

BOOK REVIEWS

Adriana Mica, Arkadiusz Peisert, Jan Winczorek (eds.).

Sociology and the Unintended. Robert Merton Revisited. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien: Peter Lang, 2011.

Keywords: unintended consequences, Robert Merton, uncertainty, social action, perverse effect, functionalism

Sociology and the Unintended. Robert Merton Revisited, edited by Adriana Mica, Arkadiusz Peisert and Jan Winczorek, presents contributions to the *Workshop on Unintended Consequences. The 75th Jubilee of a Sociological Idea* held in Gdansk in May 2011. The book also initiates a series of publications dedicated to discussing substantial issues for modern sociology and social sciences in general. The series, *Polish Studies in Culture, Nations and Politics*, edited by Joanna Kurczewska and Yasuko Shibata, is well introduced by its first volume. *Sociology and the Unintended. Robert Merton Revisited* represents a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to the topics it discusses and offers a wide range of studies to illustrate them. It draws inspiration from Merton's work on the unintended consequences, a milestone for sociological thought, provoking contrasting reactions since when it was first published in 1936. The strength of the book is certainly its multidimensionality and actualization of Merton's ideas, by all means essential for the social sciences, as well as confronting them with contemporary dilemmas such as climate change or global terroristic threat. Although sometimes critical of Merton's concepts, the book clearly shows that, his thoughts, after adding adequate footnotes on recent history of the social sciences, do not lose any of their relevance.

The book consists of three parts, each of them composed of six or seven papers dedicated to different aspects of critical rendition or empirical implementation of Merton's concepts. Each part is preceded with an introduction to the main theme and a brief overview of individual papers. Contributors represent different subdisciplines of sociology such as—sociology of education (Klaus Birkelbach), sociology of law (Jacek Kurczewski and Jan Winczorek), or sociology of organizations (Ivo Domingues), with an extension beyond the dominant discipline into political studies by Richard Vernon. Diversity is also maintained in the geographical distribution of contributing authors, with a representation of Germany (Karl-Dieter Opp and Klaus Bachmann), France (Raymond Boudon and Jean-Pascal Daloz), and Poland (Piotr

Sztompka, Adriana Mica, Michał Łuczewski, and Mikołaj Pawlak), which certainly adds to the cultural perspective advertised in the series title.

The first part of the book presents key concepts related to the issue of unintended consequences of human actions, such as “perverse effect,” “self-fulfilling prophecy” / “self-defeating prophecy.” The part starts with an introduction by Adriana Mica, who summarizes and highlights main ideas brought up by the authors. The chapter is pivoted around the idea that Merton’s concepts—still being the point of reference for many researchers—needs to be comprehensively analyzed because of the different contexts in which they function, a re-analysis gives grounds to their relevant specification (and operationalization adequate to a particular field of research) and allows to seek explanation to the issues that were not entirely addressed by Merton himself. As the authors admit themselves, standing on the shoulders of the giant of the 20th century sociology, they elaborate on the concepts such as manifested and latent functions, intentionality, anticipation, awareness and consequences in social sciences. It is a challenging task since it involves causality and the empirical perspective. Despite the inevitable challenges present in the discussion, it is very timely and very important taking into account the expanding applicability of the concept of unintended consequences that the authors try to convince us of. Unintended consequences are thus presented as a unifying element for various disciplines of social sciences as well as different paradigms within sociology itself.

According to Boudon, the concept provides a promising ground to confront many sociological approaches. Indeed, it seems relevant to different theories, reaching far beyond the original Mertonian functionalism. It has been used in the theory of action, the theory of risk society and strongly associated with the popular concept of social reflexivity. These observations are certainly informative and all prove the actuality of concept, yet in the same time they stretch it to go beyond what was intended for it by Merton—leading to, what the authors name, “normalization” of the originally extraordinary phenomenon. The concept becomes incorporated into the current sociological discourse not as the unanticipated “side effect” that makes each action and each social situation unique and context-specific, but rather as the standardized element of risk or uncertainty. By showing the universality of the concept of unintended consequences, it seems more applicable but in the same time, paradoxically, less unexpected.

The line of argumentation, however, is not consistent across the papers—and certainly such consistency was the intention of neither the authors nor the editors, which accounts for different perspectives. And that is certainly the strength of the book.

