

Rational Choice Debate

Stephen M. Walt, *Rational Choice and Security Studies*, International Security 23 (Spring 1999)

- The author is concerned about the prominence of formal rational choice theory and asks whether the increased prominence is necessary, inevitable, and desirable.
- In his opinion, a debate on the merits of formal theory is valuable because it will affect the future direction of scholar researches and focuses. (7)
- His argument is based on the claim that the central aim of social science is to develop knowledge that is relevant to understanding important social problems. (8) Unless formal theory achieves that goal, it should not enjoy higher privileges than other approaches.

What is Formal Theory?

- Formal rational choice theory refers to “the use of mathematical models to derive propositions from a set of basic premises.” (9)
- Basic assumptions of rational choice theory (Game Theory):
 1. Rational choice theory is individualistic.
 2. Each actor will seek to maximize its expected utility.
 3. An actor’s preferences must be complete (be able to rank order their preference for different outcomes) and transitive (if A is preferred to B, and B to C, then A also to C)
 4. Rational choice theory needs to have a specific structure of the game.
 5. Finding an equilibrium is the final goal of the game.

Three main criteria to evaluate social science theories

1. Logical consistency and precision.
 - The main virtue of formal theory lies in this criterion.
 - However, formalization is neither necessary nor sufficient because
 - 1) many nonformal works also contain precise, logically consistent theories such as Darwin’s theory of natural selection.
 - 2) a number of valuable theories are replete with inconsistency or incompleteness such as Keynes’s General Theory, Olson’s Logic of Collective Action, and Waltz’s Theory of International Politics.
 - 3) in some cases, human beings do not revise their beliefs rationally.
 - 4) logical consistency is not enough when there are many possible outcomes, i.e. in the situation of ‘multiple equilibria.’
 - There are also costs that associate with precision and consistency which are complexity and time consumption.
2. Degree of originality
 - Low because of
 1. Methodological overkill. (the tendency of some elaborate formal models that yield trivial results.)
 2. Old wine in new bottles. (use new concepts for familiar ideas.)
3. Empirical Validity
 - Lowest. Formal theorists either ignore empirical testing or conduct a test insincerely.

Conclusion

1. Using formal techniques is still justifiable because of its usefulness in enhancing the precision, verifying and refining its deductive logic.
2. Formal theory mostly take arguments derive from other approaches and place them in mathematical form.
3. Recent formal work lacks rigorous empirical support.

Remember these are only the author's opinions. First compare them with responses from formal theorists, then decide whether to believe it

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