On Causation, the Principle of Unforeseen Consequences, and the Matrix of Human Action: The Case of the Iraqi Conquest of Kuwait

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The epistemological and substantive status of explanation in the social science sphere is frequently complicated by several questions. These include: (i) the nature and role of causation in the context of free will versus determinism; (2) the significance of unforeseen and/or unintended consequences; and (3) whether the criteria of explanation found useful in the physical sciences can also be meaningfully and usefully applied in the social sciences. The objective of this article is to present an analysis which helps explain the complexity of the process through which results are generated in the sphere of human perception and action. The analysis will hopefully cast some light on the role of causation in this sphere while simultaneously explaining, in part, the process through which unforeseen and/or unintended consequences arise. The analysis focuses on what will be called the matrix of significances in the sphere of human perception and action. The analysis applies, pro tanto, to all fields in which human action operates in the social (re) construction of social reality. The procedure will be to consider the matrix formed by the several contexts of meaning in which the August 1990 Iraqi conquest of Kuwait, coupled with the United States (and other) response thereto, can be understood. It will be seen that the operative mix of contexts of meaning motivating and conditioning (governing) human action influences, perhaps governs, developments. Causation in the social sphere will be seen to be driven by human perception, choice and action in such a way that developments in one context of meaning affect developments in other contexts, and thereby the generation of unforeseen and/or unintended consequences.

Another way of presenting the argument is this: Policy is a function of one's definition of actual reality relative to the reality which one prefers (and also deems feasible of realization). Part of one's definition of reality is one's identification of "the problem" considered to require confrontation (policy and action). Different definitions of actual reality, including different definitions of problems, yield different policies and actions. Insofar as there are different possible definitions of reality, including different definitions of problem, therefore, which of these become(s) operative, and the manner of their interaction and aggregation, will pro tanto determine results. Moreover, and perhaps more important, the operation of the principle of unforeseen and/or unintended consequences will be shown to be in part the result not only of interaction among and aggregation of individual-agent choices and behavior but also of the impact of developments in one aspect of significance upon developments in another. In other words, given multiple contexts of meaning attaching to any situation, one of the sources of unforeseen and/or unforeseen consequences of developments in one context is the effects of those developments in another context. The significance, therefore, of one context of meaning is not limited to itself but extends to the other contexts of meaning, in sum, to the multiple and cross-cutting currents of human affairs.

The immediate question to be answered is, what is the meaning of the Iraqi conquest and the response thereto? This is no simple question. There are several different answers, each of which either derives from or constitutes a context of meaning. The set of answers together comprises a matrix of significances. The course of future history will be generated ex ante by which context of meaning(s) is perceived and acted upon, and comprehensible ex post in terms of the impact thereof on other contexts of meaning, these other impacts constituting the source of the unforeseen and/or unintended developments.

Three considerations must be noted: First, inasmuch as the actors are multiple, the perceptions and actions which materialize will depend, in part, on whose perceptions and actions come to count, which itself depends in part on the perceptions which actors have and
on which they act. Second, certain technical circumstances can and likely will affect the results, in this case military technology and the Islamic belief in the efficacy of martyrdom. Third, the key point is that whichever answer might seem most sensible (a matter of one’s own perception), the actual historical result will likely be due to the perception(s) by others of another answer(s) and to their subsequent actions predicated upon such perception(s). It is in this complex manner that the effects of human perception and action are produced, including the consequences which, from any particular perspective, may be deemed unforeseen and/or unintended; in other words, there is no mysterious source of effects, intended and foreseen or otherwise, but there is the process through which the matrix of significances is given selective effect and consequence. Let us now turn to the different answers, each constituting a context of meaning.

(1) Oil. One does not have to be a cynic to appreciate the gravity with which both the oil importing and oil exporting nations contemplate the consequences of the availability and price of oil. One can readily comprehend the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and the United States et al response thereto as essentially constituting elements in a contest over the organization, control, and conditions of acquisition of oil as a critical natural resource (of course, made a critical natural resource by the nature of modern technology and its energy requirements).

