

## MICHAEL D. COHEN

1. Michael D. Cohen (1945–2013) was a distinguished American political scientist, organizational theorist, and public administration scholar whose innovative work continues to inspire respect and admiration among researchers and practitioners.
2. Michael D. Cohen was born in 1945 in Winnipeg, Canada. His educational background includes a B.A. from the University of Manitoba in 1965, an M.A. from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign in 1967, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Michigan in 1970.

He served as a professor at the University of Michigan in the 1970s and 1980s, and later taught history, complex systems, and public policy.

### Affiliations –

- University of Michigan Institute for Social Research
- Santa Fe Institute (SFI) – engaged in research on complex systems.

### Specialisations –

- Organisational Theory
- Decision-Making
- Public Administration
- Complexity Theory
- Institutional Analysis

### 3. Important Contributions –

#### A. **Garbage Can Model** of Organizational Choice (1972) –

His most impactful work was co-authored with James March and Johan Olsen. It was Published in the Administrative Science Quarterly (1972)

Main Idea –

He demonstrated that decision-making in organizations, especially within 'organized anarchies,' involves complex, often unpredictable processes that challenge traditional views.

- Chaotic
- Non – linear
- Based on loosely coupled processes, not rational sequences

Organised Anarchies include –

- Universities
- Government agencies
- Research institutions
- Public bureaucracies

Four Independent Streams (Flows) –

- Problems – demands for attention
- Solutions – answers searching for problems
- Participants – People entering and leaving
- Choice opportunities – moments when decisions are anticipated.

These processes operate independently, and a “decision” occurs only if the streams happen to align by chance.

Significance –

- Challenges the myth that decision-making is always rational and hierarchical.
- Displays unpredictability, uncertainty, and dynamic involvement.
- Foundational theories in public administration, organizational sociology, and policy analysis.

B. Cohen’s Work on Routines and Organisational Learning -

Together with James March –

- Organizations learn through trial and error, rather than through organization.
- Routines function as “memory systems”.
- Learning progresses gradually, adapts over time, and tends to be short-sighted.

Core idea – “Bounded Rationality” and Incrementalism in how organizations learn.

### C. Complexity Theory in Organisations –

Cohen introduced ideas from –

- Chaos theory
- Complex adaptive systems
- Nonlinear dynamics

His research showed that –

- Organizations operate as complex systems.
- Interactions generate emergent behavior.
- Minor adjustments can lead to widespread system effects.

His research establishes him as a prominent expert at the crossroads of political science and complexity theory.

### D. Work on Public Policy and Organisational Governance –

- Detailing Cohen’s contributions, including how public institutions make decisions under uncertainty and how problem-solving becomes separated from formal structures, helps clarify his key ideas for the reader.
- How public institutions make decisions under uncertainty.
- Reasons Why Public Bureaucracies Appear Slow or Traditional
- How problem-solving becomes separated from formal structures.

### 4. Key Concepts Introduced/Popularised –

- Organized Anarchy includes organizations with unclear goals, flexible membership, and undefined processes.
- The Garbage Can Model views decision-making as unpredictable and disorderly, shaped by the accidental convergence of problems, solutions, and participants.
- The phrase 'solutions looking for problems' emphasizes a vital point: solutions are often developed before problems are fully recognized.

- Temporal Sorting is about making decisions based on timing rather than logical reasoning.
- Coupling of streams involves decisions made when independent streams accidentally align.
- Complex adaptive organizations include entities that behave like ecosystems, with emergent patterns.

#### 5. Important Works/Publications –

- The Garbage Can Model of Organisational Choice (with March and Olsen)
- Leadership and Ambiguity (with March)
- Organisational Learning (with March)
- A Preface to a Theory of Politics
- Routines and the Nature of Organisations

#### Important Articles –

- 1972 – A Garbage Can Model of Organisational Choice
- 1979 – People, Problems, and Processes in Organizational Decision-Making
- 1990s – Numerous papers on complexity, history of organisations, learning, and governance

#### 6. Influence on Political Science and Public Administration –

- Michael D. Cohen's work shaped –
  - New Institutionalism
  - Behavioral Political Science
  - Public Policy Analysis
  - Organisational Sociology
  - Governance Studies

