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Review Essay

Socioeconomics

IN TUNE, BUT OUT OF TOUCH, WITH RECENT SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Amitai Etzioni: *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics*. Free Press, New York, 1988. 314 pp., \$24.95 (Cloth).

In The Moral Dimension, Etzioni presents the case for a new paradigm. While the latter emphasizes rational, egotistical hedonists maximizing their utilities, Etzioni's "deontological I&WE paradigm" is based on a view of moral individuals who are part of a larger community and who seek to act in accord with broader values. Etzioni focuses *most* on socioeconomics, a theory within the new paradigm which is said to provide a way of dealing with economic behavior that stands in contrast to neoclassical economic theory.

The book is divided into three parts. Each involves a critique of aspects of neoclassical theory, as well as making the case of socioeconomics. In Part I, Etzioni examines the neoclassical assumption of individuals as pleasure seekers and argues instead that people make decisions on the basis of moral factors that cannot be reduced to personal gain. In Part II, the focus is on decision making, and the argument is that instead of making self-interested choices, people are most likely to make choices on the basis of affective and normative factors. People make less than rational (logical-empirical) choices because of the influence of normative-affective factors and limitations in their cognitive capacities. Etzioni moves from the individual level (that dominates the neoclassical paradigm) to the collective level in Part III, where he discusses how collectivities can be rational as well as involving forces (e.g., power) that impinge on individual decision making. Collectivities not only shape individual decision making, but can be restructured to make them more responsive to individual needs and aspirations. This leads to the closing chapter which focuses on the policy

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and moral implications of socioeconomics. While the neoclassical approach emphasizes the use of economic incentives and disincentives to make policy changes, Etzioni argues that we must stress moral exhortation, moral leadership, and moral education.

Etzioni's case for socioeconomics can be seen as a defensive reaction to the recent incursions of neoclassical economics into sociology and other social sciences. He is attempting to construct a theory which is informed by more moral and social assumptions than the neoclassical approach, and which is based on research from an array of social sciences. Although he relies primarily on nonsociological sources to make his case, Etzioni is articulating an eminently sociological approach to economics that focuses on traditional concerns with social, cultural, and personality factors. One certainly can anticipate hostility from supporters of the neoclassical approach.

Perhaps Etzioni is not simply defensive, but harbors grand ambitions of his own. Etzioni is quite open about the breadth of his objective when he discusses the foundation "for a valid theory of behavior and society, including economic behavior, a theory referred to as socio-economics" (p. 63; note: all page references without an accompanying date are to Etzioni's 1988 book under review here).

Innumerable issues are raised by this ambitious book, but I will focus on the relationship between socioeconomics and contemporary developments in sociological theory. Although socioeconomics is *in tune* with recent major developments in sociological theory, it is *out of touch* with them. Socioeconomics can be greatly enriched by drawing on the latest developments in sociological theory.

One of the ironies here is that Etzioni, a sociologist, stands accused of being unaware of the latest developments in sociological theory. His roots lie in Parsonsian structural-functional theory,¹ as well as that of Parsons's critic, Dennis Wrong. Parsons's emphasis on culture (in fact, he labeled himself a "cultural determinist" [Parsons, 1966]), and the links among the social, cultural, and personality systems, all play a prominent role in Etzioni's approach. Also important is the Parsonsian emphasis on socialization and internalization, as well as Wrong's (1961) caution that we must be wary of an oversocialized conception of people. However, these ideas reached their height of influences several decades ago. If Etzioni wants to operate within a modified Parsonsian approach, one wonders why he does not draw on the work of Alexander and his supporters who are endeavoring to overcome earlier weaknesses by constructing a neo-Parsonsian, neofunctionalist perspective.

How could Etzioni, who seems to up-to-date in economics, psychology, and political science, be so out of touch with sociological theory? The answer lies in the implicit politics of *The Moral Dimension*. What sociologist is going to object to Etzioni's closing message that socioeconomics views "pleasure and self-interest within the broader context of human nature, society and ultimate values" (p.251)? However, he does have to convince others, especially economists, psychologists, and political scientists. But Etzioni is also addressing a larger public policy audience. He has clearly done his homework in economics, psychology, and political science, yet has slighted his roots in sociological theory. However, my main goal here is not to

criticize Etzioni, but to point to some recent theoretical developments that would have greatly enhanced his socioeconomics.

One such development is the recent movement toward micro-macro integration in sociological theory (Ritzer, 1990a) after decades of ignoring the micro-macro issue (Kemeny, 1976). In the 1980's, a wide range of works starting from either the micro (e.g., Collins, 1988; Emerson, 1981; Friedman & Hechter, 1988) or macro (e.g., Alexander & Cölmöy, 1990; Habermas, 1981) end of the social/theoretical continua, or somewhere in between (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Ritzer, 1981), converged on the issue of micro-macro linkage.

Etzioni's work on socioeconomics is very much of this time and genre even though there is no evidence that this vast body of work had any influence on his thinking. Not willing to lose useful ideas from the neoclassical paradigm, Etzioni begins with and accepts its microlevel insights into individual behavior. However, he believes that there is more to the microlevel than simply behavior; we must also be concerned with personality factors. More importantly, we cannot be content to operate exclusively on the microlevel, we must include macrolevel factors. Furthermore, these macrolevel phenomena are more than aggregated, microlevel phenomena. Thus Etzioni includes the basic sociological principle of emergence and focuses a good deal of attention on emergent social and cultural phenomena. Most important, Etzioni is concerned with the interrelationships among these micro- and macrolevel phenomena (p.181).

