

BOOK REVIEW

THOMAS C. SCHELLING, *Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 342.

It is uncommon that an economist just awarded with the Nobel Prize in Economics collects a book of essays so reader-friendly and wide-ranging like this one. The first impression given to the reader is that during all his scientific career Thomas C. Schelling has been motivated more by the observation of life in the society as a whole than by the analysis of economic behaviour. Only three out of the nineteen papers chosen for this book are directly related to economics. The other essays give account of the many interests and activities the author has been involved with. From euthanasia to global warming, backsliding to racial segregation, screenplay to Vietnam War, Schelling wanders along a striking variety of topics by offering insightful and original perspectives. But the collection also gives evidence of how Schelling's pragmatic empiricism has always been applied with great cautiousness.

In this sense, the most enlightening part of the book is the section devoted to the issue of climate change. It documents Schelling's deep knowledge of facts and theories related to environmental policies but at the same time it raises more questions than answers. First, Schelling puts forward very openly his doubts on the efficacy of the actual policies coping with the global problem of the greenhouse effect. Then, he discusses pros and cons of geoengineering by pointing out the subtle diplomatic work needed to implement practical interventions. Finally, he claims that time discounting might not be an appropriate tool for the evaluation of environmental policies. In all these cases, Schelling does not draw sharp conclusions on the basis of the evidence discussed but he points out how complicated may be to apply general principles to the reorientation of actual policies.

This approach heavily depends on the fact that Schelling has been involved in the processes of policy formation for all his life. It is well known that he helped design U.S. policy on issues ranging from Cold War nuclear strategy to smoking prevention. Some other essays collected in the book illustrate very well his speculative attitude to these matters. Two examples may be enlightening. An outgrowth of the service as public counsellor was his collaboration with Stanley Kubrick on *Dr. Strangelove*, probably the most successful satirical movie on the Cold War period. In the prologue to the paper *Meteors, Mischief, and War* Schelling gives his version of the meeting with the English movie director. It was a consequence of Schelling's review of the Peter Bryant's book *Red Alert*, which attracted Kubrick's attention so as to inspire *Dr. Strangelove's* screenplay. In that review, Schelling remarked how easy the war might start: "If an accident, or a bit of mischief, or a false alarm, or a misunderstanding, can lead to war but not necessarily, what makes the difference, of anything, other than luck."

The second example is drawn by the book's last essay, which is devoted to the most "stunning achievement" of the last six decades: the non-use of nuclear weapons in warfare. Schelling attributes this result to the diffuse perception that "nuclear weapons once introduced into combat, could not, or probably would not, be contained, confined, limited." However, when confronted with the most recent nuclear menaces Schelling does not find anything better to refer to historical antecedents to reassure us: "as we look to North Korea, Iran, or others as potential wielders of nuclear weapons, we cannot be sure that they inherit this tradition any great force. But it is reassuring that in the same way we had no assurance that the leadership of the Soviet Union would inherit the same tradition or participate in cultivating that tradition. Not many of us in the 1950s would have thought that were the Soviet Union to engage in war, and lose a war, in Afghanistan it would behave there as if nuclear weapons did not exist."

The prudent pragmatism pointed out by pages like these is just another of the many facets of Schelling's style that remains to be fully appreciated. It also helps explain his peculiar position among

the economists awarded with the Nobel Prize. There is a recurrent question addressed to Schelling in any occasion he is interviewed, namely if he considers himself a dissenter from mainstream economics. Invariably, Schelling gives an open-ended answer. He starts by admitting that the rational approach to economics is a valuable one and then he acknowledges being interested at something different. A book like this confirms that Schelling has always been searching for the solutions to his doubts out of the consolidated truths of theoretical economics. This is probably the main reason for his self-description as an *errant economist*, who has chosen to turn aside from the search for abstract and clear-cut solutions to economic problems and to focus his attention toward empirical generalizations that can be guiding principles for all social scientists. For Schelling, the self-confidence of many contemporary economists to be "often in error but never in doubt" does not apply.