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Call for Papers

Complex systems for global governance

10th WIRE (*Workshop on International Relations*)

Brussels, Belgium, June 23-24, 2016

Analytical theme

IR theorists have been looking at complexity at least since the late 1990s. Research groups have developed,¹ seminars have been held,² special issues of scholarly journals published.³ It has especially drawn the attention of European (notably British) scholars. However, it has yet to be as institutionalized as in the mathematics, engineering, economic, natural and health sciences.⁴

As the 2009 Lancaster Seminar outlined: “The Complexity approach...can provide both a new, more realistic, paradigm and a range of simple and commonsensical tools (both metaphorical and modelling based) that can help move academics and practitioners beyond the limits of the current debates [in IR theory]”.

Indeed, since Jervis’ 1997 book and the seminal publication of Neil Harrison’s edited book in 2006, authors have amply demonstrated the potential usefulness of this approach and suggested ways in which it could alter our thinking and advance systemic approaches (e.g. Bousquet & Curtis 2011).

Nevertheless, although it helps transcend the old agent-structure debate and provide a way of conceiving and modelling decentralized governance systems, it has yet to fulfil its promises and be widely used. Much of the literature remains hortatory. They make a sound case for adopting this paradigm, but few if any demonstrate its explanatory or predictive superiority over other approaches. In this regard, Kavalski’s (2007)

¹ For example the London School of Economics Complexity Group.

² Fruitful meetings have been the workshop organized by David Earnest at ISA in 2008 and the seminar on “Complexity and the International Arena” held in Nov. 2009 at Lancaster University.

³ See, for example, *Cambridge Rev of Int’l Affairs*’ 2011 special issue.

⁴ Many universities around the world have created centers, institute or research groups on complex systems; most are dominated by natural scientists, engineers, and mathematicians, with a few scattered economists. In Belgium, see Naxys at U. Namur (multidisciplinary but a dominance of mathematicians) and the Interdisciplinary Center for Nonlinear Phenomena and Complex Systems at ULB (although it is unclear how active it now is).

characterization of the emergence of a fifth debate sounds today more like wishful thinking than a description of a movement under way. There is pretty little debate.

What are the obstacles to the emergence of this paradigm in IR and how could they be overcome? ⁵ Paradigms and theories are the product of their time. They need entrepreneurs, should be easy to understand, respond to theoretical and policy concerns, and illuminate the “right” issues. The current search for new models of international governance, away from a centralized perspective forces us to take a harder look both at the promises and at the limitations of decentralized governance models based on complex system theory.

In sum, is there a pony under all that straw? Like others, we believe there is, but whether it looks like a pony or some other animal, and how far it can be ridden, remains to be seen. In this context, questions pertain mainly to its theoretical usefulness and operationalization.

Theoretical usefulness – Are complex systems to be approached as models, theories, or simple conceptualizations? One task is to separate definition (what are the characteristics of a complex system?) from properties (how does it behave and with what consequences?). Which specific new facts and hypotheses can this approach generate? To what extent is it particularly suited to address international relations? How does its explanatory power compare with other theories? What are its relationships with other models? For example, are complex systems in opposition to power concerts?

The operationalization of the concept – Should a complex systems perspective be applied to the whole international system or be limited to specific issue-areas? (Wells 2009). Does complex systems thinking facilitate a policy-oriented agenda? How can we reconcile what takes places at different levels of governance, and how can we foster synergies (coordination and convergence) among them? Are standard computational approaches feasible?

Papers are sought that apply complex systems theory to the study of international affairs while addressing some of the questions above. The need is not for more papers on the potential usefulness of this approach. Rather, it is to see how it has been or can be applied in practice and what difference it makes.

Workshop format

This workshop is part of the WIRE series (Workshops on International Relations, see www.wire-series.org). As for previous WIRE editions, the number of participants will be limited to twenty, full papers will be distributed long before the event, and authors will only speak at the closure of the one-hour group discussion of their paper. This format offers an opportunity for extensive and in-depth discussions, provides authors with detailed feedback on their on-going research, and allows participants to get acquainted in an informal setting.

⁵ Geller (2011) and Bousquet & Curtis (2011) have outlined a few.

Submission of proposals

To submit a proposal, send a one-page summary, a biographical notice, and full contact information by email to amandine.orsini@usaintlouis.be and Philippe.Le-Prestre@pol.ulaval.ca by **January 18th, 2016** at the latest. Authors will be informed by the selection committee of its decision by January 20th, 2016. Selected candidates are expected to send a complete version of their papers (between 7.000 and 9.000 words) by **May 23rd, 2016** at the latest. Authors who fail to send their paper on time will be removed from the program.

Practical details

Meals and accommodation will be covered during the workshop for authors and discussants. Upon request, we will also provide a financial contribution for travel costs. When submitting your paper proposal, please indicate whether you want to apply for such funding and indicate clearly your city of departure. There is no registration fee.

Publication

The organizers intend to publish a selection of papers as a special issue in a leading peer-review journal. Previous WIRE editions have led to special issues in *Global Governance, Cooperation and Conflict*, the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, and *International Studies Review*. Publication plans will be discussed during the workshop.

Sponsors

Sponsors include the Fondation Francqui (<http://www.francquifoundation.be/>) and the FWO REFRACT network (<http://www.refract.eu/>).

Workshop organizers

Prof. Philippe Le Prestre (Université Laval, Canada)

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