

## **Book Review**

Aseem Prakash & Mary Kay Gugerty, eds.  
*Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

There has never been a shortage of people who think badly of idealists, understood as people who believe that members of our species should and could behave better than we do, and who are prepared to take steps to encourage the improvement of others. Such sceptics have a great deal of evidence in support of their opinions. In just the last century, we have dropped nuclear bombs on cities of negligible military importance, greatly “improved” biological and chemical warfare, constructed ballistic missiles and airplanes which don’t even require pilots in order to rain down destruction and death upon civilians below. We have invented “enhanced interrogation techniques” as a euphemism for torture. In parts of the world slavery is no stain on our historical past, but a living reality today. Meanwhile, the most powerful country on Earth cannot seem to curtail gang warfare on its streets and family violence in its homes. The “war on drugs” is being lost on all fronts, and innumerable Mexicans are paying the price. On every continent racism and misogyny are only two of the ideological pretexts for brutal behaviour. Religion, recently thought to be succumbing to secularism and science, has returned as a major excuse for hatred among and within different systems of theistic belief and ritual worship. We have experimented widely with genocide. We have, in short, a fairly poor track record when it comes to living in obedience to the “Golden Rule.”

What’s more, people dedicated to ambitious political movements intended to remove inequity, injustice and tyranny in the name of what we call “humane” attitudes and actions have frequently failed in their quest, often with disastrous results. It is my opinion that Karl Marx is no more culpable for the Moscow “show trials,” the Chinese “cultural revolution” and Pol Pot’s massacres in Cambodia than Jesus Christ is to blame for the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch-burnings and imperialist slaughters conducted in the name of Christianity around the world. Nonetheless, no one can deny that people who claimed to be acting in support of Marx’s goal of a free and egalitarian “communist” society were guilty of as many and probably more acts of torture and death than any other group of supposed humanists and idealists. Even (or especially) good intentions can lead to worldly hells.

Accordingly, many social theorists who have long doubted the claims of those who, by evolution or revolution, would set citizens free from dictatorial regimes, promote economic and social equity, loosen constraints in matters of education or sexual repression, and emancipate subjects from the authority of the state, the church or the private corporation are seeking a method to explain human actions in a more “rational” manner.

Now, many social scientists are embracing a model of behavioral analysis that purports to show that even the kindest and gentlest among us are governed by selfish impulses and that organized groups of idealists in major advocacy groups on behalf of the victims of war, poverty, prejudice and plain bad luck are no more praiseworthy than unscrupulous sales representatives and drug dealers—in fact, to them concepts of good and evil have no place in the discussion.

Such sceptics are not (always) been (entirely) misanthropes. They do not necessarily enjoy pricking the balloons of quixotic enthusiasts for social change. Very few of them actually relish cruelty and suffering. In fact, most of them share the belief that people should be kinder and gentler than they are. Instead of thinking that we behave badly because our natural goodness is corrupted by social constraints and perverted by fixable social arrangements, the sceptics realistically acknowledge that we have the capacity and even the propensity to behave horribly, and sometimes to repeat horrid behaviour with gusto (it's called "revenge"). They are, however, less concerned with the explanation of why we do what we do, than with discovering what will make us stop.

Whether our bad acts are the result of original sin, genetically inherited and innate aggression, or any other force of God or Nature, we are all susceptible to being transformed into monsters. So, the critics say, repressive social institutions and ideological indoctrination that prevent the worst in us from governing our conduct are to be encouraged. From Hobbes to Freud and beyond in both temporal directions, the establishment of law and order, the suppression of libidinal drives and inborn selfishness are said to be the preconditions of a just and stable society. In the interest of civilization, human nature is something that must be overcome, lest our lives remain "nasty, brutish and short."

To aid in the dissemination of this outlook, early social scientists sought to demythologize utopian views of humanity. A formidable presence in this gallery of realists was Robert Michels. In 1915, he published his book, *Political Parties*, which methodically pointed out how even egalitarian politicians and organizations, dedicated to equity if not complete equality, were themselves examples of what he famously called, "the iron law of oligarchy." A one-time radical socialist himself, Michels convincingly argued that organizational hierarchy and functional inequality were necessary characteristics of all human groups—no matter how altruistic their stated aims.

