

*Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays*, by **Thomas C. Schelling**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 360 pp. \$19.95 paperback. ISBN: 0-674-02567-9.

James A. Kitts  
Columbia University  
jak2190@columbia.edu

*Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays* presents a diverse collection of work by Nobel Laureate economist Thomas Schelling, whom the publisher safely calls “one of the four or five most important social scientists of the past fifty years.” The book includes articles, reports, and speeches, primarily from the last half of Schelling’s career.

The title essay consolidates four articles that Schelling wrote on commitment from 1978 to 2001. In Schelling’s game-theoretic usage, commitment means voluntarily binding oneself to a line of action by limiting one’s future choices. He notes that commitment is strategic; we bind our own behavior transparently in order to affect others’ expectations of us and ultimately their behavior toward us. For example, an advancing army may burn bridges after crossing (giving a credible signal to an opponent that they will not retreat) or a gunfighter may unilaterally disarm (giving a credible signal of conciliation).

Schelling applies commitment theory to the problem of anticipatory self-command, or constraining one’s future options in expectation of a lapse or change in preferences. For example, your ‘straight self’ may give your car keys to a friend to prevent your ‘wayward self’ from driving home after a party. As a former smoker, Schelling applies this model extensively to the problem of quitting smoking. As an economist, Schelling discusses the awkwardness of this multiple-self model for rational choice theory: Which values do we regard as authentic? How might a multifaceted self maximize her (or their) collective utility?

This collection includes numerous essays demonstrating Schelling’s engagement in policy arenas, principally in nuclear arms control and carbon abatement. Schelling’s work on the arms race follows from his classic work on threats and promises in *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960). Commitment is related to most other substantive problems in the volume, but there is little connective tissue to link the policy applications to the theory for inexpert readers. Those

interested in the Cold War, climate change, euthanasia, or addiction and recovery will appreciate the corresponding sections. Generalist sociologists may find the most food for thought in the section on models of social dynamics, although I strongly suggest beginning with Schelling's *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (1978), which gives a delightfully accessible introduction to the mathematical and theoretical foundations used in this section.

When presenting abstract concepts, Schelling barrages readers with anecdotes and toy illustrations or puzzles. As he introduces the dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecies (he prefers 'self-realizing expectations'), Schelling never defines the phenomenon but instead gives sixteen comic examples in a row. Rather than offer a comprehensive theory to account for interdependencies of expectations and behavior, he sketches some commonalities across subsets of examples, then challenges his readers (with a prize) to invent still more examples and to uncover the underlying social mechanisms of this phenomenon. His goals are transparently didactic and his audience could easily include undergraduate students as well as non-academics. Those of us who employ game theory or differential equations in our day jobs will not learn cutting-edge tools from this work, but we will enjoy sharing Schelling's indefatigable wit and intellectual curiosity with our students.

Many sociologists credit Schelling with inventing the 'tipping point' notion, where interdependence in choices by social actors leads to cascades of behaviors, such as 'white flight' dynamics in residential segregation. In "Some Fun, Thirty-Five Years Ago," Schelling tells why he chose this popular theory of segregation as a didactic puzzle for his undergraduates, applying it to a fantastic variety of substantive domains. Schelling introduces his 'spatial proximity model,' describing how he and his 12-year-old son played with copper and zinc pennies on a checkerboard to explore basic dynamics of mixing and sorting – among "whites and blacks, officers and enlisted men, students and faculty, teenagers and grownups" (p. 255) – that may emerge from social actors' preferences for interaction partners. They found a surprising variety of patterns in this toy model, and explored how these results depended on auxiliary assumptions. Schelling remains bemused as to why his "little simulation got so much attention after so many

years” (p. 251). Surely, this simplistic model exemplified the core lesson of his *Micromotives and Macrobbehavior*: Inferring individual preferences from collective behavior (and predicting collective behavior from individuals’ preferences) is perilous, due to interdependence of behavior among social actors.

Chapter 18 of this volume gives a richer analysis of Schelling’s ‘bounded neighborhood model’ than he was able to provide in his 1978 book. Here he illustratively refers to white and black people instead of pennies, but is still interested in basic dynamics of segregation by self-selection, not an empirical phenomenon of residence choice. In fact, residence in his model may represent occupying “a job, an office, a university, a church, a voting bloc, a club, a restaurant, or a hospital” (p. 284). He shows graphically that the relationship between tolerance levels of populations and system-level ‘tipping’ is highly contingent. Schelling again refrains from deriving empirical hypotheses, but enjoins students of segregation processes to give “explicit attention to the dynamic relationship between individual behavior and collective results” (p. 309).

Although only one of the essays was never published in any form, much of the reprinted material comes from obscure sources that would be difficult to find. This volume thus includes many treasures for fans of Schelling’s ideas and prose. Most readers will be attracted to chapters, rather than read the entire book, as the text does not appear as a coherent whole. Further, when several articles on related topics appear together, there is often redundant material from one chapter to the next. This design makes the chapters admirably self-contained, but I expect that an assiduous editor could consolidate the 19 chapters into a more coherent book that would invite reading from cover to cover.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- Schelling, Thomas C. 1960. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schelling, Thomas C. 1978. *Micromotives and Macrobbehavior*. New York, NY: Norton.