The oil exporting countries desire to maximize the returns they receive from their oil resources. The oil importing countries desire to minimize the cost to them of this important input. Geo-economic position seems to control.

No party to this contest over the organization and control of oil is completely ready to accept the dictates of the market. This is because of several considerations. (1) The conditions of availability and price of oil are too important to each party to abrogate the exercise of efforts to control. (2) Markets do not exist independent of the institutions (power structures, sets of entitlements) which form and operate through them; such that each party would like for an organization of the market favorable to their interests. In this context, “market price” is a euphemism for and specific to whatever institutions form markets. What hitherto had been effectuated by the major oil companies more recently has been attempted by OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, not all of which, of course, are in the area of the Persian Gulf). The oil importing countries have pursued what may be called an aggressive economic-resource imperialism, whose objective was the acquisition of oil on minimal-cost (or satisfying-cost) terms. The oil exporting countries, acting collectively only much more recently, have pursued their own version of an aggressive economic-resource imperialism (which of course may be comprehended as defensive rather than aggressive), whose objective was the sale of oil at relatively much higher prices (as well as the use of oil as a weapon – through the oil embargo technique – of political strategy).

From this perspective, then, the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and the response by the United States et al is simply and essentially a matter of the terms of purchase and sale of oil. Policies and actions would therefore be a matter of the perceptions of one’s interest in regard to the purchase and sale of oil, or, for those actors with no perceived direct interests, if there are such actors, of one’s identification (on whatever basis) with such interests.

There will be significance for oil, as a context of meaning, even if the conquest and response be seen as due to other factors or in other contexts of meaning. The cost and availability of oil will likely be significantly influenced by developments in other contexts of meaning. Most especially will this be the case if a major, if localized, war erupts, and the oil fields and recovery and transportation facilities in the area are substantially destroyed. Such an event would radically reduce the capacity to produce of the industrial, and also nonindustrial, nations, with enormous social and political, as well as economic consequences.

(2) Predatory Leader. It is possible to interpret the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait as the direct result of the machinations of a particular predatory leader, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Whether the predatory behavior be comprehended as either calculated for the achievement of personal purposes or the product of a “madman,” the result is predatory, militaristic behavior. The behavior seems essentially that of a psychopath, calculated or otherwise, meaning thereby that the person is completely dominated by self-regarding concerns and has no relevant sensitivity for the concerns of others; self-interest carried to an extreme. It is in this context that Hussein is perceived in the manner of an Adolf Hitler. for
whom no successful aggression was sufficient, and for whom peace and appeasement by others was merely the interlude between predatory actions.

In this context of meaning the problem is the presence as leader of Saddam Hussein, and it is this definition of problem-reality which can govern policy and behavior.

An alternative version of this answer is predatory military establishment, with respect to which the predatory leader is arguably both generative and derivative - which may mean that even if the existing predatory leader is somehow deposed the predatory military establishment will likely pursue the same or comparable predatory policies. It may well be that this alternative is, or is perceived to be, the more important of the two.

In this context of meaning the problem is the military regime, a definition of reality leading to a very different set of policies and behaviors. But the leader/military regime situation is both cause and consequence. Defining the context of meaning as predatory leader and/or regime treats it as cause. It is also consequence, in relation to other contexts of meaning. Developments in other contexts of meaning can enhance or diminish the operative significance of the predatory leader and/or regime.

