Apocalypses and Semicolons: Vonnegut's Multilevel Sociological Insights

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Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) was an American novelist and writer of short stories whose influence and popularity spanned much of the latter part of the 20th century. The reference to semicolons in the above title borrows from a 2005 speech in which he advised: "Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college." He cultivated this curmudgeonly persona, perhaps as a way to demonstrate that he remained in touch with life's minutia even while taking on some of the grandest issues the human condition has to offer.

Vonnegut's body of work ranged from the whimsical to the bleak, using devices as wide-ranging as war, science, art, time travel, primitive sketches, global catastrophe and punctuation marks to air his points of view on American society and its people. He was adept at walking his readers through world-altering phenomena at ground level, striking balances between the unfathomable complexities of big events and the experiences of individual human beings awash in their wakes. Step back a little and you hear the voice of a cynical and pessimistic thinker, perhaps too intelligent, too liberal and too atheistic for his own good. Step closer, however, and you can hear a softer voice expressing love, pain, compassion and hope. I doubt that anyone really knows whether the smaller voice was the True Vonnegut, or whether it was merely his cynical concession to what he surely regarded as the demons of mass-marketing. Whichever it was, the stories were better for it.

Along with many other baby-boomer sociologists, most of my exposure to Vonnegut's writings occurred in my pre-professional years around high school and college. Now, revisiting his work through a sociologist's lens, I am particularly struck by a theme that seems to recur in many of his stories: The narratives frequently play-out simultaneously at multiple human scales—multiple *levels of analysis,* to use our technical jargon. This was a perfect recipe for young students whose eyes were just opening up to the world. Vonnegut provided a literary bridge that spanned from the monumental social phenomena of the era—the space race, the cold war, women's liberation, Viet Nam, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the Watergate scandal, etc.—to the egocentric impulses of adolescence.

To illustrate briefly what I mean, consider the novel *Slapstick.* In this story, a

heavily-medicated U.S. President manages to legislate a scheme for establishing artificial extended families via computergenerated middle names and numbers. All "Daffodil's" instantly become members of a large extended family; all Daffodil-11's join a smaller, closer-knit family, and so on. "Lonesome no more!" was the President's successful campaign slogan, striking affiliative chords in the hearts of the citizens of that story's post-apocalyptic nation. This cautionary tale was an elegant jab at the political quick-fixes promised in every presidential campaign, here playing out the implications of one man's odd vision of a public policy solution for an entrenched national dreariness. A very different approach was taken in *Deer in the Works,* a short story employing one of Vonnegut's recurring themes: big corporations squeezing the life out of the common man, even while providing his livelihood. The twist here was the juxtaposition of two parallel and, ultimately, intersecting stories of individuals from two different species. One was a newly-hired employee trying to adjust to life in the fictional Ilium Works, the country's second-largest industrial operation. The other was a deer that wandered onto company grounds, became confused and panicked. As the drama unfolded within that cold and cut-throat environment, it appeared that both central characters were doomed to be crushed under the corporate thumb. Much to the reader's pleasure, both were freed in the end.

Micro-Macro Links

If not already evident from the introduction, I believe that Vonnegut's greatest sociological insight concerned the dynamic interpenetration of micro and macro social processes. This is not to say that his works directly imparted sociological knowledge, but rather that they made a contribution via their metatheoretical orientation. At least this was true for me. Over the years my research has been infused with this orientation, i.e., that it is feasible, relevant and import to understand micro-macro linkages; that sometimes the small and seemingly insignificant event can play-out on a vast scale; that the thoughts and behaviors of individuals can be largely determined by social conditions. It is conceivable that Vonnegut's major novels may have helped to inspire a generation of sociologists to investigate the interrelationship of micro and macro social processes.

In the early 1980's, there really was nothing called "multilevel theory" in sociology, despite the existence of well-developed statistical and mathematical methods for multilevel modeling. To be sure, some of sociology's founding fathers—along with many of their sons, daughters and further descendants—have been concerned about processes that operate at multiple levels of social aggregation. Rarely if ever were linkages between levels articulated explicitly, however. Over the decades we have borrowed and coined a variety of terms to help us conceptualize objects and phenomena at different levels of analysis: *mind,*

actor, value, social tie, dyad, role structure, network, stratification system, market, institution, state and *world system,* and many more. Furthermore, collectively we have devised a number of theoretical arguments—mostly of the "loose" variety—to help explain how one or another of these entities comes to manifest its unique set of characteristics, and how, when and why events at one level affect what happens at other levels. Interest in multilevel theorizing *per se,* at least among American sociologists, accelerated during the 1980's and early 1990's, spurred by the publication of collections such as *The Micro-Macro Link* (Alexander et al. 1987) and *Macro-Micro Linkages in Sociology* (Huber 1991). The Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association even had "Macro/Micro Sociology" as its conference theme in 1989. Still, while micro-macro linkages are seamlessly integrated in the theories of other sciences—cosmology, economics, biology, physics, cognitive science, etc.— sociologists still grapple with the question of how best to construct such theories (Turner and Markovsky 2006).