What might Etzioni have gained from the body of sociological theory concerned with micro-macro linkage? There is a growing consensus in sociological theory that macrostructures are *both* constraining and enabling; that structures and actors mutually constitute one another. Operating with a more old-fashioned theoretical orientation, Etzioni tends to see social structures primarily as limiting and constraining (p.4). In contrast, Giddens's (1984, pp. 25-26) ideas on structuration were that "the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. . . [T]he structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize," or structure "is *always* both constraining and enabling" (emphasis on original). Even Alexander (1987, p. 303), who began with a Parsonsian collectivistic bias, came to a similar viewpoint: "The collective environments of action simultaneously inspire and confine it."

Another work on micro-macro linkage that Etzioni might have found useful deal with the nature of the relationships between micro and macro, in which the authors, Munch and Smelser (1987) discussed such relationships as aggregation; externalization; creating, sustaining, and reproducing the macro; conformity; internalization; and limit setting. Some of these, especially internalization, are found in Etzioni's work. He could have utilized these other relationships and enriched his analysis of the relationships with which he did deal.

Also, Etzioni would have found helpful the wide range of efforts at theoretical synthesis (Ritzer, 1990b), including micro-macro synthesis. Again, although Etzioni ignores this work, his orientation is in accord with it. Specifically, Etzioni seeks to synthesize neoclassical theory and socioeconomics. He expresses it this way:

The approach followed here is one of *codetermination*: It encompasses factors that form society and personality, as well as neoclassical factors that form markets and rational decision-making. Moreover, we can go beyond suggesting that *both approaches need to be synthesized* [italics added]; we can identify to some extent how they are related to one another: The paradigm advanced here seeks to characterize the context within which the forces that the neoclassical approach focuses on are played out, a context that sets limits and provides direction to those forces. (pp. 3-4)

However, Etzioni is far from alone in setting a synthetic goal for himself. A number of theorists have recently recognized the movement toward syntheses within sociological theory (Alexander & Colomy, 1990; Ritzer, 1990b; Smelser, 1988). Nor is Etzioni alone in seeking a more synthetic approach from a base in the neoclassical paradigm (Cook, O'Brien, & Kollock, 1990; Friedman & Hechter, 1990). Other notable efforts at synthesis are found within conflict theory (Collins, 1990), symbolic interactionism (Fine, 1990), ethnomethodology (Boden, 1990), and most important, given Etzioni's tilt toward Parsonsian theory, within structural functionalism (Alexander & Colomy, 1990).

Etzioni would have profited from, among others, the recent synthetic work of the neofunctionalists. The adoption of the label "neofunctionalism" is intended to show continuity with structural functionalism, and to indicate that the new perspective seeks to overcome some of the problems associated with it as well as to extend that perspective. Alexander (1985, p. 10) enumerated the problems associated with structural functionalism that neofunctionalism will need to surmount, including its "anti-individualism," "antagonism to change," "conservatism," "idealism," and an "anti-empirical bias." Alexander and Colomy (1990) staked out a very ambitious claim for neofunctionalism. They did not see it as, in their terms, a more modest "elaboration" or "revision" of structural functionalism, but rather a "reconstruction" in which differences with the founder (Parsons) are clearly acknowledged and explicit openings are made to other theories (e.g., conflict and interactionism). Efforts are made to integrate neofunctionalism with insights from the master, such as Marx on material structures and Durkheim on symbolism. In attempt to overcome the idealist bias of Parsonsian structural functionalism, especially its emphasis on macrosubjective phenomena, such as culture, openings are urged to more materialist approaches. The structural functional tendency to emphasize order is countered by a call for rapprochement with theories of social change. Most important, to compensate for the macrolevel biases of traditional structural functionalism, efforts are made to integrate ideas from exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, phenomenology, and so on. Such reconstruction, as done by Alexander and Colomy (1990), can both revive structural functionalism and provide the foundation for a new theoretical tradition.

What might Etzioni have gained from this synthetic work in neofunctionalism? For one, he might have avoided the tendency to exaggerate the significance of moral and cultural phenomena. Etzioni errs in this direction and fails to give equivalent

attention to macrostructural phenomena. Indeed, explicit and detailed attention to such phenomena is left to the last part of the book. And when he does deal with macrostructural phenomena, he tends to focus on their subjective aspects, that is, the ways in which they are internalized among actors (p. 189). Etzioni also fails to give adequate attention to microlevel sociological theories and their insights. Again, the efforts by the neofunctionalists to integrate ideas from various microtheories would have been helpful. Or, Etzioni could have turned more directly to microtheories, such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. For example, Etzioni stresses that rationality, unlike in the neoclassical paradigm, involves conscious deliberations and not automatic, unconscious responses. Microtheorists have had a lot to say about such conscious processes.

Although this review has been critical of Etzioni's socioeconomics, he merits praise for seeking to systematically delineate a socioeconomic alternative to neoclassicism. In doing so, he has mined the literature of economics and psychology to present a detailed picture of socioeconomics. While he continually reminds the reader that he is offering only a first approximation, the detail represents a real strength in contrast to the theoretical literature within sociology. While Etzioni could certainly profit from exposure to that literature, those theorists could greatly enhance their theoretical perspectives by following Etzioni's example of utilizing detailed empirical literature and evidence. While most theorists present hollow theoretical shells, Etzioni has created a theoretical structure rich in detail. My unease is with a theoretical structure which could have greatly benefited from incorporating recent work in sociological theory.

NOTES

1. Parsons and structural functionalism also played a central role in Etzioni's (1968) earlier major theoretical work, *The Active Society*, where he wrote of "the functional analysis employed here" and made it clear that he was modifying it so that it was better able to deal with change (p. 121, see also p. 418).

2. Work on micro-macro integration and theoretical syntheses are not the only relevant bodies of work in sociology that Etzioni ignores. To take another example, Etzioni has a lot to say about emotions, but show no familiarity with the growing literature on the sociology of emotions.

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