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Conclusion

Complexifying IR

Disturbing the “Deep Newtonian Slumber” of the Mainstream

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Only after we are clear about the shape of our dream will we have a chance of attaining it: not merely a “science,” but a powerful, parsimonious, and perhaps even elegant science of international politics.

—Ronald Rogowski (1968, 418)

As Roger Beaumont (1994, 145) has quipped, there is something quite paradoxical implicit in any attempt to “conclude” the observation of complexity—the reason being that the sequential unfolding of uncertainties, dilemmas, and contingencies works against focusing analysis and drawing neat conclusions. This sentiment echoes James Rosenau’s own chagrin at the expectation that edited collections should have a concluding chapter “that ends on an upbeat note, celebrates the realization of common themes, ties all the contributions into a coherent whole and thus demonstrates the wisdom of collecting the essays between the same covers.” As he put it, “to write an Epilogue is to strain for what may be a misleading sense of closure. It amounts to having the last word, just like superpowers do” (Rosenau et al. 1993, 127–28). Sharing Rosenau’s repulsion towards the privilege of editorial “superpower,” this conclusion drafts a hesitant outline of some of the themes zigzagging across the analyses of the preceding chapters. The following remarks, therefore, are not the authoritative version of a concluding chapter that “ties all the contributions into a coherent whole,” but just one of many possible versions.
Thus, rather than “impose an outlook,” this concluding chapter illustrates a perspective on the preceding discussions. My hope is not dissimilar to that of Rosenau’s—that “readers [do not] mistake [what follows] for conclusions shared by all the contributors.”

If anything, this volume should have made clear that the perception of complexity does not automatically imply a “defeatist” attitude (LaPorte 1975, 328). Instead, as the preceding chapters reveal, complexity thinking (CT) not only calls for (as well as suggests) new ways of thinking about and doing international relations (IR), but it also insists that the discipline needs to rethink many of its core beliefs if it is to maintain its relevance. In this respect, IR’s “scientific” credentials have long concerned proponents and detractors. As the contributions in this volume reveal, establishing the scientific validity of the input of CT to IR appears to be one of its key hurdles. As Ronald Rogowski’s claim in the epigraph suggests, the hankering after an “elegant science of international politics” has virtually become a “dream” to which his and subsequent generations of IR scholars have succumbed. Belying this dreaming is a question whether IR’s social scientific inquiry can ever approximate that of the natural sciences. Perceiving the natural sciences to be “exact science,” cohorts of IR students have been developing “powerful” and “parsimonious” models for the explanation and understanding of international politics. Take the “balance of power,” for instance. Its aim is to ascertain the existence of a particular regularity in world affairs—parity between adversaries. Borrowing the notion of equilibrium from the natural sciences, the balance of power explains international order as a regulating mechanism motivated by the natural desire of states for survival.

In this way, IR has tended to propound explanations premised on assumptions of predictability rooted in the conviction that international life is a closed system, changing in a gradual manner and following linear trajectories, which can be elicited through discrete assessments of dependent and independent variables. What IR intends to produce in this way is a nearly mechanistic model of international politics that is perceived to be as rigorous and robust as the one of the natural sciences. In recent years, the simplification and reductionism underpinning this “dream” of a scientific IR have come under severe criticism from different quarters. In fact, some—such as John G. Ruggie—have made the point that the discipline needs to wake up from this “deep Newtonian slumber,” if it is to have any bearing on the real world of international politics (Ruggie 1998, 194).