(3) Mediaeval-Dynastic versus Modern State. It is possible to comprehend the situation as derivative of the nature of Middle-Eastern states. Following the dichotomy established earlier in this century by Thorstein Veblen, there are broadly two different types of state, the feudal dynamic and the modern: The dynastic state is predatory, militaristic, competitive, and rapacious. It believes in national prowess and prestige, and seeks grievances against others to redress. It is also a state most of whose peoples are held in ususfruct by a centralized and irresponsible autocracy exercising coercive personal rule, a state in which there is an identification of self and nation with ruler, a state in which subservient authority and obedience is ingrained. The modern state, in contrast, is democratic, peaceful, and cosmopolitan. Its beliefs are the post-Enlightenment values of liberalism, rationalism, individualism, and the system of natural rights. Its ideals include representative government, self-help, and local autonomy. Its people are citizens adorned with rights, not subjects laden with duties. Its people are expected to be insubordinate, rather than unquestioningly obedient.4

The states of the contemporary Middle East are generally of the predatory dynastic type. Iraq, while not a literal dynasty, is very much a predatory dynastic state in the sense intended by Veblen, arguably a contemporary equivalent to a militaristic Prussian Germany. Some of the others, such as Kuwait (at least before the Iraqi conquest), Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, are literally dynastic in the narrower sense. Still others, such as Syria and Libya, are predatory and medieval, though not literally dynastic, states - substantively if not formally in the same mold as the literally dynastic. Most of the nations antagonistic to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait are of the modern democratic and peaceful type, but not all: Some are essentially predatory competitors for regional hegemony.

One significance of meaning of the present situation, therefore, is the contest between these two types of state, and the implications for their relative strengths and positions consequent to decision, policies, and results pertinent to the other contexts of meaning. For example, close relations between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and the United States et al, on the other, centering on oil, has in the past facilitated the continued existence of these states; whereas it is possible that the literal dynasties of these nations could be weakened or even fail as a consequence of the eventual aftermath of the reaction to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait.

One important point: Veblen's analysis did more than juxtapose the two types of states, one essentially predatory and the other peaceable. Veblen argued that the very nature of the nation-state system, comprised of countries which consider themselves independent and sovereign and which are motivated if not often driven by the psychology of patriotism, itself tends to the perpetuation of war. Nation-states by their very nature, even those not classed as essentially predatory, are bellicose. The difference between nations is a matter, therefore, of degree.

In one respect, therefore, the situation consequent to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait is a contest between one or more essentially predatory states and one or more modern peaceable states. In another respect, the situation is a contest between nation-states in the nation-state system, period. The irony of peaceable democratic states coming to the aid of Kuwaiti and Saudi monarchies is, therefore, not
entirely ironic. Nonetheless, the future of mediavism in the region, and its possible replacement(s), is in part a consequence of developments in other contexts of meaning.

4. Christianity versus Islam. Perhaps the widest significance of meaning, and therefore greatest context of implications, involves the conflict between two world cultures, one European and the other Middle Eastern, between Christianity (or Judeo-Christianity) and Islam. This conflict has been in various states of activism or repose for over fourteen hundred years. Its historic episodes have included the Crusades; several invasions of what is historically understood to be Europe by Arab-Islamic armies over widely spaced centuries; twentieth-century European imperial ventures in the Middle East — whose several nations have boundaries largely set by British and French governments in the 1920s and thereafter; and the establishment of the state of Israel and the subsequent series of Arab-Israeli wars.

In this context the United States is both historically and analytically as well as culturally essentially a European derivative and therefore to be counted within the domain of Christianity or Judeo-Christianity.

For several reasons the conflict between Christian and Arab-Islamic culture was more latent than manifest during the earlier decades of this century. These include: (1) the greater military power of the European nations in the twentieth century (2) the two world wars (which were largely though by no means entirely European wars, that is, for present purposes wars which were essentially irrelevant to the clash of cultures); and (3) the conflict between capitalist and communism (West versus East bloc nations) after World War Two (which for present purposes were also essentially irrelevant to the clash of cultures — except insofar as the contest for client states and/or spheres of interest extended into the Middle East). One of the implications of enormous significance derivable from the other contexts of meaning is the reanimation of this historic clash of cultures. Anxieties and loyalties stirred by other contexts of meaning can restore to center stage of world history this venerable clash, a contest of possibly vaster historic proportions that the apparently recently eroded conflict between economic ideologies and their respective systems.

