The Moment of Decision

Christian List: So today, I want to ask the question of whether history is indeterministic. So you can see, I'm a philosopher and decision theorist. I got carried away by thinking about this stimulating material, and so this is what I've come up with. So Chris Clark has given us a fascinating tour de force of moments of decision. And in particular, he suggested that the most consequential moments of decision are those that are decisive. They are inflection points that mark a new departure, milestones, interventions that inaugurate a new future and foreclose alternative futures. So if we think that there are such consequential moments of decision in history, this immediately raises the question of whether we should think of history as being indeterministic.

So we've already seen these decision trees. So the question is, should we think of history in its entirety as having the structure of such a tree where at various decision nodes, moments of decisions, things could go in different directions. And what does this then imply for this longstanding structure agency debate, the debate about the extent to which human behavior and social phenomena are attributable to structural forces versus individual choices. And my aim today is to explore some of these questions as they've been prompted by Chris's lectures. I want to begin just with very few remarks about agency and alternative possibilities, then turn to my main question of whether history is indeterministic and put it in somewhat sharper focus.

I'll talk about the significance of levels of description at which we are thinking about history, and then I'll return once more to our question and two moments of decision. So in my remarks on Monday, I argued that if historians don't just enumerate events or one thing after another, but seek to explain them or to make them intelligible, they engage in a form of intentional or hermeneutic explanation. And once they do this, they must assume that humans are agents who choose between alternative possibilities who face moments of decision. In fact, the picture of history in which human choices play a significant role also echoes an idea that we find in the philosophy of action.

And here, the influential work on the metaphysics of agency by Helen Steward is congenial. Steward argues that agency involves the settling of matters. So the idea is that by acting, I settle certain matters that were previously open. So for example, when I chose coffee over tea this morning, and this is just a very trivial case, I settled the fact that Christian was going to have coffee today rather than tea. I mean, fairly minor, but still I settled something that was previously still open. I thereby close off certain possibilities, as Steward puts it, where those possibilities were previously there, and after acting, settling them, they are no longer there.

And this is actually remarkably similar to the idea mentioned by Chris Clark that decisions can, and I quote him, inaugurate a new future and foreclose alternative futures. It's exactly the same idea, decisions settle matters in one way rather than another. Back to our question. Is history indeterministic? Now, in one sense, the answer seems to be yes because if history had no forks in the road, we could not literally say that there are moments of decision. I mean, then this would be just some metaphorical talk, but certainly not literally true. We couldn't literally say that there are inflection points or interventions, as Chris puts it, that inaugurate a new future and foreclose alternative futures.

I mean, for there to be an opportunity to foreclose alternative futures through deciding, there have to be these alternative futures in the first place, and that presupposes a form of indeterminism. So it does appear that historians, unlike, for example, classical physicists, must treat their object of study as indeterministic. But let's be a little bit more careful and precise. Let's ask, what does it even mean to say that history is indeterministic, or what would it mean to say, for that matter, that history is deterministic? Could I not still insist that structural forces sometimes push things inexorably in one direction rather than another?

I want to begin with some basic definitions, and rather than defining what it means for history to be deterministic or indeterministic, I want to give the relevant definitions in a simpler case, which is a little bit more tractable. So consider the system that scientists typically study, the solar system, or computational system, an ecosystem, the weather, the Earth's climate system, or the global economy. Any such system is in a particular state at each point in time, and then the state of the system evolves over time. Some trajectories of the system, or series of states across time are permitted by the laws governing the system, so it is assumed others not.

So some trajectories of the planets around the sun are permitted by the laws of physics while other trajectories aren't. Now, in the sciences, we would call such a system deterministic if at any time, its trajectory up to that point in time admits only one possible continuation under the laws governing the system. So in a deterministic system, the trajectories look like in this diagram. If you fix the state of the system at time one, for instance, and you have thereby fixed all the subsequent states of the system as well. So you'd never see any branching in these trajectories. By contrast, the system is called indeterministic.

If this is not the case, that would mean there are at least some points in time at which the system's trajectory up to that point admits two or more distinct possible continuation. So the indeterministic trajectories would look like in the second diagram. So basically trajectories where there are forks. And whenever there is a fork, when there is branching, and in principle, things could go in one direction or another. I mean, in the sciences, we very often study systems where it's randomness that pushes things in one direction rather than another. But of course, it could also be choices if we look at the decision theoretic version of this idea.

So the solar system, according to Newtonian mechanics, is a classic example of a deterministic system. Similarly, classical algorithmic computers are deterministic. Indeed Einstein thought that the universe as a whole was deterministic, as expressed by this famous quote, God does not play dice, Er würfelt nicht. By contrast, an ecosystem, the weather, the Earth's climate, the economy, those are usually modeled as stochastic systems, which are or at least which behaves as if they are indeterministic. So they seem to include some form of irreducible randomness, and you've got trajectories with this branching that I've shown. Now, with these definitions in place, it already becomes a little bit clearer what it might mean to say that history is indeterministic.

So here's what we could say. History, understood as a kind of macroscopic system, I mean, admittedly, quite a big macroscopic system, would count as deterministic if at any time, the course of events up to that time admits only one historically possible continuation into the future, while it would count as indeterministic if this is not the case, meaning that at least sometimes the course of events could indeed possibly continue in different possible ways, perhaps, again, with different probabilities associated with these different possible directions. Now, by highlighting the significance of moments of decision, Chris Clark appears to have given us an argument for viewing history as indeterministic and as being indeed subject to the contingencies of human choices.

So at first sight, it really looks like, we've got a case for indeterminism of history here. But as is also very well known, I mean, there are some views out there suggesting that at least in some sense, sometimes maybe not fully clearly defined sense, history is deterministic. So think of a radical, perhaps totally caricatured version of Marxist historical materialism, according to which history follows a determined path, namely, from something like primitive communism to a slave society to feudalism to capitalism, to socialism, and then to communism. I mean, this is, of course, a total caricature just for conceptual purposes here. Or think of a radical, again, completely caricatured version of geographical determinism, the radicalized toy version of Jared Diamond's view, defended in this famous book Guns, Germs, and Steel, according to which history is determined by geographical factors, not human choices.

Now, which picture is right? The agentive or the more structural one? Now, obviously, it would be preposterous for me to try to answer that question. I'm obviously not qualified to answer that

question, but I want to briefly sketch what is at stake in this debate and why the different views, the more agentive and the more structural, need not be totally incompatible with one another, why they can even coexist in a interesting way. And this takes us to the significance of levels of description. Now, when scientists or philosophers ask whether the world or a particular phenomenon that they study is deterministic or not, they often tacitly assume that this question has an answer that is independent of how we describe the world or how we describe the target phenomenon.

A good example comes from my own domain, it debates about free will, for instance, philosophers very often ask if there could be freewill, if the world is deterministic. And then some scholars say yes and others say no, I won't rehearse the arguments here because that's not our topic. But those debates often overlook the fact that the distinction between determinism and indeterminism cannot be drawn independently of the level of description that we use to think about the relevant system. So people always very often speak about whether or ask whether the world or the universe is deterministic or indeterministic as such without pinpointing the level of description at which they're asking this question.

Let me explain this point and why it matters. Now, clearly, we use different levels of description for different purposes of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and the social sciences, describe the objects of study at very different levels, different levels of brain using different concepts and categories that's very well known, and even within individual academic disciplines, at least broadly construed, we often find different levels of description. Cell biology operates at a different level than behavioral ecology, neuroscience at a different level than psychology, microeconomics, at a different level than macroeconomics. And it's well understood that we need different levels of description with different concepts and categories for making sense of different phenomena.

So far so good. But what is less widely recognized is that a system may behave deterministically at one level and indeterministically at another. That's because descriptions at different levels differ in the level of grain at which they represent the states of the system. And I'll try to explain this a bit more carefully now. Consider the Earth's atmosphere. At some very microscopic level, it obviously consists of gazillions of individual air molecules, which each have a particular position and momentum at any point in time. The state of the atmosphere at this very fine grained scale would be an extraordinarily fine grained vector of gazillions of numbers, of course, in practice, this is totally unobservable.

Now, at a microscopic level, we describe the atmosphere in much more coarse grained terms, for instance, by specifying average states for some grid of locations or by specifying certain macro variables like temperature, air pressure, humidity, and so on. Now, whether the systems trajectories look deterministic or not will depend on our descriptive lens. In particular, the micro trajectories may behave deterministically, as indeed they might if we were to think of individual molecules as following just the laws of classical mechanics. While the micro trajectories may behave indeterministically, very roughly speaking, if we zoom in, we may get determinism, if we zoom out, we may get indeterminism and the converse is also possible.

And I want to give you some toy illustrations of how deterministic micro level trajectories can give rise to indeterministic micro trajectories and vice versa. And these basically are just intended to provide a proof of concept and to illustrate the general point. So here's one scenario. Imagine a system whose micro level trajectories look like this, so dots are states in which the system can be, lines are than possible trajectory series of states that the system could take. We go from time one at the bottom to time six at the top, and you can see immediately if you fix the state of the system, the micro state of the system at time one, then you will affix the entire series of states.