The contributors to this volume have sought to actively add to such a decentering project by advancing the complexification of IR. As the preceding chapters reveal, complexification may entail different things for different authors, but what all of them share is some form of engagement with the
complexity paradigm of the philosophy of science. Originating in the natural sciences, CT challenges the Newtonian view of an orderly world and suggests that global interactions occur in a nonlinear fashion. Consequently, the outcomes of such interactions are difficult to infer, let alone to predict. In this respect, the proponents of the complexification of IR have noted that while the “hard” sciences have become increasingly “soft” as a result of their acceptance of the uncertainty and randomness of global life, IR has “hardened” as a result of its suppression of ambiguity, disregard for surprises, and overinvestment in its desire to forecast international developments. Some commentators explain this search for (and commitment to) a predictable worldview of regularities as a “need for psychological closure,” reflecting a desire for definitive conclusions in support of preferred theoretical assumptions (Lebow 2010, 259). Others have raised the pertinent question whether “scientific IR” is not premised on “fundamentally misleading notions about science” (Popolo 2011, 23). Thus, the question that emerges is whether things appear perplexing because the ken of the mainstream is askew.

In its response to this query CT exposes that Newtonian IR tends to operate on very little information (usually a few variables); yet, this does not prevent it from jumping to conclusions as if it had knowledge about the whole picture. Such lack of sensitivity to what IR does not know furnishes a model of the world that is rarely stumped. As a result, when the accepted framework for explanation and understanding fails—it faces a question that it cannot answer (for instance, “Why did IR fail to anticipate the end of the Cold War?”)—IR reduces its cognitive dissonance by coming up with a question that it can respond to (for instance, “Why did the Cold War end?,” answer: “Because the Soviet Union could no longer maintain the balance of power, and therefore, without such capability, it could no longer survive in the international system and had to implode”).

The complexified IR suggests that by answering the wrong questions, Newtonian IR enacts a theater of validity to generate explanations far more coherent than the turbulent realities of global life. Therefore, the “incredible rate of failure” of the very frameworks asserting the “law-like regularities” of international politics to anticipate any of the major events of the past twenty-five years should not be surprising (Cudworth and Hobden 2011, 10). The irony of this situation is not lost on some observers, who note that it is the very “commitment to science and scientific methods by international relations scholars” that provides “a major impediment to their practice of science” (Lebow 2010, 259).

Thus, this conclusion offers a brief overview of the current state of the art in the nascent complexification of IR. The focus of the remaining sections is the complexification of the ontology, epistemology, methodology,
and ethics of IR. The following remarks are meant to highlight a few trends that have been suggested in the preceding chapters.

The Complex Ontology of IR

When he urged IR to come out of its “degenerating” Newtonian repose, Ruggie (1998, 194) specifically mentioned that the discipline reengages with the reality of global life. As he pointed out with chagrin and frustration, “the term ‘ontology’ typically draws either blank stares or bemused smiles” from the IR community. The contention is that IR is plagued by attention blindness: because of its preoccupation with “reductive theories about ‘the logic of anarchy’” (Booth 2007, 327), it cannot discern the vast and heterogeneous reality of global life. Owing to its reductionism, mainstream IR views reality “not as a continuous flux . . . but as a series of instantaneous ‘snapshots’ extracted from this flux” (Popolo 2011, 25). Thus, as Lebow (2010, 285) suggests, the dominant accounts of interstate relations miss the “open-ended, nonlinear nature of the social world.” He insists that the “confluence and consequences [of international politics] are best envisaged as a complex, non-linear system,” “in which multiple interrelated chains of causation have unanticipated interactions and unpredictable consequences” (Lebow 2010, 93, 77).

The ontology of complexity therefore provokes a reckoning with the multiple possibilities of becoming and becoming-other inherent in the pervasive ambiguity of global life (Kavalski 2009, 543). This is an important qualification on the earlier suggestion that CT merely models “the ontological layers in world politics as interrelated systems” (Harrison and Singer 2006, 26). Such ontological commitment reflects the insistence on “the continuous precipitation of new life and new meaning” (Popolo 2011, 43; see also Deuchars 2010; Connolly 2011). It is therefore not surprising that the application of CT to IR is described explicitly as a “shift from epistemology to ontology” (Yavlaç 2010, 169). The reason for this shift is the understanding of reality as “stratified” between the actual, the empirical, and the real (Yavlaç 2010, 170). This stratification addresses three of the key ontological claims animating the complexification of IR: (i) that the international is emergent; (ii) that the international is irreducible to and much more than its constituent parts; and (iii) that the international is subject to unexpected and (often) radical transformations—that is, small alterations in initial conditions can lead to profound changes in outcomes (Leon 2010, 38; Joseph 2010, 61).

