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WEBER'S "ESSENTIAL PARADOX OF SOCIAL ACTION": WHAT CAN SOCIOLOGY OF THE UNINTENDED LEARN FROM PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS?

Abstract

Within social sciences, the peculiarity of the sociological investigation of the unintended is the focus on paradoxical outcomes, and the analysis of these in relation to purposive social action. Although the analysis recurrently uses examples from public policy, if it comes to theory, the vocabulary employed speaks of contrarian and ironic effects of social action, or purposive social action, and not of social intervention. The inquiry thus arises: What can sociology of the unintended learn from public policy analysis? In order to answer this question, I look at framings and critical appraisal of Weber's "essential paradox of social action" (Merton 1936) — i.e., the paradox of rational ascetism — in authors who are representative for sociology of the unintended and public policy of the unintended. The findings of the comparison and confrontation are synthesized in two main lessons for sociologists. The first stresses the need to include the structural and ideological circumstances in the analysis of paradoxes. The second indicates that the paradoxes are tricky because they might work as narrative sequences which have the tendency to focus the attention on the spectacular and ironic aspects of processes in the detriment of others.

Key words: sociology of the unintended, public policy of the unintended, Max Weber, paradox of rational ascetism, Sam Sieber, Albert O. Hirschman

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“Paradoks działania społecznego” Webera**Czego socjologia niezamierzonego może nauczyć się od analizy polityk publicznych?
Streszczenie**

W obrębie nauk społecznych osobliwością socjologii w śledzeniu niezamierzonego jest koncentracja na paradoksalnych efektach oraz ich analiza w relacji do celowego działania społecznego. Mimo że w analizach wciąż używane są przykłady z zakresu polityk publicznych, od strony teoretycznej stosowane słownictwo odnosi się do sprzecznych i ironicznych efektów działania społecznego lub celowego działania społecznego a nie interwencji społecznej. Pojawia się więc pytanie: Czego socjologia niezamierzonego może nauczyć się od analizy polityk publicznych? W celu udzielenia odpowiedzi na to pytanie rozpatruję ujęcia i krytyki weberowskiego „paradoksu działania społecznego” — tj. paradoksu racjonalnego ascetyzmu — w pracach autorów reprezentujących socjologię niezamierzonego oraz analizę polityk publicznych niezamierzonego. Wnioski z tego porównania ujęte zostają w dwie „lekcje” dla socjologów. W pierwszej lekcji podkreśla się potrzebę włączenia do analizy paradoksów okoliczności strukturalnych i ideologicznych. W drugiej lekcji wskazuje się, że paradoksy bywają zdradliwe, gdyż funkcjonują jako sekwencje narracyjne kierujące uwagę kosztem innych na spektakularne i ironiczne aspekty procesów społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: socjologia niezamierzonego, polityka publiczna niezamierzonego, Max Weber, paradoks racjonalnego ascetyzmu, Sam Sieber, Albert O. Hirschman

Within the social sciences, the peculiarity of the sociological investigation of the unintended is the focus on paradoxical outcomes, and the analysis of these in relation to purposive social action. This taste for the ironic and contrary effects to the initial intention is oftentimes elevated and presented as the vocation of the sociological theoretical exercise (Schneider 1975: 30–58; Portes 2000: 6–7; Portes 2010: 18–24). Schneider (1975: 41–42) even spoke about “a sociological *mode of thought*” that is “centered on unintended consequences and carrying a strong tincture of irony”.

Sociology as analysis of the paradoxical — to paraphrase Portes’s (2000), “sociology as analysis of the unexpected” — developed in obvious contrast with the approach in economics which focused on social institutions as patterned structures emerging from separate actions which did not intend the overall resulting order. The latter are the so-called “establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design” (Ferguson 1966; see Cherkaoui 2007: 17–35). The sociological angle became associated theoretically with functionalist, middle-range and methodological individualist paradigms (Baert 1991; Udehn 2002; Boudon 1982; Hedström, Udehn 2011), and it developed a predilection for the un-

desirable, an evolution which is quite understandable in light of the fact that sociological insights are quite often built on policy-relevant examples (Baert 1991: 210).

These would be, in a nutshell, the main characteristics of sociological treatments of the phenomena termed by Weber as the "paradoxical results of actions" [*Paradoxie der Folgen*] (Parsons 1966: 644; Swedberg, Agevall 2005: 192; see Cherkaoui 2007). The latter observation regarding the sociological significance of illustrations of reverse effects from the public policy domain is of interest in the present paper. The problem is relevant because the main theoretical approaches to the paradoxical in sociology defined and established themselves as inquiries into unanticipated and unintended consequences of social action, and not of social intervention. Although the analysis recurrently used examples from public policy, when it comes to theory, the employed vocabulary spoke of unanticipated and unintended effects of social action or purposive social action, but not of social intervention — see, for example, Portes (2000, 2010).