So far so good, that's a deterministic system. Now let's re describes the system at a more microscopic coarse grained level by assuming that we zoom out such that whenever two or more distinct microstates that fall within the same cell in this rectangular grid become indistinguishable

at the macro level because of the lower resolution, the more coarse grained resolution, And then this is what we get. All of a sudden, we've got something that is very much indeterministic, namely, if we fix the macro state at any given point in time, two or more distinct macro trajectories can then subsequently follow from that macro state.

So this is the kind of case where if we zoom in, we see deterministic behavior, if we zoom out, we see indeterministic behavior. We can also have the converse. So here you've got a system which behaves indeterministically at a micro level. So you see if you fix the state at time one, for instance, you still have plenty of branching, so things could go in different ways. But if you once more cause grain by assuming we zoom out so that we can't distinguish between micro states that fall within the same cell in this grid. So we're operating at the zoomed out level of resolution, then we get these micro trajectories that look deterministic.

So the first scenario illustrated micro determinism with micro indeterminism, and this is the converse. So in the first scenario, the system sensitivity to how any given macro level state is realized at the micro level, gives rise to macro level branching, and we can think of this as a form of emergent indeterminism. In the second scenario, the indeterminism that we see at the micro level washes out or averages out, if you like, at the macro level, and we get a form of emergent determinism. It's important to recognize that both are possibilities, and this is a phenomenon that we find frequently in a whole variety of different sciences where we're dealing with different levels of description.

Now, critics might complain that if indeterminism or determinism are merely emergent, then they are somehow not real, just an epistemic illusion that stems from our informational limitations at the macro level. But I think such scenarios depict real patterns or features of reality whose recognition may matter explanatorily, and therefore, even from a scientific perspective, it's perfectly acceptable to take them at face value. So quickly back to history and moments of decision. Now, my analysis suggests that whether history should be understood as deterministic or indeterministic may be a matter of how much we zoom in or out. Without specifying the level of description, the question is actually ill-defined, ill-specified.

The question has no well defined answer. The question of whether history is indeterministic or deterministic becomes meaningful only relative to the level of grain level of description at which we are looking at history. It's entirely possible that if we focus on the individual actors participating in a particular historical episode, then we see many small scale forks in the road corresponding to their decisions. While if we then zoom out and look at things from a more microscopic perspective, we might see something like a deterministic trend. This would happen if the consequences of individual choices were to wash out in the grand scheme of things, much like the way in which the micro-indeterminism in my second scenario here washes out at the macro level.

In this sense, structural determinism is at least in principle compatible with agential level indeterminism. But it's also possible that we don't end up with a deterministic picture of history, even if we zoom out. It could be that some differences at the level of individual actions scale up and get amplified so as to support a form of large scale indeterminism. Indeed, Chris Clark says in his lectures that he's particularly interested in, I quote, those decisions whose consequences are amplified. It's exactly the same notion are amplified by the asymmetries of political power. Political power might actually be some kind of amplification device, amplification technology that makes it the case that micro-indeterminism ends up showing up also at a more microscopic level.

Indeed, this suggests that the most decisive moments of decision in history would be precisely those that continue to be visible in the historical trajectory, even if we zoom out a lot and look at things from a very coarse grained perspective. Proponents of a deterministic view would have to argue that there are very few, if any, such genuinely decisive decisions, while opponents of such a view would have to argue that there are at least some such decisive decisions, and I assume

Clark leans towards the latter view, but I'm interested. Finally, I just want to quickly illustrate the present points with the help of an example on which Chris Clark is actually much more qualified to comment than I am, namely the outbreak of World War I, but I'm particularly curious, therefore, to hear what he would say about this example in light of the present picture.

The conventional narrative that many of us, myself included, have learned in high school, is that the war was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro Hungarian throne. On the 28th of June 1914, he was killed in Sarajevo by a Bosnian Serb student named Gavrilo Princip, who was a member of a group campaigning for liberation from Austro-Hungarian rule. Now, by committing the murder, Princip clearly made a fateful choice. But the historical question is whether he thereby pushed history in one direction rather than another. Was this one of those decisive moments? Did he cause World War I in the sense that without the assassination, the war wouldn't have happened?

Now, these questions are not easy to answer. We all know that historical counterfactuals are notoriously difficult and controversial. But what is clear is this at some level of grain, we can be virtually certain that the events would have been at least slightly different if the assassination had not happened. For instance, the precise chain of diplomatic failures that unfolded in the aftermath of the killing, the July crisis wouldn't have happened in the exact same way. Maybe a different July crisis would have happened, but certainly not exactly the same sequence of events. The month of July 1914 would have been different without Princip's act.

At a fine grained level, we would have certainly had a somewhat different course of events. But this still leaves open whether at a more macroscopic level, if we coarse-grained and zoom out, World War I would have happened nonetheless. I think this question now has a semantic aspect and a substantive one. The semantic aspect is that even if there had still been a large scale war from 1914 onwards, it would have been somewhat different from the actual war. It would have been a different version of World War I, if you like, because it would have differed in some details. This raises the semantic question of whether we can still use the same name for it, World War I, because names, after all, are supposed to be rigid designators, which entail some claims of identity across different possible worlds.

But the substantive aspect is really the more interesting one, and that concerns whether a war of the same scale and violence would have happened. Now, it's sometimes said that Franz Ferdinand himself would have been a voice for peace, so perhaps the war might have been avoided or maybe there would have been a smaller, more regionally contained war. If this were so and I'm not in a good position to judge, then Princip's decision would have been an example of one of those hugely consequential ones. So the upshot is this, what emerges is a philosophical criterion for how historically decisive a decision is.

Here's the criterion. A decision is historically decisive to the extent that the fork in the road corresponding to it is preserved under coarse graining in our description of history. That is to the extent that it remains visible even if we zoom out. Now, of course, this is a purely philosophical criterion. In practice, given all the problems with counterfactuals, we can't fully know what the criterion would say about a particular case, but I think it's a useful heuristic for thinking about the issues. So in any case, the study of moments of decision, I think is so fascinating because it forces us to confront not just this intriguing relationship between contingency and necessity as a driver of events, but also the human role in it. Thank you.

Sophia Rosenfeld: I have no slides and nothing even remotely as elegant as that to present. But I will say that I think it says something about the interest level of Chris Clark's lectures that it's led me, too, to think largely about how do we write history? Not just do we write this history, but how do we write history? Because it does open up some rather large conceptual questions. One could call them methodological or one could really even call them philosophical, though I'm not a philosopher. Let me try to take on the historical questions, but from a slightly different vantage point.

Last night I mentioned what I took to be the importance of considering the sovereign's specific powers in a specific political context, as well as the importance of a broader decisional culture in determining but also constraining any kind of political decision making and also its performance. I'm not going to repeat any of that tonight. Tonight I'd like to consider something different. The use of decision science and its critics in the writing of history more generally, before turning to the other side of Professor Clark's power differential, which is to say, he mentions there's another side, the people who get acted on, but doesn't say much about their role in all of this.

But first about decision science. As Professor Clark made clear in his first lecture, research on how and when and why humans choose has been a central feature of 20th century social science. In particular, we pointed out during the Second World War and continuing into the Cold War, interdisciplinary teams of experts worked hard to rationalize the process by which decisions were made. You can think about this under the banner of operations research, decision science. All of this work that was really about making the business of choosing into an object of study and also something that could be potentially ameliorated with reason, often understood as utility maximization or self interest as really the gold standard.

This is a story that's by now quite well known and been well rehearsed by all of those terrific books on Cold War social science have given us a lot of this story. Clark also noted just in passing that as early as the 50s, social scientists were forced also to confront Herbert Simon's concept of bounded rationality and a series of other challenges to the idea of the rational actor. You have psychologists, anthropologists, political theorists, even some economists increasingly rejecting the idea that humans engage in an effective cost benefit analysis or risk assessment in every decision making scenario. This work eventually also extends into things like the critique of the idea of rational foreign policy, along with a voluminous literature critiquing rational choice theory more generally, both as a way of describing real humans behavior and as a form of modeling.

Indeed, as Clark pointed out, the nature and limits of the powers of decision making in various scenarios has been the subject of a number of very prestigious previous Tanner lectures, and that's simply because it's been so central to so many different disciplines in the social sciences and beyond. But what does this have to do with how history gets written? The answer generally is not much. Historians sometimes lament the fact that decision scientists, past and present don't seem to be very attentive or not attentive enough anyway, to external constraints from the situatedness of the individual actor in any given context to large structural forces, the kinds of things that sometimes seem deterministic and sometimes not.

