



# Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge

*Michael Suk-Young Chwe*

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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.

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