Precisely forty-nine years after its release, I was assigned *Political Parties* as required reading in an undergraduate course on twentieth-century political theory. As something of a callow "idealist" at the time, I rejected its findings on both normative and empirical grounds. Despite the inventory of past wrongs, I refused to believe that hierarchy and its normal accompaniments, inequity and oppression, were necessary features of human relations.

If Michels were alive today, he might approve of the general thesis of the volume under review, but not on its epistemological atomism. The editors of *Advocacy Organizations*

*and Collective Action*, of course, do not base their rather pessimistic picture on anything as antique as Michels' "iron law," nor do they seek explanations in social structures and organizational rules of behavior. Their preference is for a somewhat more modern contribution to social scientific literature, though one that arguably has an even longer pedigree—all the way back to the political theory of possessive individualism as it emerged in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Their key to understanding why we behave as we do is to be found in the "rational choice" model of individual human behaviour. The result is much the same as Michels devised. Human organizations require inequality in order to function—whether as Michels would say, the need is part of the structure of the organization or, as Prakash & Mary Kay Gugerty prefer, a consequence of the aggregated actions of the individuals who work within them.

Put simply, rational choice theory depends on suppositions that have sustained game theory, been explored by experimental psychology and applied to decision-making models in various social sciences, most importantly perhaps in microeconomics, but also in political science and sociology. It has also been justified in philosophy where it extends utilitarianism into the twenty-first century and dresses it up with almost mathematical precision to rationalize (so to speak) avarice.

The "rational" in rational choice theory has nothing to do with what people normally mean by rational, which is to say an attribute of thinking which emphasizes careful deliberation, thoughtfulness and lucidity. Rather, it simply means precisely calculated with the ethical or moral quality of the decision deemed irrelevant. If a person is a cocaine addict or a compulsive gambler, then "rational" will mean choosing the most expeditious means to feed the habit, regardless of the fact that the goal is bad or even self-destructive. It is currently a prominent paradigm and sufficiently well regarded that two of its primary proponents, Gary Becker and Daniel Kahneman have won the Nobel Prize in Economics (or, as the Nobelists call it, "economic science"). The fact that it provides ideological support for neoclassical economics and neoliberal ideology in general doesn't hurt either.

In addition to being silent on the ethical content of decisions, rational choice theory also ignores social and historical interpretations and influences. It is uninterested in biological and psychological determinants of human behaviour. It doesn't even care about marketing strategies and motivational analysis to say nothing of addictions that might explain why people are eager to obtain or to do things that are demonstrably bad for them. All that matters is the method of decision making, and whether it is best able to achieve maximum advantage for the decision maker, whatever the quality of those decisions might be. It therefore applies equally to saint or sinner in the pursuit of good or evil. Sadism and self-destruction are perfectly acceptable domains in which to employ rational choice theory, as are the quest for social justice and ecological sustainability.

When used in the analysis of human organizations, rational choice theory does take context into account, but only insofar as it states the probability that both public sector, private for-profit and non-for-profit entities function in a similar environment—the environment of scarcity. Prakash and Gugerty may be prepared to acknowledge that

people drawn to advocacy, particularly in support of the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised and dispossessed or on issues as diverse as animal rights, population control, freedom from censorship or any item in the litany of liberal causes do so with pure hearts and an abundance of altruism; but, they really don't care.

What matters is not the nobility of the project, but the fact that rational people who seek to make the world a better place are going to behave in pretty much the same way as purveyors of alcohol, drugs and firearms or automobiles, electronic toasters and baby buggies. Regardless of subjective beliefs and apparent motivations, they decide to create or work with an already existing institution through which their normative preferences have a better chance of being realized than if they sought to achieve their goals alone. As Joel Pruce of the University of Denver put it: "... NGOs are venues for collective action, and even organizations built on normative imperatives operate with instrumental directives, comparable to those of for-profit commercial entities ... NGOs are engaged in a competitive, marketized environment of supply and demand, under conditions of resource scarcity, which further compels self-interested decision making, often at odds with the foundational moral claims that justify the organization's inception, or so the editors suggest."