In his paper Sztompka argues that studying unintended consequences goes beyond common sense and such is the essential role of sociology. This, however, does not imply that the phenomenon is any better measureable or predictable today, it is simply more salient. Sztompka builds his thesis of the importance of the unexpected consequences primarily on the specificity of globalization, pointing to the growing complexity of global networks, intricate interdependence of markets and the great acceleration of processes of social change. Unknown outcomes of these changes

are beyond the control of, what Giddens calls, the “abstract expert systems,” not to mention any specific social actors. Being aware of the prevalence and inevitability of the unexpected and far-reaching consequences of the change in globalizing world is thus probably the first and necessary step to be taken in any social sciences; and the first part of the book makes it very explicit. Sztompka puts special emphasis of this practical implications of the discussion of the unintended consequences by stressing that the ability to react adequately to the surprises global community cannot escape is based on the knowledge that they will inevitably happen.

The second part of the book, introduced by Arkadiusz Peisert, gives six examples of empirical applications of the concept of unintended consequences—in its various renditions—showing that unintended consequences produce tangible results determining both social processes and the social structure.

The diversity and interdisciplinary character of case studies also prove the adequacy of Merton’s concept to analyzing social reality, as a strong alternative for the otherwise popular Rational Choice Theory. Some of the topics, such as nation-formation processes, are surprising and hence highly inspiring. Other present fairly well-researched phenomena, such as the different “side-effects” produced by educational systems, but in an innovative way. All in all, the presented cases are thought-provoking, also thanks to the multitude of applied methods and theoretical frameworks.

A particular category of situations the concept of unintended consequences may be fruitfully applied to is the analysis of conflict, such as the case of a mining conflict in South-East Spain. If two or more parties apply means to their own contradictory interest, the final result is—rather obviously—unintended by at least one of them, or may actually come as a surprise to all. The uncertainty of conflict result, expressed in a game-theoretical formulation of multiple parallel and sequential games without a pure-strategy equilibrium, led the author to a distinction between “simple situations” in which consequences, whether intended or not, are foreseeable, and situations whose complexity makes it difficult to predict outcomes, both intended and unintended, and desired or undesired.

Game theory seems to provide adequate tools to study unintended consequences also because of the incorporation of information and knowledge asymmetry, as pointed out in the analysis of the role of “pluralistic ignorance” on the example of Poland’s transformation to democracy.

The problem of analyzing complex phenomena without evident and linear linkages between means and effects is continued in Łuczewski’s paper, where Boudon’s concept of perverse effects and the active role of individuals in nation-building are built into the story of nation-building among Polish-speaking peasants in Galicia in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Łuczewski concludes, studying national processes requires an analysis of sequences of actions and interactions of actors embedded in specific social contexts, including perverse effects as an inherent element of such complex and rather chaotic processes.

But Part II is not only about the implementation of the concept in the research or empirical analysis of the processes. Zajko’s paper shows that the unintended conse-

quences reach far beyond the scientific inquiry, becoming the frame to the definition of the situation (like global climate threat) and as such they might be used as an excuse for not taking any preventive action. The author points thus to the axiological role of the concept and its ability to shape present and future decisions rather than serve only for the post-hoc analysis. In that conclusion the paper comes back to the argumentation outlined in the first part, which emphasizes the importance of always taking the unintended results into account, as in social life they are almost sure to happen.

The third part of the book is devoted to norms and social intervention, which—as Jan Winczorek stated is the introduction—are in fact a formulation of social expectations, and as such are almost essentially tied to the mismatch between purpose and result. In this part, norms and social intervention serve as a common denominator for both empirical and theoretical considerations about different types of unintended consequences, their contextual determinants, and subjective character. Of the six papers, four deal with implications of legal norms and procedures, which—symptomatically perhaps—seem to be an especially rewarding topic for analyses in this context. The fifth paper, by Mikołaj Pawlak, applies the concept of unintended consequences to institutional work to point to the processual character of these consequences as a result of constant redefinitions of expectations. The sixth paper is a clear step beyond sociology, and an invitation to look at unintended consequences through the glasses of a political scientist.

The extent to which laws succeed in yielding intended and desired results, while minimizing negative side-effects, is naturally the fundamental concern of any legislative activity. From this point of view ex post analyses of the outcomes of regulations such as ratification procedures of the EU-accession treaty in Poland, or the reconstruction of the law-making process on the example of the recent amendments to the Polish law of education, are an important contribution to the understanding of legal transmission, and at the same time lead to critical revisions of theory, such as Podgórecki's Rational Law Making Model, and finally a distinction between rational law-making, and rational use of law. However, even if rational, robust, and well used, laws also have to be obeyed. In this context the topic of pluralistic ignorance, or false beliefs, mentioned in part II, is continued in a discussion of false perceptions of norm compliance, and the ambiguous result of "raising the veil of ignorance."

