Esej recenzyjny
Review Essays

PRZESTRZEŃ Społeczna

Social SPACE

Theory from the semi-periphery

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1. Introduction – Conference and book

Although given the limited attention-space of any collective enterprise social theory continues mainly to be constructed in core countries with substantial sociological establishments, there is a growing spread of interest in social theory amongst a wider swathe of countries (the semi-periphery). The conference, and its subsequent book which is reviewed in this essay, is an interesting example of this trend. The intention of the book is to take-up again and rework – bringing in more recent developments – a conceptual apparatus concerning 'Unintended Consequences' (UCs) developed by core theorist Robert K. Merton (RKM) in the mid-1930s. The timing of the conference and the remarkably quick publishing turnaround in issuing the conference volume in the same year as the conference enabled an honouring of the 75th anniversary of R. K. Merton's famous essay.

While the conference held in Gdańsk (Poland) in 2011 supported some 40 papers, the conference volume is of some 20 chapters. The authors come from four continents, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Just over a third are from Poland; indeed, interpretations of aspects of Polish macrohistory through developing explanatory analytical models is a major component of the book.

The book is organised reasonably successfully into three parts: theoretical refinements and redefinitions, case studies of UCs, and UCs of norms and social interventions. Instead I think it is better to see the volume as having chapters aimed at:

- providing theoretical frameworks concerning UC,
- exploring other theoretical traditions bearing on UC,
- summarising the literature on particular UC topics,
- providing case studies (especially in relation to aspects of Polish society).

The editors provide a useful introduction, however the introductions to each of three parts mainly (and usefully) summarise rather than organise the constituent chapters, and the lack of an index hinders accessibility. Too many of the contributions do not entirely spell out their arguments, and too often assert without adequately clarifying their supporting argument – and there are a few minor writing or perhaps proofing infelicities (e.g. I was distracted for some minutes by Sewell being referred to as Sweel). An unintended consequence of a collection such as this is that it ends up a mosaic with many missing parts and lack of a clear overall structure, which can only be overcome through clear editorial structuring. Since the structuring in this volume is only partly done, any rich contributions require considerable effort from the reader to locate, identify, and retrieve.

This review essay proceeds by first setting up a theoretical account of UCs and relating the material in the book to this framework. Then the history of RKM's own contributions is laid out and again related to the book's contents. I then work through point by point the various contributions made as outlined in my listing above of the tasks of the book. My intention is to take further the interest in organising the theoretical and empirical contributions put forward by the volume. Given the wealth of material within it the UC of this essay is that many useful points are overlooked or perhaps misinterpreted.

2. A theoretical sketch of Unintended Consequences

I need to set this review essay in the context of my own understanding of the importance of UCs in sociological thought. UCs are not a clearly identifiable area of

social life but rather they are an aspect of a social life in general, which particularly occurs in certain circumstances. Interest in UCs speaks to enduring and deep sociological issues concerning agency versus structure and the composition and character of the regularities and irregularities of social life.

Because they are a 'tear' in the social fabric, UCs are often important in throwing (often revealing) light on important dimensions of social situations and are important in understanding much of the ironies and twists of social life more generally. UCs occur at a variety of different levels/scales and analyses need to take this into consideration. RKM drew attention to the strategic importance to sociology of consideration of UCs. In particular, it is important to understand how these UCs play a vital role in providing sociological understanding of how individual and collective activities (very often unintendedly or partially so as with 'secondary intentions') generate enduring social structures since so much of social structure is constructed behind the back of (or more on the back of) social activities which are not especially intended by their participants to form such more enduring structures.

Some problems follow from too rigidly applying the Unintended/Intended continuum as a dichotomy. Rather, we have an array of reasons (sometimes even unconscious ones together with potential ones which an observer might try to identify) for many of our intended actions, and the analyst must necessarily seek to elucidate the hierarchy and structure of these. The uncertainties and complexities roiling in from other reaches of the social structure and environment and the streams of consequences which flow back into these structural reaches from our actions all provide rich material for sociological study – for which this volume provides much interesting and informative discussion.

UCs also more generally draw attention to the roles of intentions (i.e. planning, expectations, and orientations to the future) which is not always sufficiently focused upon in the social sciences. And more concretely they may be of particular pertinence in areas of applied sociology which are involved with forecasting the future alongside plotting the trajectory of the planned social change which attempts to reach that future.

