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Review of *Prisoners of Reason: Game Theory and Neoliberal Political Economy*. S. M. Amadae. Reviewed by James Midgley

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Book Reviews

S. M. Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason: Game Theory and Neoliberal Political Economy*. Cambridge University Press (2016), 360 pages, \$34.99 (paperback).

The term “neoliberalism” is now widely used in social welfare and social work, but it is seldom defined, and few of those who use the term appear to understand its complex meanings or appreciate its nuances. Instead, it seems to be a generalized synonym for what was previously known as “capitalism” or otherwise for a predatory type of capitalism characterized by the voracious pursuit of profits by large commercial firms and their political allies. Some regard neoliberalism as a totalizing ideological system in which human relationships are entirely shaped by market forces, while some believe that it comprises a unique form of governance in which the state exercises its power to promote the interests of business elites. Others take a more capacious view, regarding any type of market exchange as neoliberalism.

Amadae’s book makes a major contribution to understanding the concept of neoliberalism and its multiple meanings and dimensions. She begins by distinguishing between classical liberalism and neoliberalism. While the former upholds a “no harm” principle in which the pursuit of self-interest should not disadvantage others, the latter promotes a “nuclearized sovereignty” in which self-interest is unconstrained by either moral norms or state regulation. In addition to classical writers such as Smith, Locke and Mill, she believes that twentieth century market liberals including Hayek, Friedman and Nozick also subscribe to the “no harm” principle and should therefore be classed as classical liberals. On the other hand, neoliberalism rejects the no harm principle and is tantamount to a winner-take-all game in which no limitations are placed on the pursuit of gain, and losers are mercilessly eliminated. Amadae illustrates her argument with a detailed analysis of game theory and its adoption by governments and policy makers.

Game theory was pioneered by strategic analysts associated with the RAND Corporation during the Cold War, who sought to model mathematically the way nuclear weapons could be used to maximize their deterrent value. This soon led to its application in other fields. Together with rational choice theory (which Amadae discussed in a previous book) she believes that the adoption of game theory in academic circles and in public policy marks a profound phase in the development of the social sciences.

The author uses the celebrated Prisoners Dilemma game to illustrate her analysis of how game theory is applied to different intellectual and policy fields. As is well known, the prisoner's dilemma game demonstrates how rational decision-making based on self-interest can be mathematically modelled to calculate the risks associated with different outcomes. She contends that this relatively straightforward game is a useful way of gaining insights into the far more sophisticated and mathematically prodigious body of knowledge that now exerts a powerful influence on policymakers and in academics in fields as disparate as economics, evolutionary biology and jurisprudence. Her message is that game theory should not be dismissed as an exotic preoccupation of a handful of scholars engaged in obtuse computations but recognized as a scientifically-based justification for elevating strategic rationality to the highest levels of government. The strategic rationality that permeates game theory, she contends, also forms an integral part of neoliberal ideology, which directly affects the lives of hundreds of millions of people today.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I provides a discussion of the emergence of game theory and its application in formulating nuclear strategy during the Cold War. Part II examines the application of game theory to public policy, showing how the classical contractual principle of consent has evolved under the influence of rational choice and game theory into a darker interpretation in which the use of coercion to require cooperation is justified. In an interesting analysis, she shows how these ideas gained popularity through the work of leading neoliberal scholars such as James Buchanan, who overturned the classical liberal no harm principle by abrogating the requirement that those who are disadvantaged by

policy decisions should be compensated. In Part III of the book, the author examines the way game theory has influenced evolutionary biology, and particularly the concept of the Selfish Gene developed by Richard Dawkins. The book concludes by drawing the material together and offering a brief but heartfelt call for a different approach that celebrates human agency and transcends the narrow confines of rational choice and mathematically computed rational outcomes.

Although this is not a book for beginners, it offers important insights into a dimension of neoliberalism that is seldom recognized or subjected to detailed scholarly scrutiny. The author makes use of a formidable body of literature and demonstrates her equally formidable mastery of the material. Those who make frequent rhetorical references to the evils of neoliberalism should consult this book to better understand the complex ways Western individualism has evolved into an extreme form of atomized rationality in which human behavior is interpreted in terms of mathematical formulas based on games with calculable outcomes. By reading Amadae's fascinating book, they will be better equipped both to understand and respond to the neoliberal challenge.

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Lal Zimman, Jenny Davis, and Joshua Raclaw (Eds.), *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender and Sexuality*. Oxford University Press (2014), 231 pages, \$23.70 (paperback).

Queer Excursions contains chapters summarizing eight different studies looking at language, gender and sexuality. I envisioned a focus on 'queered' binary language, such as the use of gender neutral pronouns and being introduced to more recent studies on 'queer non-binary' gender identities and sexual orientations. But rather than looking at language, gender and sexuality as separate entities, the book's approach was to analyze language use surrounding queer identities.

Some studies were easier to understand than others, but all were interesting. What I found to be most valuable was the inside look at gender and sexuality structures in other