
In his famous 1964 work, *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse wrote: “We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality.” The rational irrationality of Cold War culture was exemplified by the RAND nuclear strategist Herman Kahn. Indeed, as Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi’s recent biography of Kahn makes apparent, he was a man who relished the absurd. Marcuse excoriated the affluent consumer society as composed of people who “find their soul in their automobile [and] hi-fi set.” The quintessentially Los Angelan Kahn was certainly fond of his convertible car and his swimming pool—a pool he had installed inside his fall-out shelter. Most vexing about Kahn, though, was his tendency to turn mass murder into a joke: he delivered lectures on World War Three with the timing and cadence of a nightclub comic. After reconstructing a typical Kahn monologue, Ghamari-Tabrizi reflects: “One expects him to murmur ‘But seriously folks…’ to close the bit, it so much mimics a nightclub *spiel.*” (45) Kahn’s physiognomy contributed to his absurdist aura. In the photograph on the book’s cover, he resembles Humpty-Dumpty, his trousers hitched up high around his bulging mid-section. This funny fat man, who gloried in the sunny hedonism of early 1960s southern California—whether that meant lounging at the Del Mar Hotel and Beach Club, or taking experimental doses of LSD, to which Kahn declared himself a “convert” (75)—was also the high priest of the survivable and winnable nuclear war. Kahn’s droll monologues arrived at scenarios in which survivors would emerge from underground bunkers to begin the task of eking out their existence on a post-holocaust scorched and radioactive Earth.

Ghamari-Tabrizi’s fascinating and sparkingly written book is one of the best examples of how the genre of biography is developing as focal social history. This kind of biography considers the individual as a point at which broader social, institutional, and cultural dynamics and conflicts intersect. To uncover the individual life is simultaneously to analyze a broader social and cultural condition. Kahn serves Ghamari-Tabrizi as just such a point of convergence, allowing her to draw together transformations of consciousness and authority within the American State and in the culture more generally. By tracing the rise, albeit brief, of this bizarre figure to political and cultural prominence, she shows us also how Americans and their institutions grappled with the Atomic Age. This was, to Americans, the age of the new, overturning old certainties and seeming to call for new faiths and prophets.

Ghamari-Tabrizi captures the underlying malaise of the post-war affluent society: beneath the swelling abundance of gas-guzzling cars, ranch-style suburban homes, washing machines, and TV sets, there was the unreal reality, the nuclear “uncanny,” as she calls it, of potential mass annihilation. (85) Ghamari-Tabrizi reconstructs this unease, and the search for faith that it propelled, by comparing those who thronged to Billy Graham’s revival meetings with those who sought reassurance in RAND’s scientific priesthood. She quotes letters from members of the public, housewives, and junior high school teachers, who found themselves, amid “cookies, bike rides…and trite household chores,” unable to repress thoughts of impending atomic doom. For them, Kahn was a kindred spirit, someone who wouldn’t regard them as ridiculous, because he also “thinks about the unthinkable.” (15)

The central theme of the book is the interplay and tension between experience, reason, and faith. The new civilian defence intellectuals of RAND audaciously staked out their authority at the centre of the military-strategic apparatus with the claim that the atomic bomb had undermined grounds for trust in experience. Facing generals who were suspicious of these soft-skinned intellectuals with no first-hand knowledge of blood, guts, and mud, the RAND
technical intelligentsia could argue that experience was, in fact, a hindrance to grasping the radically novel realities of atomic war fought with long-range missiles. The age of the new required expertise oriented toward a future that would not be like the past. The authority of experience was ultimately based on faith in the continuity of past, present, and future. The atom bomb had shattered the grounds for such faith.

In the age of the new, reason would displace experience. Ghamari-Tabrizi emphasizes the symbolic importance of the computer, both in the broader culture of 1950s and 1960s America and in the particular organizational and political culture of RAND. For Kahn and his colleagues, the computer presented the power of deductive pure reason as opposed to inductive reasoning from experience. Game-theoretic thought experiments enabled the reduction of reality to rational first principles and, hence, the development of a priori military strategy. Yet, the problem of induction could not so easily be banished. Simulation and game theory produced embodied expertise rooted in the experience of gaming. Was this experience any less subject to inductive scepticism than that of the traditional military man? Why should one infer that real hostilities will be faithful to the assumptions built into any game? Not only were the assumptions underlying the game perhaps arbitrary, but it was not necessarily clear what those assumptions were. Simulation methods, relying on complex mathematical models, were largely opaque to those outside the gamers’ professional circle. Ghamari-Tabrizi writes: “Hence we arrive at the conundrum of simulating nuclear war. There was no independent way to validate the findings from any game. One could only submit to an act of faith.” (179)

Kahn was calling for his military, political, and public audiences not only to take an imaginative leap into the unreal world of gaming, but also to take a leap of faith. So from journeys into formal computer models and the flight of abstract reason, we arrive back at Kahn himself, and to the question of whether this was a man in whom one was willing to place faith. Although he appears an unlikely figure to call charismatic, Kahn indeed drew on a kind of
embodied individual authority. Though he circulated through the bureaucratic agencies of the Cold War state, he was a gadfly, and independent from their routines. According to the sociologist Max Weber, the paradigmatic pronouncement of the charismatic prophet is, “It is written, but I say unto you.” Kahn presented his insights in similar form, as a challenge to established institutional assumptions and order. A climate of uncertainty, in which tradition and experience are undermined, provides the setting in which charismatic authority can introduce a new worldview. Kahn offered a radically new worldview, which denigrated tradition and promised to overturn it. What he offered in place of tradition was reason.