One of the consequences, therefore, the other contexts of meaning, for example, oil or the aggressive behavior of a particular predatory leader or state, can be the fueling and restoration of the conflict of cultures most Europeans have long forgotten, having relegated the circumstances of the Crusades to the annals of yesteryear, but which has never been far removed from the active memory of Arab-Islamic peoples. What would otherwise appear to be an unintended and/or unforeseen consequence of the conflict, for example, over oil, in such an eventuality will be the result of the empowerment of another context of significance.

5. Arab Nationhood. Closely related to the immediate foregoing is the sense, over against the present reality of an array of independent Arab nation-states each with their own perceived interests, of an Arab Nation latent within the totality of these particular political nation-states and awaiting its grand (re)birth or (re)unification.

Developments in other contexts of meaning can take on new and different vigor should other causes become allied with the idea of the Arab Nation. For example, if Hussein should be understood as the potential bringer-into-being of the Arab Nation, or if Arab-Islamic resentments can be focused against the United States et al in such a way as to launch Iraq as the vanguard of the Arab Nation. Moreover, developments in other contexts of meaning can either reinforce and further animate or weaken the idea of the Arab Nation. Finally, the very nature of the idea of the “Arab Nation” — as well as the geopolitical and socio-economic uses to which it will be put — is involved.

6. Status Emulation among the Middle Eastern Nations. It is not saying too much that in every society there are strong tendencies to conflict along distributional lines. The history of individual nations (and in part also of international conflict) has as part its center of gravity the tension between hierarchical and egalitarian tendencies. In the modern world this takes the form of conflicts over the distributions of opportunity, income, wealth, and control of the state. It seems that there is a great deal of latent fury among the Arab-Islamic masses because their ruling classes, perhaps especially the literate dynastic ones, have enjoyed lives of lavish splendor while the masses have been impoverished. This enmity seems to have built up among the Arab-Islamic masses and been directed to the rulers of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This context of meaning can affect and
be affected by other contexts of meaning. The apparent widespread support for Hussein and Iraq among the masses in Jordan and other Arab or Islamic states is evidence of such spillover effects, effects otherwise so readily perceived as unintended and unforeseen consequences. Another latent fury seems to be the antagonism felt by Palestinians not only for the Israelis but for their erstwhile Arab-Islamic brothers, whose interests have not led them to provide more than token economic support for Palestinian refugees - though relatively significant support for anti-Israel terrorist movements has been forthcoming.

7. Domestic Political Psychology in the United States. Economic interests, centering on the acquisition of oil on terms favorable to the imperial power, is not the only source of imperialism. Imperialism can also derive from domestic political maneuvering in the imperial power, as nationalism, patriotism, and predatory behavior abroad serve to mobilize political psychology and enlist economic interests in favor of certain groups in the domestic contest for the control of the state. Here predatory behavior directed toward foreigners is derivative of domestic power play, but clearly the former context of meaning can have spillovers on the latter, not all of them either intended or foreseen.

In the present circumstance one of the contexts of meaning of the United States response to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait - in addition to obvious concerns about oil and the predatory behavior of a renegade nation-state, if not also fear of the rise of a powerful Arab Nation - is the utility of the situation for, first, the enhancement of the image of a particular president, and second, the cultivation and manipulation of political psychology by political conservatives. With the seeming passing of the menace of communism, the apparently failure of such issues as abortion, flag burning, and school prayer to nourish conservative political psychology, and the emergence of domestic economic problems (for example, the saving and loan crisis, federal deficit, recession), the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait may have seemed a serendipitous occasion. But even if not a matter of deliberative decision and policy, certainly one of the presumably unintended and unforeseen consequences of the Iraqi action has been the nourishment of conservative political attitudes and the enrichment of the political fortunes of a president. This latter is, however, dependent on the outcome of the United States military expedition to Saudi Arabia in particular and the Middle East in general, an outcome conditioned in part by the spillover implications of these other contexts of meaning and in part by certain specific circumstances, considered below.