The argument from historian's point is that there isn't enough sense of how these factors have changed over time or space, or what most historians would think of as really the stuff of history. From the perspective of historians, behavioral economists, for example, typically focus too much on what they take to be the psychological constants or what would have once been called the facts of human nature. But it's also necessary to point out that historians have not frequently taken up the work of social scientists who study choice making in the wake of Simon either. Historians have generally had very little to say in recent decades about how psychological factors, including things like trouble assessing options and odds, susceptibility of peer pressure, refusal to think long term, etc., have shaped decisions in the past, collectively or individually.

I think it must be said that historians in general have often failed to historicize the psychology of those they study, and that includes, importantly, their subjects assumptions about what we're doing when we choose things or decide things or judge or a variety of different kinds of mental activities. There are some exceptions to this. Abner offers the challenge of affluence, self control, and well being in the United States in Britain since 1950 is an excellent example, I think, of a historian making effective use of the work of behavioral economists in considering the history of postwar consumer behavior. There are some books out there where there's some meeting between the two.

There have also, of course, been figures who've arrived at conclusions about the intersection of particular forms of cognition and particular forms of political behavior independent of this literature. Hannah Aren is especially relevant here. Her famous account of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann's trial, for example, remains controversial, precisely, I think, because of her specific focus on the kind of thinking or what she really called unthinking that she claims made possible his decisions about the fate of the Jews. Offer and Arent are, though, themselves unusual figures. Clark might be called a welcome exception, too, I think, in trying to bring decision science to bear on thinking about the history of leadership in the highest echelons of politics.

Though, again, I wouldn't say that this is done particularly in the style of either Offer or Arent in a sense, this is carving a new opening here. But I'd like to suggest that we could go further. If not all leaders across time and space where Bismarck invested, whether in practice or theory in weighing the evidence and coming to the optimal conclusion from among the options available, even less should all people in the past be treated as proto liberal thinkers in this mode, regardless of the very different cultural conditions under which they live or lived or the very constraints they faced or still do.

Right now, though, those of you who read a lot of history, which is many people in this audience, I know, it might be said that the default position of most historians, even when it comes to those most limited in their options. Think of the way people write about the enslaved or the imprisoned, or the way people write about those seemingly living farthest from the conditions of our own lives. Say, there's a very interesting recent book on the Aztecs that takes up, why sacrifice, for instance, was a practice, why anybody would have acquiesced in it, why anybody would have engaged in it.

Interestingly, it seems to me that often those people, even in those extreme circumstances, are described almost in that Bismarckian fashion as if they were contemplating the options they had before them and picking which one is best. The reason is clear. History today is widely acknowledged "to be the study of people and the choices they make." That's the Princeton Guide to Historical Research's opening statement. That's what history is. Historians are loath to deem anyone in the past lacking in the agency and intellectual capacity associated with a rational weighing of distinct options. This it's not simply that, of course, we all act like we have free will.

Whether we do or don't, we certainly act as if we do. But beyond that, this is something more. It's the sense that we need people in the past to assume the decisional style that's most valued in our own moment and our own cultural milieu. It's by seeing all people, regardless of their circumstances as choosers and rational ones at that, that we imagine ourselves giving people their dignity and posterity. But just as Clark imagines both the great elector and Donald Trump operating outside the paradigms of rational choice theory when it comes to consequential decisions, and probably rightly, we should, I think, do so even more for their subjects, their constituents, and those with less power, whoever they might be.

Otherwise, we risk turning all people into, in a sense, proxies for ourselves. The great elector operated at a moment when thinking didn't regularly take this form as practice or ideal. Donald Trump is operating at a moment when he's consciously turned his back on this norm. Moreover, insofar as decision science has helped us see the role of the irrational, the perverse, the self-abnegating in a huge range often clashing values and aims, not to mention the fact that most of the time, most of us are passive in the face of choice and even anxious about it. If we see those as also constraining factors in history, I think we can start to explore the mental processes of past actors and how they take on meaning and value in different contexts in different ways across time and space, in ways that help us, I think, avoid making all of our subjects into, I'll call them proto-Bismarck.

I would have said something like rational actors, but I'm going to use the description we got yesterday. Why does this matter? I just want to say this in conclusion, and then I'd like to hear

more about other people's responses to this. But I think for one, it would make our history less distorted. But even more, it might get us out of thinking that the only way to imagine freedom and autonomy is by thinking of freedom as identical to freedom of choice. In that regard, Professor Clark's lectures strike me as a step in the right direction. Thank you. [Applause]. Stephen Kotkin: Unusually, I've been asked to speak again, even though I spoke yesterday, and we haven't really heard much from the audience.

Yesterday, if you were here, you heard that I spoke about several things. I just want to say that when someone gives a series of lectures or writes a book or an article, as a commentator, you must refrain from telling them to write a different book or a different article, the one that you might write. Instead, you have to work within their task that they've set themselves. I tried to do that yesterday, and I spoke five things, the scope of the argument, what is the scope of the claims that the argument is making? I mentioned that there's no Chinese cases, for example.

Not because I wanted him to include them, that's up to him what to include or not include. But I just wanted to understand the scope of his claims. I also spoke about selection. He chooses certain leaders or examples, certain cases, but he doesn't explain those choices. Again, those are his choices to make. I don't advise him on what choices to make, but I'd like to know why he chose those and didn't choose others. Then I had a subset question on this about decisions that don't happen, what could have happened or should have happened because he's choosing decisions that do happen.

Then I talked a little bit about theater of power, and then I talked a little bit the fourth point about the Wizard of Oz, the awareness of people in power that know it's a fake. Then the fifth point was the Rubik's cube with no solution. Today, I'll talk about those things I didn't talk about last night but mentioned, if that's okay. One was this Ian Lustick argument from 1996. Lustick a political scientist who was interested in history made the point that if you're going to generalize in international relations theory about war, how war starts, how wars go, how wars are settled, you're choosing historical cases.

But those historical cases are not settled. There are different accounts of the wars, and the accounts they diverge. For him, this was a selection bias problem. Why are you choosing Christopher Clark's account of World War I when you're generalizing about how wars begin? Why don't you choose Otte's account of the July or whatever it might be? This is a selection bias question in Lustick's article. But it's actually not a selection bias question. It's the problem that history, which is the study of change fundamentally changes itself. Because before Christopher Clark's intervention on World War I, we might have had a certain view on World War I, and his intervention could potentially change that view of World War I.

The war has happened, it's over. But the history of the war itself is not over. It's a continual process. Even if you are scrupulous in your selection of the historical record. You're really careful to select "only the best scholarship, which has the preponderance of evidence on its side" that body of knowledge is subject to change time and time again. If you're talking about decisions as opposed to some other social science topic, and we can mention any topic we might be interested in social science generalization. If you're talking about decisions, the body of work that you're choosing, which in his case was the Great Elector.

It was Frederick II, it was Hitler, it was Uncle Merkel, it was Trump, there is not agreement among well-intentioned, scrupulous people about those bodies of knowledge that he's relying on. Of course, he trusts himself on those questions, and he's written about those particular incidents in some cases. But why should I trust the choices he's made to form the basis of his generalizations, of the general patterns that he's seeking to make when I have other choices I could make for the historical body of knowledge. I raised this as a question for him. Whether it's soluble or not would be up to him.

This is 30 years ago now, Lustick raising this awareness, self-consciousness of how social science is based upon a changing or a disputed body of knowledge. The second thing I'll mention, which I didn't talk about last night, is whether decisions inaugurate new futures and foreclose alternative futures. This was a point raised in the comment tonight by Christian List. Do they appear in the moment to do that, when, in fact, they're overrun by longer-term trends, structural forces, but also by decisions that others make? You think you've made a consequential decision, but someone else is turning the Rubik's cube on you without you being able to control that.

It's not only structural forces that can overrun or wash out your decision, it's someone else's decision. Anyway, I think this is also a profound and challenging problem for the series of tasks that Regis Clark has set himself. Again, not something that I'm asking him to do instead. And I'm not sure where he's going to go with this, but I'd like to hear that because, again, there are some decisions that seem highly consequential that in the fullness of time, clearly have become less so in our understanding of them. But then there are some which look really big. For example, the decision to collectivize agriculture in 1928 across Eurasia, 11 time zones.

The upheaval is just massive. I'm not sure that that decision washes out over time. I'm not sure that that's a deterministic problem. I could argue the case that it might have been deterministic, but I would not argue it with sufficient conviction. How many such decisions like that could we collectively come up with? Truman's decision to use the bomb against Japan. There was actually no decision. He actually never made a decision that we have tremendous historiography by really good people that Truman never made a decision to use the bomb. It looks extremely consequential. It doesn't look deterministic from structural forces, but it wasn't a decision that Truman made.

It's quite an interesting different type of case. Anyway, I could endlessly go on, as everyone on this panel could about those decisions which they think actually don't wash out. But the Truman case on the bomb is one of my favorite since there was no decision. It was highly consequential but not determined by the usual larger structural forces. Finally, third point that I didn't talk about that I'd like to raise, which we discussed very briefly at dinner last night in the Wolfsschanze. Tremendous fantastic restaurant, by the way. It used to be Bay Wolf when I lived in Rockridge many, many years ago. The Bay Wolf.

