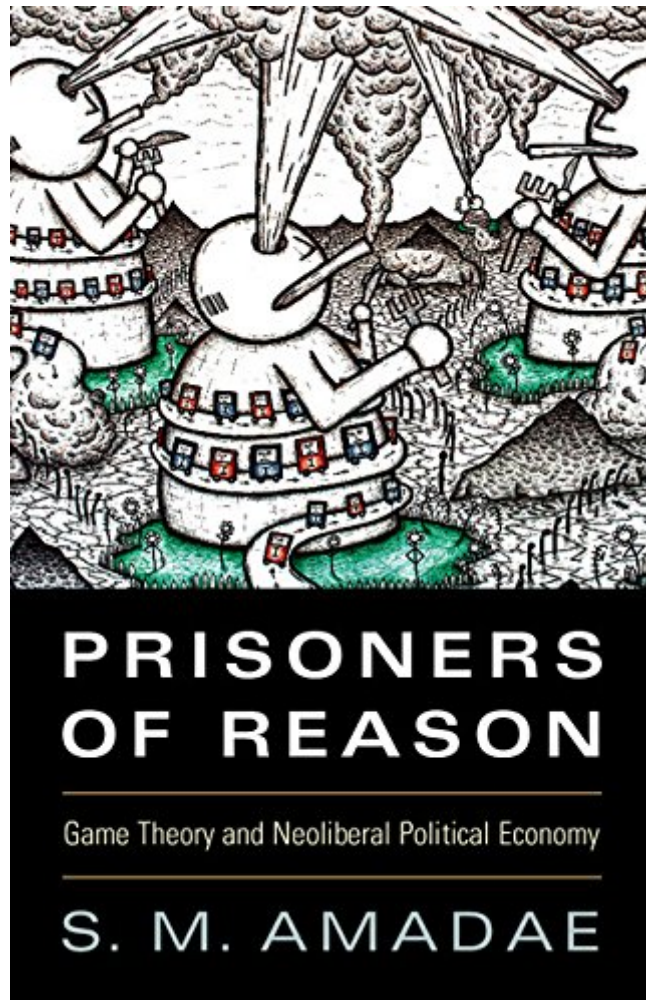


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Prisoners Of Reason: Game Theory And Neoliberal Political Economy



Synopsis

Is capitalism inherently predatory? Must there be winners and losers? Is public interest outdated and free-riding rational? Is consumer choice the same as self-determination? Must bargainers abandon the no-harm principle? Prisoners of Reason recalls that classical liberal capitalism exalted the no-harm principle. Although imperfect and exclusionary, modern liberalism recognized individual human dignity alongside individuals' responsibility to respect others. Neoliberalism, by contrast, views life as ceaseless struggle. Agents vie for scarce resources in antagonistic competition in which every individual seeks dominance. This political theory is codified in non-cooperative game theory; the neoliberal citizen and consumer is the strategic rational actor. Rational choice justifies ends irrespective of means. Money becomes the medium of all value. Solidarity and good will are invalidated. Relationships are conducted on a quid pro quo basis. However, agents can freely opt out of this cynical race to the bottom by embracing a more expansive range of coherent action.

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Customer Reviews

Amadae does an in-depth historical review of our current "Neo-liberal" socio-economic and political philosophy based on the "prisoner's dilemma" conundrum, the assumption that no one can be trusted if cheating yields cash value, what matters to corporate executives. The profit motive is abstract and inhumane, and political power is bought by the highest bidder! Trapped in that rigid idealization of "Competitive Capitalism" we are persuaded to support actions that will end our civilization! Current policy, U.S. preparation for "Nuclear Use Target Selection - NUTS" assumes that a plausible threat will make their use unnecessary, and we can still rely on "Mutually Assured Destruction - MAD" to prevent nuclear war. The last half of the book explores government, coercion vs. inclusion, rule of law, with a final section about natural and cultural evolution and the social nature of human motivation. We must go beyond our present cultural ambience of commercial-media glorification of greed.

