

Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited	
Journal Code: POPS	Proofreader: Emily
Article No: 775	Delivery date: 25 May 2010
Page Extent: 4	

*Political Psychology*, Vol. xx, No. xx, 2010

## BOOK REVIEW

**How Do You Know? The Economics of Ordinary Knowledge.** By Russell Hardin. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2009. 224 pp.

All knowledge is local, or at least that message emerges from Russell Hardin's new book titled, *How Do You Know? The Economics of Ordinary Knowledge*. The book represents the latest installment on Hardin's renowned scholarship on collective action and rationality. Readers learn early in the preface that there are two obstacles to declaring actions rational. The first occurs in interactive choices among two or more actors. In such situations, outcomes are jointly determined and one cannot simply choose an outcome, only a strategy which may constrain the possible outcomes. Hardin covers strategic interactions like these in a forerunner tome, *Indeterminacy and Society*. The latest *How Do You Know?* book serves as a companion to the previous one and it takes up a second barrier to assessments of rationality: the knowledge base of individuals making choices.

Far from there being one single definition of rational action, focusing on individual-level knowledge recognizes that rationality lies in the eye of the beholder. Given a certain set of beliefs or facts, one could deem many actions as rational from the actor's point of view. As Hardin writes, "What must interest anyone who wishes to explain behavior is the knowledge or beliefs of actual people" (p. 2). The "actual people" part of the passage represents an opening shot across the bow for anyone who imposes their notions of correct or incorrect beliefs on the mass public.

From that point, Hardin sketches an economic theory of knowledge that draws attention to "... the costs and benefits of having and coming to have knowledge, or to correct what knowledge one has" (p. 2). The quote makes it obvious that Hardin treats knowledge as distinct from objective fact. That knowledge can be corrected instead of the common view of knowledge as an indicator of objective facts reminds us once again to view the world from the eyes of ordinary individuals, not as social scientists. Elsewhere, Hardin distinguishes between "justified true beliefs," which are in the realm of public knowledge, versus the more intimate "personal knowledge."

1 Hardin's economic theory of knowledge conjures other classic works in  
2 political science, such as Anthony Downs' 1957 classic *An Economic Theory of*  
3 *Democracy*. As Hardin writes, "an economic theory of democracy requires an  
4 economic theory of knowledge, especially of political knowledge" (p. 64). The  
5 author goes on to explain that individuals might vote differently not because they  
6 have different interests, but because they have different beliefs about the candi-  
7 dates or the issues. Absent an objective measure of the truth, "We are our own  
8 judges" (p. 65). Through passages like these, the book will likely inspire academic  
9 debates in several respects. Is knowledge really knowledge if it is factually incor-  
10 rect? Hardin's view on this might not attract many adherents now, but it is  
11 thought-provoking.

12 Downs' work appears prominently in the book because Downs was among the  
13 first to point out the disincentive citizens have to learning about politics since their  
14 votes probably will not decide the election. Critics of instrumental voter rationality  
15 counterargue that many people do in fact vote, which implies little support for  
16 rational choice perspectives. However, Hardin parries the thrust. He notes that  
17 many people vote because they *believe* it to be rational. Moreover, Hardin points  
18 out that many people do indeed remain rationally ignorant. Ultimately, though,  
19 Hardin strives for détente. He argues that the median voter theorem "should be set  
20 aside" (p. 81) in favor of an account of ordinary knowledge.

21 Despite the aforementioned references to Downs, Hardin does not engage  
22 modern scholarship in political science as much as he might have. In what may  
23 disappoint readers of *Political Psychology*, Hardin consciously does not "canvas  
24 psychological limits [on decision making] in this book" (p. xii). This is unfortunate  
25 because decision making biases documented by political psychologists might look  
26 a whole lot different if evaluated from the actor's eyes. For example, measures of  
27 "voting correctly" by Richard Lau and David Redlawsk are externally defined,  
28 albeit using individual-level data. One could imagine alternative standards based  
29 upon what an individual believes to be true, irrespective of whether it is. While  
30 personal beliefs might be warped into conformity with political preferences,  
31 decisions flowing from them could look quite reasonable. Passages reminiscent of  
32 this appear late in the book in a Chapter 8 on "Culture." There Hardin writes,  
33 "Culture is a product of knowledge . . ." (p. 161). Later in a line that one could  
34 easily imagine in works on motivated reasoning, Hardin writes, "If I seek some bit  
35 of knowledge because it might benefit me to know it, then acquiring that knowl-  
36 edge may tend to lead me to a bias toward my own interests" (p. 172).