Speaker 1: The Bay. Stephen Kotkin: Anyway, but the food was tremendous. We talked about this a little bit, so I bring it to your attention, which is that he started with this problematic of decisive decisions, and then he began to entertain us with discussions of the nature of the state and of personalism versus bureaucratism, and I could go on. We ended up with two different series of questions that had a partial overlap, but not a full overlap. Is he talking about decisions, or is he talking about the nature of organizing decisions or the nature of power in particular circumstances that he's chosen as his cases?

We talked a little bit about whether the Trump example was appropriate, and those kinds of things. I should say that this is another consequential moment of the three that I'm mentioning tonight, the one about history itself changing, and that being the body of knowledge that we rely on, the one about decisions that wash out or don't wash out, including things that are not really decisions, and now this one about the nature of the organization of power, the pathologies of large organizations, the pathologies of multiple actors involved, the principal agent problem. I raised this issue in part because we think we know more about this than we do.

This may look like a digression, but allow me to end with this. Pauline Kael, a person who would be heroic and with an audience like this, [Laughter] a person of high standing and reputation. She was in her office and someone came by and said, "Pauline, Nixon won the election." She was shocked, and she said, "That's impossible. I don't know a single person who voted for Nixon." [Laughter] That was as true a statement as she ever issued in all of her years of being the film critic at The New Yorker. I raised that because there are certain political views at play

here in the nature of the state, the contemporary discussion of populism, which is just tremendously disappointing, and all sorts of other things that I could name.

People think of Roosevelt as some type of heroic president compared to Trump, of course. But Roosevelt hated process. He hated expertise, he hated the bureaucracy. He cut the State Department out of decisions. He had no National Security Council to take down. He didn't have one at all and I could go on. But in the imperial presidency literature, Roosevelt is generally not taken to task for being an imperial president, even though he is the gold standard of the imperial presidency problem in the US. Again, by the way, I'm not a member of any political party, and this is not a partisan discussion.

I'm just pointing out that this third problem is also a deep one because we have political allegiances that we're not always fully conscious of when we're discussing things like state power, pathologies of giant organizations, the various different actors, etc. The centers of power on the Trump administration are mostly invisible to people because it's the Treasury Department, which is a huge center of power of very high competence. If you meet them as I have, they're stunning in what they know and what they're doing and just how much expertise they have, and it's a better level than the ones I met from the previous administration, just as an example.

The CIA, for example, has only two political appointees in the entire gigantic organization, which is not well known to people, the director and the deputy director. Otherwise, every single person his career. The military has undergone purges, and yet it has demonstrated its ability, certainly in the tactical sense, to implement just really difficult operations at huge scale in short periods of time. That's also in this administration. Then I could go on. The energy department, which runs all our national labs is also a high level of competence in the current administration. I'm not saying this because I'm advocating for the current administration.

I'm actually not that well disposed towards sloppulism, so I prefer integrity. I prefer competence. I prefer lots of things as a voter, but you can't get them in America. But anyway, I raise these because when we're talking about the state, bureaucracy, personalities, personalism, we're actually veering sometimes into a discussion about political allegiances, even if we're scrupulous scholars and self conscious about this. I saw this happen in these sessions, and I'm guilty of it sometimes myself, so I'm self conscious of it, and this is not an accusation. Again, this is an observation that I think we all need to abide by.

But anyway, it was thrilling to be a participant, to be brought down this road with Regius Clark, and I look forward to seeing the further iterations of this really interesting project. Thank you. [Applause] Christopher Clark: I'm going to begin by trying in a rather transparent way to sue for your sympathy because I've been thinking last night and this morning about my responses to what's happened to what's been said, and so on. Then today, there have been new impulses and prompts and so on and now lots of different thoughts and responses are swimming around in my head, so I'm under cognitive and decisional strain in trying to resolve in which order I should discuss these things and how I should connect them all up.

I'm going to stick loosely to what I'd come up with it just before I went off to have lunch. But I'm going to try and feed in thoughts that I've been having this afternoon rather, listening to what my fantastic colleagues have been saying, but I wanted to start by saying what a fabulous experience this has been, and it does demonstrate the more you put in and the more quality you put into a process like this, especially in the form of the commentating colleagues, the more you get back out of it. What emerged from our discussions, it seems to me, is the nodal quality of the concept of decision.

It branches out in every direction. It connects with many issues of importance. By the way, this is the first time I've ever used a diagram of this kind. I've been inspired by the proximity of the decision to social science, so I'm way outside my comfort zone, but I'm doing what I can. Over the last two days, we've noticed that decision or decision making, thinking about decision

making. This is a point that Sophie made or Sophia made. We've noticed that thinking about decisions makes us think about what we are doing as historians. So deeply is the idea of the decision woven into what we do as historians, especially when what we're doing generating or crafting a narrative of some kind, and there's the circle at the top, because narratives seem to need decisions.

We've noted, as Christian List pointed out, the centrality of decisions to narrative structures and a gentle reasoning more generally. If we want to construct stories with agents in them, then they will have to demonstrate their agency by decisive behavior in one sense or another. Narratives of the kind we find useful and nourishing as modern people may need to be organized around or even towards decisions of one kind or another. The Indian writer Amitav Ghosh made the interesting point in a book called The Great Derangement. He said that this need for human gentle decision making makes it very difficult for us to absorb things like climatic change, catastrophic shifts, which are not human or human generated, even though climate change is, of course, at least partly human caused.

But nevertheless, he says that this dependency on decisions and on the idea of individual agents choosing one future over another simply make us unable to absorb these kinds of non human driven processes and explain why natural disasters are so rare in canonical fictional works, for example. They are very rare in fiction. There are obviously some exceptions, and one of my favorites is the Makioka Sisters, which has a huge flood, Japanese flood. But nevertheless, for the most part, natural disasters are rare. He says that that's something that impedes our ability to respond to those kinds of processes. Decisions may also be, in a psychological sense, the places that allow us imaginatively to inhabit the narratives that we consume, because we can think when we look at what an agent is doing in the past or in the present, I would have done that differently.

We can put ourselves into the story in an activist way at those nodal moments of decision. There was a time, of course, where it was fashionable also to think of decisiveness in a larger historiographical sense. There were lots of books in the 19th century with the title Decisive Battles about battles that change the direction of history. We've been thinking with, and that's the historiography decisive battle bubble, and we've thought with Sophia Rosenfeld about the relationships between deciding and choosing. Choosing reminds us that the political decision is one rather peculiar instance of a behavior that is ambient and essential to our existence as social beings.

In her book, The Age of Choice, Sophie argued that the conflation of freedom with choice is a relatively recent invention and that there have been other ways of conceptualizing freedom. Iran, for example, the idea of the pursuit of the good. Some of these versions we might even consider reactivating as a corrective to our overemphasis on choice. In this connection, it's worth noting that the freedom of the ordinary choice maker and the freedom of the political decision maker are or at least can be very different things, and not just because people in positions of political power can, in theory make choices with consequences of a kind that subaltern people or just ordinary people cannot, but also because when you're in a position of responsibility, decisions have a different quality or behaviors of different quality.

I'm thinking here of Wilhelm II, for example, the last Kaiser of Germany, who would often make very scandalous announcements in speeches and so on, and then would be absolutely brutally dubbed by the press. When this happened, he would have a nervous breakdown. He would say, how is it possible that I'm the only citizen of this empire who doesn't have freedom of speech? They would say to him, no, but Your Majesty, freedom of speech is different. If you're the sovereign, you don't have that freedom. You have other freedoms to act, but not the freedom of speech. Your utterance is too consequential for the idea of the freedom of speech to be invoked in your case.

Then there was the question raised today about how we think about those who don't or can't choose. A lot of the time people are not choosing, and even political actors are playing to a kind of script. That was a point that, I think Stephen was making. There was also the contrary point, which is made, I think, by Sophia, that when we examine the situation of subalterns, one way in which historians respond to subaltern personalities, historiographically, is to assign to them a decision making or choosing power that it might not seem that they had. I'm thinking here, for example, of James C. Scott's book, the Weapons of the Weak, or of a study of 19th century sex workers in Leipzig by Victoria Harris.

She argued that women who were caught up in the sex trade in 19th century Leipzig were actually making choices. They were gentle decision makers who entered into the trade of prostitution and exited from it again, and that this was part of a strategy which belonged to a particular life course. They weren't, in other words, simply disempowered victims. There are two different ways of thinking about the powerless. One is to deplore their powerlessness, and the other is to discover that actually they do have a certain discretion and power. These things push in different directions, even though they may be motivated by the same emotional response.

Christian List reminded us of the fraught relationship between the imputed free will of actors, political or otherwise, and the apparently determined character of change. That's free will agency versus structure in the systems that we call chemical, biological, or physical, and he proposes an elegant way of overleaping that impasse. The two levels he proposes seem to me to offer themselves in quite different forms. The first is categorical, and the other is focal. First has to do with what we think the units of analysis, what we call them. Do we call them atoms, for example, or molecular systems or chemical systems, or do we call them persons?

