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Processes Too Complicated to Explain:
An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Our government's interventions in foreign societies are plagued by unintended consequences, whether we are aiming for strategic advantage, conflict resolution, or economic development. Such consequences range from the trivial to the catastrophic; they can be significant enough to defeat the original purposes of the intervention. Since we cannot usually see them coming, our ability to cope with them is limited largely to damage control.

The problem is global. The noise level caused by cross-cultural confusion is rising rapidly almost everywhere, as technology and crowding force formerly isolated cultures into increasingly close proximity. It may be time to establish a new category of scientific inquiry specifically for this problem. This newly identified discipline could provide a focus for current efforts by anthropologists, historians, behavioral psychologists, evolutionists, and others, including diplomats and aid bureaucracies (both public and private), to cooperate in constructing a conceptual framework that would help us understand how cultures respond when they impinge on each other, and help us foresee the consequences.

P2C2E is an acronym coined by Salman Rushdie that means "Process too Complicated to Explain." It isn't quite a cliché yet but it deserves to become one, and not just because it is twitter and tweet-friendly. Think of how easy it will be to explain to your kid how the latest gadget works when you can just look smug and say, "P2C2E." In this technically advanced age the need is apparent and the possibilities are endless.

We all tend to think of process as something we control, or ought to. In older and simpler times we accepted processes too complicated to explain as the inevitable byproducts of the machinations of higher powers. Now that many of us reject the whole idea of divine interference in our daily affairs, we have taken on the awesome responsibility of conjuring up our own explanations for everything that happens. That's all very well when it works, and what with the scientific method and much hard work we have explained many processes that used to be too complicated to explain. But our world is still encumbered with many P2C2Es, even if we hate to admit it.

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If you are looking for a field of human activity where P2C2Es and their unintended consequences are particularly abundant, our government's efforts to effect change in other societies is a great place to start. This is true whether the interventions are strategically motivated or aimed at peacekeeping or at economic development.

Take the smokeless *chula* as a relatively simple example of a process we thought we understood, and the unexpected consequence. In the typical hill village in Nepal, villagers cooked their rice on indoor fires that smoked up the interior of their houses, causing much smarting of eyes and respiratory problems. An alert Peace Corps volunteer resolved to be good by doing good and devised an ingenious design made of locally available materials with local talent that would get the smoke out of the house. He sold the idea to headquarters back in Kathmandu and pretty soon Peace Corps volunteers were introducing the smokeless chula all over the country. Ten years later the idea was kaput, history. Why? The unintended consequence of the smokeless chula was that after a couple of years or so the roof fell in, because the smoke was what had kept the termites from eating out the rafters.

If there is any one principle that underlies the processes that produce unintended consequences, it is that possibilities for such consequences increase exponentially as the subject matter becomes more complex. I suspect that a human culture is about as complicated as anything else on this planet. It follows that when some agency of our government intervenes as an agent of change in a foreign country with a well-evolved culture of its own, it is asking for trouble. I picked the smokeless chula as an example of the principle of unintended consequences because it is extraordinarily simple, by comparison with what has happened with most of our cross-cultural interventions.

Let me take another example to illustrate that point. I shall use Nepal again because I have had the most experience there, and over the longest time span.

Back when Nepal was off the beaten track, and only rarely visited, our economic aid program was facilitated by the fact that we were dealing with a thoroughly feudal society and the peasants were accustomed to doing what they were told. The rulers welcomed our intervention mostly because they saw it as an offset to the more threatening efforts of neighboring India to establish a dominant presence. We rocked along in a cordial state of mutual misunderstanding until Peace Corps volunteers appeared on the scene, moved out and lived with the villagers, and got to know something of local village politics and how things really worked. After a few more years, some of the volunteers who had served in Nepal got positions on our bilateral aid mission's staff and worked their understanding of local cultures into the cumbersome, made-in-Washington aid machinery. With their brains and AID dollars things began to move. In the early 1980s we had a pilot project, an integrated rural development project in the Rapti Valley, that took off at unprecedented speed. It sparked a real peasant awakening.

Years later, well after I retired, I learned that the Rapti Valley had become one of the main hotbeds of early Maoist agitation. So, did our success there plant seeds for the insurrection that has plagued the whole country in more recent years? Were there termites in the rafters there that foiled our best intentions, eventually?

I hope no-one will mistake these anecdotes as an attack against the Peace Corps. If we have reasons to want to help cultures with quite different societies to modernize, then the Peace Corps approach is unusually effective. It has the added advantage of giving a corps of American citizens an unforgettable indoctrination into the complexities of differing cultures. And we need all the cross-cultural sensitivity in our population we can get.

The United States Government has no monopoly on the problem of unintended consequences from interventions in foreign cultures. The problem, writ large, is generic, and global. If culture is what keeps people together in cooperating units, and if culturally unified groups evolve over time in ways that adapt to specific constraints and opportunities, and if they do so in relative isolation, then they are bound to diverge in both visible and subliminal ways. When circumstances bring them together again there will be differences between them on both the conscious level, like language, and the subconscious, like values. Messages transmitted by one party are decoded by the other and in the process get garbled. Like the ancient saw about the two deaf men on a train: "What time is it?" … "Thursday" … "So am I, let's have a drink." Unfortunately, the results are often not so benign.

Population has trebled or more in the lifetimes of many of us, while space barriers have collapsed and communication has become instantaneous. What used to be an occasional collision between cultures has become a normative experience for most of the planet. But it has come on us gradually, like climate change. Pieces of the problem have been appropriated by different professions, notably diplomacy and the social sciences. The diplomats are like the midwives in earlier days, who eased the pangs of childbirth and other illnesses through tried and true locally available potions, while the social scientists are more like the shamans, producing elaborate explanations for the multiplicity of P2C2Es that confuse and confound their society.

Perhaps the analogy is a little stretched, but I do see a kind of precedent here, when we look at how people's understanding of the problems of age and infirmity evolved over the millennia into modern medical science. In much earlier times, our ancestors knew nothing about hypertension or diabetes, and a colonoscopy would have scared the bejesus out of them. But they did suffer from normal human afflictions and had worked out various ways to cope. Midwives eased the pains of childbirth while storing accumulated information about therapeutic benefits from locally available substances like willow bark. Shamans and witch doctors either stored or invented ritual procedures to cope with other disorders, or at least gave the appearance that they were coping.

All in all, the state of the art for medicine in those days was not all that different from the state of the art these days when it comes to mapping strategies for cross-cultural interventions. We have some tried and true nostrums and some pretty fancy theories, but can we be reasonably certain in advance what the consequences of our intervention will be? Modern medicine relies on an elaborate scaffolding of tested theories and facts to support sophisticated diagnoses of the patient's illness, and prescriptions for relieving it. If there is any comparable body of proven theory and observed fact about how whole cultures work, that can support similarly reliable predictions about how a given intervention may play out, why are we so afflicted with unexpected consequences?

So forgive me if I compare diplomats to midwives and social scientists to witch doctors. No offense intended. I simply wish to illustrate the point that the specialists in our society who are most concerned with problems of cross-cultural confusion are scattered across a wide range of disciplines and professions. It's like the blind men describing an elephant. Has anyone produced a complete operational plan of the beast, how it functions and where it fits in the environment? If so, how does that plan stand up under scientific scrutiny? We may have thousands of talented individuals, each coming up with a brilliant ploy or analysis that deals with a piece of the beast, but if there is no shared sense of the totality, there is going to be less of a concerted effort to put the pieces of the jigsaw together.

Perhaps we can define naming a problem as a critical stage in the evolution of understanding the problem as a whole. When the blind men get together and agree to call the totality of what they have been investigating an elephant, new focus and purpose can be injected into the common search for understanding it.

If our modern midwives and shamans can get together and agree on a name for the beast they are all investigating, the battle against P2C2Es could take a decisive turn for the better.

There are, of course, some differences between our modern midwives and shamans in how they customarily proceed. There is an epistemological gulf, relating to how one establishes what is true. The diplomat tries to ease tensions that arise between specific friction points between cultures, deploying skills based mostly on personal experience backed by judgments absorbed from the peer group. The scientist, like the shaman, is more likely to seek to explain the inexplicable in theoretical terms, or, when the P2C2E is completely beyond reach, to devise the most plausible explanation possible under the circumstances. The two groups are united, however, in the search for better solutions to this problem of unintended consequences. Is it unrealistic to hope that combining the two approaches may in the end lead to the best results?

What we are contemplating here is an exploration of sorts in uncharted waters. It's not that these waters are unexplored, actually we know quite a lot

about what's in them. We know about various islands, and shoals and reefs and other navigational hazards. All sorts of specific features have been mapped in detail. What we lack is a chart for the area as a whole, that shows how the various elements are situated in relation to each other, a chart that will allow us to plot a course from A to B without running aground en route, or suffering other kinds of unintended consequences.

Before we even enter these uncharted waters we need to get past a couple of major navigational hazards; call them Scylla and Charybdis if you are feeling classical.

Scylla is the problem we face if we give this body of water a name that evokes the nasty memories of Social Darwinism. We could call our subject Cultural Evolution, for example, but cultural translates easily into social, and evolution into Darwinism, so let's just explain that we are not getting into anything like the aberration evolutionists took a century ago, and look for another name. It should be clear from the outset that we are not seeking to justify any individual group or society or draw moral judgments. We are looking for scientific explanations of principles and processes that underlie the evolution of whole groups or societies. The theoretical basis for our search is our premise that when groups of individual humans get together and cooperate as units, these units react to external circumstances and challenges, and evolve over time, in ways that are analogous (though not identical) with the processes that allow individuals to evolve. The basic purpose of our voyage is to explore whether we can get fresh insights into real current problems by seeing whether evolutionary principles can apply to them.

Charybdis is the fact that some scholars who advocate evolution as the basic principle explaining life in our biosphere dispute the validity of the whole concept of group selection, which is one of the foundational premises on which our whole enterprise is based. They are the purists, fascinated with recent discoveries in molecular biology and genetics, who insist that if something can't be found in the DNA it is inherently not heritable. All I need say at this point is that the study of the evolution of complex societies has gone much too far to be dismissed this cavalierly. Plenty of evidence has accumulated that demonstrates, once and for all, the essential wrongness of the school of thought that denies group selection as an organizing principle for our species.

So what is it that we are looking for? In the first instance, the shamans and midwives among us need to learn from each other. Swapping theories is all very well, but it probably makes sense to start with comparing notes on how we see problem areas in specified countries and regions. Do we agree on what the main issues are? Do we agree on why we think they are important? Let's discuss different approaches to resolving these issues, what has worked and what hasn't. We can look for unintended consequences, in the context of what we had hoped to achieve and what actually happened. If this leads to theories of why some things work and others don't, well and good, the evolution experts

among us can make their case and the rest of us can consider how well their theories stack up with our collective experience.

I suspect I have been clearer in my initial diagnosis than in the immediately foregoing prescription. That may be unavoidable. The challenge before us is huge, and fuzzy around the edges. There are going to be many valid approaches to attacking it. If these thoughts stimulate interest in developing new tools and data that will help us navigate these explored but relatively uncharted waters that I have described, it will have served its purpose.

Acknowledgment
This paper was originally written for a conference between diplomats and scientists jointly dedicated to better understanding the multiple problems that plague our government's interventions in the Afghan/Pakistan region.