8. Iraqi Economic Needs. It may well be the case that the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait was the result not of a generalized predatory lust but of perceived and relatively limited specific economic needs. Iraq, it seems, suffered enormous economic losses during its eight-year war with Iran and in the two years since that war ended has been unable to generate economic recovery. The conquest of Iraq, in this context of meaning, was essentially a venture by which to capture economic resources, in the form, especially, of oil reserves, equipment, and gold.

If the Iraqi government was surprised by subsequent events which its conquest provoked, then it seems clear that these reactions derive less if at all from this context of meaning per se and much more fundamentally from other contexts of meaning, including the concern about oil but also concerns relating to the rise of an Arab or Islamic power. The same is true if the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait was a nationalist attempt to (re)establish certain national boundaries.

9. Israel. Aside from the circumstance that one can interpret the nation-state of Israel as a particular manifestation of European culture, one of the contexts of meaning of the events subsequent to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait is the existence of Israel. Specifically, in the event of outright major war between Iraq and the expeditionary force located in Saudi Arabia, it is not unexpected that Iraq, as part of a massive attack or counterattack on its enemies, would devote some of its military power to the destruction of Israel, figuring, among other things, that no significant derived incremental adjustment of United States retaliation would ensue, given the fact of major welfare.

10. The United Nations and International Law. It may be that the transformation of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, including both glasnost and perestroika, will endure, bringing that nation into the sphere of nonpredatory, democratic nations. This may augur a renaissance of the United Nations and its role as a generator of international law. Such is presaged by the series of unanimous Security Council votes responding to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait. It does remain difficult to envision
countries such as the United States and Great Britain either explicitly renouncing or implicitly surrendering their option to engage in international violence on their own behalf, which is so deeply felt to be a part of their national sovereignty. Still, the antagonistic worldwide response through the United Nations, in which both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. joined, may make it increasingly difficult for countries to engage in foreign adventures in their own interest. But only increasingly difficult, not impossible: After all, one of the objectives of American leadership in the response to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait was oil, and other was the somewhat more ambiguous “defense of the American way of life.”

Such internationalism may appear to be, and at times actually constitute, another mode of imperialism. Yet international interdependence, selectively operative and selectively perceived and acted upon, may be as important as traditional (or novel) forms of imperialism, and may constitute the ultimate rationale of a United Nations role (motivated and channeled by joint United States and Soviet Union interests) as “world policeman.” Even if this is considered the case, however, the problem remains of determining “law and order” of which, that is to say, whose terms. Developments in this context of meaning will have enormous consequences for the other contexts of meaning.

At a different level, internationalism may influence domestic perceptions bearing on local issues and thereby local law. One example is the concept of “pornography.” Whereas some people find frontal nudity and/or portrayal of coital positions to be pornographic, the United States military has found that in Saudi Arabia the open display of female legs and arms is considered pornographic. Internationalism may abet a sense of cultural relativism and thereby permissiveness, or nationalism may reinforce certain conservative sentiments.

The foregoing are the principal contexts of meaning pertinent to the aftermath of the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait. The sequence of events will be generated by the interaction and aggregation of historic forces derived from and representing these several contexts of meaning, including the empowerment of certain contexts of meaning by decisions and behavior generated in other contexts, constituting their unintended and unforeseen consequences.

The sequence of events, and the generation of results, particularly in the event of significant warfare, will also likely be profoundly affected by two circumstances.

First, the military psychology of the two sides differs greatly, with potentially profound consequences. The military psychology of the United States et al treats war and death due to war as necessary evils, the goals being to satisfactorily accomplish national objectives and to return to normal living. The military psychology of the Arab-Islamic people is nourished by a belief in the efficacy of martyrdom and treats war as an opportunity for martyrdom. So far from being concerned with this-worldly interests, the psychology of the Arab-Islamic people actively applauds transcendence through death in a holy war. At the very least, fanaticism coupled with what Christians consider a low regard for life and Arab-Islamic peoples consider a high regard for martyrdom as the key to the afterlife, will be difficult for the former to deal with. At the most, it may be decisive, in the realms of military action and domestic staying power.

