



BOOK REVIEW

Erickson et al.: How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind

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Paul Erickson, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin, *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013

Pp. vii+259

ISBN 978-0-226-04663

Price: \$35.00 (cloth)

How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind is an unusual book, for several reasons. It is one of the very few examples of collective authorship of more than two or three writers in the Humanities/Social Sciences. Six renowned authors, some of whom were very well known, gathered in Berlin for six weeks in the summer of 2010 in order to produce the manuscript.

The study that resulted from this process tries to investigate the gap between reason and rationality that opened up after World War II in the thinking of intellectuals who advised politicians and decision-makers in the United States during the Cold War era. This gap constitutes what the authors seek to analyze, they coin the term “Cold War rationality”. Unlike the historical actors of the study, the authors do not believe in the universality of the idea of rationality that emerged, matured and finally diffused into other fields of research, and even daily life, between the 1950s and the 1980s.

The first chapter begins with mathematician Merrill Flood trying to gain insights into human decision-making by observing and questioning his three teenage children. Neither Flood nor most of his colleagues at the think tank RAND in Santa Monica had any doubts about the fact that rationality basically concerned rules, though conceptions of rationality had changed since they became central to “western” thinking during the Enlightenment. Erickson et al.¹ give a rough outline of the historical direction of rationality between the 18th and mid-20th centuries, before raising the question of how rationality and rule-bound calculation processes could become so close after World War II.

In chapter two, the procedures that allowed the Berlin Airlift to operate are described. Operation Vittles had to be planned and calculated according to a rule-set that was supposed to allow the population of Berlin to be supplied at minimum cost and with minimal effort, but that maximized output. Limited computing capacities rendered the complex calculations necessary for these procedures difficult, although the US Air Force had already begun to streamline operational

¹ The order, in which the authors appear on the cover was determined by computerized randomization.

efficiency via scientific computing. Instead of sticking to an optimal solution found by the algorithm, which could not be achieved as decision-makers had no access to complete sets of information, the introduction of “satisficing” results helped to shape a way out of the dilemma.

While chapters one and two shed some light on the formalization of decision-making under the constraints of a trend towards rationalization, the subsequent chapters scrutinize rule-bound rationality in action.

Chapter three investigates the Cuban Missile Crisis, presenting the different viewpoints of researchers and advisors. While Herman Kahn—one of the key figures of the book and author of *On Thermonuclear War* (published in 1960)—believed in rational choice theory, its critics had severe doubts about its validity under conditions such as the Cold War. Among these critics were Charles E. Osgood and Irving Janis, both of whom were psychologists. Their concerns concerned the limits of rationality under extreme conditions. Osgood suggested a de-escalation of the arms race, and so developed a program that he called GRIT (Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension Reduction). Janis’ concept of groupthink sought to explain the interference of emotions with rationally correct choices.

Consequently, chapter four deals with small group interactions, studied by social psychologist Robert Freed Bales of Harvard, who also worked with RAND. Bales recorded group interactions and tried to extract fundamental dynamics in order to develop a model that allowed for the description of the basic processes in group formation. His method aimed to find reliable parameters for the building of stable and functional groups in terms of split-second decisions. In other words, the kind of decisions to be made by small groups of officers in the context of the Cold War.

Chapter five focuses on Game Theory and both its mathematical and psychological dimension. Its development is scrutinized and illustrated by the famous Prisoner’s Dilemma, as described by Anatol Rapoport. According to the authors, Rapoport over concentrates on interactions and neglects the personalities of the people involved. Another laboratory researcher on the prisoner’s dilemma, Morton Deutsch, places too much emphasis on personal qualities. Both fragmented decision making in certain ways in order to make the underlying procedures objects amenable to formalization.

Chapter six describes the end of Cold War rationality. After two decades of formalizing decision-making in order to safeguard the (Western) world against the consequences of a possibly irrational decision, in the late 1970s it became apparent that there was a gap between the formal standards established and actual human performance. Game theorists reacted with disillusionment to this insight. At this time, Cold War rationality lost much of its energy, though it did not disappear completely and still lives on in certain fields of research and expertise.

Beside the fact that “How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind” is a lucid, coherent argued and very well written masterpiece of the History of Science, it has further qualities that make it an extremely important contribution to a broader collection of academic fields. It delivers an outstanding social history of a particular, small, though very important and influential group of white Americans during the Cold War era. The people, scrutinized in this work shaped a certain perception of the “West” for most of the Post War era for most of the “western” world. “How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind” provides extensive and lucid insights into a particular cultural history, and raises questions that deserve further research. The dynamics of Soviet Cold War rationality, for example, upon which they touched briefly in the introduction.



However, exceeding its original value as an extremely rich and original investigation into the idea of rationality in the second half of the 20th century, the study lives up to the promise of collective and truly trans-disciplinarian scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences.