

Renzo Carriero

The fates of human societies: caught between causality, chance and agency

Guns, Germs, and Steel (1997), the international bestseller by that out-of-the-ordinary scholar Jared Diamond, carries a subtitle that was changed, regrettably, in the Italian translation of the book: *The fates of human societies*¹. The term *fates* – with all its overtones of destiny, foreordination and fortune – effectively encapsulates Diamond’s enormously long-term view of how human societies’ have evolved, with environmental causes and geographical factors intertwining with contingent and unforeseeable events in mapping societies’ historical trajectories. Simone Sarti’s book, *Il caso e la società. Il ruolo del caso nei fenomeni umani e sociali* (Torino, Utet, 2021) – *Chance and Society* – is very much in the same vein, addressing a topic that is bound to discommode many sociologists because it takes a hammer to what they thought were some of their firmest foundations, leaving them on shaky ground. One of sociology’s stated aims and purposes – there are others, but few shoulder as much weight – is to demonstrate the contextual underpinnings of social action, and shed light on how individual agency takes shape within a perimeter whose size is determined by opportunity structures that can be taken as given and are reproduced with a certain sluggishness. Restoring chance to a central role in the fates of individuals and societies is like setting the table for the Commendatore’s statue – the most unwelcome of stony-faced guests, as Sarti remarks; and we can presume that not all sociologists identify strongly with Don Giovanni – and having to engage him in conversation. This is thus a book that raises uncomfortable questions for us as sociologists, making us reflect on what we believe. Here, what is called into question is not so much our beliefs about the epistemic status of our discipline (the truth values it can offer), as the relevance of the *causal* factors that intrigue us so much and define a sort of sociological paradigm: culture, structure, class, and so forth. Sarti invites us to put these factors into perspective. Not to abandon them, but to reconsider the weighty role of *random* factors in the doings of individuals and societies.

¹The Italian edition is subtitled *Breve storia del mondo negli ultimi tredicimila anni*, i.e., *A Short History of the World in the Last Thirteen Thousand Years*.

As Boudon (1984) – whose spirit hovers over the text, though he is never cited – tells us, we must *give disorder its due*, reassessing the unintended and unexpected effects of social action.

The book is divided into four chapters plus the conclusions. The first chapter is devoted to defining the notion of chance, focusing on three conditions: probabilistic uncertainty (an event is random when we cannot determine beforehand whether it will take place or not, but only make more or less informed predictions based on probability); non-intentionality (an event is random if no one intended, at least to some extent, to make it happen); and lastly, the indeterminacy of outcomes (an event is random if it does not figure among those that could reasonably be expected).

The second chapter discusses examples of the role that chance (or perhaps it would be better to say contingency) played in a number of historical events, with far-reaching consequences: from the biography of Hitler, to the discovery of America, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here Sarti's main point is that the after-the-fact reconstruction of events invariably makes them seem more orderly, predictable and even inevitable than could have been thought beforehand, when there was no way of knowing that random events might arise.

The third chapter offers Sarti's theoretical justification for dealing with chance, viz., the theory of complex systems, where human societies are some of the most complex, perhaps the most complex there are. The theory of complex systems holds that the dynamics of such a system can be reconstructed *a posteriori*, but not predicted. This point ties in with the typically sociological theme of the unintended consequences of social action, the example given here being Schelling's simple but eloquent models of segregation. The chapter also discusses how chance makes it difficult to make long-range – and sometimes even short-term – forecasts. Sarti's example is that of predicting election results on the basis of polling. Though polls often prove quite accurate, they can be worthless when something entirely unforeseen intervenes, as was the case with the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid and their impact on Spain's general elections a few days later.

The fourth chapter is the most riveting for sociologists. It raises a crucial question: given that society strikes us as being orderly on the whole, what role does chance actually have? Here Sarti comes to grips with social determinism, the weight of social origin in individual destinies and the role of the social mechanisms of cumulative advantages and disadvantages. The chapter also presents some interesting findings of a study Sarti carried out of the intergenerational transmission of football fandom: how much weight does the family of origin have? According to Sarti, determinism never enters the equation, even where the family seems to carry considerable weight. By contrast, chance is very much at work here, as idiosyncratic and unpredictable circumstances determine what team a child will support when he grows up (if he becomes a fan).

In the conclusions, Sarti touches briefly on the metaphor of society as a lottery, but one where not everyone has the same odds of winning the prizes because of the way today's society leads to dynamics of cumulative advantages – the Matthew Effect – whereby distribution is concentrated in the hands of the few. Even if the rules for distributing the prizes were changed to favor individual merit, however, chance would continue to have a role because the foundational dimensions of individual merit, talent and effort, “derive from material, biological and environmental contingencies” that are randomly distributed.

I find Sarti's book to be admirable, because it has dared to take on a subject of major importance to the discipline in a language accessible to the dedicated student, and not only to the specialist. For example, Sarti provides a commendable description of how social mechanisms of cumulative advantages and disadvantages act independently of individual merit and can trigger random mechanisms. The distribution of talent is undoubtedly random, i.e., it is a statistically normal distribution, but the same distribution is not observed for wealth, fame, prestige and so forth, given that the mechanisms of the social structure and, I might add, economic mechanisms like those operating in winner-take-all markets lead to concentrations of wealth that are very different from concentrations of talent. Sarti also sums up his thinking with what I found to be a very sage observation: while society is a complex system that can go through periods of disorder and chaos that are essentially impossible to predict much in advance, we nevertheless can and must build institutions that try to mitigate the unintended harm they can cause.