That's a categorical difference. But there's also the idea of the focal length. How far back do we pull the Zoom length? Are we all individuals in this room, or are we a sociological phenomenon? The named lecture, the academic conference, the workshop? I think here about a remark made in the preface to virtual history, Niall Ferguson's book, which reflects on those moments, those paths not taken in history, what might have been different if a different path had been taken. In that preface, he reflects on how he met his first wife. He says, if it hadn't rained on such and such a night and I hadn't decided not to drive through Oxfordshire to a particular destination, but to drive to another one, then I wouldn't have met my wife and my entire life would have been different.

But then I remember reading this thinking, well, at one level of resolution, that argument makes a lot of sense. If you situate yourself inside Niall and you're moving through the world, a Niall shaped agent, that makes a lot of sense. But if you pull back and look at who Niall and his wife were, because they're not married anymore, but they're both journalists or journalistically active. Niall was very active as a journalist as a young academic, as he has remained. She was, too. They were both part of the network around Max Hastings and the Times. In other words, they moved in the same circles.

In a way, sociologically speaking, the system they were part of was forcing them together. It didn't matter whether it rained or not. In the end, they were going to bump into each other. This connects with the question raised about World War I by Christian List, and I recall in that case, what would have been different if Gavrilo Princip hadn't fired bullet or if he'd missed or whatever, if like all the other because there are plenty of other assassins. There were six other assassins in the city that day, and three or four of them meant, one through his bomb, Čabrinović, his bomb, but it went off harmlessly, not killing anyone.

A couple of the others lost their nerve and tried to hide their bombs and guns and so on. It could have gone very differently. But Rebecca West, writing about the outbreak of the First World War, she conceptualized this in a very interesting way. She said, look, there's no point in speculating about this. The fact is that the corpulent body of the heir apparent of Franz Ferdinand was a magnet, and it was placed in the city of Sarajevo and it was going to suck those bullets out of

someone's gun, one way or another. The reluctant bullets were sucked into the belly of the Archduke or the neck or whatever it was, his chest, actually.

His neck, in fact, and that of his wife. There's this curious turn of phrase we have, an accident waiting to happen, something which seems accidental, but somehow the odds are stacked up to make this outcome anything but surprising. It is about which categories we deploy when we're trying to make sense of these things and how far back we pull the Zoom lens. The political decision as a distinct species of decision making also turns out to be complex in the questions it throws up. Stephen Kotkin drew our attention to the theatrical and performative dimension of decision making and we came back to that today when he discussed the possibility that decision making, we talked about this yesterday as well, can be highly theatrical and performative, but that also raises questions about its effectuality, its consequentiality.

It may well be that when we contemplate the Trump administration, the current administration in the United States, for example, that amidst all the theater and the emotional effects generated by that, we miss continuities, structural continuities in which the impacts of the behavior of particular individuals within that administration might be much less apparent. It could be that when we move through this moment and beyond it, and we look back on it, they will seem much less consequential, much more evanescent, to borrow a word that he used yesterday than they seem to be today. Then another point. Deciding is a particular form of behavior.

It's only one of the many things that politicians do, and it's very difficult, in some cases, to distinguish between deciding behavior and signaling or communicative behavior. Decisions, and that's, I think, particularly the case in the current administration, but it's also in the United States, but it's the case in all, in particular, modern democracies, in all administrations, that it's often very difficult to say what is a decision and what is an act of communication or a signal to the political base or to the public in general, or whatever. That, of course, connects in turn with questions about when decisions are effectual and when they are not.

Some decisions have deep structural impacts, others do not for all kinds of reasons. That, I must say, was not my central subject matter. What I wanted to talk about, and I realize I may have at various points allowed the focus to drift a little, but what I really was interested in was the question of, and this in a way is an answer also to Stephen's point about how mobile historiography is and how the reputation of particular actors as very powerful and consequential or not shifts over time. Everything is mobile, everything is in flux. But in any case, my idea was, rather than asking how consequential was what the Great Elector did or Bismarck or Hitler or other people, it seemed to me interesting to ask, what did they think they were doing?

What was decision making supposed to be? Answering that question might mean, and this is why I brought in a few points about the relationship with institutional structures, it might express itself. Your thinking about what a decision is will express itself partly in what you say about your decisions, but it may also express itself in how you make your decisions. Who do you seek advice from? Do you take advice at all, and from whom? Are these groups that you take advice from, are they established institutions that you've inherited from your predecessors, or are they something that is newly emerged in your own time in office?

These are all important questions. But it seems to me that was my central focus. The question that poses itself for me now, although I can't answer it is, should I perhaps, obviously, we're supposed to turn this into a book, might it be worth thinking about making space for these other questions about consequentiality and about the structures around which Sophie also raised, the question about how the structures around decision making change from one moment to another. Sophie Rosenfeld reminded us that the behavior of decision makers is embedded in broader patterns of behavior, in ambient decisional cultures. Of course, I think it may well be worth looking at these as well.

Does the decisional culture of the current administration in the United States correspond to a broader cultural moment? I'm not competent at the moment to answer that question, but it seems highly likely that it does. But how should we make that claim in a robust and evidence-based way? Then there's the question of how decisions are made of the institutional structures that generate them either by filtering the information available to the decision makers or by supplying political advice or so called neutral competence. By the way, it's interesting what Stephen said about Roosevelt because we talked about Roosevelt briefly last night, I went online and looked at the recent literature on Roosevelt's decision-making and found that actually there is quite a difference of opinion about Roosevelt's relationship with neutral competence.

As it's called in parts of the decision-making literature, and that the Bureau of what's called the BoB, the Bureau of the Budget, his relationship with the Bureau of the Budget exhibits a very deep willingness to depend on neutral competence by seasoned experts. Presumably the relationship differs from one section of the apparatus to another, which is also the point you were making about the current Trump administration, which I thought was a brilliant and important point. Finally, we thought a lot over these few days about, it seems to me, this was one of the themes that was floating around in Christian's Sophia's and also Stephen's comments around the question of complexity.

Stephen used the metaphor of the Rubik's Cube, and he's very kindly given me a Rubik's Cube. I was planning to solve because, of course, I can. I could just solve it while I'm talking to you, but I thought that would be showing off, so I'm not going to. But in any case, it was Clausewitz who captured, who placed this idea of complexity and nonlinearity right at the heart of his understanding of warfare. But there's an interesting story to be told about how his understanding of complexity migrated from warfare to politics. Clausewitz is the one who turns complexity into the thing that you should be thinking about.

But there's a genealogy which takes us from that moment through to Moltke Elder or to Bismarck, where the Clausewitz understanding of complexity and opacity becomes part of what people think politics is and what it's like to make decisions under political conditions. Of course, they also filter through into ambient cultural effects, and one example would be Tolstoy. Tolstoy read Clausewitz, and Tolstoy's reading Clausewitz deeply informs his account of the war, in particular, the campaign of 1812 and his descriptions, the famous description where Pierre Bezukhov stumbles onto the battlefield and has no idea where anything is. He sees some men marching, but it turns out they're marching backwards, or at least so it seems to him.

What's interesting about Clausewitz is his insistence on an immersed perspective. You think of the moment in the book, it's a chapter called, it's quite a short chapter, most of the chapters are only a page and a half or a few pages long, and it's called On Danger In Warfare. In this chapter, for the first time and the only time in the whole book, Clausewitz addresses the reader with the personal pronoun. It's do. It's the intimate do. He says, You are an officer. You have to make your way to the command post overlooking the battlefield. He describes your experience. As you get closer and closer, the noise gets louder and louder.

You feel these vibrations in your guts. But as you get closer to where the commander and his staff officers are standing near a tree, you see that everybody is behaving oddly. Nobody is behaving the way they normally do. A man famed for his courage is standing behind a tree like this and checking some maps. All oddities are happening, and he says, You realize the air has a different color. It's as if it's being filtered through some glass, some colored glass. He says, You also understand that the logic and reasoning that apply in your usual life simply will not work here.

They are not in operation in this space. It's an absolutely gripping piece of writing, an amazing piece of writing by Clausewitz. He goes on to say, There is no way to understand war except from this immersed perspective. He takes you, incidentally, beyond that place on the top of a hill down towards the front line because the instruction you get is to take a message right down to

one of the commanders on the front. He said, As you get nearer to the front, you see men disemboweled, amputated limbs, horses screaming with agony. He says, the anguish and the suffering would destroy your soul if you could not inure yourselves to it.

It's an incredibly powerful invocation of how difficult it is to think when you're in the middle of something. He compares those theorists of war of the 18th century, who are very numerous, who wrote about war in a non-immersive way as if it was a form of geometry. He says, These people are like swimming teachers who've never learned to swim and they ask their pupils to lie on a bench and to make this motion like this and he says, Now, you should be fine. The class is over. He says, of course, that will never work. Clausewitz's war was competitive, adversarial, multipolar.

