

Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Strategic Instincts: The Adaptive Advantages of Cognitive Biases in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2020. xii+392 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95

The theory of rational choice presumes that leaders generally focus on building support through popular policies that distribute resources and rewards to their constituencies. The theme of the book deals with how our environment and experiences biasedly and mentally affect our decisions. The 392-page book blends historical and current world events to explaining the advantages and disadvantages of biases within individuals and nations. While each of the ten chapters of the book seemly stands alone by their titles, they are more connected as each chapter is built on the other.

The author, Dominic Johnson, uses case studies to elucidate our biasness in presenting events regarding international relations and why nations and individuals try to justify their actions even when “our intuitions” are supposed to “lead to good decisions, not bad ones,” something the author refers to as “strategic instincts” (pp. 2-3). He maintains there is an iota of strategic biases inherent to human nature, which outperforms any rationality in decision-making. Such unconscious biases affect our adaptive thinking, which includes, but not limited to, cognitive heuristics, emotions, memory distortion, and superstitions and religious beliefs (pp. 17-18). Cognitive bias is not only important in our everyday life but also it becomes essential in times of crises and conflict in international relations and politics.

As the author attempts to give details of adaptive advantages of cognitive biases, the reader is more likely to believe that this is literature on psychology. However one thing is clear: no amount of rational choice would ever be the best strategy for achieving one’s goals. In fact, Johnson discusses human behavior in decision-making, the spread of the rational choice, and dominance of this theory in evaluating both economic and political decisions by insisting that cognitive biases have limitations. The author examines three cognitive biases: Overconfidence,

Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), and In-Group/Out-Group bias, using three case studies: The American Revolution, Appeasement of Hitler, and the Pacific Campaign of World War II, respectively. All these tend to influence our way of thinking about the other especially, in international politics. Using evolution as a theoretical framework, the author explains how origins, diversity and human adaptations influence our ideological beliefs and decisions and not surprisingly our voting behavior. Chapter Three juggles biology, psychology, and other disciplines in the social sciences and how they indirectly affect our cognitive biases in the decision-making process be it rational or not. He maintains that human nature undeniably “played a central role in the development of political theory and international relations theory” (p. 30) as all theories rely on individuals in supporting collective decisions by government in international politics, as no one individual has the absolute power in decision making in modern democratic governments. Thus, state decisions are the results of amalgamated individual adaptive or maladaptive decisions driven by an overall cost benefit for the individual or the nation making the decision.

Using Al Qaeda’s attack on America (9/11/2001), Egypt and Syria’s attack on Israel in 1973, and other attacks including the “Cuban Missile Crises in 1962, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the rise of Hitler in the 1930s.” (p.117) Johnson draws from the three variables: overconfidence, FAE, and in-group/out-group bias concepts to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of cognitive bias in decision-making in international politics and their implications for leadership, international relation theory, and political thought. Johnson asserts while overconfidence might lead a seemingly superior group in attacking the other without assessing the strength and resources of the other. This is seen in wars where the aggressor in the long run fails to achieve its core goal or give up entirely. The implications of adaptive decision-

making in-group/out-group is also seen in globalization and international politics where societies are, in theory, supposed to come together through increased interactions by way of their institutions, markets, multinational firms, and networking.

The hypothesis in this decision-making model is to, arguably, bring all cultures together defusing “into a larger, more homogeneous global community.” Unfortunately, the reality is that societies try to maintain their “distinctiveness, identity, language...in the face of global homogenization” (p. 203). The work sees excessive overconfidence and in-group/out-group biases through ideology and patriotism where “identical behavior was deplored when it was carried out on the enemy but excused or explained away when carried out by one’s own side” (p. 255), for example the invasions of America in Iraq and Russia in Ukraine respectively. While the West condemns the atrocities of Russia, the same group was, by and large, silent on the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by America. The book utilizes historical global events to confrontationally argue that decisions in international politics are as result of our cognitive biases, which is part of human nature, and explains the mistakes that go with foreign policy failures. Hence, we are all, individuals and nations, psychologically unintentionally biased in our decision-making process. This book is recommended for policymakers and leaders in attempt to reduce our inherent bias in international politics.

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