Two issues addressed in the book deserve further reflection: the nexus between *casual* and *causal* – an anagram that expresses the book's leitmotif – and the role of individual *agency*. Perhaps swayed by his own enthusiasm, or perhaps to convey his message with greater effect, Sarti may have been a bit hyperbolic in describing how chance operates, while the role of agency remains ambiguous, overvalued at times, underestimated at others.

Speaking of the work of historians, Sarti notes that “while the historian can take comfort in thinking that history would in any case have proceeded in more or less the same way, the social scientist does not find this convincing. [...] True, things happen in only one way. But only after they've happened” (2021, 33). In other words, we can reconstruct after the fact and superimpose a logic on the chain of past events that make them seem almost obvious and inevitable to us, but if we think we can start predicting future events, we will soon be disabused of this notion by facts we could never have expected at the time we were hazarding our forecasts. Why does this happen? Everything seems obvious and inevitable in hindsight only because there is no counterfactual, and we can thus afford the luxury of telling ourselves a story that could not have gone otherwise. This is exactly what Duncan Watts (2011), among others, argues. In sociology, as in all the social sciences, there is a growing awareness of

the fact that a *causal* explanation of social phenomena must be grounded in a *counterfactual* notion of causality (Morgan, Winship, 2007). The point here is that counterfactual causality cannot be applied to *unique and unrepeatable events*, while the techniques of (counterfactual) causal inference always rely on *casual* factors (chance and randomness), whether we are dealing with an element of chance that is generated on purpose, as in randomized experiments, or with a randomness generated “by accident” – as in natural experiments – but which is nevertheless useful for producing exogenous variation in the variables whose *causal* effect we want to estimate.

And so, yes, with a single and unrepeatable event it is very easy to hypothesize and see the action of chance, but is this really true? And is this what interests us? In other words, if we adopt a notion of counterfactual causality, we have to do without making statements of a causal nature about single individuals or events, simply because we do not have an appropriate counterfactual – unless we make assumptions (about invariance and equivalence) that are usually implausible. Consequently, even just saying that *chance* had a decisive *causal* role in the fates of a single individual could be something of a stretch. Were this not so, we could assign a decisive role to any other individual characteristic or circumstance with the same certainty that we assign it to chance. In addition – and here I come to the second question – from the standpoint of *prediction* chance is undoubtedly a disaster, because it ruins even our best short-term forecasts. Nor can we hope to make medium – and long-term projections about the fate of a society. As Sarti points out, a society is a highly complex nonlinear system, and any prediction (or rather, simulation) of the future would have to allow for all the possible human reactions and adaptations to the prediction itself, even before random events come into play (see Vespignani, 2019, Chapter 6). From the standpoint of *explanation*, on the other hand, chance is our best friend in enabling us to estimate the effect of a given cause. Paradoxical as it might seem, then, though chance is the enemy of *causality*, it is in reality the precondition for recognizing it!

Regarding individual agency, as I mentioned earlier, my impression is that Sarti oscillates between assigning it too much or too little weight. Too much weight is, I think, clear in Sarti’s interpretation of a number of historical facts, about Hitler, for instance. Reading the German dictator’s biography makes us wonder what would have happened to Germany and the entire world had certain fortuitous events not taken place (for example, if the Munich Putsch had not failed). In my view, such a reading of history overemphasizes the role that a single individual had or could have. The case of Putin and today’s Russia springs to mind. But we must not forget the collective will of the masses who followed and supported Hitler yesterday and Putin today, and the far from marginal part played by the other actors who contributed to furthering Hitler’s (and Putin’s)

designs.² Chance's role may thus seem to be scaled back a bit, though by no means eliminated, given that there would also be little sense in taking a naively deterministic view of history.

The question of agency also looms large in the fourth chapter's analysis of the weight of social origin in individual destinies. Sarti maintains that individual destinies are influenced by social origin, chance and the effort each person shows. However, when he discusses the role of effort as a culturally and physiologically induced factor, it seems to me that he overemphasizes determinism. Minus the weight of social origin, it is as if everything comes down to chance or to genetic and physiological determinism. So is there no such thing as agency? Or is agency in reality something predetermined by biological and genetic factors of which we are simply unaware? Indeed, this is what Sarti argues on page 112: "we might ask ourselves whether free will is basically caused by indeterminacy, rather than be actual choices." And again, in the conclusions, when he states that the dimensions of individual merit, talent and effort "are not in any case 'skyhooks', abstractions that depend on an idealistic will (Dennett); rather, they derive from material, biological and environmental contingencies which we can say are randomly distributed" (126). Accordingly, not only is talent, in the sense of an innate gift, beyond the individual's control – quite rightly, being born with a gift that is particularly useful in a certain context is not considered meritorious – but so is the effort that the individual puts into making the talent bear fruit. Having the right family background and circumstances to develop a talent is obviously beyond the individual's control – take, for example, the case of a child with an unusual flair for mathematics, whose family is too poor to afford good schools and universities. But since it is equally obvious that some talents are "wasted", as it were, even though everything would appear to be in their favor and all the conditions for developing them are right, it seems to me that the question of individual effort cannot be so easily discounted. There is always, I believe, an element of agency at work, without which we would be nothing more than the playthings of chance and necessity. The questions Sarti raises for discussion are entirely legitimate, but they need further exploration and empirical research. An excellent subject for his next book.

Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società
Università di Torino

² How important individual influences can be and how long they persist is still an open question. As Sarti points out, Diamond (1997) agrees, speculating about what course history would have taken if certain events in Hitler's life had not gone as they did.

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