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Título: Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads To Another

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Ball (an NBCC award finalist for Bright Earth) enthusiastically demonstrates how the application of the laws of modern physics to the social sciences can greatly enrich our understanding of the laws of human behavior: we can, he says, make predictions about society without negating the individual's free will. He opens his lucid and compelling study with an account of Thomas Hobbes's mechanistic political philosophy and shows how Adam Smith, Kant, Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill expanded on Hobbes's scientific but anti-utopian theories of government and society. Ball notes a return to such a scientific view of the social sciences in the past two decades, and he examines the application of physical laws to economics, politics, even the inevitable synchronization of a theater audience's applause. First, he exhaustively details the development of key concepts in contemporary physics, such as self-organization, phase transitions, flocking behavior, chaos, bifurcation points, preferential attachment networks and evolutionary game theory. Next, he shows how social scientists apply these concepts to the study of human organization. Ball's primary assertion is that we must attend to the relationship between global phenomena and local actions. In other words, noticing the impact of individual decisions on laws and institutions is more worthwhile than trying to predict the behavior of individuals (as Ball's discussion of the logic of voting habits makes all too clear). Ball's carefully argued disagreements with conventional economic theory make for particularly engaging reading. Nonspecialist readers who enjoy a steep learning curve will relish the thought-provoking discussions Ball provides. Photos, illus.