In this setting, CT asserts that the world with which IR engages self-organizes in complex and contingent ways. Yet, what distinguishes this
collection is the confrontation with the “ontological issue of the different layering of the social (and natural) world” (Joseph 2010, 65). Conventionally, IR has tended to ignore the fact that international politics both inhabit and are embedded in complex spaces. In this respect, a number of contributors have stressed that one of the greatest ontological boons of complexified IR is the recognition of the “totality” (Yavlaç 2010, 171) of human and nonhuman interactions in global life. It is worth pointing out that such diverse and profound considerations of the complex ontology of international politics are intended not merely as a criticism of mainstream IR, but also as a provocation for reengaging with the ongoing and overlapping interconnections animating global life.

In fact, the radical totality of human and nonhuman interactions has been framed as “posthuman IR” by Cudworth and Hobden (2011). Recognizing the qualitative and quantitative difference between human and nonhuman systems, the “complex ecologism” of “posthuman IR” uncovers that the “world is not divided into territories in which bounded societies of humans live under singular political authority and in the context of discrete natural environments”; instead, global life is “a complex interweave of numerous systems nested, intersected and embedded in each other, all undergoing processes of co-evolution and linked by innumerable feedback loops” (2011, 173, 175). It is for this reason that Dunn Cavelty and Giroux (in chapter 8) suggest that technology is no longer merely a tool for human society, but becomes constitutive of new forms of “complex subjectivities,” in which human societies themselves are perceived as critical infrastructures.

In fact, these explorations might remind some readers of Harold Lasswell’s (at the time mischievous, but today—with the benefit of hindsight—oracular) question: “[W]hen shall we extend the protection of the Charter of Human Rights to ‘machines’ and ‘mutants’?” (Lasswell 1965, viii). Such inquiry into the subjectivity of nonhuman systems intimates that not only human relations, but all kinds of relations in global life, are marked by uncertainty. Bousquet (in chapter 7) reinforces this point with his insistence that “we [humanity] are merely a particular manifestation of a wider material continuum in which we are deeply entangled.” As Ford, however, presciently reminds us (in chapter 3), “all complex adaptive systems are not, as it were, created equal.” The ideational input distinguishes human/sociopolitical systems from all others and allows them both purposefulness and reflexivity of agency in global life. Yet, Ford stresses that CT also makes possible the comprehension of “the very cognitive frameworks that separate us from nonhuman linearity” (emphasis in original). Echoing this ontological commitment, the complexified perspectives on IR approach world affairs as overlays of complex interactions “between people and each other, their
products, their activities, nature and themselves” (Yavlaç 2010, 172). In fact, such complexified ontology echoes the insistence of Harold and Margaret Sprout (1971) that the IR conversation should be moving “toward a politics of the planet Earth.”

An Epistemology for the Complexity of IR

As it can be expected, the inclusive ontological purview of the complexity paradigm presents a number of analytical challenges. Yet, as indicated by the proponents of CT included in this collection, assertions about the appropriate ways of describing the world emerge from the ontological assumptions of what the world is like (Joseph 2010, 65). Thus, on a metatheoretical level, the problem stems from the realization that we can never be fully cognizant of the underlying mechanisms and processes of global life, because this will imply “knowing the not knowable” (Kavalski 2007, 448). Some proponents of CT explain that the contingency of our knowledge reflects “the critical importance of non-observables and non-systematic factors.” Others, draw attention to the constraining effects of “blind variations (almost guesses) in knowledge” (Harrison 2006, 187). Such statements should not however be taken as an indication of the impossibility of providing robust IR interpretation “rooted in non-linearity and confluence” (Lebow 2010, 6–7). In this respect, as demonstrated by the preceding chapters, the acknowledgment of the limits of our knowledge can become a very productive analytical point of departure.

