

Week 8: Achen and Snidal, "Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies"

**Attempts to examine the claims of case-study critics of rational deterrence.

Case studies have been valuable for:

- 1) historical wisdom about the limits of current theory
- 2) empirical generalization to be explained by future theory

Case studies have failed, however, when used for purposes for which they were never suited:

- 1) theory construction
- 2) theory verification

**Only when combined with deductive theory and statistical inference can case studies be genuinely helpful. "Even though case studies provide interesting insights, they do not *by themselves* provide clear guidance for generalization to other cases."

**These case-study theorists are united in their misgivings over rational deterrence theory but unsure as to what should replace it.

- 1) Cognitive view: that rational deterrence theory fails to consider the exogenous factors affecting decision makers, such as fatigue, fear, or other thought-inhibiting processes. One answer to this, "cybernetic decision-making," considers actors as incapable of rationally generating long lists of alternatives and payoffs, depending, instead, upon feedback from the environment to adjust their behavior marginally.
- 2) Misperception: that the penetration of asymmetric information prevents the proper application of rational deterrence theory.
- 3) Achen and Snidal maintain that, regardless of the differences between individual case-study theorists, they are united by their attempt to trace theory to particular historical examples. Theory, then, becomes empirical generalization—not deduction from general assumptions.

Rational deterrence theory, as Achen and Snidal frame it, is conditioned by three postulates:

- 1) Rational Actor Assumption: Actors have exogenously given preferences and choice options, and they seek to optimize preferences in light of other actors' preferences and options.
- 2) Principal Explanatory Assumption: Variation in outcomes is to be explained by variation in actors' opportunities (appeals to exogenously-determined preferences, norms or culture are to be temporarily or analytically suspended).
- 3) Principal Substantive Assumption: The state acts as if it were a unitary, rational actor.

**In this way, case studies are useful tools (like statistical inference) to aid theory, but they fail to provide any middle ground from which to base theory, on their own.

- 1) Empirical laws should not be mistaken for theoretical postulation.

- 2) Because inductive theory lacks the ability to provide surprising insights and predictions, there is no way to tell a consequential finding from an artifact.
- 3) This inductive approach has resulted in case study bias and the uncritical use of decision makers' own reconstruction of their thinking.
- 4) Although case studies are vital for the testing of analytical theory, they should not be confused as bodies of theory or tests for explanatory power.