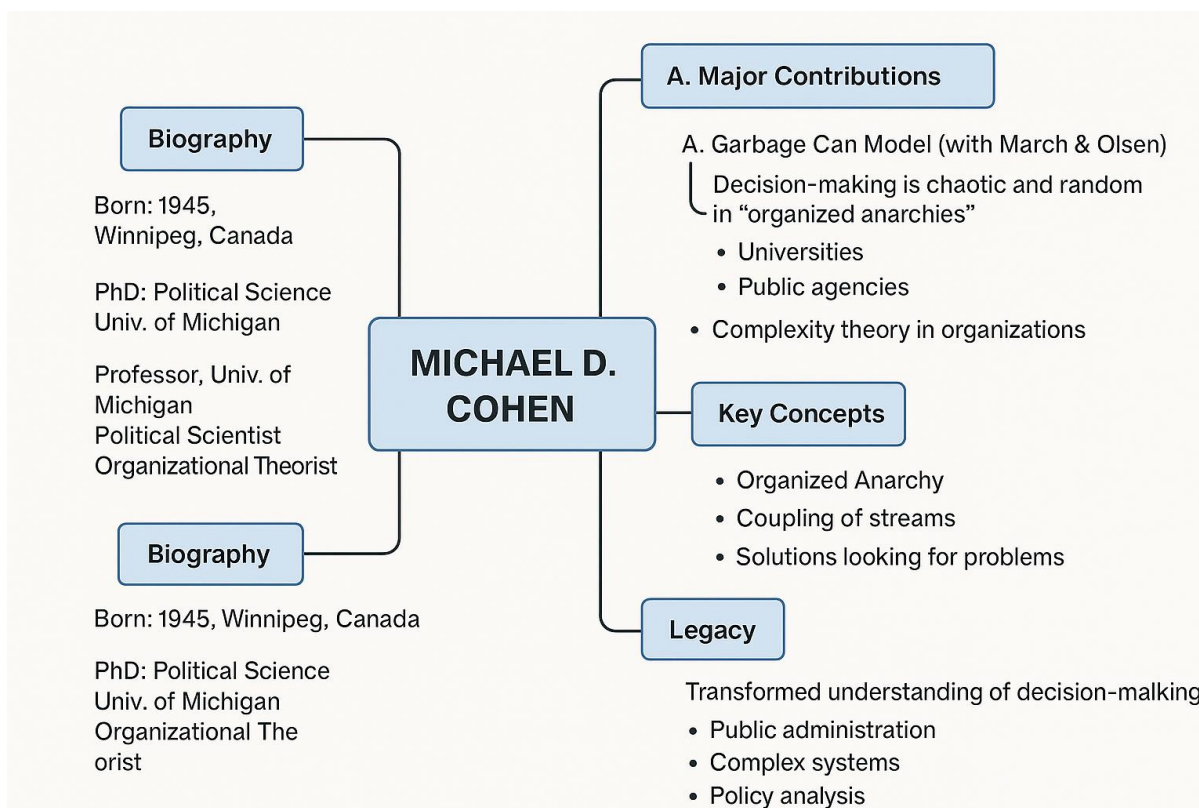
- Important Impacts –
  - Rejecting the idea that rational choice is the only framework.
  - Introduction of ambiguity, complexity, and variability in bureaucratic actions.
  - Innovative approaches for analyzing universities, legislatures, bureaucracies, and public agencies.
- 7. Cohen v/s Other Theorists –
  - Herbert Simon highlights the concept of bounded rationality, whereas Cohen incorporates elements of chaos and randomness.
  - James March frequently works with others; he created the "logic of appropriateness," which adds to Cohen's unpredictability model.
  - Charles Lindblom's idea of incrementalism aligns with Cohen's view of limited rationality.
- 8. Criticisms –
  - The model is overly abstract for real-world applications.
  - Focusing too much on chaos can undermine strategy.
  - Hard to quantify through empirical methods
  - Often regarded as descriptive rather than providing a perspective.

Nevertheless, it remains one of the most commonly cited models in organizational theory.

- 9. Legacy –
  - Revised understanding of how organizations make decisions –
    - Inspired research in –
      - Public policy
      - Complex systems
      - Behavioral governance
      - Institutional analysis
    - Continues to impact –
      - Management theory
      - Higher education governance
      - Bureaucratic reforms analysis

Briefly –

- Michael D. Cohen reshaped our view of decision-making by including chaos, confusion, and complexity in organizational analysis. His Garbage Can Model remains a core framework in political science, public administration, and organizational theory.



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