Great artistic expressions, whether communicated through painting, literature, music, theater or other forms, often seem to involve multiple levels (Hofstadter 1979). Micro-level objects and events that are relatively small in scale, short-lived and/or fast-changing, but still recognizable and beautiful in their own right—e.g., brush strokes, phrases, notes, and the spoken word—are shaped into macro objects that are relatively large in scale and enduring such as allegories, themes, movements, and productions. Classic examples abound, but to select just a few: one family's struggle to survive against the backdrop of depression-induced poverty in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath;* one man's sensory experience of a great city expressed through the interplay of individual instruments and powerful orchestral passages in George Gershwin's *An American in Paris;* an artist's psychological torments and sense of despair made visible through the dynamic skyscape of Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night.*

In writing about micro-macro linkages, Huber (1991:11) argued that "The basic problem is to explain how persons affect collectivities and how collectivities affect persons *over time."* It is one thing to assert that phenomenon *x* at one level affects phenomenon *y* at another level in some particular way. It is quite another to imagine the process unfolding as in time-lapse photography. Vonnegut's narratives are like this, zooming in and out between multiple levels of social aggregation, unpacking little stories inside big stories and establishing critical points of connection between them. By transcending a single-level focus in his stories, Vonnegut not only adds interest and complexity, but also provides greater insights into the mutual impacts and interactions of society's micro and macro components.

Multilevel Theories & Phenomena

Elsewhere (e.g., Markovsky 1997) I have offered formal criteria for building and evaluating multilevel theories. Summarizing these informally, a theory consists of a set of abstract, general, logically related conditional statements. Let us call these *propositions* that express how one thing is presumed to lead to another. In order for a theory to be multilevel, propositions must satisfy two conditions with respect to the linkages they use to span different levels of analysis. First, the *containment* condition requires that each higher level unit contains multiple units at lower levels. For instance, a network contains nodes, and a cult contains followers. Second, there must be either a *propositional bridge* or else a *definitional bridge* that fleshes-out the linkage. In the first case, the level of the antecedent condition in a proposition differs from the level of its consequent. For instance, "If political sentiments are skewed toward the liberal end of the spectrum, then the Democratic Party candidate will be President." This establishes the macro-to-micro (or micro-to-macro) bridge simply by assuming it to be so. In the second case, a definitional bridge, the subject of a higher-level proposition is (elsewhere) defined in terms of a lower-level subject. For example, in "A class system exists if and only if socioeconomic strata form a transitive hierarchy" the macro-level "system" is defined in terms of its multiple micro-level strata. Propositions are the heart of a theory, and through them express the abstract and general conditions and dynamics that account for the concrete and specific social phenomena it seeks to explain. Just as the structures of propositions and theories are not limited to any particular subject matter, so are multilevel theoretical methods unconstrained as to their substance.

Vonnegut's fictional social dynamics illustrate multilevel processes through a wide array of concrete story lines. Typically the micro objects, macro objects, and linkages are more than apparent as we observe macro-level machinations trickling down on the common person, or conditions arising wherein the individual suddenly impacts the entire society or world. More than this, he shows in exquisite detail *how* these things can happen and that, when they do, it is very, very interesting indeed.

Cat's Cradle

This novel, assigned in my eighth grade English class, was my entree to Vonnegut. I had never heard of the author and, in retrospect, it is surprising that my relatively straight-laced teacher would have required a group of impressionable 14-year-olds to read it. The story has a wild plot that defies brief summarization. At a most general level it is about the diffusion throughout an entire culture of one person's made-up story disguised as Truth. The cat's cradle metaphor refers to one of the figures that is formed in the children's game

involving the looping of strings between left and right fingers and hands to create different crossing patterns. A character in the story recalls being shown the game as a child, staring and staring at the zigzagging strings, but seeing "No damn cat, and no damn cradle." Life is portrayed as deeply cruel and unjust, rife with unnecessary hardship and pain, sometimes inflicted person-to-person, but usually attributable to the military-industrial complex. Enter the cat's cradle of Bokononism, a religion offering a hopeful world-view for the individual, an opiate for the masses, all concocted from "happy lies" rather than chemical compounds.

Chemical compounds actually do play a central role, but not in the form of recreational drugs. The plot involves a dangerous substance known as "ice-nine," a variant of water that freezes at temperatures below 45.8 degrees Celsius (114.4° F). In the story, Bokononism is used by one of the unscrupulous protagonists to control and exploit the population of an economically depressed island nation. Narrative lines interweave the religion, some ice-nine seeds, and several other elements, with all story threads ultimately ending badly. In a plot-twist that pre-dates the Jonestown and Heaven's Gate tragedies, the thousands of Bokonon followers are instructed by their spiritual leader to commit suicide. So, too, do things end badly for nearly all of the citizens of planet Earth. In one of his most memorable passages, Vonnegut constructs a scene that begins with micro-events and ends with their world-changing macroconsequences. A dictator near death with access to a vial of ice-nine decides to end his pain by ingesting an ice-nine crystal. He freezes solid. His personal physician touches the body and he, too, freezes. A plane crashes into the nearby hills and triggers a rockslide that eventually sends the dictator's frozen body into the ocean below. The ocean freezes, and since the planet's waters and population are all interconnected, practically everything else freezes solid—including virtually the entire human population of Earth.

