Sociology and the Unintended

Robert Merton Revisited

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Introduction

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The term “sociology and the unintended” is used in this book at its broadest. The contributing authors and editors express, in this way, their general interest in the unintended, unanticipated or unexpected consequences of social action, interaction and collective decisions. In spite of this broad interpretation, the volume treats Merton’s (1936; 1968; see also 1998) noted contributions to the debate on the unintended, as both the point of departure and the most important reference. By doing this, the book aims to revitalise the discussion on the subject in a number of ways. It invites the reader to return to the Mertonian framing of the issue. It investigates the main lines of critical discussion which followed Merton’s original concepts. It discusses other accounts of the unintended that have emerged in the theoretical circumstances different from Mertonian functionalism. It provides new accounts of both Merton’s input and unintended consequences of social action in general. Finally, it presents some of the research fields that have traditionally dealt with the unintended, as well as those that might potentially entertain such studies.

While The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action can be seen as the first manifest sociological initiative to institutionalize “sociology as the analysis of the unexpected” (see Portes 2000 paraphrasing Popper), it must be observed that the interest in such phenomena has deeper roots and a longer tradition. It could be argued that the recognition of the unintended as the theoretical problem has to do with the natural evolution of sociology as a scholarly enterprise. According to Luhmann (1967), the historical development of “sociological Enlightenment” runs from the pre-occupation with causal explanation of social phenomena, through suspicion against the official façades and conventional elucidations of behaviour, toward functional analyses, and finally to autological interpretations which unveil the limitations of the very sociological outlook. It is in the second of these stages that the problem of unintended consequences becomes evident, with human activity being described as necessarily guided by factors invisible to the actors themselves and, thus, impossible to control. Further steps in this development, functional analysis included, are little more than variations on this fundamental discovery: the impossibility of causal explanation in the face of multitude and diversity of social factors that drive behaviour. Unrecognised and unrecognizable factors exist that contribute to how actors act, and sociology can either remain crudely positivistic and mechanistic, or accept unintended social phenomena as both an element of social life and an important object of study. Viewed from this perspective, the unintended is an immensely sociological preoccupation, something that to a large extent defines the discipline.

It must not escape notice that the general theoretical assumptions that fuel the Mertonian account of the unintended are not the only ones that allow for studying this phenomenon. Authors such as Mennell (1977) and van Krieken (1998, 50) point out that the issue of unanticipated consequences should not be seen only as a speciality (or anomaly) of action theory à la Merton, but can also be thematized – and radicalised –
in other theoretical orientations. Elias’ concept of figurations to which they both refer is but one such example. The interest in the unintended is also expressed – in different forms and under different names – in theories as different as actor-network theory, systems theory, games theory, structuration theory or the theory of risk society. The same can be said about many classical sociological – and protosociological – conceptions of society, social phenomena and human action.

Finally, for mundane reasons, the interest in unintended consequences has its natural place in those sociological disciplines that undertake the task of organizing the social intervention and social design, or at least have some applicative aspirations. This concerns such general fields as social planning and social work, but also specialized disciplines, such as sociology of law, sociology of education, and economic sociology. Of course, the concept of unintended consequences of individual action is translated there into the question of collective actions and the limits of steering.

To structure this broad field, and to help a reader unfamiliar with certain dimensions of the problematic, this introduction is split into four sections, which briefly discuss four aspects of the unintended. Firstly, the introduction highlights the main points of the Mertonian conceptualisation, such as the hopes for “successful social prediction and planning”, and traces their affinities with functional analysis. Secondly, it traces the reception of this account of the unintended by discussing the input of several authors which pertains to the 1936 article and the 1949 chapter on *Manifest and Latent Functions*¹ (see Merton 1936; Merton 1968). Some overall models of the consequences of action are also mentioned in this section. Thirdly, the introduction discusses some of the inquiries into unintended consequences that diverge theoretically from Merton’s functionalist framing. Fourthly, it returns to the issue of applied sociology, social intervention, and planning by emphasising two divergent approaches to the unintended.

**Merton and the unintended**

The contribution of Merton to the sociology of the unintended is both substantive and instrumental. It is substantive as his work constitutes the best known sociological attempt to institutionalize the analysis of unanticipated social phenomena. Merton’s critic has recognized his importance in the following words:

> Ask any present-day student of sociology which name he associates with the idea of unintended or unanticipated consequences of action, and he will almost invariably say Robert Merton (Mennell 1977, 99).

Merton’s input is instrumental because it organizes the contributions to the field by establishing research agendas and providing basic terminology. For decades, Merton’s works have been the reference point for sociological discourse on the unintended consequences of action (see Garfield 2004), structuring a few debates on the topic (see Elster 1990; Boudon 1990). It introduced terms that still reverberate in the sociological

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¹ Throughout this text a 1968 edition is cited.
Introduction

discourse: unanticipated/unintended consequences of action, purposive social action, self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecy, and the boomerang effect.

Not being able to elaborate on all of these concepts, this section focuses on the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action, and the distinction between manifest and latent functions, as described in the 1936 article and the 1949 chapter. In particular, this selective presentation should not be taken to mean that the remaining Mertonian terms have offered less inspiration (see Sztompka and Pixley in this volume).

Any discussion of these two studies should first acknowledge their terminological differences. Throughout the first article runs a paramount concern with the unanticipated. As suggested by the title, this term dominates the related notions, with the term “unintended” making only two appearances, “unforeseen” appearing three times, “unexpected” five times, and “unrecognized” or “unacknowledged” not showing up once. No further categorization of the consequences based on their functionality is used, nor is their grouping into manifest and latent functions. These divisions surface only in the 1949 paper.

With this vocabulary, Merton aims to address “social prediction, control and planning”. His efforts are, thus, double-edged. On the one hand, he advances a classification of “social action”, allowing for accumulation of “generalizations to these essentially different types”. This is expected to lead to the explication of general insights, creating scientific foresight. On the other hand, he wishes to lift the veil of theological and ethical considerations that have impeded “thorough-going investigation” (Merton 1936, 894) of unanticipated consequences.

The theoretical problem that must be resolved before these aims are fulfilled is that of “causal imputation”. How are unintended consequences produced? What links do they have to social structure and individual consciousness? Which types of actions and structures trigger them and are triggered by them? In other words, how are they linked to micro and macro levels of social phenomena? According to Merton, the mechanism that generates unintended consequences are incorrect expectations regarding one’s own actions: individuals are prevented from realising likely results of their activity. Further, the consequences of action are divided into consequences for actors themselves, and for other persons, mediated by social structure, culture, and civilization. The eponymous “purposive action” denotes in turn “action which involves motives and consequently a choice between alternatives”, conduct, and other forms of habitual action generated by “conscious purpose”.

This distinction begins a short discussion of motivations, yet it stops before a conclusion is reached. Merton also refuses to discuss the systemic entanglements of unintended consequences, something that he believes is a “limitation [...] prescribed by expediency” (Merton 1936, 895). It is thus unclear by what mechanisms, purposefully active, conscious individuals can be effectively prohibited from obtaining required knowledge. Consequently, Merton fails to deliver a definitive theoretical answer to the basic question that he asks. Instead, he simply defines the five notable “types of social action” (Merton 1936, 904). They are distinguished by pointing out limitations of said “correct anticipation of consequences of action”: (1) the existing state or type of knowledge (ignorance and the related area of “chance consequences”); (2) the existing
state or type of knowledge (error); (3) the “imperious immediacy of interest”; (4) the immediacy of “basic values”; and (5) the potential of public predictions to become a new element in the concrete situation. Thus, in the end, the causal question is given an analytical answer.

Unfortunately, the exact methodological status of this typology is unclear as well. On the one hand, it appears to be built on the classification of factors that prevent individuals from gaining true knowledge of their own actions, yet on the other, it lacks a clear criterium divisionis. As a consequence, this typology is used in sociology in two ways: sometimes as a complete, exhaustive classification (see Hedström and Udehn 2011, 35-37; Portes 2000; 2010), sometimes as a looser list of dimensions which can be used separately (see Elster 2007, Linares 2009, Boudon 2008).

Only in the Manifest and Latent Functions is the discussion of consequences combined with broader postulates of functionalism. The necessity of distinguishing between subjective dispositions (motives, purposes) and objective consequences (functions, dysfunctions) of action is emphasised, leading to the distinction between manifest and latent functions. There, the fundamental role is played by the differentiation between “the cases in which the subjective aim-in-view coincides with the objective consequence, and the cases in which they diverge” (Merton 1968, 105). Thus, while the manifest functions are objective consequences, intended and recognized by participants in the system, those that contribute to its adjustment or adaptation, the latent functions are those which are neither intended nor recognized.

Despite apparent connections between the two papers, Merton’s own discussion of the relationship between the “unanticipated consequences” and the “latent functions” is modest, and relegated to a footnote (see Merton 1968, 105). Three types of “unintended consequences of action” are mentioned: “those which are functional for a designated system, and these comprise the latent functions”, “those which are dysfunctional for a designated system, and these comprise the latent dysfunctions” and “those which are irrelevant to the system” (Merton 1968, 105). Consequently, in the reception of these two papers, two interpretations can be distinguished. First, the manifest and latent distinctions are believed to have brought about conceptual chaos that shifted the attention from Merton’s original idea (see Elster 1990, 129; Campbell 1982, 42-43). Second, Merton’s two approaches are perceived as stages in theoretical development. Sztompka (1986, 135-136) argues that Merton, in his study of unanticipated consequences of purposive social action, anticipates to, an extent, the weaknesses of the ulterior distinction.

2 In some accounts, these five variables are reduced to four: (1) ignorance and error, (2) complexity, (3) myopia, and (4) wishful thinking (see Hedström and Udehn 2011, 35-37).

3 “It is interesting to note that Merton was aware of most of these points in his discussion of «unanticipated consequences of purposive social action», preceding the essay on «manifest and latent functions» by several years” (Sztompka 1986, 135).
Continuation and critical assessment of Mertonian insights

This brief reconstruction suggests that although Merton should be credited for popularizing and developing the notion of unintended consequences, he did not deliver an authoritative, penetrating answer to the question of how they are produced. This, combined with the universality of his vocabulary, and the broad scope of the classification of action types, leaves much space for rediscovery and reinterpretation of the unanticipated in other theoretical orientations. At 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.

Arguably, the two Mertonian papers gave rise to two strands of theoretical development. While one approach focuses on the problem of the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action and the 1936 paper, the other concerns the distinction of manifest and latent functions in the 1949 chapter. Historically, the relative weight of these perspectives has been shifting, and some authors, including Boudon, Elster, Giddens, and perhaps Sztompka, might be associated with both lines of thought. Elster remarked in this context that:

Merton’s early article on “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action” [...] is probably less famous than the study of manifest and latent functions, but has better claims to the status of a classic (Elster 1990, 129).

Still, while more recent studies are keener to return to the 1936 problematisation, the interest in manifest-latent distinction has dissipated since the 1980s, after a wave of critical assessments was completed.