On the one hand, this appeal to public policy analysis is rewarding because of the pertinence of the empirical examples (for a competent review of the field, see DeMuth 2009). On the other hand, it creates confusion and is somehow misleading because it fails to distinguish in a straightforward manner between the paradoxical outcomes of social action and those of social intervention. Sociological accounts of effects contrary to intention leave the impression of having incorporated what has been said or what there is still to say about reverse effects of social intervention. However, upon taking a closer look, doubt arises questioning whether this is really the case.

Thus, the following inquiry emerges: What could the study of paradoxical outcomes of social action learn from framings of contrary and reverse effects of social intervention? There are two main ways to answer this question. The first is to build on a systematic and comparative presentation of surprising and ironic outcomes of social action in sociology on the one hand, and paradoxes of social intervention in policy analysis on the other. Such an approach would presuppose an intellectual background and analytical competency similar to Opp's (1979) outstanding evaluation and confrontation of perspectives regarding the emergence and effects of norms in sociology and economics. The second modality is to review the manner in which

concepts and mechanisms, which became influential in the sociology of the unintended, were tackled in policy analysis. By all means, this latter tactic could be reproached for not giving a full account of the state-of-the-art in both fields. And yet, it has the advantage of better organizing the presentation of sociological inquiries and of indicating the points in which this could be refined in reference to policy analysis. These investigative gains, in the context of the exploratory character of this paper, eventually laid the balance in favor of the employment of this latter method of scrutiny herein.

From the array of unexpected and ambiguous instances in the sociology of the unintended, I will focus on Weber's paradox of unintended consequences, as depicted in the Protestant ethic thesis. This choice was motivated by the recently revitalized interest in the sociology of the unintended with the elective affinity between rational ascetism and capitalism (see Cherkaoui 2007; Portes 2000, 2010). Further, also decisive was the non-negligible fact that Weber's thesis enjoys the status of the so-called "essential paradox of social action" (see Merton 1936) in this field. The argumentation evolves in a few steps. I first sketch the attempts to include Weber's paradox in a broader classification of unintended consequences in sociology. I delineate the main interpretation lines of the paradox of rational ascetism — ranging from, initially, more subjective to, recently, more structural attempts. Following, I discuss usages and critical approaches to Weber's thesis by two representative authors for the policy analysis of the unintended — Sieber (1981) and Hirschman (1991) — who employed a more determined structural perspective when explicating this paradoxical outcome. The overall discussion is exploratory and conceptual. I conclude with the abstraction and formulation of two main *lessons* for the sociology of the paradoxical.

1. Paradoxes and Unintended Consequences

When attempting to circumscribe various approaches to the paradoxical results of social action, it is important to distinguish the analysis of the contrarian and ironic outcomes from related yet distinct treatments within the analysis of the unintended in social sciences. In addition, to be taken into account as well is the element of in-

ternal differentiations of more or less pure paradoxical manifestations².

Regarding the drawing of external boundaries for the preoccupation with the paradoxical, this should be discerned from the study of side effects and externalities of social action and social intervention. In general, the paradoxical upshots depict repercussions of actions which are contrary to the actors' interests. They constitute the terrain of the classical proverb: *The road to hell is paved with good intentions*. The paradoxes come close to irony, ambiguity and surprise (see Schneider 1975: 3–58; Boudon 1982). The side effects and externalities on the other hand, pertain to the effects of purposive activities on third parties, which were not initially accounted for but are further constitutive of the circumstances of social action (see Coase 1960; Norbert Elias quoted in Mennell 1977; Giddens 1984; Cowen 1998; Callon 1998; Norbert Elias quoted in van Krieken 1998; Rosen 2002; Beck, Bonss, Lau 2003; Elster 2007: 303–311). Although the investigation of these two types of processes do have much in common, in the actual research they became associated with distinct theoretical framings and methodological approaches to the extent that they constituted themselves in particular sorts of inquiries³.

Regarding the would-be conceptual divisions among studies of unintended consequences, the idea to distinguish between paradoxes and unintended consequences surfaced in the literature under various forms, though it cannot be stated that it got as far as to be institutionalized. A door-opening approach was presented by Schneider's (1975) analysis of irony (and paradox) and unintended consequences, where the ironic situations were granted elements of ambiguity and surprise. Of interest was also Van Parijs's (1982) distinction between weaker and stronger manifestations of perverse effects in Boudon. In his reading, the strong type, the so-called PD-effect, pertains to the "unintended outcome of the rational actions of individuals involved in a non-zero-sum game". Whereas, the weaker instance, or the so-called aggregation effect, is "just the unintended outcome of the aggregation of actions by several individuals" (Van Parijs 1982: 590).

²Arguably, the most skilled sociologist in this regard is Schneider (1975: 3–58).

³For a discussion on structuration in relation to counter-finality and sub-optimality see Baert (1991: 209)

Also in the genre of strong and weak manifestations, Hood and Peters (2004) intuitively, though quite briefly, differentiated between looser and stronger meanings of paradoxes in their analysis of accounts of unexpected outcomes and surprises in institutional interventions. Accordingly, the looser instances consist of outcomes that run unexpectedly and contrary to the initial intention, mainly in the form of reverse and undesirable effects — though not necessarily, and not exclusively. The stronger manifestations pertain to phenomena having seemingly contradictory qualities, which might be understood and explained.

In a comparable vein, Linares (2009) considered weak and strong unintended consequences. The former emerge in systems of actions depicted as “simple”. Wherein, “actors, even if they do not personally know each other, are easily able to anticipate each other’s behavior” (see the Prisoner’s Dilemma in Linares 2009: 1). Hence, the strong ones arise in “complex” systems — i.e., “actors cannot predict the ultimate consequences of a large chain of interconnected actions” (see the two-level games in international relations in Linares 2009: 1).

These presented approaches indicate that, as in the case of general parlance, logic and rhetoric studies (see discussion in Luhmann 2002: 80–82; Poole, van de Ven 1989: 563–564), we can also attribute a level of meaning to paradox in the sociology of the unintended. With the scope of capturing its meaning, I employ a generalization of the distinction between strong and weak unintended outcomes, though in a more general fashion and beyond the game theory paradigm. Accordingly, the paradox (which would be tantamount to the strong unintended consequence) is a specific type of unexpected outcome which contains elements of irony, “apparent” contradiction, ambiguity and surprise (on irony and paradox see Hoyle, Wallace 2008: 1430; Poole, van de Ven 1989). It depicts the dynamics emerging from complex systems of action which render it less transparent and, as a consequence, also more surprising and intricate (such as the shift from initial values to contrary ones during the act of carrying these out).

Framing the paradoxical occurrence along these lines, as any conceptualization of the paradox for that matter, inevitably leads to such questions as: To whom does the outcome occur as unexpected? Who perceives the ironic disposition of the phenomenon? Who is the ob-

server? And how many other observers are there? For the purposes of this study I focus on two categories of observers — the sociologists and public policy analysts respectively — and try to differentiate the manner in which these relate to Weber's paradox of rational ascetism. Luhmann (2002) made an interesting observation regarding how the location of the observation results in viewing the outcome as more or less inevitable, and — we might add — as more or less paradoxical. Accordingly: "for the self-observer things may appear as natural and necessary, whereas when seen from the outside they may appear artificial and contingent" (Luhmann 2002: 79). Invoking this statement, but the other way around, we could ask what the perception of paradoxicality in certain phenomena studied by sociologists tells us about the location and distance of these vis-à-vis the processes they research. Although this is an exogenous problem to the one directly approached herein, my investigation will try to offer a basis for an analysis in this direction as well.

2. The Protestant Ethic and the Essential Paradox of Social Action

Arguably, the most celebrated and debated paradox in sociology is the thesis that rational ascetism indirectly and unintentionally led to the accumulation of wealth that it previously rejected, as outlined by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (1985). He showed that the inner-worldly ascetism of the Protestant sects developed a set of values that were compatible with, and legitimative of the ethos of rational capitalism, and that the ascetic activities indirectly and unintentionally contributed to its rise.

By a peculiar paradox, ascetism actually resulted in the contradictory situation already mentioned on several previous occasions, namely that it was precisely its rational ascetic character that led to the accumulation of wealth (Weber 1978: 586).

The paradox rests on the mechanisms of a shift of goals toward contradictory ones in the course of a given activity. Thus, it is less an instance of an *unintended consequence*, than one of an *initially unintended one*. Within the sociology of the unintended, the most theoretically appropriate designation of this dynamic was given by Portes

(2000, 2010). He listed the Protestant ethic thesis as an example of the so-called “mid-course shift” and included it in a broader typology containing five alternative action sequences to linear purposive action. This is one of the few instances in sociology where this paradox is distinguished as an autonomous type in the classification of unintended consequences. Portes’s move also resonates well with other recent theoretical initiatives to include Weber’s famous argument on the agenda of the sociology of the unexpected (see Cherkaoui 2007) or to state the research of unintended outcomes as a necessary step in the analysis of an interpretative economic sociology *à la* Weber (see Swedberg 2007).

The significance of these recent initiatives should be weighted in the context of certain blind spots in the analytical development of the sociology of the unintended. Wherein, in spite of the abundant references and critical accounts in theoretical sociology, the paradox of rational ascetism enjoyed a somehow arrested carrier since it was first mentioned in Merton’s (1936) typology of limitations to correct anticipation of consequences of action. The sociologist identified five circumstances which stand in the way of successful prediction and planning — (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. In various degrees, these worked both as limitations of anticipation of action consequences and as sources of unintended consequences. What facilitated this juxtaposition of meaning was that throughout the 1936 article, the unanticipated consequences were correspondent to unintended outcomes, and that Merton did not consider differentiating between the two types.

Merton discussed *Weber’s paradox* in relation to the immediacy of basic values⁴. Accordingly, the fulfillment of these takes priority over the consideration of effects of action to the extent that “adherents are

⁴Elster’s (2007: 81–84) consequentialist and nonconsequentialist motivations might be considered a contemporary sequel of the immediacy of basic values on the unintended agenda. Still, given that his approach does not discuss Weber’s thesis, I did not include it in the herein discussion either.

not concerned with the objective consequences of these actions but only with the subjective satisfaction of duty well performed" (Merton 1936: 903; see also the discussion in DeMuth 2009: 2).

He has properly generalized this case, saying that active ascetism paradoxically leads to its own decline through the accumulation of wealth and possessions entailed by decreased consumption and intense productive activity (Merton 1936: 903).

He analyzed the manner in which the consequences of actions that focus on a particular value-area have the tendency to further transfer to interrelated fields and to subsequently *react* upon the initial value system which was transformed or broken down. Merton located the *essential paradox of social action* in relation to this reflexivity: "the »realization« of values may lead to their renunciation" (Merton 1936: 903).

In addition to the 1936 article, the value shift argumentation surfaced again in Merton's work (1938: 417, 460) when he accounted for the paradox that Reformers' teachings, although depreciative of science, helped encourage scientific research in the long run. Still, in spite of the appreciative references, the Weberian thesis failed to hit the headlines of the unintended consequences debate in sociology. As suggested, viewed retrospectively, this evolution is quite surprising given the gained recognition and controversial nature of the thesis of Protestant ethic in the wider discipline.

A creditable exception to this *no*-trend was Schneider's (1975: 3–58) account of irony, unintended consequences and sociology, where he built directly on Weber's and Merton's theories. To be a bit more precise, Schneider actually focused on instances of irony, yet he admitted to the closeness of meaning between irony and paradox, and, in particular cases, even to interchangeability⁵. In a similar vein to Merton, Schneider located the ironic (paradoxical) element in the indirect consequences of the Protestant ethic, in the fact that the implementation of values and institutions also progresses their renunciation — "There is something to the remark once made by the

⁵"One may write, «the paradox of unintended consequences», as Weber does here, or one may prefer »the irony of unintended consequences«" (Schneider 1975: 39).

French historian, Ernest Renan, that «institutions die by their victories»” (Schneider 1975: 40).

A more recent theoretical move to recover Weber’s paradox on the terrain of unintended consequences was initiated by Friedhelm Guttandin (1998, quoted in Symonds, Pudsey 2008: 225–226). The author linked Weber’s writings with several other instances in social sciences, ranging from the paradoxes of Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith to the unexpected accounts of Niklas Luhmann. This is a seemingly ambitious attempt that Symonds and Pudsey (2008: 226) were perhaps too hasty to dispraise on the grounds that, by including “the Weberian paradox” on the unintended agenda, it failed to do justice to its “crucial qualities”.

We feel that in trying to slot Weberian paradox back into the general debate on unintended consequences, Guttandin undermines the crucial qualities of Weberian paradox (Symonds and Pudsey 2008: 226).

Instead of using unintended consequences as a springboard for Weber’s paradox, these authors suggested hijacking it altogether from this field in order to better reveal its potential. They discussed the contrarian and unexpected instances of Protestantism, and those pertaining to science, politics and bureaucracy and found two main characteristics of the paradox at the German sociologist. The first element was that the fundamental values or ends are diverted in the attempt to implement them. Mainly illustrated here was the process by which the means to attain certain ends become ends in themselves. The second point was that there is a certain fatality to this process which makes it impervious to human agency. This feature was considered to delineate the paradox from the unintended consequences in a fundamental manner. In addition to these attributes, with regard to the temporal circumstances of its emergence, the authors located the paradoxical on two levels of analysis — universal social action and western modernity.

This reading brings us back to the mid-course shift in Portes’s (2000, 2010) typology of alternative action sequences to purposive social action. In addition to Weber’s thesis, Portes also pointed to Michel’s (1968) iron law of oligarchy and introduced the shift of goals of a given activity under the pressure of external forces or as a result of embeddedness of action in various domains — for this latter aspect

see Polanyi (1944), Granovetter (1985) and Portes (2010: 48–70). As stated, the merit of Portes's approach rests in having firmly located the Protestant ethic thesis on the agenda of the unintended consequences and in having it linked it with other theorists. The review character of the article, however, did not give space to engage in a deeper discussion of its mechanisms. Because of this, the opportunity to speculate on its theoretical assumptions is rather limited.

Much more outspoken in this regard was Rasch's (2002: 27) argument about the paradox of rational ascetism: "Ascetic denial of the world produces more of the world it denies, as Weber clearly saw". Rasch invoked Niklas Luhmann and showed that he can explain the dynamics of this paradox in reference to George Spencer-Brown's concept of "reentry" (quoted in Rasch 2002: 28) — i.e., one introduces a distinction, is active on one side of it and, consequently, the other side gets pushed ahead and invigorated. In the case of Catholic theology, the distinction was made between "the immanent, worldly world and transcendence" (Rasch 2002: 28). Both medieval Catholicism and modern Protestantism complexified the world by denying it. The case is pointed as illustrative of Luhmann's theory on the potential and productiveness of the paradox in giving impulses to the world.

When adding up the treatments of Merton (1936), Schneider (1975), Portes (2000, 2010) and Symonds and Pudsey (2008), it emerges that the main mechanisms explaining the Weberian paradoxes and, in particular, the one of ascetism, are the over-commitment to values (in combination with the spill-over effect) and the over-commitment to means (in the detriment of goals). Importantly, as underlined by Rasch's (2002) discussion, the over-commitment operates on one side of the distinction that was made, and by this operation the other side emerges strengthened. The approaches of these authors — though less in the case of Schneider and Portes — also converge in characterizing the change of the dominant value system with a certain fatality.

Here is the essential paradox of social action — the "realization" of values may lead to their renunciation. We may paraphrase Goethe and speak of "Die Kraft, die stets das Gute will, und stets das Böse schafft" (Merton 1936: 903).

We show in this article that there is a common form of paradox in Weber's works, and that this form has two basic characteristics: firstly, fundamental values or ends are undermined, lost or reversed in the very pursuit of those values or ends; and, secondly, this process is unable to be altered or avoided by human agency — it is, or has been, “fate” (Symonds, Pudsey 2008: 223–224).

Protestant worship of an absent God, provoked by an intense concern for the otherworldly salvation of one's soul, should lead to the obsessive need to save and invest money, so that daily news of interest rates and stock market averages read like the weather reports of heaven [...] is just one of the ironies that reveals how paradox, far from paralyzing activity, does the essential work of the world (Rasch 2002: 28–29).

Following Turner (2007: ix), it can be agreed that this sense of fatefulness is given by the tension between the good intentions and maleficent consequences. Such an impression is indeed supported by certain passages in Weber's work (see Schneider 1990: 169; Swedberg, Agevall 2005: 192). On the other hand however, the idea of fate also seems to return a certain sense of control in a field which is supposed to be dealing with the unexpected. Hirschman (1991: 36–37), for instance, linked the perverse effect with predictability, showing that it somehow defeats the purpose of unintended consequences, which “originally introduced uncertainty and open-endedness into social thought”. Equally, in reference to Luhmann's (2002) comment on the influence of observers' position, we might infer that the acute perception of paradoxicality in social processes indicates that these researchers were closer to their object of study than they appeared.

The location of the paradoxical in relation to the idea of fatefulness should not be taken too literally though. Worthy to also note is that more structural and contingent perspectives recently flourished with regard to the thesis of the Protestant ethic. Illustrative in this regard is Lal's (2001) analysis of the impact of cosmological beliefs on the economic performance and political economy of the West. In the field dealing with unintended consequences, this author is credited with bringing two refinements to Weber's thesis. First, he reviewed literature documenting that Weber “was right, he just got his dates wrong” (Lal 2001: 174), meaning that the rise of “in-wordly” individualism began long before the Reformation. Second, he underlined that the process was “historically contingent”.

On the origins of this "strange" belief I find Goody's explanation the most persuasive: it arose as the unintended consequence of the Roman Catholic's church's acquisitive hunger. Thus there would seem to be a "materialist" origin for the "idealism" that led to the rise of the West. But it was historically contingent (Lal 2001: 174).

This kind of analysis brings us to Cherkaoui's (2007: 1) recent recreation of "Weber's sociology of the paradox of consequences", wherein he identified and comprehensively discussed five types of unintended consequences explanations⁶. Regarding the paradox discussed herein, Cherkaoui (2007: 44–54) stressed the "elective affinity", and not causal, sort of relation between the ethics of rational ascetism and the rise of capitalism. This restatement is important because it goes beyond the internal dynamism and fatefulness in analyzing the phenomenon that is typical of the approach depicting the relation between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism in terms of the "essential paradox of social action".

This brief examination of treatments of the paradox of rational ascetism by unintended theorists points out two things. First, the problem of strong paradoxes in the sociology of the unintended only recently started to be paid the theoretical attention that it deserves. Although I would not go as far as Symonds and Pudsey (2008: 225) in stating that "this debate never recovered the original Mertonian understanding of paradox; in fact, paradox is hardly mentioned again"⁷, the overall disappointment of these authors seems somehow justified⁸. Second, the sociological accounts balanced between approaches stressing certain fatefulness in the dynamics of paradoxes, on the one hand, and less novelized, yet more systematic treatments

⁶The five types of mechanisms generating unintended consequences are: (1) a mismatch between means and ends, (2) the structure of interdependence between actors, (3) the spill of actions over their domain of activity, (4) the conflict between the rationalities of different domains, and (5) the sudden emergence of new, contradictory, values during the process of their implementing (Cherkaoui 2007).

⁷For example, to the contrary, see Merton (1968) on latent functions, Campbell (1982) on the interest in paradoxical in Merton, and Boudon (1982) on paradoxical accounts at Michels, de Tocqueville, Durkheim and Karl Deutsch.

⁸Indeed, systematic efforts to explain and recover some classic paradoxes in the sociology of the unintended are quite recent (see Elster 2009) and even now it could be hardly stated that we are dealing with a growing trend.

of the broader processes in which the paradox emerged, on the other. In terms of analysis, there is a slow yet discernible move from the exclusive focus on the paradox itself to the study of the broader phenomena and context of which this is part. The former approach stresses causal links and internal determinism while the latter traces structural links and is interested in the broader picture. The former speaks of fatefulness, whereas the latter brings in the elective affinity aspect.

3. What Can Sociology of the Paradoxical Learn from Policy Analysis?

According to Merton (1936), “In considering *purposive* action, we are concerned with »conduct« as distinct from »behavior«, that is, with action which involves motives and consequently a choice between various alternatives”. While, “the term *social intervention* denotes any sort of deliberate effort to alter a human situation in some desired direction, such as a welfare program, a military expedition, an organizational structure, or a law” (Sieber 1981: 9) — its scale ranging from guided historical changes and modernization projects to interpersonal relationships. Therefore, in comparison to social action, the intervention is characterized by the intention to transform the social reality in a clearly stated direction.

The study of unintended consequences of purposeful intervention is the territory of public policy analysis, planned organizational change, evaluation research, and the study of social problems and the impact of high technology on society (see Marx 1974; Vildawsky 1980, 1988; Sieber 1981; Brooks 1986; Thompson, Ellis, Vildawsky 1990; Grabosky 1995; Tenner 1997; Hood, Peters 2004; Roots 2004; Fine 2006; Margetts, Perri 6, Hood 2010). In addition, it also surfaces in particular areas of sociology — such as the sociology of law, applied sociology, and urban and environmental sociology (see Gross 2010; Mica, Peisert, Winczorek 2011: 21–23; Winczorek 2011). Within the limits of this article, I will designate the interest in the paradoxical and side-effects of social intervention as policy analysis of the unintended. This is an inquiry which, from the theoretical and conceptual point of view, steers closer to sociology than to economics of the

unintended. Though it builds on sociological framings — notably in Mertonian fashion (see discussion in Hood and Peters 2004⁹) — this field also advances potent original formulations and classifications of the unintended in its own right (see DeMuth 2009).

What can sociology of the paradoxical learn from policy analysis? As stated in the introductory part of this paper, my proposal is to begin to sketch an answer to this question by presenting treatments of the protestant ethic thesis by two representative authors for the policy analysis of the unintended — Sieber (1981) and Hirschman (1977). The name of the former is linked with the systematic study of mechanisms producing reverse effects in organizational and public policy management. While the name of the latter is of a wider resonance, covering theoretical innovations in the study of the unintended — the principle of the hiding hand (Hirschman 1967) and the three theses of reactionary rhetoric, which mobilize against progressive public policies, and which are framed in terms of unintended consequences (Hirschman 1991), to name just a few contributions.

The herein consideration of Sieber (1981) is not accidental. His systematization of mechanisms leading to ironies of social intervention might be considered as a policy analysis of the unintended comparable to the 1936 Mertonian initiative to advance sociology as analysis of unanticipated and unintended consequences. In addition to Sieber's focus on social intervention, the authors further diverge as Sieber dealt with regressive outcomes, while Merton's compass was much broader and also included side effects of social action. Sieber identified seven¹⁰ recurring characteristics of interventions, which in reaction with their environment are likely to produce the opposite of the intentions of the agents who prompted them. By the opposite he had in mind the pernicious effects, those regressive outcomes which worsen the conditions which the social intervention aimed to ameliorate. The conceptual development of some of these built directly on a theoretical polemic with concepts introduced by Merton in the unintended vocabulary. Of particular interest both for Sieber and for this paper is the case of

⁹For non-Mertonian sociological inspirations for policy analysis of the unintended see Gross (2003, 2010).

¹⁰Sieber's (1981) "conversion mechanisms" are: functional disruption, exploitation, provocation, classification, goal displacement, overcommitment, and placation.

