

***One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict*, by Russell Hardin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.**

This book has two main themes. The first is an attempt to push rational choice theory as far as it will go in the explanation of group conflict, group norms and group identification. The second is a sustained polemic against communitarianism. The critique of communitarianism is largely based on the analysis of group conflict. It is the norm-generating communities apparently favoured by communitarians that engage in brutal conflicts - not the ad hoc associations that arise in liberal societies. It is Serbs, *qua* Serbs who slaughter Croats (and vice versa). The members of the Bridge Club leave the Operatic Society alone.

Although Hardin tries to push rational choice theory as far as it will go, he does not suppose that it will go all the way. There are some behaviours that cannot be explained on the basis of rational self-interest. How far does he suppose that rational choice theory can be pushed? The short answer is "a lot further than you might think", but the long answer is rather bitty and in some cases a little obscure. This is partly because the story is rather complex (some people being more "rational" than others) and partly because the notion of self-interest is never clearly defined. Since it is not clear what self-interest is, it is not clear when self-interested motivations give out and "irrational" or "extra-rational" motivations kick in. However Hardin scorns as intellectual laziness attempts to put down the crisis in the former Yugoslavia to primordial hatreds. Such "explanations" cannot explain the long periods of relative harmony and even intermarriage nor the particular go of the periods of violent conflict. Moreover they excuse inaction. If conflicts are due to primordial hatreds, there is nothing much to be done. If they are due to rational but evil choices, then perhaps we can put a stop to them by altering the incentives which drive people to murderous action.

Chapter 1 sets the scene. Hardin points out that if we are as self-interested as rational choice theory supposes, collective action is "hard to motivate". This is often taken to be a gloomy conclusion since the failure of collective action leaves us worse off than we would otherwise be. Hardin stresses that in some contexts at least this is a happy fact. Not all collective action is good. The back of the invisible hand blocks

groups from wrecking individual prospects. Rational choice theorists hitherto have tended to concentrate on benign forms of collective action, explaining how it can be (or seem to be) in the interests of selfish individuals to cooperate and even to make sacrifices for the common good. Hardin is interested in malign forms of collective action where the members of one group cooperate, and even make sacrifices, to suppress another. This too can be largely explained on the assumption of rational self-interest. "Self-interest can often be matched with group interest", says Hardin. "And when it is the result is often appalling" (p. 5). Witness Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia.

Hardin distinguishes between coordination and exchange. A coordination problem (such as which side of the road to drive on) is solved by cooperation but the coordinators suffer no losses as a result of their collective action. In an exchange relationship there are costs as well as benefits from cooperation and there is a constant temptation to harvest the benefits without incurring the costs, thus undermining the collective enterprise. Coordination can empower not only the group but individuals within the group. (Hardin cites the rise to power of pastoral chiefs as described in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.) Moreover, it allows us to solve a circularity problem that plagues Hobbesian accounts of the evolution of the State. To put it crudely if we can't solve the collective action problem by agreeing to get along, how can we solve the much bigger collective action problems involved in setting up a state? Hardin's answer is that an accumulation of coordination power may be sufficient to do the trick. He goes on to give a qualified defence of the "gunman" or "dual coordination" theory of the state. Governments (especially minority governments) survive because the rulers and their agents coordinate on enforcing obedience and potential rebels cannot coordinate on rebellion. They face their masters singly not as a corporate body. This illustrates a point that is implied by Hardin's theory but is somewhat obscured by his talk of driving conventions. Coordination may be a cost-free process for the coordinators, but it need not be so for anyone else. My group may not suffer (much) when it coordinates to suppress yours, but you may suffer severely.

Hardin seems to concede the existence of a primordial need to identify with some group or other, though we have no primordial tendency to identify with a particular group (p. 48). He also concedes that people's behaviour is determined by socially supplied beliefs *including their moral beliefs* (pp. 49, 60 & 62). Since these are largely derived from the communities in which we are raised, they often foster loyalty to the community. These concessions severely limit the scope of rational choice explanation. Indeed if my alleged project is to maximize my self-interest *given certain moral beliefs* (and the interests that they determine) the notion of self-interest and hence of a rational choice explanation begins to lose determinate content. However the picture that emerges from Hardin's discussion is something like this. Groups may solidify in virtue of "extra-rational" motivations. But once they exist, there are often strong self-interested reasons for potential members to identify with the group. (Though sometimes the crystals of self-interest require the grit of extra-rationality if they are to form and grow.) For instance if I have learned my community's language, it might be (or seem) more advantageous for me to promote the linguistic supremacy of my community rather than to learn another language. And that, of course, may involve promoting its political supremacy. Or I might live in a spoilsman society in which most of the good things in life (such as they are) are in the gift of the state. (Hardin specifies post-colonial and post-communist societies with a weak capitalist sector.) In such a society my only chance for advancement may be a) to identify with some group and b) for that group to seize control of the state apparatus. For the society does not allow a person to succeed on his or her own. The groups can then coalesce around some fairly arbitrary and trivial differences. (Think of the Blues and Greens under Justinian!)

Tendencies to identify can be reinforced by norms of exclusion. These function so as to define a group and to set it off from others. They enforce a choice between full identification and leaving the group. Though the *content* of these norms may be settled by coordination, their effect is to block prisoners' dilemma incentives to defect. You are not allowed to enjoy the benefits of group membership without bearing the costs of group action - or at least without demonstrating emphatically that you belong.

Once sufficiently cohesive and exclusive groups exist, violence becomes a possibility. If the central government which holds the contending parties in check is weakened, we may get something like a Hobbesian state of nature in which preemptive violence looks like a rational option. But it is violence on the part of groups not of individuals. (Thus Hobbes's individualist psychology may be wrong but his political sociology largely right.) A preemptive strike on the part of one group creates a "tipping phenomenon" in which a peaceful but precarious balance degenerates into violent conflict.

Many other topics are covered in this book. There are sections on duelling, on the Iceland of the sagas, on Is and Ought, on Corsican vendetta, on the Mafia, on *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, on Jewish as opposed to Catholic guilt, on rap culture and on the distinction between communitarian and universalistic ethics. Hardin makes the interesting point that some universalistic norms - those prescribing behaviour in repeatable two-party interactions - are strongly reinforced by self-interest. It pays on the whole to tell the truth and to keep your promises. The social sanction (in the form of a bad reputation) cuts in fairly quickly if you fail to measure up. It does not pay in the same way to give to charity (in the form of foreign aid), to work for a cleaner, greener world, or to take the trouble to vote in elections. Accordingly such norms are not complied with to the same extent.

I found Hardin's trenchant criticism of communitarianism convincing - if indeed communitarianism is what he says it is. But he himself did not seem to be entirely sure of this. However, his apparent uncertainty about what communitarianism amounts to was shared by all the moral philosophers in my department, so this can hardly be held against him. Communitarianism is such a nebulous doctrine that it is difficult for an opponent to avoid the impression that he is slashing at the fog.

This is an excellent book full of bold ideas and fascinating examples. Moreover it is one of the few works of political philosophy to tackle the disasters of the 20th century head on. Philosophy should not be dumb when confronted with chaos and catastrophe. Hardin, at least, has something to say. Buy it, read it, and ponder.

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