

Review of: "Economics Rationality in the World of Amartya Sen"

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This review comes from the perspective of an intellectual historian who is not an expert on Sen, but who is interested in how the meaning of “rationality” has shifted and been contested over time. From that perspective, I found this article about a major twentieth century thinker interesting and thought provoking. Indeed, it has suggested connections I can pursue in my own research. More importantly, I believe the article can, at a general level, be of interest to historians of the social sciences and, at a more specific level, can be of interest to historians working on the history of rationality and cognate concepts in the twentieth century. For instance, while reading Mariani’s article (and before Herbert Simon makes an appearance) I kept thinking of Hunter Crowther-Heyck’s *Herbert A. Simon: The Bounds of Reason in Modern America* both Simon and Sen challenged prevailing definitions of rationality, although in very different ways! But the point I want to make here is that, while not ready for publication at this point, Mariani could make some modifications that make the article more appealing to intellectual historians. Other reviewers can, I believe, speak more authoritatively to Mariani’s technical treatment of Sen. The same goes for the use made of Hacking’s ideas. Thus, in what follows my comments will focus on how the article could be improved for the benefit of readers who are interested in where Sen’s critique of rationality fits in the history of ideas.

The article is framed as a contribution to Sen studies, and there is nothing wrong with that. But framing the article (at least in part) as a contribution to research on the historically contested meaning of rationality (see suggested reading below) can broaden the intended audience without diluting the core thesis. Mariani here is interested in explicating Sen’s critique of prevailing economic understandings of rationality. And Mariani reminds us that this critique was developed in “dialogue with moral philosophy and epistemology.” It is this dialogue that I want to know more about. These questions come to mind: In what intellectual context did Sen formulate his critique of economic rationality? In which intellectual traditions did he situate himself? Which thinkers did he view as his primary interlocutors/adversaries? What was he reading in the 1950s and 1960s that underpins his critique? I have a feeling that his time at Cambridge in the late 1950s and early 1960s is a key chapter of this story. Think of it this way: Sen seems to have started writing about this set of issues around 1970, so what was it about that moment that prompted his intervention? Mariani hints at Sen’s intellectual formation (“He was ‘an Indian thinker inspired by 18th-century Scottish economists, French mathematicians, and famous Bengali poets.’”), but I think that expanding this sentence into a section that contextualizes Sen in greater detail will help to sharpen the issues at stake for Sen and set up the discussion that follows. Adding the historical dimension also has the advantage of giving Mariani a story to tell, rather than simply an explication to deliver.

It might be possible to do this by putting Sen in dialogue with Adam Smith. Indeed, the elements of such a dialogue are already implicit in Mariani's article. Mariani writes: "According to Smith, man was driven by self-interest, but Smith never said that the whole nature of man was self-interest." Indeed. The theory of self-interest Smith develops in *Wealth of Nations* needs to be seen alongside his earlier argument in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that human behavior (including moral behavior) is fundamentally social. Reconciling these seemingly contradictory views has been a major problem of Smith studies (for an overview here see Darwall, Stephen. "Sympathetic liberalism: recent work on Adam Smith." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 28, no. 2 (1999): 139-164.), but I think it is now accepted that *The Wealth of Nations* understanding of human nature was not meant to displace or supersede the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* understanding. For Smith "sympathy" is as important a concept as "self-interest." So, can we say that Sen's criticism of the homo oeconomicus understanding of rationality is an attempt to remind us of this? Mariani's claim that Sen does deny not the role of self-interest while also emphasizing that humans act from a "plurality of motivations" seems consonant with Smith's nuanced view of human nature as socially emergent. Moreover, we know that Sen understood his work as part of an intellectual tradition that can be traced back to Smith. So, if Sen is in fact trying to reintroduce—and build upon—a more nuanced Smithian understanding of human nature, that is important and a point worth exploring in depth. The section on sympathy and commitment would be a natural place to explore this Smith-Sen connection.

Pushing this further, I think Mariani should think about what the article is really trying to do. It is framed as an explication of one aspect of Sen's thought. But when we get into the article we find that it is something more: Mariani wants to argue that at some point economics took a wrong turn in its conception of rationality, and wants to use Sen to help make that point. For example: "That is why I appreciate Sen's effort to dismantle the traditional economics of rationality. I support Sen's argument that economics have laid a fragile foundation in economics models. We can see that rationality in economics has given inappropriate criteria about the standard of human rational behavior." And one of the strengths of the paper is that it reminds us of what is at stake. Models of human nature and rationality offered by economists have real-world implications: "This issue has far-reaching implications, because the description of human nature in the social sciences is not just an innocent description, but is used as a normative-prescriptive agenda of what kind of human being should be, especially through government policies, educational curricula, and management." All of this is well and good. But how can Mariani convey this in an effective academic essay? My suggestion is to reframe this as a paper about a specific *moment* in the development of Sen's thought, a moment in the 1970s when he began challenge regnant definitions of rationality within economics. This would also help solve the problem that in the article as it is, there is a chronologically loose treatment of Sen's thought: recent works are treated as entirely consistent with much earlier works, giving the impression that his thought has not developed meaningfully. Doing all of this will require a much deeper dive into the existing secondary literature.

A few more specific comments:

First, the article needs the careful attention of an editor. Many sentences are unclear or awkwardly constructed and there are punctuation and typographical issues throughout.

Second, the footnotes and bibliography also require attention. Some footnotes are incomplete, some seem to have incorrect page numbers, and formatting is inconsistent. There also are references in the text that lack footnotes.

Third, constructions like “That is why I appreciate...” and “I support Sen’s argument...” strike the wrong tone for an academic essay.

Fourth, The treatment of Hacking’s ideas aside, I think Mariani needs to do more to justify this digression.

Suggested reading:

If Mariani is interested in following up the suggestions above, the following works might be helpful:

Griswold Jr, Charles L. Adam Smith and the virtues of enlightenment. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Thomas, William. Rational action: The sciences of policy in Britain and America, 1940-1960. MIT Press, 2015.

Erickson, Paul, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin. How reason almost lost its mind. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Crowther-Heyck, Hunter. Herbert A. Simon: The bounds of reason in modern America. JHU Press, 2005.

Heyck, Hunter. Age of system: Understanding the development of modern social science. JHU Press, 2015.