at Rochester to fulfil his theoretical ambitions
- In doing this he was favored by the presence of a well funded and ambitious academic environment, and an advanced and theory-driven economics department, headed by Lionel W. McKenzie (1919-2010)



- The closeness between the two departments was real, and according to scholars like Amadae (2003), the presence of such a theory driven department had a strong impact on Riker's ability to pursue his theoretical agenda
- Taking this influence for sure, however it could be too simplistic ("economic imperialism")
- By reconstructing the story of how Riker and McKenzie reshaped the departments they were called to chair, this paper aims to assess the kind of influence economics had on Riker's "Positive Political Theory"
- Then, one can appraise the significance of the "local dimension" in the history of science
- Two points neglected in this paper: 1) interdisciplinarity at Rochester does not limit to political science and economics, but also economics and history (Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman) 2) The strong connection of Rochester Economics and Chicago ("Freshwater Macroeconomics," in the 1970s and 1980s)

# The University of Rochester and its transformation

- The University of Rochester has been established in 1850 in Rochester (NY)
- However, it was only in the 1950s, thanks to the fundings provided by such companies as Kodak and Xerox (both based in Rochester), that the University administrators began a program to enhance the academic status of their institution
- For what concerns social sciences, the main transformations regarded the activities at the Department of Economics, and at the Department of Political Science
- The Department of Economics was established by splitting the Business School, and Lionel W. McKenzie was called to chair it in 1957. His task was to develop a first rate department, especially in Graduate Education



- With a similar task, Riker was hired in 1962. McKenzie recalled that he played a role in convincing Riker to accept such a position (cf. McKenzie, 2012)
- In 1962 the renowned Chicago statistician W. Allen Wallis became the chairman of the University. Wallis was very close to Chicago Economics (especially Milton Friedman and George Stigler), and was even part of the Mont Pèlerin Society
- In 1968 Wallis hired the law scholar Henry G. Manne to set up a Law School. Manne was particularly interested in "Law and Economics," but was unable to establish a Law School in Rochester, leaving in 1973 to accept a position in Miami (cf. Gindis, 2020)

# Riker and the transformation of Political Science: setting the "Positive Political Theory"

- The 1950s represented a period of ferment for American Political Science (the "Behavioral revolution." cf. Dahl, 1961; Adcock, 2009)
- Despite this, Rochester political science remained in the periphery of the most recent developments of the discipline
- Riker, shared many views with behavioralists, but at the same time, he pursued his personal theoretical agenda, which involved a solid commitment to formal analysis, economics as a "role model," and game theory. (cf. Riker, 1962)
- He came to Rochester in 1962 and remained there until his death in 1993

- Riker favored the development of a "formal, positive political theory," whereas "formal" means that the theory is to be expressed in algebraic terms, and "positive" is the opposite of "normative." (cf. Riker to Ralph Tyler, December 4, 1959, WHRP, Box 10)
- In order to do so, specific training in game theory, decision theory, quantitative methods, and math, was required and Riker reorganized the courses for a training in political science toward a more analytical approach (cf. UR 1967-8 undergraduate bulletin)
- However, the most important novelty of Riker's chairmanship was the establishment of a Graduate Program
- This started in 1963. The graduate education spanned from the most recent topics of formal political theory (as Arrow's Theorem, the Spatial models of voting, and Game Theory), but also entailed a more traditional education



- The Rochester Graduate program came to be identified in the late 1960s with its strong emphasis on mathematical political science and formal modeling and the student's undergraduate background that applied for it differed mainly from other political science programs.
- For example, among the graduate students, Kenneth Shepsle had a Major in math, as well as Richard D. McKelvey; Peter Ordeshook instead was an Engineer
- Other than Political Science training, Math education occupied a central role, and students were required, and encouraged to take courses in Math, in Statistics and Econometrics.
- In the late 1960s-early 1970s, thanks to Riker's effort, Rochester political science had faced a series of dramatic changes, up to become one of the cutting-edge places where to make political research in the US. (cf. Amadae & Bueno de Mesquita 1999)

- Lionel W. McKenzie was one of the main characters in the Postwar "going mathematical" turn of Economics (a well known story, see: cf. Weintraub, 2002; Düppe & Weintraub, 2014)
- In the 1950s McKenzie was a member of the Duke Faculty, and he had produced significant results in the theory of General Economic Equilibrium, and more in general, mathematical economics
- However, at Duke he maintained a peripheral role in the community of mathematical economists. At Rochester, instead, he had the opportunity to develop from near-to-zero an entire department, as well as a Graduate Program
- McKenzie hired such scholars like Ronald Jones, Richard Rosett, Sherwin Rosen, and Robert Fogel among the others (cf. McKenzie, 2012)

- McKenzie was a theoretician, but he favored the development of a strong empirical attitude in the department (think, for instance, to Robert Fogel's economic history works)
- Besides, McKenzie also gave to Rochester Economics a definite theoretical fashion, as different, for example, from Gerard Debreu's researches in Berkeley (cf. Düppe & Weintraub, 2014)
- The main difference was the focus on the economic relevance of mathematical results (cf. McKenzie, 1954; Mitra & Nishimura, 2009)

- The overlapping presence of Riker, with his reformist agenda, and McKenzie with his highly theoretical attitude, points to the connection between economics and Positive Political Theory
- In some works (e.g., Mirowski 2002; Amadae 2003; Erickson et al. 2015) the development of mathematical economics, game theory, and rational choice theory in the Postwar is linked with the political issues concerning the Cold War
- However, Riker's commitment to formal theory and game theory was fueled more by the author's aim to advance scientific understanding of politics, than other ideological motives (only in the 1970s Riker developed a fairly libertarian attitude)
- Then, what was, if any, the influence of McKenzie's department on Riker's project?

- The influence indeed in the methods and economics provided to Rochester political scientists, or at least some of them, with the highly refined mathematical notions and tools they were striving for
- The closeness between the two departments (and the two communities) was real. For example, Duncan Black came in 1963 as visiting, sharing his time between political science and economics.
- But there is no proof that McKenzie was convinced that highly mathematical economic theory
- Similarly, Riker's view of economics as a "role model" (cf. 1962) entailed game theory and not the General Economic Equilibrium theory. For what concerns GT, in the 1970s at Rochester arrived James W. Friedman. An economist, he helped people in political science department to get a proper training in the field (cf. Ordeshook, 2021)

# Conclusive remarks

- First, this paper presents a historical narrative of the development of two of the most outstanding research communities in American postwar social sciences, both located in the same place, namely the University of Rochester
- Second, I showed that despite the closeness between economics and political science at UR, the influence of McKenzie's economics on Riker's "formal political science", is more complicated. For sure it is not a case of economic imperialism
- A final point (neglected in this paper): how the community of scholars devoted to "formal political science" extended in the 1960s beyond Rochester (Public Choice, albeit with many differences; CMU, and in from the 1970s onward, Caltech)