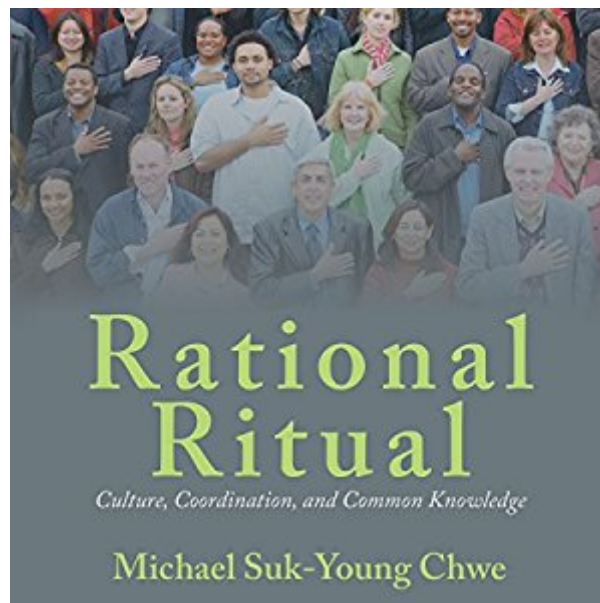




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Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, And Common Knowledge



Synopsis

Why do Internet, financial service, and beer commercials dominate Super Bowl advertising? How do political ceremonies establish authority? Why does repetition characterize anthems and ritual speech? Why were circular forms favored for public festivals during the French Revolution? This book answers these questions using a single concept: common knowledge. Game theory shows that in order to coordinate its actions, a group of people must form "common knowledge". Each person wants to participate only if others also participate. Members must have knowledge of each other, knowledge of that knowledge, knowledge of the knowledge of that knowledge, and so on. Michael Chwe applies this insight with striking erudition to analyze a range of rituals across history and cultures. He shows that public ceremonies are powerful not simply because they transmit meaning from a central source to each audience member but because they let audience members know what other members know. For instance people watching the Super Bowl know that many others are seeing precisely what they see and that those people know in turn that many others are also watching. This creates common knowledge, and advertisers selling products that depend on consensus are willing to pay large sums to gain access to it. Remarkably, a great variety of rituals and ceremonies, such as formal inaugurations, work in much the same way. By using a rational-choice argument to explain diverse cultural practices, Chwe argues for a close reciprocal relationship between the perspectives of rationality and culture. He illustrates how game theory can be applied to an unexpectedly broad spectrum of problems while showing in an admirably clear way what game theory might hold for scholars in the social sciences and humanities who are not yet acquainted with it. In a new afterword, Chwe delves into new applications of common knowledge both in the real world and in experiments and considers how generating common knowledge has become easier in the digital age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an interesting and compelling book. Although it is not really written as a marketing or business text, it has much to offer in those areas. The ideas in the book form a tool set that can be used to explain why successful companies do the things that they do. I read the book three times in a couple of weeks just to be sure that I was understanding all of the concepts. Since then I have given copies to 3 business associates, all of whom have become fans. I now consider this book to be one of my best "secret weapons" when thinking about business tactics and strategy.

This book is a nice extension of game theory into the area of culture and ritual. Some of Chwe's arguments seem a bit of a stretch, but I think his basic premise is sound.

A good book.

Overly and unnecessarily academic. I have a long academic background myself and got bored quickly.

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