



The Taming Of Chance

Ian Hacking , Quentin Skinner (Editor)

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In this important new study Ian Hacking continues the enquiry into the origins and development of certain characteristic modes of contemporary thought undertaken in such previous works as his best selling *Emergence of Probability*. Professor Hacking shows how by the late nineteenth century it became possible to think of statistical patterns as explanatory in themselves, and to regard the world as not necessarily deterministic in character. Combining detailed scientific historical research with characteristic philosophic breath and verve, *The Taming of Chance* brings out the relations among philosophy, the physical sciences, mathematics and the development of social institutions, and provides a unique and authoritative analysis of the "probabilization" of the Western world.

The Taming Of Chance Details

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From Reader Review The Taming Of Chance for online ebook

Alex Lee says

In this amazing work, Ian Hacking shows us the development of statistics. At first, statistics was used to find the "laws" of society. The patterns that were discovered were then utilized to as both prediction and explanation, to calibrate both the past and the future. Out of this use, the figure of the "normal" took over. This reinforced a position by which society then sought to calibrate itself in mediocrity. The present was thus always in decay, as normal slipped away due to change. At the same time, normal was understood as a purified state, one that people needed to attain to be "healthy." The resolution that these statistical laws were explanation and prediction thus reproduces itself in the field as ideology.

Both past and future are colonized by our imagined laws, explained by nothing yet colonizing everything.

Hacking here presents the theoretical mechanism, the heirs of Newtonism, as developing the formula for state policy and social control. From the end of the French Revolution to the development of the centrist liberal state, we have a consistent march towards state intervention through the technicalities of a healthier, managed people.

June says

I read it as one of the compulsory reading set once when I did my training in India. Until the first half of the book I couldn't find it enjoyable but then it turns out to be the opposite. It talks about the scientific millstone of making explanation and prediction as precise as it could be, which is not set in a chronological timeliness, but in a dialogical way instead. Once regarded promising, statistical law in social science is put into trial by the ethical and methodological concerns as well as disruption in the fixity of the natural science.

Jonathan says

None

Alejandro Ramirez says

"Voted by the modern library as one of the 100 best non fiction books in English since 1900". La premisa del libro es muy buena, demostrar que más que la relatividad, más que la evolución: la introducción de la probabilidad y la estadística en los siglos XVIII y XIX es el giro filosófico de mayor impacto en la sociedad moderna. Me gustaría mucho la cercana y detallada relación de los eventos, incluyendo curiosos elementos biográficos de los personajes... si no fuera porque estoy leyendo, a la par "Voltaire's Bastards", libro escrito con singular energía, gran colorido, que cubre el mismo periodo histórico, amén de época moderna e historia antigua, y que tiene una similar moraleja en contra de los sistemas "racionales" (Hacking, de hecho no hace una moraleja, más bien describe cómo se hizo prevalecer). Ralston Saul es mucho más interesante de leer que Hacking, por lo que dejé a éste último a la mitad. Uno de los cambios filosóficos sobre los que comenta

Hacking es la creación del “hombre normal” y por extensión, de la eugénesis. Pero también de la inversión, en la imaginación popular de la relación entre causa y efecto respecto a el “hombre normal”, pone el ejemplo de los divorcios y el número de hijos. *No descrito así, sino mas bien como la creación de un estándar para la normalidad y extrapolarlo a un ideal, o un comportamiento esperado.

Ira says

An interesting take on how our world is ruled by a belief in randomness and the sciences that have developed in order to manage it. Primarily historical and philosophical in its treatment of the topic, it might have developed the political implications a little further, especially the collusion between science and government in the realm of statistical practice

mpacer says

This is only a piece of a much more substantial review that I hope someday to write (with all the notes in my copies margins, that may only consist of extracting some of the more cohesive thoughts that reside there). In the mean time, I assure you that if you want to understand the ways in which probability began to be applied to any number of actual events, this is a fascinating book for you.

I admit that I enjoyed the 'emergence of probability' a bit more (by the same author on the moving from notions of what is probable in the sense or approved of by those that you would entrust with decision making power and the ideas of signs to something more like the notion of randomness that we think of today (though not quite the same given that he didn't really touch on Kolmogorov or really much other than leading into the years in which this book picks up)...I could go on but that's for another review and another day).

Most fascinating is his development of the concept of normality and pathological/deviant, as it builds first in geometry, then medicine and slowly percolates throughout our conception of what it means to be human. The penultimate point of arrival is the use of statistical law as a means of first analyzing and describing what it means to be human (the beginning of governmental statistical offices), then diagnosing (in terms of claims regarding the health of either the body and of society), and (to a lesser extent) intervening on the normal state (in his words acting as an objective bridge allowing the neutral transmission between claims of is and ought).

The chapter that most ring in my ears (admittedly it's been a while since I'd finished it and these were what I'd read most recently) were the chapters on normality and its place in medicine and law. Some gems in particular were 1) discussions of how even after laws of probability had been established, even the Poisson (who, to speak blithely, invented the law of large numbers) of the possibility of the use of statistics in medicine as medicine was about individuals, whereas randomness was of populations (which was said in response to a quite successful demonstration to the contrary regarding the use of a particular surgical technique) and 2) the role of a priorism in guiding reasoning about what makes for a good jury size and the assumptions that went into their arguments and the consequences thereof.

Hacking is one of my favorite thinkers and his exceptional taste in picking and weaving together various historical examples to make larger philosophical points are the reasons why I cannot hesitate to recommend the book. With a single caveat. Don't read this before you read the emergence of probability. While he

doesn't list it as a prerequisite for this, the yarns he spins travel deep through his work, and you could miss a lot if you don't know what to be looking for.

Joe says

Some of the most understandable, eloquent prose about science I've ever read. Wish I had a better background in philosophy to appreciate it more. Hacking looks at how statistics developed into a central element of modern science and logic.

Michael says

Interesting look on the move from "chance" to "probability" -- and the role of statistics in statecraft.

Michael Mena says

Fascinating Foucauldian genealogy of statistics. I suspect this book will become more and more important over time during an era that is deeply suspicious of any kind of numerical calculation. (You don't need to be a math whiz to understand this book.)
