

## BOOK NOTES

Book Notes by Scott A. Anderson (University of Chicago), Jeremy D. Bendik-Keymer (University of Chicago), Samuel Black (Simon Fraser University), Chad M. Cyrenne (University of Chicago), Bart Gruzalski (Pacific Center for Sustainable Living), Mark P. Jenkins (Franklin and Marshall College), John Morrow (Victoria University of Wellington), Michael A. Neblo (Ohio State University), Tommie Shelby (Harvard University), and James Stacey Taylor (St. Norbert College).

Chong, Dennis. *Rational Lives: Norms and Values in Politics and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. 292. \$50.00 (cloth); \$18.00 (paper).

*Rational Lives* successfully extends rational choice theory into such areas as political socialization, adaptation to norms, and identity formation—all purportedly “symbolic” concerns where rational choice has heretofore been found wanting. The book stands with Gary Becker’s *Accounting for Tastes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) as the two most powerful rebuttals to the argument that rational choice can account for neither the origin of preferences nor the importance of social identity.

Chong’s most effective move is to introduce a time element into his analyses. He traces the indirect effects that instrumental calculation has on ostensibly noninstrumental future behavior. He develops two simple algebraic models and goes on to examine dozens of empirical examples under the light that they shed. None of the examples offers a statistical test of either model, but the models themselves do serve as effective heuristic guides to an astonishing range of phenomena. And while alternative explanations do exist, they lack the unity and simplicity of Chong’s elegant parameterization.

Though Chong seeks to integrate economic and sociological elements, his approach is unmistakably skewed toward the economic. For example, he “assume[s] that an individual acquiesces to a group’s norms only if there are self-interested reasons to conform” (p. 53). Passages like this lead me to my only substantial concern: Chong does not take seriously the idea that there is any useful concept of rational action beyond strictly instrumental rationality. However, if his extensions of rational choice continue to subsume many more unexpected phenomena, this concern may become increasingly irrelevant.

M. A. N.

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