Protestant ascetism because, from the array of Mertonian terms, this came closest to what Sieber defined as the regressive effect.

The preceding section on strong paradoxes in sociology presented theoretical considerations of the consequences of fundamental value commitment and mainly depicted them as a Weberian problem. Sieber, however, initially approached it as a Mertonian formulation. Even though he acknowledged the Weberian inspiration and also built on scholarship on Weber, it was with Merton's framework that he first and foremost took issue with. Certainly, Sieber's conclusions eventually added up to a refinement of the Weberian thesis. This notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge that the starting point of the argument was Merton's framework on the Protestant ethic, and not Weber's as such. It was Merton because Sieber (1981) acknowledged him as the bellwether of sociology of the unintended.

Sieber reviewed Merton's "essential paradox of social action" through the lens of regressive effects and pointed to several shortcomings. These pertained to the exclusive focus on the "subjective sources of reverse effects" in the detriment of more objective and historical circumstances; and to Merton's failure to show why actions committed to fundamental values lead to a contrary effect and not to a mainly different one — "a reverse effect rather than a side effect or null effect" (Sieber 1981: 33). In addition, Sieber criticized Merton's approach for not considering cases in which actors with fundamental value commitments do attain their ends, even though this presupposes negative externalities of high proportions — as was the issue with the American abolitionism. He partially concluded that the over-commitment to values works as a limitation of anticipation of future consequences, but cannot immediately count as a source of regressive effects.

In sum, while strong commitment might reduce one's awareness of reverse effects, the actual occurrence of such effects often depends on other factors (Sieber 1981: 34).

These findings confirm the observation regarding the Mertonian enumeration of limitations to a successful prediction of outcomes of action that I made earlier — that this typology merges in its explanation the impediments to anticipation with the sources of unintended outcomes. Sieber (1981), however, followed through the implications

of this finding even further and provided an alternative–complementary mechanism for explaining the case of Protestantism. This occurred via the exploitation of the legitimative potential of religious values in early capitalism.

The thesis of ascetism and wealth is a case of the licit exploitation of new opportunities — new in the sense that they did not constitute an intended and foreseen aspect of the intervention. Such exploitation of resources of a social intervention is a reverse mechanism, which might be traced to the hostile and non-hostile targets of the intervention, as well as to its agents. Sieber (1981: 93) briefly explored monastic ascetism (the case of Cistercians) and the role of Protestantism in the spread of mammonism “in terms of the agents’ exploitation of emergent resources that come to exceed the rewards of pursuing an original goal”. With the progression of the movement, the attractive rewards of the exploitation of religious values undermined the ascetic values of its founders. The legitimative potential of Protestantism for businessmen in the centuries following the Reformation consisted of this “intervention” acting as a source of group solidarity in business dealings and as a legitimizer of the institutions of private property, material success and competition (Sieber 1981: 94–95).

The abstraction of the findings on the cases of monastic ascetism and Protestantism led to two pertinent observations regarding the rise of capitalism. First, the overcommitment to values might explain the limitation of anticipation of action/intervention, but it does not universally account for the actual occurrence of unintended outcomes. Second, although the system of fundamental values that induced the action/intervention might lead to systematic conduct, this fact alone does not automatically explain the emergent indirect and unintended consequences. The exploitative potential by various actors of the action/intervention under specific historical conditions should also be explored.

The ramifications of this discussion could be further investigated, and by bringing in Sieber’s other concepts, quite a bit of insight could be gained into the intrinsic dynamics of the paradox of ascetism and the rise of capitalism. In light of the exploratory character of the article however, suffice here to point out that *the lesson to be learned is that, in addition to the psychological aspects and subjective processes which shape the anticipation of consequences, sociology of the unintended-*

ed should also pay attention to the structural and ideological conditions in which the paradox emerges.

Hirschman's (1977: 129) analysis of the "still puzzling ideological circumstances of the rise of capitalism" gives support for extrapolating these one-case conclusions to findings with claims of generality. Similarly to Sieber, in Hirschman's (1977: 129) work, the paradox of ascetism was not refuted as such, but extended to the process of interested groups exploiting the new phenomenon by occupying more central positions "in the «power structure» and the «establishment» of the time". Where Sieber pointed to the utilization of the legitimitative potential of the religious ideas, Hirschman revealed the pursuing of capitalism for its political consequences of imposing discipline on rulers and ruled alike. The advantage and interest were embraced for their perceived potential to do away with the destructive passions of humankind.

Weber claims that capitalistic behavior and activities were the indirect (and originally unintended) result of a desperate *search for individual salvation*. My claim is that the diffusion of capitalist forms owed much to an equally desperate search for a way of *avoiding society's ruin*, permanently threatening at the time because of precarious arrangements for internal and external order (Hirschman 1991: 129–130).

