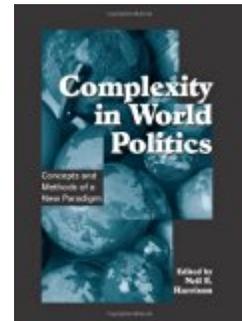


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Neil E. Harrison, ed. *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2006. vi + 214 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-6807-4.

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Published on H-Ideas (June, 2007)



An Overview of a Complex Paradigm

A number of commentators have noted that the climate of post-Cold War interactions remains uncertain. Rather than a transitory stage, the resilience of the pervasive randomness of global life has challenged the dominant frameworks for the study of world politics. Thus, the increasing dynamism, adaptability, unpredictability, and change of global politics has puzzled both popular and policy considerations. In this respect, some have advocated the infusion of International Relations theory with the conjectures of Complexity Theory (CT). The breadth and scope of the literature that has emerged as a result of such synergy is deemed reflexive of a paradigmatic shift in the explanation and understanding of international politics.[1] The volume edited by Neil E. Harrison, therefore, is a timely overview of the conjectures advanced by such “complexification” of the study of global life. In this respect, it pulls together the disjointed analyses on the application and approaches of CT to world affairs.

In fact, the very ability of the book to pull off such an endeavor is already a significant achievement in its own right. The literature on the complexity of global politics is notorious for its lack of interaction among the various proponents of the complexity paradigm to the study of international relations, as well as for its tendency to refer to CT exponents in the natural sciences rather than engage complexity commentators from the fellow social sciences. In this respect, *Complexity in World Politics* presents in an accessible (yet critical) manner the conceptual and methodological innovations prompted by the ap-

plication of CT to international relations that clearly have enormous analytical and emancipatory potential both for the discipline and its subject matter. In his editorial grappling with the dynamics of global complexity, Harrison has enlisted some of the pre-eminent interlocutors of the complexity paradigm in International Relations theory.

It seems that all of them concur with the assessment that complexity is more than a metaphor, but less than a theory of the current dynamics of international life (p. 147). In order to make this point clear, however, the volume introduces the vocabulary and the perspectives of CT. Its conceptual underpinnings are captured by the core notions of “emergence,” “self-organization,” “co-evolution,” “agent-based systems,” “fitness/resilience,” “fitness landscapes,” “self-organized criticality,” “punctuated equilibrium,” etc. In their chapter, Neil Harrison and J. David Singer detail the distinct meanings and contexts of this terminology. In this respect, the application of CT to global political trends suggests that the patterns of global life need to be conceptualized in terms of “complex adaptive systems” (CAS). This claim concurs with the dominant suggestions in the literature on CT in International Relations theory and has important implications for the understanding of agency and structure in world affairs.[2] Actors in global life are themselves perceived in terms of complex adaptive systems, which calls for their problematization in systemic ways. Structure, on the other hand, is not determinative—that is, the impact of the external environment is not as compelling as to negate the effects of interactions and

to obviate the role of idiosyncratic events and subjective perceptions and choices. In this respect, the various contributors to the volume zoom in on different nuances of the CAS approach.

For instance, Dennis J. D. Sandole emphasizes its potential to provide a “theoretical and pragmatic basis” (p. 43) for tackling the complexities of conflict resolution. Building on these suggestions, both the contributions by Walter C. Clemens and Ravi Bhavnani suggest the applicability of the CAS model for understanding and coping with ethnic conflict. On the one hand, Clemens posits that “ideas and concepts from complexity can enhance our ability to describe and explain the past and present” (p. 73); on the other, Bhavnani insists that the complexity paradigm offers unparalleled insights into the emergence of “behavioral norms defined in ethnic terms that effectively persuade members of an ethnic group to participate in violence against nominal others” (p. 122). This emancipatory potential underwriting the applications of CT to the study of international life is further reinforced by Matthew J. Hoffman’s analysis of the emergence of global environmental regimes in response to climate change. He suggests that the complexity approach allows for the study of “how actors co-evolve with their political context and how adaptive actors come to understand both the environmental problems that they face and the potential solutions to those problems” (p. 95).

At the same time, the chapters by Robert Axelrod, David Earnest, and James N. Rosenau and Desmond Saunders-Newton concentrate on issues of methodology. In particular, their contributions are preoccupied with how the students of international politics can begin approaching the complexity of international life. In this respect, the proponents of the CT paradigm advance agent-based modeling and computer simulations as tools for grasping the complexity of international life. Simultaneously, these investigations take issue with the rational-choice paradigm and game theory along with their failure to account for the pervasiveness of adaptive behaviors. In fact, Harrison asserts that the conventionally simple model of rationalist causal thinking “has misled generations of scholars and policy-makers [and] like a cancer it changes minds and institutions until its simpleminded rationality seems utterly human” (p. 183). In this respect, the methodological peregrinations of the volume demonstrate that the acknowledgement of the complex-

ity of international life renders the conceptual apparatus of rational-choice useless.

Such consideration of the application of the complexity paradigm to the study of global life suggests the challenging conceptual and methodological issues facing the study and the practice of international relations. *Complexity in World Politics* is, thereby, a timely overview of a new approach to global affairs. The contributions to this volume insist that the framework of complexity is solely in taking the discontinuities of international life seriously and that it proffers intriguing heuristic devices that both challenge conventional wisdom and provoke analytical imaginations. In this respect, it is expected that *Complexity in World Politics* would benefit both the explorations of advanced undergraduate students as well as assist the inquiry of established scholars of international relations. The volume can be used both as a textbook in grappling with the “complexity” of the complexity paradigm to world politics as well as a reference source for the ways in which its application can refocus the content and context of the study and practice of global affairs.

Notes

[1]. Mathias Albert and Lena Hilkermeier, eds., *Observing International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2004); David Alberts and Thomas Czerwinski, eds., *Complexity, Global Politics and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: National Defence University, 1997); David Byrne, *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1998); Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1998); Walter Clemens, *Complexity Theory and European Security* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield); Michael Dillon and Chris Wright, eds., *Complexity, Networks and Resilience* (London: Chatham House, 2006); and John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

[2]. Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Kurt Richardson and Paul Cilliers, eds., *Explorations in Complexity Thinking* (Mahwah: ISCE Publishing, 2007); Samir Rihani, *Complex Systems Theory and Development Practice* (London: Zed Books, 2002); and, James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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Citation: Emilian R. Kavalski. Review of Harrison, Neil E., ed., *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

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