Second, unlike the war in Viet Nam, in which high technology confronted the low technology (but not low sophistication) of guerilla warfare, and unlike the invasions of Granada and Panama, in which enormous military superiority overwhelmed pitiful opposition, a war between the United States et al and Iraq would be quite different. Although the economic foundations of the respective economies are vastly different, and while the United States (among its allies in the venture) is a military as well as economic superpower, Iraq both has been furnished (by the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and West Germany) and has itself produced significant supplies of weapons of mass destruction. An outright major war in the Middle East could be a bloodbath. The nation-states of Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, among others, could, for all practical purposes, likely not exist after the war. It is, alas, incomprehensible that Iraq would not use its sophisticated ballistic, chemical, and biological weapons – and indeed nuclear weapons if presently available; and the United States, once it found that its and its allies land and sea forces were being decimated by Iraqi power, would undoubtedly rely on its own weapons of mass destruction. The immediate result would be warfare with destruction on an order of magnitude hitherto unexperienced since
World War II.

The combination of differential fanaticism and an enormously destructive war could produce dramatic unintended and/or unforeseen consequences in contexts of meaning other than whichever context one thinks is the principal initial ground of the conflict. The world fuel situation could be seriously adversely affected for some time to come. The future of the Arab Nation could be greatly enhanced or destroyed. The political fortunes of the President of the United States likely could be greatly enhanced or destroyed. The contest between European and Arab-Islamic cultures could have reached another turning point. And so on.

The example of the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and the response of the United States et al. illustrates, therefore, several important points. Causation in human and social affairs is in part a matter of human perception and choice, and in part a matter of developments in one area of meaning having impacts in other areas. Unforeseen and/or unintended consequences are due in part to the fact that human situations do have multiple contexts of meaning, and arise because the consequences of developments are not limited to one context but have spillover significance for others. One implication is that the analyst must be alert to the entirety of the matrix of meanings and not restrict oneself to one.

Finally, the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait did not just happen. The analyst also must be alert to the circumstances which led to – generated or enabled – the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait: The initial situation itself will have been the result of a concatenation of factors and forces, of developments in one context having unintended and/or unforeseen consequences in other contexts. In the present case, the situation was itself a product of policy decisions in the Reagan-Bush era concerning oil independence, fuel conservation, and automotive fuel economy policies, as well as related policy decisions by governments and private firms in the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and West Germany, among others, to supply advanced technological armaments and chemical, bacteriological, and nuclear production capabilities to Iraq as well as support for the Hussein regime through various overt and covert alliances. Many of these decision were made for other reasons, for example, corporate profit, ideology, business use of government, government use of business, anti-communism, latent United States conflict with Iran, and so on, including the United States and other nations’ Departments of Defense and State serving as adjuncts of or extensions of the marketing departments of various “defense” industries. Finally, inter alia, there is the insidious political psychology of both leadership and followship in the nation-state system which thrives on international crises which provide opportunities both to eclipse domestic problems and for “greatness,” a characteristic which, incidentally, is by no means the monopoly of regimes led by male presidents and prime ministers.

Notes
2. Inasmuch as the example used in this article is one of a large class in which few if any people are so determinist or fatalist that they eschew careful and deliberative policy making, the free will versus determinism issue is not dispositive of the issues raised.
5. The term “Islam” is used here to refer to predominantly religious considerations, and “Arab” for cultural. The term “Arab-Islamic” is used to cover both religious and cultural and to avoid having to distinguish between them. Indeed, the argument of this article may well apply to which term is used for which purpose in the future.
7. See Samuels, *ibid*.