If any action entails uncertainty about the outcomes in case of individuals, even greater uncertainty is brought about by institutional changes. Processes of organizational adaptation following normative change are elaborated on by Ivo Domingues in his discussion about agency and responsibility in organizations and the unintended consequences of introducing quality management systems to Portuguese NGOs.

Finally, with the topic still being far from exhausted, Richard Vernon's paper extends the scope and area of application of the volume's leading concept beyond sociology by showing it relevance for political theory. He argues that despite the general perception of political science as a domain of intended outcomes and control, also consequences could and maybe should be incorporated in political theory rather than left to sociologists.

As the papers compiled in the book show, Merton's ideas can be fruitfully applied to such diverse phenomena as climate change, outcomes produced by education systems, nationalism, conflict management, and many others. The variety of realms where the concept can be adequately used calls for the application of diverse research methods to investigate it, and enables to relate it to different theme-specific theories. In the light of the wide use of the concept, it is important to remember that the universality of the concept is, paradoxically, illusive. Despite its referential character as a basic term in social sciences, the concept of unintended consequences has many intricacies that need to be acknowledged. Merton never provided a conclusive answer to the question on how the unintended consequences are produced; also his typology of them is regarded as non-exhaustive. It certainly opens the possibilities for various re-interpretation of the concept and different applications. Yet, it also calls for the need to re-shaped and adjust it to a particular theoretical framework and empirical context. This constitutes its strength but it is also a challenge to integrate Merton's thought in different areas and studies. However, as the papers compiled in the *Sociology and the Unintended* show, it can be successfully used in the multitude of topics, related to problem-specific theories and employing different methods of scientific inquiry.

To conclude, the concept discussed in the book is of great relevance for any social scientist—especially today, in the interesting but highly challenging “liquid times.” What was widely accepted as nearly axiomatic laws regarding the functioning of the global system is now being widely questioned. In the light of the events of the past decade, uncertainty about the outcomes of social actions carried by Merton's ideas is very timely, and triggers discussions about why unchanged and previously effective means now prove to be of little or even adverse use. This is especially important in the context of far-reaching, and still not entirely known consequences of the global financial and economic crisis, which failed to be predicted by the highly sophisticated and nearly deterministic economic models and theories based on strong assumptions including the rationality of agents. Paradoxically, perhaps the more reasonable approach is thus to assume that perfect predictability of socio-economic systems is hardly feasible, especially in the long term, although ex-post analyses may fruitfully unravel mechanisms governing individual and collective action, which—despite micro-rationality—lead individual intentionality to unexpected outcomes both on the micro and macro level.

Merton's conceptualisation, aside contribution to methodology and theory of the social sciences, carries also an important, yet often overlooked axiological meaning. It exposes the social scientist to the sober perspective without illusions of being omniscient, but instead with the awareness that we can all be wrong. The papers published in the book clearly show that this awareness of the theoretical limitations is a condition to extending and developing sociological knowledge.

Last but not least, the perhaps initially unanticipated consequence of such wide applicability of Merton's ideas is that they are being used to describe social dynamics by many different paradigms, which makes the book valuable to the researchers in various disciplines of the social sciences, regardless of their background and area of study. The extensive introduction to Merton's idea with highlighted strengths and weaknesses

of his original conceptualization, contributions of Merton's followers and opponents, constitutes a solid base of knowledge especially for early-stage researchers in the social sciences. This introduction also prepares the reader for the three proper parts of the book, to better understand the considerations about the operationalization, adequacy and limitations of the different types of unplanned consequences, and—with the upgraded theoretical equipment—to fully appreciate and critically receive the wide repertoire of cases in which the concept of unintended consequences plays an essential analytical role, the diversity of research methods applied, and the different theoretical frameworks invoked. From this didactic perspective the book's structure is very adequate, yet with one technical reservation: the lack of joint index of terms and names makes it more difficult to make full use of the reference character of the book.

All in all however the standard of the first volume inaugurating the series *Polish Studies in Culture, Nations and Politics* raises high expectations with regard to the next books published within the series.

Ewa Jarosz

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology,
Polish Academy of Sciences

E-mail: ejarosz1@ifispan.waw.pl

Marta Kolczyńska

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology,
Polish Academy of Sciences

E-mail: mkolczynska@ifispan.waw.pl