In this setting, the suggestion is that CT provides a “genuine Epistemic Revolution,” which renders the Newtonian paradigm “obsolete” (Popolo 2011, 3–6). In fact, Ernst Haas (1983, 24–26) has long argued that the IR literature needs to learn from the “evolutionary epistemology” of global life. What he had in mind is the emergence of IR scholarship that

must be open, unspecifiable ahead of events in terms of substance, and as unpredictable as evolutionary adaptation . . . [The inference is that there] is no fixed “national interest” and no “optimal regime.” Different perceptions of national interest, changeable in response to new information or altered values, will result in different processes and in a variety of regimes that will be considered rational by the actors—at least for a while.

What is revolutionary about CT’s contribution to IR is not only its debunking of the common wisdoms of “scientific IR,” but also its dedication
to “uncertain knowledge,” where uncertainty is regarded and accepted as an intrinsic quality of nature and not as a result of imperfect knowledge” (Haas 1983, 29). The suggestion is that by focusing mainly on stable equilibrium configurations, the study of IR has remained consciously ignorant of a whole “new species” of discontinuous intuition (Holt et al. 1978, 203; Phillips and Rimkunas 1978, 259–72). Thus, by painting itself into the Newtonian corner, the disciplinary mainstream has, on the one hand, evaded the need to recognize that there are dynamics which are not only unknown, but probably cannot ever be meaningfully rendered comprehensible, and, on the other hand, has stifled endeavors that can engage in thoughtful deliberation and productive management of the discontinuities, complexity, and nonlinearity of global life.

According to the contributions included in this volume, there are several important features underpinning such an approach to knowledge. First, the contingency of both global life and our ability to know it makes it impossible to construct predictive explanations of outcomes. Lebow is quite emphatic when he asserts that “[v]ariation across time, due to the changing conditions and human reflection, the openness of social systems, and the complexity of the interaction among stipulated causes make the likelihood of predictive theory—even of a probabilistic kind—extraordinarily low” (Lebow 2010, 265). Thus, the proponents of CT ascertain that, due to its overreliance on predictive theories, mainstream IR “must be totally discarded” (Yavlaç 2010, 170). A further reason for such rejection is the observation that the production of knowledge by Newtonian approaches has also limited “what is open for debate” (Joseph 2010, 53). For instance, due to the preoccupation with interstate relations, the discipline produces foot soldiers for this or that theoretical approach to international anarchy rather than students genuinely interested in observing the complex patterns of global life.

Second, the unwillingness to engage with the unpredictable becoming of global life reflects the patterns of linear causality that still seem to inform the disciplinary mainstream. The issue of “complex causation” (Lebow 2010, 10) aims to enhance sensitivity to the unintended consequences of international interactions. Such effects defy the conventional focus on purposive behavior. In fact, it is “chance, confluence, and accident that often play a determining role” in global life, rather than intentionality (Lebow 2010, 258). The complexification of IR thereby intends to supplant reductive explanations by considering the “conjuncturally determined” patterns of world affairs (Yavlaç 2010, 171).

Third, the proponents of complexification critique the way in which mainstream IR has theorized international developments by focusing on major events. Richard Ned Lebow indicates that the bias toward events
thinking belies the predisposition “to think of big events as having big causes” (Lebow 2010, 266). For instance, the origins of war are usually attributed either to singular events or to the resolve of specific individuals, rather than “the result of nonlinear confluences” (Lebow 2010, 262). The suggestion therefore is that the dynamics of global life are “characterized by unintended consequences, interaction effects, and patterns that cannot be understood by breaking the system into bilateral relations” (Jervis 1991/1992, 42). Thus, the focus on both spatially and temporally proximate causes underpins the blindness to the complex interactions of global life, which turns the disciplinary terrain into a frozen expanse of accidents. The complexification of IR outlined by the preceding chapters evinces that “mainstream IR cannot talk about underlying processes, only about systems and units,” which is why the chapters included in this volume advocate the abandonment of the “talk of levels of analysis in favor of complex, layered assemblies of social relations” (Joseph 2010, 64–65).

