
Preface

This book arose out of a previous book, *The Serendipity Machine*, in which I explored the many ways in which modern computing exploits unexpected discovery. The final chapter of that book briefly explored the ways in which the information revolution was itself leading society into unexpected “discoveries” about new ways of working and living. In the course of writing the book, it became evident that the unexpected consequences of using computers were symptomatic of a much wider set of processes at work in society. Exploring and developing this insight led directly to this book.

Before I am attacked for sexism, I should explain the title. The title is an allusion to the poem *To a Mouse*, written by Robert Burns in 1785. It contains the famous line:

The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley.

Here I have adapted this line to refer to the way humans plans go wrong because we are like ants: busy with our individual concerns without being aware of the wider consequences.

Recently, a number of ideas about social complexity have surfaced in popular literature. Some have even entered the language as common expressions, such as “six degrees of separation” and “tipping point.” However, for the most part they have been presented as interesting, but isolated ideas. One goal of this book has been to show how these ideas all fit into a larger, more comprehensive framework of social complexity. Networks provide a good model for understanding complexity. Here I use them to show how many familiar ideas arise as natural consequences of social and other networks.

The problem in trying to write about social complexity is that there is so much of it. The curse of trying to pull together so many ideas and issues into a coherent theory is that it is impossible to deal with any single issue in-depth. This applies both to individual examples, such as the origins of World War I, and to major issues, such as the discussion of environment in [Chap. 19](#). It also applies to the geographic spread of examples. The risk is that by delving too deeply into such issues, the main themes could be lost among the detail.

Likewise, I have tried to provide examples, as well as statistical evidence, from many countries. However, in today’s globalized world, similar issues tend to arise in every part of the developed world, so I have sometimes used cases from my

home country Australia as typical examples. Overall I have tried to strike a balance between maintaining the thread of ideas and providing enough stories and examples to clarify them.

In all of the above cases, I have had to strike a balance between telling the whole story and clearly describing the role played by unconscious side effects in creating the situation. The problem is that many of the topics I need to touch on could be the subject of entire books; more than a few have been. [Chapter 18](#), for instance, concerns economic growth, which has been the subject of countless books and debates. Likewise [Chap. 19](#), which concerns the global environment, draws heavily on my book *Complexity in Landscape Ecology*, as do several examples presented in other chapters. Humanity's impact upon the environment has been the subject of intense debate and conflict. In both chapters, I have had to restrict myself to showing that these issues, of intense public debate, arise as unintended trends produced by human activity.

A lot went into the making of this book. It rests on years of observations. These have been filtered by theory, and tens of thousands of words have been deleted from early drafts.

I am grateful for the generous help and support of family, friends, and colleagues at every stage of this work. Several family members, Dr. Tony Green, Cheryl Green, and my wife Yvonne Green, provided many useful insights and suggestions. My daughter Hilary Green provided a cover picture. Colleagues also made significant contributions. I am grateful to Dr. Suzanne Sadedin and Les Hughes for many helpful discussions, as well as constructive feedback and comments on drafts of several chapters. Dr. Joanne Evans and Prof. Julie Fisher also provided useful feedback about several chapters. Dr. David Squire checked the entire text with his text analysis program Damocles. His cross chapter analysis helped me to avoid duplication and to build coherent threads of ideas and examples. His plagiarism check revealed just how easy it is to fall into using clichéd phrases! Marc Cheong provided useful feedback on drafts of the entire manuscript. Finally, Jacob Matthews did a thorough job of proof reading the manuscript, as well as providing many useful suggestions. I am grateful to all of the above for their help, support, and encouragement.

Melbourne, Australia

David G. Green

Of Ants and Men

The Unexpected Side Effects of Complexity in Society

Green, D.G.

2014, XI, 271 p. 29 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-55229-8