37 Another opportunity to engage the social science literature revolves around  
38 information acquisition. Hardin writes that contrary to scientific notions of knowl-  
39 edge based upon evidence, "In ordinary life, knowledge is almost entirely  
40 grounded in testimony" (p. 58). This leads to a focus on the sources of knowledge,  
41 not the knowledge claim itself. If that is the case, then one lament is that there were  
42 precious few passages in which Hardin focuses on the flow of political information  
43 from the mass media, which is presumably how most people become informed or

1 misinformed. He notes that the *New York Times*, long billed as the “newspaper of  
2 record” for the United States (p. 68), has ceased publishing regular reports on  
3 congressional votes. Hardin is on the right track here and more attention to the  
4 supply of political information would have been helpful.

5 In the same vein, the lines about sources of information will remind some of  
6 the *The Democratic Dilemma* by McCubbins and Lupia. In fact, the subtitle of that  
7 book is “Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?” Phrases like that appear  
8 in Hardin’s book, but he does not delineate the conditions that facilitate sound  
9 political decision making. Yet, it is not as if Hardin endorses information short-cuts  
10 or heuristics. At one point Hardin likens low information rationality—that is,  
11 behavior consistent with one’s best interests despite factual ignorance—to cultural  
12 battles over the origins of the universe. Such scholarship represents “accidental  
13 rationality” and is equated with the “magical intelligent design of electoral choice”  
14 (p. 67).

15 Hardin does reference what is probably the most well-known book on political  
16 knowledge, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* by  
17 Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. In that sense, the classification scheme  
18 Hardin uses for knowledge—science knowledge, moral knowledge, institutional  
19 knowledge, cultural knowledge, etc.—goes beyond what others have done and  
20 could represent a lasting contribution. Similarly, the sections on religion-inspired  
21 factual claims via authority are particularly intriguing. Finally, it is also important  
22 to note, as Hardin does, that there are some domains (like medical knowledge) in  
23 which knowledge is produced by others, not the individual who uses it.

24 Upon first glance, readers expecting an empirical test of the propositions will  
25 be disappointed. However, the book deserves another chance. As noted, there are  
26 some memorable parts of the book, many of which originate in the provocative  
27 chapter on “Democratic Participation.” There and elsewhere, Hardin cannot be too  
28 forceful about reminding readers that knowledge has value and that knowledge  
29 acquisition entails costs. Knowledge can also be a byproduct of other actions, such  
30 as in social interaction with friends who happen to discuss politics. Ironically, such  
31 indirect paths to learning might remind some readers of selective incentives (e.g.,  
32 bumper stickers, group insurance, travel discounts) that can help inspire collective  
33 action.

34 In general Hardin employs a conversational style. Some readers might even  
35 imagine that they strolled into a pub with the author. Belly-up with Russell Hardin  
36 and upon reading the book it will be like you are old friends. There are no awkward  
37 tables or mind-bending data analyses. Instead, the conversation will range widely,  
38 including references to the height of Mt. Everest, the Catholic Church’s trial of  
39 Galileo, Intelligent Design theories, Einstein, and even the Unabomber. A word of  
40 caution, though. It might be helpful to review the works of Wittgenstein, Dewey,  
41 and Hume. Anything more than a passing familiarity with prominent political  
42 philosophers will aid readers. Likewise, the author traces the intellectual lineage  
43 of the book back to John Stuart Mill, James Madison, and even the Austrian

1 economist F.A. Hayek. Hardin employs these works to remind us to trust indi-  
2 viduals because, in the end, only they know what is best for them, even if their  
3 knowledge may be subpar when judged by external standards.  
4

5 Jason Barabas  
6 *Florida State University*

7  
8 **REFERENCES**  
9

- 10 Lupia, A., & McCubbins, M. D. (1998). *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They*  
11 *Need to Know?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
12 Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters.*  
13 New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.