Neither the plot nor the message about religion in this mostly sad and cynical tale could ever be construed as subtle. Against the social injustices wrought by scientific, corporate and state powers beyond our control, it is made to seem that the only recourse for the common person is a fourth institution, religion. Yet at the places where devout individuals and organized religion meet, we again see almost nothing but more institutionalized cynicism and unscrupulousness. The message is that religion at least *pretends* to care about the heart and soul of the individual in ways that the other institutions do not, as if this were really a good thing. In the end, however, the house of cards built from the accumulated lies of Bokononism collapses upon itself, in perfect synchrony with the collapse of life as we know it.

Throughout the awful events conveyed in Cat's Cradle, the tone of Vonnegut's narrative remains so lighthearted and ironic that the reader cannot help but smile rather than weep when setting down the book upon completion.

The injustices and deceptions at the core of a corrupt religion may be horrible and sad, but at least in the end they are exposed and eliminated. For Vonnegut, even the fact that the planet and most of its people have been destroyed collaterally is not enough to render the ending an unhappy one.

Slaughterhouse Five

Vonnegut's best-known work, Slaughterhouse Five offers up the strange account of a meek fellow named Billy Pilgrim who becomes "unstuck in time" and so flits uncontrollably amongst the various people, places and ages of his life. The most powerful and memorable components of the book have a strong anti-war bent, but this was a different kind of anti-war story for its time. In non-chronological sequence, the narrative of Billy's life spans his awkward early years, his military service in World War II, his stellar career as an optometrist upon returning from the war, his marriage and suburban life, his survival of a plane crash, the bizarre accidental death of his portly wife, and his experiences as a sort of zoo animal following his abduction by aliens and confinement on the planet Tralfamadore. Only Billy experiences his life out of sequence, and so he has no evidence with which to convince others of the sheer weirdness of his existence.

Billy Pilgrim appears to be a pawn in some cosmic game, and neither he nor the reader ever is privy to the rules. As are we all, Billy is pushed and pulled by what could be regarded as the book's predominant macro-character: "The System." It consists of the broader social, political and economic forces that shape American society, but in his case there is an added time-bending force that sometimes takes the pushing and pulling to extremes. What keeps the novel from falling off the edge of absurdity are its recurring visits to the sub-plot of Billy's experiences as a soldier and prisoner of war. For these episodes Vonnegut drew from his own service and imprisonment experiences. Although it has been more than 35 year since I first read this book, I can still recall the emotional impact stirred by the vivid descriptions of the bombing of Dresden, Germany. This atrocity is set up by rich descriptions of the city's beauty as Billy and his fellow prisoners are marched through town on their way to an internment camp. Soon comes the allied bombing and the reduction of the city to cinders and charred corpses, a scene into which the dumbstruck prisoners and guards emerge from their underground bomb shelter.

Much has been written about *Slaughterhouse Five,* and many kinds of interpretations offered. The relevance of the story for the purposes of this essay are quite simple, however. Vonnegut centered his story around basic injustices at micro and macro scales: the pointless deaths of innocent people, the nonsensical destruction of a picturesque city, and the mutual vilification of, and efforts to destroy, competing ideologies. The reader is witness to atrocities perpetrated by

both sides, upon everyone from lovable individual characters to faceless masses. The System carries out its functions, indifferent to the injustices perpetrated by, and upon, its countless victims. The Tralfamadorian episodes afforded Vonnegut the opportunity to insert an omniscient perspective about the human condition, confirming both the inevitability of war and the rationality of Billy's unwavering passivity in the face of cataclysms large and small. The novel ends horrifically but for a reminder that somewhere springtime is occurring.

Conclusion

Multilevel social phenomena are not always easy to grasp or to communicate. Often there is a sense of mystery attached to multilevel phenomena, as when we ponder how miniscule properties of genetic material give rise to biodiversity; or how air molecules organize themselves into city-flattening cyclones; or how if conditions are right, social traps draw otherwise peace-loving couples, groups or nations
inexorably into conflict. Multilevel theories are designed to help disentangle, simplify and clarify these processes by identifying and defining the crucial objects involved and, more importantly, by providing explanations for how phenomena at different levels produce and affect one another.

It does not help that we are so embedded within our socially constructed world, and sometimes it is good to have this pointed out to us. In spite of our professional training, and in much the same way as some of Vonnegut's hapless characters, we may have trouble seeing forests for trees. For at least some of us in sociology, however, Vonnegut helped to stir an interest in understanding the ways that social phenomena are vertically integrated. He did so by devising edgy, entertaining, and sociologically insightful stories that alternated in their focus between the lives of his characters and the social environments within which they operated.

Vonnegut's stories can be rip-roaring fun, but to think of them as mere entertainment would miss the point. These are not sweet candy treats to be consumed and forgotten. Every tale has multiple textures and layers, with all manner of riveting apocalypses and metaphorical semicolons. In reading Vonnegut's stories we feel that we have become part of something bigger than ourselves. And while my recreational reading interests may have moved on, my interests in multilevel theories have only become deeper and broader.

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