It resembled commerce and statesmanship, but what set it apart from those things was the extreme peril and danger of the space that its practitioners had to traverse. He knew that war was more than just disorder and chaos, but there's nothing in his account of it to boost the confidence of the would be warlord or to suggest that by making brilliant decisions, you could make good things happen. On the contrary, he says the moment when the coup d'oeil, the moment of insight, could produce a brilliant decision by a warlord, those days are over. You're too deep inside the beast to be able to make those decisions.

It makes sense that on war, never published in his lifetime. It was never finished either. It remained a miscellany of notes and fragmentary observations until when he died in 1831, and it's his wife, the brilliant Marie von Bruhl , who turned it into, who gave it a certain coherence, though it's still not an especially coherent work, but she gave it as much coherence as it possesses through her editing of the text and her preparations for publication. Well, decision makers, too, are totally immersed, and in the kitchen where decisions are made, emotions ride higher. It is a battlefield. You are fighting on many fronts at once.

Anybody who observes Keir Starmer in the UK at the moment can see what that looks like from a distance. It's cognitive overload, it's stress, aggression, and distress. I thought I noticed when I was sort of looking around last night at the decision literature on the current Trump administration, I found something absolutely bizarre, which I wanted to share with you. It's this article here, multimodal AI-based visualization of strategic leaders emotional dynamics, a deep behavioral analysis of Trump's trade war discourse. This is just to give you a sense of what's going on in some branches of decision science. It goes on. There's an emotional cycle mapping model of Trump's emotional cycle.

Of course, when it surges to the top, that's when the Chinese get 125% tariff, and then there's a draining away again. There's the behavior response chain model, the B flow Trump. Then we have emotional release caused by an emotional trigger. Then we have a policy conversion, then we have market feedback and on it goes. This is the behavior response chain. Here we have, this is the best bit, the microexpression emotion correlation map model, known as the FEM Map. Now, I know you probably can't. Can you read that? Based Trump's public interview clips, blah, blah, blah, blah, this report analyzes his facial microexpressions and intonation changes frame by frame to construct FEM facial emotional mapping mapping to reveal the strategic significance behind his psychological state, behavioral motives, and policy rhythms.

This is a sample of the frame-by-frame microexpression analysis. Here we have what the different facial features tell us. Okay. I mean, this is just a scream, I think. I mean, when I first read this, I thought, so this is written by the onion. It's like something you might read in the onion. But it is a serious article or at least, I personally don't think it's particularly serious, but it's certainly serious in its intentions. But there you are. This is the thing that's going on, but it does it's useful in one way, and that is that it does remind us that this is not dry land, mathematics we're talking about.

This is an immersive form of activity. There's another absurd diagram. This is Trump's the FEM radar. He's a political figure with strong ego emotional epiphenomenon, whatever that means. It says, nonlinear cognitive trajectory in which emotion dominates behavior, language precedes logic, power mobilization precedes rational verification, blah, blah, blah. His nonverbal cue is facial microexpressions, intonation changes, speech rhythm constitute a set of neuropsychological windows of this is the best bit, power stability, emotional mobilization, behavioral regulation. There's I mean, just the absurdity, this is a so-called star mesh, a microexpression feature weight star mesh graph analysis. I think that's enough of that. But in any case, and the writer of this piece concludes that actually Trump's decisions are not driven.

I'm quoting now by rational deduction, but emerge from dominance coherence rhythms. A six-axis national strategic tempo intervention framework is proposed to support anticipatory policy modeling. In high-pressure decision-making scenarios dominated by uncertain leaders, mastering the logic of pacing is far more strategically valuable than speculating on their true intentions. Now what's interesting about this is the level of description problem that it seems to be addressing, because it's turning the behavior of an individual person into a heat map, a rhetorical heat map that's a variation of surface effects, which you can sort of model mathematically and then try and predict and work with.

The idea is that foreign leaders might well kind of try and plug in to get into Trump's rhythm and then work with that in order to secure better outcomes. How would it be if we thought about decision-making as simply as pulses of heat and arousal paste in predictable cycles? It's not quite atoms and molecules, but it isn't really a gentle person's either. Stephen, we spoke last night about the difference between night and day in the presidency, with the different setting you're in when you're alone in your house at night in the White House, that is, or in Malaga or whatever, how different it is from when you're in the day surrounded by people, by advisors and so on.

Those cyclical differences. Okay, and I want to close with this thought. We are immersed, too, when we fix our gaze on the present. I think that I was aware that it's a risk to bring a contemporary case into an analysis like this. It's possible, I think, to be very smart about the great elector, I'm not saying that I was, but I mean, it's possible in theory, to be very smart about the great elector, and quite dumb about Trump within the same 60 minutes. We all struggle with this. The talk of Trump derangement syndrome is annoying, but it's also smart because it's discerning something that is real, a state of arousal in us that makes it harder for us to think.

I remember at school, if you get upset with what somebody's saying and someone wanted to make it worse, there was this gesture, this is in Australia, this gesture where people go, getting cut, and meant you're suffering, you're feeling the pain, and they'll make this gesture like that. And I think that it's very difficult to work beyond that and to think coolly about these things. I want to, but that's obviously something that I'm going to keep trying to do, and hopefully also in the context of this project. I'm going to close now and thank you all for these wonderful three days.

Sophia, Christian, Stephen, Chris, Stephen, and all of you have taken part, and Jay, you for your marvelous hosting. You have made it an intellectually incredibly rich experience and so have you as an audience and everybody who ask questions. Thank you for coming back. Thank you for surviving the attrition, and thank you altogether. Thank you. Speaker 2: I thought I'd maybe give a tiny preamble with a few examples. For instance, I don't know if I have free will or it's just my quirks telling me to do this, but I appreciated the free will comments, and it reminds me a line I came across from a colleague at Princeton who said, History has no control group.

It reminds me of a number of examples here. But I must say that I think that I was shocked by yesterday when there was a discussion between Regis Chris, and Stephen about whether there are non-decisions and so forth, because I just see this history replete with non-decisions. I think we heard one today about the lack of decision about the atom bomb with respect to Truman. But if you think of other ones like France not attacking Hitler when he went into the Rhineland in

1936, although, as I understand it, now I'd be wrong with some of these details, but Hitler said, just run away if the French attack, don't go in there.

Or, apparently, Stalin assumed that he was going to be killed after mismanaging the early part of World War II, that the Politburo or others would be killing him. These were non-decisions by the Politburo, like in the French non-decision. Florida, county not fixing its butterfly ballot that might have changed the 2000 election toward Al Gore. Trump continually saying that his health care plan is only two weeks away, but that non-decision just keeps rolling and rolling. Or Congress deciding to not do anything about the Medicare or Social Security running out of funds and so forth. Or the seven states deciding not to fix the Colorado River, which is running dry.

Obama, not stopping James Comey from putting his letter out right before Hillary Clinton would have been elected. I'm hoping you can think about some of these as exemplars. I don't know if they'll come out in your book or whatnot, but it seems to me that there's history is just replete with non-decisions if you really choose to look for them. I'm curious about your comments on that. Thank you. Christopher Clark: Thanks very much. That's a fascinating comment. I think that it's true that not deciding is a form of decision. There's a slight semantic problem. That is, if you don't decide, then the decision is something we impute to people who have done nothing.

We say you should have done something that you didn't do. But there are often quite good reasons why people don't do the things that they don't do. There's a problem there that, in the end, you can end up imagining that a course of action was perfectly possible and option when it actually wasn't. In the case of the French, for example, in 1935, that would be one counterargument you could make. You could say people came out with all kinds of reasons why they shouldn't. Also, the people who brought Hitler into power in 1933 didn't think very hard about what to do if they lost control of Hitler and his Nazi following.

There are all kinds of things that people don't do and don't decide about, and that's a very good point. The trouble is we have a preference for the things that happened over the things that didn't. Once we start talking about the things that didn't, we're in that world of counterfactuals. Once you say that something else might have happened, you create multiple universes, as it were, and then you're in that problem that all counterfactuals have that we talked about before, or at least that Christian talked about before. But thank you very much, and that's something I think we should try to integrate.

It also puts me in mind of what Stephen said about how a lot of behavior by politicians, as well, isn't actually decision. It's something that might look like decision, but actually isn't. It's riding this wave or that wave. I think also, and this is something we didn't have time to talk about or didn't think about talking about just now, there are some situations in which the future is more open-ended than others. For example, in the case of the Great Elector , distances were large, armies were slow, and situations were evolving very slowly by today's standards. There really was an open question.

Do we deploy the army in Pomerania or not? You can say yes, or you can say no. It really is an open situation. But the situations Bismarck was in or the situations that Angela Merkel was in, they weren't like that. They're very closed, very saturated environments, and so is that of the current administration in the United States. Sometimes we imagine on a diagram that there's a decision tree, but actually it might be something much more constrained than that. Speaker 3: There might still be room for more refinement of what properties a human action must have in order for us to call it a decision.