Consequently, authors perceiving the Mertonian studies through the lens of the 1936 text usually have little interest in debates on the manifest and latent functions. They also introduce further dimensions of unintended consequences of action (see Baert 1991), and argue for sociology as an analysis of the conditions leading to unexpected consequences of outcomes (see Portes 2000; Portes 2010; Linares 2009). Such a tendency is visible in analytical sociology, which perceives this article as exemplary evidence of some important features of its own approach, such as the micro-to-macro linkages. This aspect of analytical sociology is particularly visible in its take on the question of motivation (see, for example, Elster 2007 on consequentialist and nonconsequentialist motivations), in the theory of ordinary rationality (see Boudon 2008; Boudon 2011; Demeulenaere 2011), as well as in its focus on such phenomena as “self-fulfilling prophecies” (see Biggs 2011). In this vein, the 1936 paper was even dubbed “a nice example of Merton the analytical sociologist” (Hedström and Udehn 2011, 35). Still, the link between unintended consequences and analytical sociology goes beyond mere re-evaluations of Merton’s contribution. Furthermore, authors such as Boudon and Elster might be considered both “analytical” and “consequential” sociologists (see Demeulenaere 2011, 3; Boudon in this volume; Elster 1990; Elster 2007).4

4 For a parallel discussion of Boudon’s perverse effects and of Elster’s social contradictions see Van Parijs (1982).
Another field which draws on the first Mertonian formulation of the unintended is rational action theory (for a noted exemplification see Coleman 1994, 166-180). According to Portes (1998, 18), Coleman turned unanticipated and unintended consequences of purposive individual action “into a centerpiece of his version of rational action theory”. The affinity between the two rests on the interest in seemingly rational behaviour that might still produce instabilities in a system of action by leading to instances such as “fads”, “panics”, “grazes”, “fashions”, “bubbles” and “crashes” (Coleman 1994, 169-170). In this way, the “unanticipated consequences of purposive action” are transformed into “social anomalies”, pertaining particularly to the “public goods’ problem” (see Coleman 1994, 167).

Some types of economic sociology also benefit from Merton’s 1936 article, drawing on it for general theoretical inspiration. Portes, arguably the most prominent author in this field, maintains that:

[...] Merton’s article [...] is invoked as a guiding perspective for this field because of its singular affinity with the concept of socially oriented economic action and the related fact that a number of prominent studies in the field conclude by highlighting how embeddedness leads to unexpected consequences of the most diverse sorts [...] (Portes 2010, 19).

Portes’ further development of this observation is three-fold. First, he proposes that the unexpected consequences of social action are elevated to the level of “explanatory mechanisms and, hence, empirically testable propositions” (Portes 2010, 19). He enumerates five types of unexpected outcomes in purposive action: “the hidden abode”, “the latent function”, “the shift in mid-course”, “the unexpected outcome”, and “the lucky turn of events”, where only the fourth scenario “comes closest to Merton’s original treatment of unintended effects” (Portes 2010, 22). Second, Portes alters the agenda of the sociology of the unintended by introducing his “embeddedness assumption” (for comparison see Tilly 1996). Third, he argues that the distinction between linear and non-linear models of social action must be made. The linear process is “represented by a straight arrow between the avowed goal of actors – individual or collective – and the achieved end-state” (Portes 2000, 7). The non-linear model is referred to in terms of “alternative behavioral patterns” or “possible alternative outcomes to purposive action” (Portes 2010, 18-24).

Despite many attempts at reconceptualisation of Merton’s insights, the reception strand focusing on unanticipated consequences is only rarely directly critical of his ideas. One example of such study is delivered by Tilly (1996), who believes that Merton “only played half the tune” by enumerating the limitations to purposive social action and the reasons for unexpected consequences, and “left untouched the problem’s other half”, that is, the way in which purposive social action “produces systematic, durable social structure” (Tilly 1996, 592). This voice converges with the Eliasian (Mennell 1977) and Giddensian (see Giddens 1984; Thompson 1994) accounts of the unintended. Yet another approach that might be viewed as indirectly critical appears in Aubert’s (1982) discussion of predictability as a test of scientific validity in sociology, and of chance in social life. Aubert (1982, 136) calls for careful recording and analysing of those areas that lack purposive consistency, and “do not take on the character of systems in any strict sense”.