PURPOSE, MEANING, AND ACTION

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ACTION

CONTROL SYSTEMS THEORIES
IN SOCIOLOGY

Edited by
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and
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2006 978-1-4039-6798-5

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First published in 2006 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-73419-1 ISBN 978-1-137-10809-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-10809-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: June 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to digital printing in 2007.

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PREFACE

The chapters of this book combine theoretical ideas with empirical studies and also with simulation tools to show one important way that cybernetic conceptualizations of control, which first appeared on the scene more than half a century ago when Norbert Wiener coined the term cybernetics and highlighted the importance of negative feedback, continue to have relevance to contemporary sociology. The book brings together for the first time examples of the work of each of a number of independent research groups that have contributed to a recent “cybernetic turn” in sociology, with contributions from leading members of each group, and an emphasis throughout on the common theoretical orientation underlying their research.

Although the focus of this volume is on research-oriented theorizing that employs the idea of a control system, we make no pretence of offering a comprehensive review of all the ways in which cybernetic ideas influence contemporary sociology. In particular, as we note in chapter 1, a where we discuss the intellectual setting for this volume, the ideas of Niklas Luhmann are not within its scope. In addition, the research programs represented in this book should not be confused with the “control theory” approach in criminology and, more generally, in the study of deviance. The idea of control, as used in this volume, is associated with a general model of human behavior grounded in cybernetics. According to this model, all human action involves control as a relation among purpose, perception (or meaning), and overt behavior. When two or more actors interact, their interactions imply a “coupling” of efforts to realize goals that may or may not be compatible, giving rise to the varied phenomena studied by sociologists. Our contributors, in one way or another, explicate the meaning of this idea and report research embodying it.

Thus, the chapters of this volume combine the symbolic interactionist idea that human society emerges by means of the symbols that permeate social interactions and institutions with the principle that human behavior can be understood in terms of a fundamental control mechanism. We believe that these linked ideas belong in the core of

sociological theory and can aid sociologists and other social scientists in developing more powerful explanations of the social world. The reader is asked to view the contributions here in that light, that is, as both modest achievements and as promising indicators of a new direction in sociological thinking.

Although the contributors to this book have never met together in a single location, the book to a great extent represents a group effort. McClelland initiated the project by contacting Burke, Fararo, Heise, and McPhail, all of whom enthusiastically enlisted their associates and coworkers to contribute to the book. Fararo graciously volunteered to serve as coeditor. An internal review process was set up, by which each of the chapters was reviewed by at least one other contributor in addition to the editors, and we are extremely grateful for how promptly and cheerfully the contributors complied with a rigorous schedule for drafting, reviewing, and revising chapters.

We are grateful, also, to Farideh Koochi-Kamali of Palgrave Macmillan for her willingness to take on this project, as well as Elizabeth Sabo, Gabriella Pearce and Julia Cohen of Palgrave Macmillan and Maran Elancheran of Newgen Imaging Systems for their care and efficiency in bringing the book through the publication process. We thank Stacy Kossoy for her valuable contributions to the initial editing process and Karen Groves, Stephanie Puls, and especially Linda Price in the Carnegie Academic Support Office of Grinnell College for their indispensable assistance in every phase of the project. Finally, we are grateful for the loving support and encouragement provided by our families, and especially Katherine McClelland and Irene Fararo.

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December 13, 2005