There is some truth to this, but less than meets the eye, or at least less than is immediately useful for understanding human behavior. Rational choice theory makes a number of assumptions of which three stand out: individualism, optimization and self-interest. By these lights, successful advocacy organizations certainly fit within the standard theory of the firm, albeit with a few twists.

First, people who join advocacy groups, whether as part-time volunteers or as skilled professionals (accountants, fund-raisers, government liaison officers, personnel trainers and maybe even some lawyers) do so to maximize their impact on particular policy issues. Other opportunities are available; but, whatever the objectives, members are there to achieve something of personal value to them. The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, but the parts are the foundations upon which the whole is built.

Second, people who join advocacy groups do so because the organization presents the best available opportunity to realize a goal. Both as a person and as a member of an organization dedicated to achieving this or that qualitative social change, the organization is constructed with a view to implementing instrumental strategies for success efficiently and effectively. For a private corporation, success might mean profitability. For a public sector service provider, it might mean the satisfaction of client needs. For an advocacy group, it might mean saving starving children in a foreign land or winning the release of the wrongfully convicted at home.

Third, people who join advocacy groups do so from self-interest, whether their efforts make them feel better about themselves than they might by earning more money or are tied to some religious or spiritual belief in salvation through good works is irrelevant to the rational choice analyst. One way or another, people do what they do in order to enhance themselves in their own eyes, the eyes of others or, for that matter, the eyes of

God. Rational choice fanciers do not necessarily advance this assumption because they are cynical or mean-spirited; they do so because they think it best explains why people make sacrifices in the service of others. Besides, a cooperative society based on norms of reciprocity is not necessarily less noble than a society based on pure selflessness (whatever that might be).

Prakash and Gugerty, as well as some of their contributors, do seem to delight in reducing altruism to self-interest beyond what is required for their theory to prevail. What's more, they observe similarities in the organization of business firms and large-scale advocacy groups like Amnesty International and Oxfam. They claim that, because they need to compete with others in the struggle for scarce donations and therefore advertise on television, or have human resource departments, or carefully pick their battles in the hope of winning more of them, they are therefore the same as breakfast cereal producers, airlines and insurance companies.

If this is true, it is more by tautology than by empirical social science. If the rational choice model is to be taken more seriously, it must not only describe and interpret observed behaviour, but also predict it. Some efforts have been made in this direction when rational choice is applied to microeconomics in the emerging but slightly troubled sub-field of "behavioral economics." At most, rational choice theory provides a partial picture. Its methodological individualism precludes the analysis of larger units as anything other than aggregations of asocial, ahistorical and apolitical human units. It excludes, however, both the statics and dynamics of the social organizations, but also of the broader society in which organizational behavior is influenced by the norms, rules and laws which exist and exercise influence.

By focusing on the individual, assuming rather than explaining rational individualism and merely declaring our norms to be preset and impenetrable, rational choice models explain everything by explaining nothing. Explaining NGOs in terms of people's inclination toward wanting more of a good thing (while remaining agnostic on what counts as good) really doesn't advance our understanding a great deal.

Nor does the concept of "rational" accord with most philosophical definitions and standards. Jeremy Bentham might see some merit in the idea, but I suspect G. W. F. Hegel, never mind Plato and the Pythagoreans would be baffled by it. In fact, even in ordinary language, there is more to the word than is evident here. To most people, rational implies clear thinking, or at least sanity. Rational choice theory, however, sets those notions aside and proceeds merely to calculate the optimum chance of achieving a goal, regardless of whether that goal meets some moral test of goodness or is even apt to enhance or preserve the life of the chooser.

To quote the now famous assessment of yet another Nobel prize-winner, Amartya Sen, the rational choice model is mainly attractive to "rational fools."

**About the Author:**

**Howard A. Doughty** is a professor at Seneca College in Toronto, Ontario. He can be reached at: [howard\\_doughty@post.com](mailto:howard_doughty@post.com).