Complexity Science in IR

Workshop Chair: David C. Earnest, Old Dominion University
Location: San Francisco Hilton, Franciscan D
Time: Tuesday, March 25, 2008, 8:30 am – 6:00 pm

The purpose of this proposed workshop is to elaborate a research agenda in International Relations for complexity science. The volume of recent scholarship illustrates that complexity science today appeals more broadly to International Relations scholars than ever before. Yet this research reflects both different research traditions and disparate findings. There seems, therefore, to be a genuine need for a forum and subsequent body of work to pull some of this research activity together and provide a core focus to the topic which can stimulate future scholarly investigation.

It has been over a decade since three scholars of international relations separately published influential works that sought to call our discipline's attention to "complexity" in world politics. Robert Jervis's System Effects (1997) explored how a new scientific corpus known as "complexity science" might change the ways we think about international politics. That same year Robert Axelrod published The Complexity of Cooperation, in which he applied the new methods of complexity science to his research agenda of understanding dilemmas of interstate cooperation. Prior to these two works, James N. Rosenau published Turbulence in World Politics (1990), one of the earliest works in international relations that highlighted the promise of complexity science for understanding the dynamic changes we witnessed after the Cold War.

Despite these promising beginnings, international relations researchers have still to articulate a coherent research agenda for complexity science in international relations. Yet complexity science clearly has profound ramifications for our understanding of both the physical and social worlds. Through a flurry of concepts, including networks, open systems, distributed agency, non-linearity, feedback loops, self-organisation, and emergence, this new research paradigm has challenged established scientific wisdom and its claims about predictability, control, and the very nature of physical reality. These concepts have been fruitfully applied across a vast range of natural sciences from meteorology, ecology, molecular biology, and neuroscience to chemistry, physics and zoology. Numerous thinkers in a variety of disciplines have either adopted ideas drawn directly from complexity, or connected existing concerns to those concepts and applied them fruitfully in areas as diverse as economics, sociology, architecture, business and art. These ideas have lingered at the very margins of debate in international relations, but have failed to generate a significant groundswell of complimentary research despite a growing interest in their promise (Rosenau 1990; 2003; Axelrod 1997; Cederman 1997; Hoffmann 2005).

Considerable disagreement exists among researchers over whether complexity science offers a new method of inquiry or merely a useful set of metaphors. To date, scholars are yet to systematically elaborate their points of agreement and disagreement, nor have they identified areas of research that might intermediate their disagreements and yield theoretical progress. This workshop is proposed to provide an important forum for delineating and catalyzing a research programme for complexity and International relations.

Workshop Participants:

- Antoine Bousquet, Birkbeck, University of London, UK
- Simon J. Curtis, London School of Economics, UK
- David C. Earnest, Old Dominion University
- James Rosenau, George Washington University
- Colin Wight, University of Exeter, UK
- Paul Cilliers, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
- Neil Harrison,Sustainable Development Institute
- Patrick Meier, Tufts University
- Robert Cutler, Carleton University, Canada
- Christine Brachthäuser, University of Tübingen, Germany
- Matthew Hoffmann, University of Toronto, Canada
- Kim Holloman, Science Applications Intl Corporation

This workshop is sold out. Thank you for your interest.