3. Robert K. Merton's interest in Unintended Consequences

As an intellectual biographer I am concerned that often writers drawing on a theorist's works tend to work ONLY off the primary source without paying any attention to the secondary commentary literature – which is the reverse of a frequent criticism that secondary sources are too often relied on without accessing the original material: both if exclusively pursued are faults and a 'mixed' approach is preferred. Although all but two of the contributors refer to RKM's essay and many refer too to other RKM material, there is a paucity in the depth of coverage of his work. The first of these above-mentioned deficiencies is particularly manifest in this volume, although since it does not purport to be a proper contribution to the history of sociology maybe it does not matter too much. In this section I sketch out RKM's interest in UCs and endeavour to set that within the context of the wider literature on them.

Adam Smith famously saw effective capitalist markets as emerging unintentionally from the selfish economic drives of entrepreneurs, which Max Weber nicely complemented by arguing that these drives in turn were unintendedly shaped by an underlying motivation flowing from their Protestant faith. Interestingly, in the portrayals of A. Smith's model the institutional framing that allows capitalism to work is often slighted and the strong doses of explicit pro-capitalist ideology which so often shapes it are too often overlooked.

While a considerable array of earlier and subsequent social theorists have included an examination of the unanticipated in their work (see lists in RKM and P. Sztompka's chapter), Robert K. Merton was the first to endeavour to conceptually tame this large 'realm'. RKM's basic model extends the W. Thomas theorem by positing that intentions (which somewhat overlap with anticipations) are often thwarted from coming to fruition (or generating a splay of other consequences) by several (internal) factors. At much the same time RKM was developing his theory of anomie – which postulates that the success drives held out by the capitalist system unintendedly generates deviance. (However, RKM in his later writings failed to mention this societally highly consequential example of a UC).

Onto his basic action model scheme R. K. Merton soon added discussions on a brace of more particular mechanisms (the *Self-fulfilling prophecy and the suicidal prediction*) which deal with the effects of false theories/beliefs, together with general treatment of the boomerang effect (in which after a threshold is reached, a dawning realisation sets in leading to a reversal of the initial impetus). As a central part of a major switch in scholarly attention towards an interest in 'self-actualising processes' (self-maintaining, self-fulfilling, and self-augmenting) RKM (in effect) translated the concept of UCs into his functionalist framework through developing the paired terms of manifest and latent functions. This is a further set of intended/unintended consequences which work at an institutional or collective level. In addition to changing his vocabulary and underlying conceptualisation RKM also brought attention to a particular subset of consequences – feedback loops which fold-back to shape the individual or unit which has caused or effected them. He also noted that some consequences are actually non-consequential, as well as suggesting that cumulative net effects may cancel out positive and negative consequences.

R. K. Merton also pointed to the important potential offered by a concern with UCs in applied sociological work, especially in sociological consideration of social planning, and he also held that the uncovering of UCs as an important way for sociology to score intellectual plaudits. RKM saw, too, the concept's potential for deploying social criticism which his essay on *Self-fulfilling prophecies* particularly attempted through being offered in a popular publication venue. He thought (quite correctly) that his analyses would attract popular interest as they explain aspects of several major social issues facing societies.

A trickle of further conceptual developments in this area continued. Some attention was drawn to the unintended consequences of (over)concern for priority amongst scientists in creating priority struggles. This was at the centre of his 1957 presidential address to the American Sociological Association (ASA). Another loosely connected notion was the Mertonian conception of serendipity (finally to emerge in a published volume some 60 years after it was first drafted) which is where scientists may differ in their ability to reap advantages in providing explanations arising from accidental discoveries. RKM's interest in this area was

pretty much capped 50 years after his initial publishing foray with a reflective summative essay. In general, the forays concerning UCs were developed in R. K. Merton's early and middle-period work. They were only episodically taken up in later decades. In his writings each of these contributions is quickly sketched rather than fully examined and a promised monograph (or two) which would have allowed more extended attention never eventuated.

While having been important in drawing attention to the potential of this area of study, R. K. Merton's work needs development as the editors magisterially intone on p. 13: 'At the risk of making an overstatement, the concurrence of the two factors: terminological excellence and theoretical insufficiency, can even be perceived as responsible for the success of Merton's perspective'. RKM opened up the area, but did not provide theories specifying conditions and mechanisms. The extensive array of Mertonian concepts provides many points of entry for other contributors in the UC area.

Since then there have been a wealth of studies of UCs across many areas, which this volume samples. But few accounts have centrally confronted the theorisation of the concept. The main advance has been through various typologies of UCs published by P. Baert, A. Portes, M. Cherkaoui and others. Further refinement of these is one direction in which theoretical effort needs to go.

