

Culture



Youssef, COHEN, *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries: The Prisoner's Dilemma and the Collapse of Democracy in Latin America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Catherine Schissel

Volume 14, numéro 2, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083538ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083538ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Schissel, C. (1994). Compte rendu de [Youssef, COHEN, *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries: The Prisoner's Dilemma and the Collapse of Democracy in Latin America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.] *Culture*, 14(2), 135–136. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083538ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1994

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des
services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique
d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de
l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à
Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Book Reviews / *Comptes rendus*

Michael HOUSEMAN and Carlo SEVERI, *Naven ou le donner à voir, Essai d'interprétation de l'action rituelle*, Paris; CNRS Éditions, 1995, FF 135.

By Eric Schwimmer

This book deals with a single society, the Iatmul of New Guinea and a single institution, the *naven* ceremony. Although Bateson was the first to analyse the *naven* ceremonies in his classic study of 1936, a great deal more has been discovered about them lately, notably by the Basel school of Anthropology which has produced a series of magnificent field studies of Sepik peoples. Swiss scholars such as B. Hauser-Schäublin, M. Stanek, J. Wassmann and F. Weiss greatly widened our knowledge of rituals of the *naven* type and deepened the analysis of those rituals well beyond what Bateson discovered, both on the level of social structure and of ritual symbolism. Moreover, they drew attention to the theatrical and manipulative aspect of these rituals as well as the way they were transformed in post-contact history.

In fact, the excellence of the Basel school's monographs would have been recognized many years ago but for the sad fact that hardly any Melanesianist scholars have sufficient command of the German language to read them and that these monographs are too specialized and detailed to invite translation. The Houseman/Severi essay is therefore serving a highly useful function in presenting some of the key ideas of these monographs in a language more accessible to anthropologists. If it had confined itself to a critical review of these works, and to showing how they enriched and added further dimensions to Bateson's classic, it would have been possible to give the essay almost nothing but praise (although it seems insensitive to the Basel school's historical and transactional finesse).

Unfortunately, the authors decided to treat this material as the basis of a general theory of ritualised action. Their basic concept is "ritual condensation" (p. 55) which appears to transpose to the field of ritual analysis the kind of mathematical formalization presented in Lévi-Strauss' canonic formula for myths.

The authors are right in noting that Bateson himself did not see how these relations could be mathematized, but R. Wagner, M. Strathern and several others (unmentioned in the essay's bibliography) have taken the novelty out of all these doubly inverted plant and animal parts identified with simulated physiological processes appropriating a kind of pseudo-control over child-birth.

The authors are not melanesianists (one is an anthropologist who did fieldwork in Panama, the other is a comparative sociologist). They have too limited a knowledge of the vast and challenging regional literature and seem unaware of what has already been discovered. There are no particular errors in what they say about ritual condensation, but a lack of novelty and a certain vagueness in restating what M. Strathern has stated more precisely and coherently. Moreover, if the authors had read Strathern, they would have known that the *father* (p. 201) is not a figure absent from *naven* and they could have seen how he fits into their scheme.

In spite of its failure as a new theory of ritualized action, the book is useful to those interested in Iatmul ethnography but unable to read the original texts of the Basel school. Their presentation is skilful and perceptive, and the comparison with Bateson is illuminating.

Youssef, COHEN, *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries: The Prisoner's Dilemma and the Collapse of Democracy in Latin America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

By Catherine Schissel

University of Calgary

Youssef Cohen's *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries* is an attempt to explain the rise of authoritarianism in Latin America in the sixties and seventies. Using Brazil and Chile as case studies, Cohen offers a rational-choice interpretation of the events that lead to the overthrow of Presidents Goulart in 1964 and Allende in 1973.

He begins by stating that the more common structural-functionalist explanations of these events are fundamentally flawed because they do not take into account personal choice and individual will when addressing political conflict. Referring to the work of Theda Skocpol, the author argues that by focusing on structures and ignoring personal beliefs, preferences and goals, a key part of the equation has been missed.

As an alternative to this approach Cohen offers an intentional, rational-choice explanation. He describes rational-choice as a type of situation where the actors involved choose from a set of available options. He specifically focuses on what he refers to as the prisoner's dilemma game. The game suggests that people or groups will cooperate only if they can be guaranteed that they will not make themselves more vulnerable by doing so. Cohen suggests that in Brazil and Chile the moderate forces of the left and right were caught in the prisoner's dilemma. Both moderate sides wanted democratic reforms and they were willing to compromise somewhat with the other side to achieve them. To work together they needed to completely break with their radical allies as an indication of their commitment to moderate reforms. Because neither side could be guaranteed that the other side would break with their radical supporters, the process of democratic reforms stalled. As a result, the moderates moved closer to their radical allies and the democratic system eventually broke down.

Cohen claims that it would have been possible to reach a compromise between the moderate forces and maintain the democratic process. However, he does not discuss what would have happened to the radical forces within the government if they had been completely rejected. Especially considering that these forces often had widespread armed grassroots supporters. It is possible that this could have actually lead to further conflict such as civil war.

Cohen offers a unique explanation of how and why the democratic regimes of Brazil and Chile collapsed. However, rather than offering rational-choice as the definitive answer to understanding societies in conflict, it makes sense to recognize the complexity of the interactions of all actors involved, both human and structural. The prisoner's dilemma game reduces the complexities of the situation into a simplistic choice between maintaining democratic institutions or not.

Cohen ends by saying that he has shown that structuralist explanations are insufficient because they claim it is possible to successfully explain historical outcomes like the collapse of democratic institutions by direct reference to structural conditions, without any mention of human beliefs, preferences and intentions.

However this is not always the case with structuralist explanations. They do not always ignore personal choice and motivation, but rather recognize the complexity of the situation and the relationship these factors have to economic and political structures.

For example, Cohen in his extensive explanation of what took place in Brazil and Chile pays little attention to these economic and political factors. He does little but give passing reference to the class conflicts occurring within the countries and pays no attention to the countries rate and level of capitalist development or to the regional and international setting in which the events occurred.

One of the more blatant examples of this is his discussion of the nationalization of the formerly US. owned cooper mines in Chile. He mentions that they were nationalized by Allende, but he does not discuss the US. response to the nationalization, or their consequent attempts to further destabilize the Chilean economy. Yet these were factors which played a very important part in the overthrow of President Allende.

I would agree with Cohen's premise that these two case studies are extremely complex and must be addressed in an equally sophisticated manner. However I would question whether using rational-choice theory, and in particular, the prisoner's dilemma, is sufficiently complex to do so.

I must also make one final note on the author's use of gendered language. Taking into consideration all the advances that have been made to incorporate non-gender specific language into written materials in the social sciences, it is disappointing to see a recent publication which has ignored these developments.