Weber, of course, contrasted charisma with any kind of rational regime of legal, administrative, or technical rules. Kahn, however, represents a peculiar synthesis: his was the charisma of reason. Indeed, it was the charisma of Weberian instrumental reason—a concern with means, not ends. The question for Kahn was how to win a nuclear war; there was no questioning of whether a nuclear war should be fought. When it came to such questions of values, all Kahn could offer was banal Cold War rhetoric about “punishing the Soviets for their aggression.” But Kahn’s instrumental rationality was charismatic in the same way that it was avant-garde: it promised an overturning of the past. Ghamari-Tabrizi describes the RAND culture as “Cold War avant-garde”: “Cool jazz could be heard outside somebody’s office at night. Beards sprouted here and there, and pipe tobacco was everywhere.” Describing a Life magazine photo essay showing RAND intellectuals at work, she writes: “This is the mise en scène for the modern intellectual: along with futuristic chairs and a Japanese paper kite dangling from the ceiling, the image highlights the conspicuous informality of lolling on the floor while debating the life and death of the nation.” Like avant-garde artists, the RAND intellectuals took pride and pleasure in attempting to épater les bourgeois: the coolness with which they treated mass death was a display of aloofness from the values of ordinary people and everyday life.
The gallows humour that was so central to Kahn’s persona was expressive of his commitment to reason, but also of the knowledge that pure reason may lead in directions that are unpalatable from a standpoint of moral values. The worldview that Kahn embodied was one in which, if moral questions could not be reduced to an instrumental calculus (comparing numbers of dead bodies, for example), they were unimportant and were to be laughed off. As a charismatic representative of instrumental reason, Kahn conveyed a supreme confidence in the powers of science and calculation and a dismissive attitude toward all other value logics. If instrumental reason led to amoral absurdism, then so be it. Kahn pressed the question: “How many deaths are acceptable?” not as a rhetorical question, but as one demanding a numerical answer. (212)

Scratch the surface of Kahn’s comic and hedonistic persona, and there was the glint of steel. This steeliness comes across in Kahn’s humour: “Let me tell you my solution to the whole problem…. You make the SAC commander’s job hereditary and put a guy like…General LeMay in charge who really is going to hit them hard, you know, and he is really irrevocable. You make his assistant’s job hereditary and his job is to shoot LeMay at the outbreak of war. So you have a sensible strategy.” (218) The point underlying Kahn’s humour was the necessity of calculative ruthlessness: not what, to Kahn, was the mindless inflexibility of LeMay, but the calculative strategizing of the rational organization that employs LeMay. We can see Kahn as someone who embraced Max Weber’s prescriptions regarding the scientific vocation: “if one wishes to settle with this devil, one must not take flight before him…. One has to see the devil’s ways to the end.”3 There is the echo of Weber in Kahn’s statement that “it takes an iron will…to distinguish among the possible degrees of awfulness.” (219)

Ghamari-Tabrizi’s study of Kahn contains an implicit critique of the Weberian prescription for dogged attachment to value-freedom. Kahn embodied this ethos and its resulting absurdity. Kahn’s bland reassurances about the survivability of nuclear war and the resilience of human life and society were, in Ghamari-Tabrizi’s
words, “pert and pompous.” (221) The core of his outlook was a dogmatic faith in the power of science and technology to overcome all obstacles. Ghamari-Tabrizi calls this “comic reason,” referencing Hegel’s definition of the comic hero, a figure of unflappable complacency. One could also call it comic-book reason, since, as Ghamari-Tabrizi puts it, “for comic reason, the earth itself is plastic.” There is no transformation of nature and society that the magic of technology cannot accomplish: “Under the sign of comic reason, every obstacle is a temporary hindrance.” (311-313) There was, then, a profound unreality at the core of Kahn’s much-vaunted realism and rationalism, a denial of human frailty and of the fragility and limits of ecosystems and Earth. Kahn’s campaign was short-lived. By the mid-1960s, he declared himself “bored” with the subject of nuclear war. (314) But as Ghamari-Tabrizi emphasizes, Kahn-esque expressions and modes of reasoning continue to echo through the corridors of power. Ours is still a world in which “irrational rationality” holds sway.

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Notes