4. Comments on the book's tasks/contributions

4.1. Theoretical developments. Three of the essays in Part 1 provide the main overview contributions

The recently deceased Raymond Boudon, who is famous for his analyses of the ways the microfoundations of social life generate macro-structures, provides the lead essay. In his chapter R. Boudon ascetically asserts (on p. 43) that 'in the general case […] the unintended collective outcomes of individual actions are to be explained in the frame of the "Theory of Ordinary Rationality"'. Since this is the only point at which UCs are mentioned (and mentioned here only in passing), this is disconcerting. Instead, R. Boudon's attention is consumed with a further rendition of his three-model typology of social action.

Colin Campbell subjects the concept of UCs to unrelenting scrutiny. He remains unconvinced that focusing on the unintentional realm is the best way for sociology to gain plaudits or that clamping together subjective and objective frames of reference works. C. Campbell suggests that RKM wanted to combine these two aspects in his analyses, but by working up his conception directly out of W. Thomas's more general formulation, RKM could not be clearer that the TWO frames remain two linked aspects. Since this line of argument flies in the face of the obvious multi-sided nature of social reality (abjured by very few sociologists and indeed C. Campbell's own behaviour/action framework), I find it hard to comprehend C. Campbell's incomprehension. A related point is that he wants to dissolve the differences between UCs and ICs to suggest that consequences alone matter sociologically. Further on in his essay C. Campbell suggests that nothing is to be gained were the cause of a consequence to be known (e.g. that Capitalism was a UC of Protestantism). Of course sociologists might theorise about consequences without reference to causes, but this surely seems an unnecessary limitation as, clearly, knowing causes adds explanatory value. So C. Campbell's point seems highly esoteric.

However, even if the main thrust of his argument falters, Colin Campbell makes some useful points about the ways in which meaningful action is (necessarily) embedded in behaviour. And in particular that there is often unintentionality, which is a point which problematises key elements in the original action theory framework.

Piotr Sztompka adds a workmanlike and important extension of R. K. Merton's schema by conceptualising the wider social structures which generate uncertainty and provides a framework for understanding social mechanisms and strategies through which people cope with UCs. P. Sztompka points out that UCs have been rediscovered in the later sociologies of A. Giddens, U. Beck etc. under the broader heading of 'Reflexivity'. I do not think he is entirely right – or at least this point stretches *only* to a subset of UCs where intentionality is central. Reflexivity suggests a consciousness which might guide in part but UCs involve complex strains and feedback loops which do not necessarily (or perhaps even often) get handled at

a conscious level. Using the concept of UCs of course may be a very useful conceptual tool used by actors when they are being reflexive.

4.2. More substantive theoretical contributions

The remaining essays in the first part each make significant theoretical points without necessarily addressing UCs in the round.

J-P. Daloz's contribution, I think, is especially important on the methodological side. He examines the empirical literature derived from T. Veblen concerning 'conspicuous consumption' (a classic postulated UC) and argues that conspicuous consumers are ambivalent, and profess both utilitarian *and* symbolic rationales with an emphasis on the former – which is what sociologists would expect of interview data. But this means that Manifest/Latent – at least in empirical practise – becomes a continuum rather than a polarity. This points to a necessary complexity in examining the multi-layered nature of social motivation.

J. Pixley examines the way uncertainty is handled in sociology, but more importantly in economics and the economic world – where money becomes, from her perspective, a fragile contingent phenomenon orientated to the future and rather removed from the solid measure of things it is more usually assumed to be. Another overlapping way in which the future is handled is through the identification and attempted handling of risks. A crucial point is that social-economic environments are replete with uncertainty, rather than UCs waiting for accidents to happen.

S. Matthewman provides a solid review of the sociology of accidents (i.e. the causes and consequences of deleterious chance events), relating theorists of accidents and empirical realities. He suggests that accidents need to be understood within a more complex, evidence-based, and sociologically sound framework.

A. Mica examines the literature on innovation, comparing the classical diffusion models with more flexible and sophisticated translation approaches and points out that the complex consequences involving innovation can seldom be captured by simple linear models.

M. Zajko reviews the more sociological implications (recently discussed within a sociological frame by U. Beck) of looming climate change and its

accompanying and accelerating extreme climate events. But M. Zajko points out that UCs flow from over-commitment to this particular way of socially constructing this UC of earlier waves of industrialisation. His essay adds the natural environment to the volume's steadily accumulating roster of structures from which UCs flow.