Stephen Kotkin's example of the atom bomb is, I think, an interesting way to pursue this. Because although it is absolutely correct that Truman did not make this decision because of Martin Sherman and many other historians have shown, there was never any doubt that the bomb was going to be dropped. If the bomb could be made, it was going to be dropped. Now, you could say that the decision was made by Roosevelt when he was approached by Szilard and

Einstein and told about the possibility. There's a decision there. It's a decision that was reinforced. Bush Vannevar and Conant and all the other people that are involved in this, and Stimson, assumed if the bomb was there, it was ready to be dropped.

Now, is that a decision? Now, we need to remember that along the way, within the Manhattan Project, there were a lot of people who thought it was a decision. After Germany was conquered, and the movie that you've all seen is quite good on this, there are a group of people within the Manhattan Project scientists who said, no, we should not drop this on Japan. We've already solved the Nazi problem, which is the big thing. Now, a decision was made by Oppenheimer not to go to Stimson and Truman and Bush and Conant and say, we shouldn't do it. Oppenheimer, in some ways, made the decision that we should continue the assumption that we're going to do it.

Now, are we going to say that the United States dropped these bombs on Japan without any decision? It's one thing to say Truman did not make the decision. Stephen Kotkin is absolutely correct about that. But didn't somebody make a decision? Or if all this sequence of things that led to the bomb is not a decision, what is our analytic vocabulary for describing it? Christopher Clark: I know next to nothing about the decision to drop the bomb, but I was very interested in your depiction of the problem. That's right. Because I think a lot of decisions are produced in a constellated way.

Many people contribute to a decision. You can think of it as pieces of causation. Somebody says the bomb is ready, somebody else says it'll be ready by a certain time. Someone else sets out scenarios or whatever. In the end, the result of the sum total of all of this is a decision, but not necessarily a decision that you can place at the feet of one particular actor. These human systems, and in fact, the Austrian decision-making process in 1914 was like that. It was like a beehive. There were dozens of people who had input and contributed to the process by which Austria decided to wage war on Serbia and to risk the horrendous possibility that the Russians might respond with a declaration of war against Austria-Hungary.

I think that is a very good point that we mustn't over-individualize decisions. They're often composite effects of numerous inputs from many different sources. Stephen Kotkin: What about our decision-making expert? Might want to talk to? Christian List: I think one thing that is important to recognize is that individual humans need not be the only loci of decision-making. Collectives could also be loci of decision-making, and even when we consider collectives loci of decision-making, there are different ways you could look at these collectives. You could look at them in a more distributive mode or in a more corporate mode. When, for instance, you've got a corporate entity making a decision, then you'd ascribe the decision to the corporate entity as a whole.

Whereas when you think the phenomenon that you're looking at is really the result of a complex interplay of multiple individual decisions distributed under the umbrella of a particular collective structure, then you'd be also talking about collective decision, but in this more distributive mode. But I would also, not being a historian and not being qualified to comment on the historical aspects of the case, but you would absolutely still give an intentional explanation of the series of events leading up to the dropping of the bomb, even though the structure of decisions and the series of decisions in the run up to the whole thing may have been more complex so that it cannot be attributed just perhaps to one single individual.

Speaker 3: So we count as a decision than any purposive social act? Christian List: That's a long story. The devil is in the detail. [Laughter] Stephen Kotkin: That's why you're here. [Laughter] It is a long discussion, but aren't you here? Anyway. Sophia Rosenfeld: Aren't there two separate questions, though? One is what counts as a decision, which is, in a sense, a philosopher's question. The historian's question might be quite different. Might be, what are the varieties of kinds of decisions made in different contexts or scenarios? I think they're not identical, and actually, they can't really be collapsed. Stephen Kotkin: Truman had the power to decide not to drop the bomb, but he chose not to exercise that power.

That was his decision. The scientists had the power not to make the bomb work for when it was going to be dropped even after they tested it, if they didn't want it to be used. They could have rejiggered some of the mechanisms to make it not work. The pilots had the option to drop the bomb in the ocean rather than on the cities that were targeted. That would have been an act of insubordination and potentially subject to criminal prosecution if they had admitted they'd done that, and if it had been known it was intentional rather than accidental. There are all sorts of decisions or non-decisions along the way, in addition to the structural process of the development of the bomb.

I wasn't suggesting it was some type of freak without a decision that the bomb was dropped. I was suggesting only that Truman did not make a decision to drop the bomb, which in some ways is one of the most consequential presidential decision cases of all time, given the nature of nuclear bombs. Speaker 4: Do political values exist? If so, how do political decisions reflect political values? If the concept of political value is incorrect or if it doesn't make sense to use it as a way to elucidate political decision-making, why is that so? Christopher Clark: Could you explain why is what so?

Speaker 4: If, for some reason, you believe that political values, if that doesn't make sense in this context, if it has no explanatory value, or if it makes sense but it does have no explanatory value when you're looking at trying to explain or narrate a decision in history, then why doesn't it work, and why does it make sense? Christopher Clark: That's an interesting question. I think that I would respond to that by saying that, as a historian, if you were a moral philosopher or something, you might be interested in how political decision making, how saturated it ought to be by reflections on values.

But if you're an historian, you might be more interested in when commitments which seem based on values are articulated as a reason for doing something and when the impact of that reasoning is verifiable. For example, in the case of the Great Elector, he was a Calvinist, and he felt a great deal of solidarity with the Calvinist Netherlands. When possible, he would come to the aid of the Netherlands or be part of the coalition or connection that supported the Netherlands. But there were times when he simply couldn't because France was at war. There was a reunion of Louis XV, meant that he had to stand back or even sometimes supply France with troops for a war against a country with whom he felt a very great personal, a link through shared values and shared religious beliefs and commitments.

I think values are play in decision making behavior, and especially in the language that's used to describe and explain and justify decisions. But their impact on actual behavior varies enormously from situation to situation. The historian would always be looking at them as one variable among many. But your question puts me in mind of Peter Clarke's book, The Engine of War. No, the Motor of History, something like that, which is about the way in which liberal politicians, Woodrow Wilson, Clemenceau, Edward Grey, and many others, Asquith, and so on, justified the World War in 1914-'18. He makes the point that a certain set of liberal values meant that you couldn't justify a war simply in terms of interests.

You couldn't say Britain is doing this in order to secure its empire or France is doing this for its eternal security. You had to say that right was defeating evil. It was a struggle between good and evil. That there was no other way in the liberal political economy, as it were, to justify something like a war. I think values they can be invoked in that setting as well, where they're essential to a certain habit of legitimation, which can't do without the invocation of values. That doesn't mean they are the decisive ingredient, but they'll be present for that reason. But this broader question of when and whether values should infiltrate and shape political decision-making is one, I think, for a moral philosopher.

Sophia Rosenfeld: Can I just add that I think there are also interesting cases in which it's not simply a matter of does the person get to act on their values? This goes to behavioral economists' claims, people often act against their values. Look at something historically, look at

Jefferson on race, for instance. It's almost impossible to make good sense of the conflicts between his behavior and his statements at different moments in different times and places. I think that accounting for the fact that we're not consistent rational actors all the time, whether it's not just external constraints, in other words, that keep us from acting on values, people are inconsistent.

Speaker 5: I realize now, looking back, that one of the problems in reading history is that you forget that you know the end of the story and the actors don't. That changes things enormously. I know what's going to happen with the American Revolution, and they didn't. Each step that they're taking, they're taking risks, and it doesn't feel that way when I'm reading about it. This relates to my question, which is that anything that happened before I was born feels very, very different from anything that happened while I was alive. This is related to whether history is deterministic. From my perspective, there's a very simple answer to that question, which is anything that happened before I was born that's predetermined.

Anything afterwards, that's up for grabs, because I can influence it and I experience it and so on. I think now that I'm getting towards the end of my life, and I'm looking at, say, the younger generation and saying, how come they didn't learn to say don't read history and learn the lessons that I learned. It's because the lessons I've learned weren't from reading history. They were from the experience that I had directly. The next generation has to go make the same mistakes again, and that's very disturbing, that they didn't live when there was a Holocaust, or there was all these sorts of things.

It doesn't have the same meaning to them, and so it's something that I worry about. Other than with historians, it's a natural human thing, which is to think in terms of yourself as being part of something that's up for grabs, but viewing everything else before you as not having been up for grabs. Christopher Clark: I think that's a really good point. It's something that is a epistemological problem historians face at every turn, basically. I have two thoughts about that. The first is that actors in historical settings sometimes do have quite a good understanding of what could happen. If you think about the First World War, for example, the idea that people were blind to the possibility of a European conflagration is simply not true.