Apart from the addition of this structural component, Hirschman's (1977: 131) treatment of the unintended also departed from Weber's thesis in that it drew attention to the symmetrically opposite manifestation — "the intended but unrealized effects of social decisions".

This [Weber's] thesis was more than a magnificent paradox: it spelled out one of those remarkable unintended effects of human actions (or, in this case, thoughts) whose discovery has become the peculiar province and highest ambition of the social scientist since Vico, Mandeville, and Adam Smith. Now I submit [...] that discoveries of the symmetrically opposite kind are both possible and valuable (Hirschman 1991: 130).

We encounter in this quotation a partial restatement and upgraded theorization of the arguments presented in Hirschman's (1967) earlier essay on the "hiding hand principle". Accordingly, the intended but unrealized outcomes are important because of their initiation of social change. The expectations regarding particular effects facilitate

certain decisions, but they also “help *keep* their real future effects from view”. Their research is important because actors’ acknowledgement or repression of unfulfilled expectations might challenge the legitimacy of the newly established social order — one of the unintended but realized effects of social decisions.

To be sure, neither Sieber nor Hirschman proved the paradoxical nature of the ethic of Protestantism false, but they drew attention to the fact that the mid-course shift of values, the way it was taken up in sociology of the unintended at least, was mainly involved with subjective and psychological processes. They hinted that there is more to the rise of capitalism than a paradox can envisage. *The lesson to be learned is that paradoxes are as fascinating social phenomena as they are tricky. They are tricky because they might work as narrative sequences which have the tendency to focus the attention on the spectacular and ironic aspects of processes in the detriment of others.*

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to open the discussion regarding the possible points of convergence and divergence in the framing of unintended consequences within the sociology of the unintended and public policy analysis of the unintended respectively.

The endeavor might be considered a success in that it pointed to differences in approaching the paradox of rational ascetism — Weber’s thesis of Protestant ethic — at authors who are representative for these two fields. Thus, it showed that, until recently, the sociological treatments were fascinated with the internal dynamism of the paradox and overlooked the opportunity structure and broader ideological circumstances in which alleged ironic and surprising effects surface. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1985) was considered tantamount to the “essential paradox of social action” — that the “«realization» of values may lead to their renunciation” (Merton 1936). In spite of its appeal however, this paradox was somehow marginalized, or taken for granted, in the sociology of the unintended, and it was only recently that it claimed a place at its table. Such reintegration on the critical agenda commenced in two main ways: the further appraisal of the element of fate and internal dynamism in the

Weberian paradox, on the one hand, and the revealing of the elective affinity component, contingent and structural aspects, on the other.

Regarding the approaches advanced by public policy analysts, the paper followed up Sieber's and Hirschman's framings. Both are authors who, although not directly disavowing the "essential paradox of social action", do demystify it to a certain extent by pointing to the structural and ideological circumstances of its emergence. The reviewed treatments also seemed less emotionally engaged or fascinated with the unexpected outcomes and more circumspect in terms of the universalization of internal dynamism mechanisms operation.

These findings were synthesized in two main lessons for the sociology of the paradoxical. The first stressed the need to include the structural and ideological circumstances in the analysis. The second called for awareness of blind spots in the narrative, which the study of contradictory outcomes nourishes by focusing the researcher's attention on the ironic flip flops in the dynamics of social action.

While all these pertain, there are also some points in which the present investigation might be considered unsuccessful. As such, it did not sufficiently recover, as promised, the treatment of unintended consequences and paradoxical outcomes of social intervention. Although Sieber and Hirschman — and especially Sieber — clearly reinterpreted the ascetic activities as social intervention, the theoretical breakthrough did not stem from reconsidering the ascetism along these lines solely. Hence, there is need to extend the comparison of sociology and public policy analysis of the unintended in the direction of confronting particular investigations of unexpected and ironic consequences of social action and social intervention. The herein preliminary inquiry into the manner in which already well-established paradoxical outcomes in social sciences (be they of social action) have been taken up in these two fields should pave the way for such a comprehensive and ambitious investigation.

It is mainly in relation to this general goal that the potential of the herein theoretical intervention should be evaluated. In this respect, this proved worthwhile because it showed that, in the analysis of paradoxes of social action, sociology employed and continues, here and there, to reproduce a rather endogenous perspective, while public policy analysis concentrated on the exogenous aspects instead. This finding is somehow in line with Luhmann's (2002) distinction

between self-observers and observers. Invoking him, it emerges that indeed, when confronted with the paradoxical, the sociologists were initially inclined to look for the "natural and necessary", and the public policy analysts for the "contingent" (see also Scott 1999: 342–345). In this respect, new contributions to depicting the paradox of rational ascetism along more structural lines indicate not just overall analytical and conceptual refinements in sociology of the unintended, but also what we may refer to as *re-situation* (see Haraway 1991 on "situated knowledge") of the position from which sociologists approach paradoxical phenomena.

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