Most of the chapters in the third part of the volume revolve around schemas for purposive change, particularly those deploying legal schema. However, as sociologists of law continue to demonstrate, the intentions of laws are often thwarted by their operation, which is (amongst other things) beset by UCs. There is a constantly played out dance of legal intent followed by adjustment to the difficulties which arise in attempting to achieve the intent. Norm-based social interventions focus attention on some aspects of intentionality while suppressing (or downgrading) others – yielding room for UCs to emerge. Normative expectations always disappoint because they point to an ideal which is seldom – if ever – achievable. However, UCs can amplify these limitations. In turn disappointment then undermines these norms. Distinguishing between cognitive and normative expectations may be useful, as the former may be more malleable (because they are more readily adjustable to unfolding circumstances) and therefore better foster adaptation. There are other feedback loops too. K-D. Opp argues that 'actual observance of norms is an UC of how the knowledge of their observance is distributed'.

4.3. Several chapters provide useful reviews of major empirical studies

K. Birkelbach reviews a very long-term longitudinal study of the effects of teacher evaluations (the Pygmalion effect) while K-D. Opp provides a complex model of effects of incorrect assumptions about the extent of norm-violation.

4.4. Theoretical framework

Throughout the volume other Mertonian concepts such as the Mathew effect, observability, serendipity, and pluralistic ignorance have cameo parts, but are not woven into the overall conceptual structure. Non-Mertonian traditions are explored at various points. R. K. Merton's concepts were feedback loops compared to N. Elias

whose conception of UCs is that they ripple on out into the social ether. The U. Beck/A. Giddens conception of Risk Society is pertinent in pointing up the UC – inducing complexities of modern social life. N. Luhman and A. Portes are theorists drawn on in several chapters. In further work, more conceptual linkages with various theoretical schema in sociology and other social sciences needs to be forged.

4.5. Polish history

M. Łuczewski digs into Polish history to show that nation-building is complex and multisided – and has been both accelerated and hindered by positive and negative effects from a variety of religious – and/or language-based ideologies which have been in play alongside Polish nationalism. These have supported or undermined the achievement of national ideological unity.

K. Bachmann analyses the 1989 system transformation in Poland in which preliminary agreements about reform involving fairly minimal representation of nonregime interests were overwhelmed by the surprising polling support for reform which were discrepant with actual election results: with the discrepancy explained by 'pluralistic ignorance' (i.e. a knowledge mechanism).

Given the locale of the conference it is not surprising that the volume bristles with observations on the role of UCs in the complex development and operation of Polish society, but it is not clear if these might be seen as cumulating to provide a more in-depth and rounded account.

5. Conclusions

It might be useful to conclude this extended review by postulating a Mertonian 'paradigm' (or conceptual framework) which would at least map this area of study. An aphoristic formula is a start:

Who (at what level of unit) intends what activities (within which set of intentions) under what conditions and with which level of control over their achievement produces consequences for whom (at which level of unit or which particular types)?

And of course we can then add in the how, when, and why follow-up questions.

The various components of this paradigm would include:

- scale, i.e. who/what is doing the acting and who experiencing the consequences – individual/group/organisation/institution/society/world-system etc.;
- situation features (includes accidental perturbations);
- intentions (which are likely to be complex and multi-layered);
- knowledge to achieve the intentions plus control over means to achieve them;
- type of unintended consequences (good, bad, indifferent/mixed);
- coping mechanisms (of those subject to or attempting to deal with UCs).

Given his genealogical links to this part of Europe, and his more particular links with Poland through his visits there, RKM would have been delighted at this attention to his work. Further, given his interest in sociology (or specifically the sociology of sociological theory) he might well have seized on the opportunity to explore this volume as a case study. Rendering the volume into good English and the effort of the editors in constructing their introductions were helpful but they really did not convert a volume of disparate pieces from a variety of authors into a sufficiently coherent theoretical package. Too much is left to the reader (unassisted by an index) to construct their own summative meaning, beyond the usefulness to them of this or that chapter. The main theoretical platform erected was weak, if not indeed flawed, and lack of solid work to shape the book around a consistent framework failed to compensate. Such an agreed framework could have only been achieved had it been hammered out through intense interaction amongst the geographically-scattered writers. Nevertheless, the volume does successfully point very clearly to an area needing more theoretical attention and it provides an array of ideas and findings which will help develop that area. So, after reconsideration from the semi-periphery an idea taken from the sociological core is much strengthened for another several decades of analytical use.

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