They did very frequently canvass and describe the likely consequences of a real conflagration, and they described it in very horrifying terms. There are also existed studies by people like Ivan Bloch and a man called Lamszus, who wrote a book called Das Menschenschlachthaus in 1911, a social Democrat teacher, in which he described very precisely what would happen in the trenches, mutilated bodies, and so on. Lists of the wounded and the dead so long that newspapers would refuse to print them, that kind of thing. There are actors who do have a vision of the future. When the Russians were thinking about going to war over the Serbian crisis, the Sarajevo crisis, there was a man called Durnovo, who was one of the most conservative figures at the Tsar's court.

It's sort of fallen out of favor somewhat. He wrote a memo to the Tsar and said, "Don't do this. Don't get yourself dragged into this Balkan millwork. Not only will we lose because the Germans will come in, and we will lose because we cannot beat the German army, but it won't just be a defeat. It will sweep away everything. The entire Russia that we love will be destroyed and swept away in a tide of blood". Now, that is a high-quality prognosis, but nobody paid attention. So the question isn't just is the prognosis there, it's also is anyone listening? And, unfortunately, no one at that moment was listening to Durnovo.

Stephen mentioned that the decision to opt for forced collectivization, for example, was a decision of the most immense traction and consequence. Events which are very large, especially when they haven't been decided by a particular individual, can come to seem to acquire a certain weight of inevitability. When an event is so transformative as the First World War, it's very hard to imagine an alternative scenario where it doesn't happen. One of the tasks of historians, then, it seems to me, is to go back and excavate those other futures that seemed very real to the people

who were making decisions at the time, but then subsequently got switched off and replaced by other futures.

But people were aware of them when they were selecting their options. You make the point very well. The future was as open to those who lived then as it is to us who are alive now. Speaker 6: I want to start out just by saluting the project of attempting to apply decision theory to high political and strategic level decision making. I think it's really important. It's also, I think, really difficult for the simple methodological reason that a great deal of decision theory, perhaps an overwhelming preponderance of decision theory, arises out of studies of human behavior under conditions of experimental psychology.

Situations in which participants in experiments are asked to make decisions, often pecuniary decisions involving calculations of gain and loss, from which conclusions about the psychology of human decision making are deduced. It's a methodology that is really very different in the circumstance that it puts the decision maker into than are the circumstances that the statesman or stateswoman occupying a position of high responsibility inhabits. Let me focus on the predicament of high responsibility that the statesman inhabits. I wanted, here, to ask you to reflect upon the ways in which history in the second half of the 20th century might have functioned to radically circumscribe the parameters of possibility for decision makers.

A couple of dynamics in particular seem to me immensely important. The first, and I speak here from the parochial perspective of an Americanist, but the first is what we might call the bureaucratization of decision. The construction, at least in the United States government, of immense institutional capabilities for enacting decision-making. The National Security Council, the interagency process; these bureaucratic transformations have the effect of radically winnowing the decision maker and perhaps turning the decision maker into something less than a decision maker. Perhaps a mere cog in a bureaucratic apparatus for decision-making. The second dynamic that seems to me immensely important, especially in matters of war and peace, is the nuclear revolution, which raises the magnitude of the possible consequence of decision-making to heretofore unimaginable levels.

If a decision could plausibly result in the annihilation, not just of one society, but of the entire human race. How does that prospect affect the calculus of decision? Would suggest that one plausible point of convergence of these two trends, bureaucratization and the nuclear revolution, makes itself manifest in Stanley Kubrick's Dr Strangelove, and that is the Doomsday Machine. Sort of the ultimate mechanical instantiation of decision, but also inversely, of the human propensity for indecision. To bring this to a conclusion that I think David may not like, how does this affect our perspective on Donald Trump? Should we see Trump merely as an inept decision maker who is incapable of drawing creatively upon the routinized capacities for decision making that the US government has developed over 80 years?

Or might we alternatively see Trump as a president who, in a fit of unconventional creativity, has strived to rescue and recuperate some latitude for autonomous decision-making from circumstances that have precluded it? Christopher Clark: I would like to hear what the others think about this as well. I don't want to be the only one who answers it. It's a very interesting and suggestive question. I think that one of the central themes that did interest me when I was putting together these lectures was this question of whether there's a sort of vector of change that we can identify over time. One of the vectors that suggests itself is bureaucratization.

It also fits nicely with modernization theory to which we're all, in a way, in hock. Even if we're skeptical about it and so on, we recognize the world's not getting more secular and so on, we still think of modernization as the sort of path or the general direction of travel. In that case, it ought to be the case of bureaucratization, a famous Weberian category, which the modernization theorists plugged into their paradigm, that ought to be part of this, and that ought to mean a stark relativization of the decisional importance of individuals. Then you suggested that the nuclear

age pushes in the other direction because it places the option to deploy a nuclear weapon in the hands of a particular person.

But on the other hand, I'm just trying to remember his name, the Israeli geopolitical theorist. Is it Martin Van Gelderen? No, it's not Van Gelderen. Anyway, it's got a Dutch name. Van Creveld, yeah, he's a sort of controversial figure. But in any case, one of the arguments he makes is that, as he puts it, the atomic bomb or the nuclear weapon is the greatest gift to human peace that humans have ever acquired or have ever been given to humans by science. That, in some ways, you possessing that weapon in that very moment deprives you of the power to use it because of the immense risk involved in it.

These things push in different directions. As for how to read Donald Trump, I mean, I'm not an expert on the Trump administration. I've been reading around frenziedly in preparation for these lectures. I've felt that a lot of the writing about Trump is captive to a kind of emotional overload, and that was the case also with that scientized article I was talking about. It's absolutely dripping with hostile emotion. Concealing itself with this scientistic language of graphs and so on. There's a real problem working through all that, but I was struck by what Stephen said about the notion that there may be bits of the story which look very much like bureaucratic constraints, and there may be parts of the administration that are functioning still in a highly bureaucratized, highly norm-driven, and path dependency-driven way.

Whereas there are quite clearly other parts in which very bold initiatives are causing structural change. The two things may be happening at the same time. In a way, the jury is still out, but I would be very interested to hear what my fellow panelists think about that. Sophia Rosenfeld: It's a very interesting argument that bureaucracy has largely worked to constrain decision-making and nuclear power alongside it, and law is supposed to be the other great force to have kept people in their lanes. However, there are also always countervailing forces. For instance, the ability of a technology in the form of a phone that allows the ruler to reach everyone 24/7 directly without any other channels might be seen as a way of saying the ruler is less constrained than in the past.

We think of the absolute ruler as having some sort of extraordinary authority, but that person was constrained by time, distance, and communication in ways that would be extraordinarily burdensome for a ruler today. I don't think we can probably tell the story in a linear fashion. I do think that the current president's ability to communicate in this completely seemingly unmediated way globally in real time is very much not a constraint, but a form of, and again, it collapses the difference between decision and performance quite thoroughly. Stephen Kotkin: Trump's theory of the case, maybe that could be useful. The argument that Republican presidents get elected, and then they come to power, and they discover that the bureaucracy doesn't work for them, but against them, is empirically true.

There is no doubt there's copious evidence to support that supposition. It's then exaggerated just how great the Opposition is, rather than the conscientious implementation of decisions based upon a sense of professionalism and impartiality. But it's a real phenomenon. Democrats, they fetishize process. They love the process. President Obama was dean of the United States Law School, and so the government ran like a law school seminar. The seminars were long, everyone got to speak, and then the guys got in the car to drive back to the Pentagon, and they're like, Well, what did we decide? They decided nothing, but it was a very good seminar and a good discussion.

You can fetishize process also, and the Republicans hate process because process provides opportunity for sabotage by the various different layers and levels. Trump's theory of the case was that they sabotaged me in the first term, so I will sabotage them now. I will undo the processes and the constraints on me so that they don't have these opportunities for me not to decide what I want to decide. The problem with that theory of the case is that after he issues the

tweet, there's nobody to implement the action because he's sabotaged the process. Whereas he thinks that sabotaging the process is empowering, it's actually disempowering.

Then he's got to contrive some sort of processes in order to get things to happen, so he returns right back to the problem that he began with in his theory of the case. In parallel, what I've also said is that there are processes underway that he has not sabotaged that are quite formidable, having to do with the treasury because of the importance of the economy, finance, and the banking system. You cannot run that without any process whatsoever, and he doesn't. The technology industry has a little bit of process, not enough, but it's acquiring more and more and more now as we speak.

Then there are other parts, like the State Department, which they sabotaged on purpose. The National Security Council, which was two people under Truman when it was formed, and grew to 400 at its peak under the Democrats, is now something like 37. You say, Well, that's terrible. It's just that 400 was also terrible, and so it's not clear how you come out on that. But my point is that this is a problem not peculiar to Trump. This is a problem that is not going to be resolved under Trump. There is an impulse in court society and emotion, and we have that around every president, including the one.

There was a court society around the one. I witnessed it firsthand. Then there were lots of bureaucratic processes which were disenabling. In studying this phenomenon, is it necessary for Regis Chris to bring this into decision-making? These considerations.