Sonja Amadae's "Prisoners of Reason" is a well-argued and highly relevant analysis of the origins of neoliberal thought in game theory. The advent of game theory (most commonly known in context of the Prisoner's Dilemma) came in the Cold War amidst the attempt to find a way to solve the seemingly insolvable nuclear dilemma. She explains, "By accepting that national security depends on wielding deterrent threats to wage nuclear war, game theory offers an abstract formal means to model the security dilemma and evaluate the credibility of threats." She shows how the confining logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma led to the failure of MAD (mutually assured destruction) as a deterrence strategy and the rise of NUTS (Nuclear Utilization Target Selection) in its stead, even despite the otherwise pacific inclinations of President Jimmy Carter. But game theory's reach soon extended beyond this specific dilemma and came to be introduced into social and political thought and the understanding of human evolution itself (Dawkins's selfish gene). Amadae explains lucidly how the foundational assumptions of game theory--that all individuals act only out of self-interest and are willing to break any agreement, that all sources of value can be reduced to one metric for evaluating outcomes, etc.--are incompatible with classical liberalism and its emphasis on fair play and commitment to promises made. The game theoretic and neoliberal understanding of the individual leads to a heavily coercion-based social contract, a hollowing out of the concept of consent, and a belief in the futility of collective action. Amadae makes astute connections between the rise of neoliberal thought and the rise of surveillance and mass incarceration. Classical liberals often placed a strong value on education: they believed that inculcating a certain set of values (and knowledge) would guarantee the harmonious functioning of society within the context of a minimal state. Although classical liberal punishment (such as Bentham's panopticon) can look rather

horrifying in retrospect, there was still an emphasis on "rehabilitative education," per se. Welfarist or social liberals see redistribution as a key tool to guaranteeing buy-in to the social contract: if people see the system as fair, they will not defect. But neoliberalism rejects the premises that underlie these strategies. If all individuals are potential criminals because they would all defect if given the chance (no matter what their economic status or education), then the only tool available is coercive sanctions. Amadae asserts that there is nothing inevitable about neoliberal subjectivity: we need not believe the game theoretic assumptions about human nature nor must we act by them. And this is particularly important within the context of higher education, where the social and political agents of the future are trained. We need to understand the foundational assumptions of such theories--as well as their limitations--if we are to avoid being trapped by them in our thinking. For those interested in understanding neoliberalism and those interested in nuclear politics, this is a must-read.

Amadae leads us through classic liberal, game theoretic, and neoliberal texts and shows how the Prisoner's Dilemma went from a practical nuclear defense posture with limited real-world applicability to a far-reaching cultural modus operandi that fundamentally opposes cooperation at a conceptual level. In response to the high stakes of nuclear war and the prospect of totalitarian governance, a paradigm shift occurred retreating away from classical liberal notions of reciprocity, good will, and fair play. Voluntary cooperation resulting in mutual prosperity is viewed as irrational as a matter of policy, which instead encourages individual gain at the expense of others. The Prisoner's Dilemma is shown to be oversimplified, not accounting for the quality of preexisting relationships, and irrelevant to virtually all real-world scenarios. The end result is individualism taken to such an extreme that it rivals totalitarian governance that liberal democracies initially sought to defend against when the Prisoner's Dilemma was devised. *Prisoners of Reason* is a sobering look at how Game Theory arose out of historical military circumstance and came to influence economics, governance, and even theories surrounding biology in the years that followed.

I recommend *Prisoners of Reason* to all those interested in or engaged in neoliberal economics and/or neoliberalism in international theory. Amadae's central argument is that strategic rationality has become a universal touchstone across domains ranging from international security and the role of the government to evolutionary biology. Amadae's argument is broken into and supported in three parts; introducing neoliberalism and the all too familiar Prisoner's Dilemma - making the book adaptable and easily followed by readers of various backgrounds in the realm of political theory.

Though free-standing from one-another, the books chapters go on to link topics ranging from Nuclear security, the social contract and climate change (among others) under the ubiquitous umbrella of the Prisoner's Dilemma according to the standard models of game theory. Regardless of one's personal beliefs on the Prisoner's Dilemma or game theory, readers will find Prisoners of Reason thought provoking, mind broadening and enlightening.

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