The resultant complexified epistemology of IR intends simultaneously to rethink and reinvent the study of world politics. Interestingly, most proponents of CT tend to be in agreement that this needs to be done through the “demystification of science” (Lebow 2010, 286). Such demystification entails the rejection of the Newtonian “scientific fallacies” (Popolo 2011, 22) of the discipline and accepting “the fact of epistemological realism: namely, that all beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient, and neither truth values nor criteria of rationality exist outside of historical time” (Wight and Joseph 2010, 13). It is also worth pointing out that while assisting the explanation “of our chaotic and unordered world,” CT is idiosyncratically self-reflexive about its own epistemological investments in a specific understanding of the international and readily concedes that “knowledge sometimes has the effect of accelerating disorder” (Lebow 2010, 3).

The Methodology of Complexified IR

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of complexified IR underpin how it examines world affairs. Commentators have noted that CT has already spawned a variety of innovative approaches ranging from agent-based modeling and computer simulations to scenario building and intuitive judgment (Harrison 2006, 189–90; Kavalski 2007, 447). The proponents of CT frame this development as “methodological pluralism,” which makes possible the “direct observational access” of the patterns of international affairs (Kurki 2010, 141). In this way, the methodology of complexity assists with
gaining a deeper understanding of “our own human experience” (Popolo 2011, 34).

Like most commentators, the contributors to this volume acknowledge that the complexity of global life demands approaches resting on “intuitive judgment,” “gut feel,” and “speculative thinking” (Bradfield 2004, 35; Cederman 1997, 10). The suggestion is that in some sense “we create our own consciousness of complexity by seeking it out” (LaPorte 1975, 329). For instance, by insisting on the “plausibility of alternative worlds,” counterfactual analysis lays bare the “contingency of our own world” (Lebow 2010, 17). Such production of “imaginary constructs” simultaneously allows for the examination of “judgments of possibility” and draws attention to discontinuities of the past in anticipation of future transformations in global life (Cederman 1997, 22). Thus, Harlan Wilson asserts that the “analytical complexity” of studying the complexity of global life has to reflect the interdependence of conceptual factors, variables, and components, which relate in systemic ways (in LaPorte 1975, 282). The bulk of CT research in IR promotes agent-based modeling (ABM) and computer simulations—which rest on mathematical algorithms and data sets—as tools for grasping the complexity of global life (Axelrod 1997; Cederman 1997; Pil-Rhee 1999; Rosenau 2003). Both chapter 1 and chapter 4 offer excellent demonstrations of the value added from employing ABM in the study and practice of IR. At the same time, chapter 5 cautions against the uncritical application of ABM as a one-size-fits-all approach to the complexity of global life.

At the same time, CT investigations take issue with the rational-choice paradigm and its failure to account for the pervasiveness of adaptive behaviors in global life (Axelrod 1997, 4). For some, “the linear hegemony” of rationalist causal thinking represents an “intellectual attempt to control” the study of politics by imposing a conceptual framework that is “blatantly untrue” about the patterns of international interaction (Brown 1995, 144). For others, it “restricts” interpretation by “structuring perceptions of reality” and inhibiting “creative thinking” (Bradfield 2004, 37). In a less radical mood (but equally forcefully), Robert Jervis (1997, 91) demonstrates that the acknowledgment of the complexity of global life renders the methodological apparatus of rationalism useless by “confounding standard tests of many propositions, and undermining the yardsticks or indicators for the success of policies.”

Thus, in contrast to the linear perceptions of change in mainstream IR—that is, changes in variables occur, but the effect is constant—the complexification of IR suggests that “things suffer change” (Richards 2000; Kaval-ski 2007). The contention is that the unpredictability of the emergent patterns
of international life need to be conceptualized within the framework of self-organizing criticality—that is, their dynamics “adapt to, or are themselves on, the edge of chaos, and most of the changes take place through catastrophic events rather than by following a smooth gradual path” (Dunn Cavelty 2007, 99). As the preceding chapters reveal, change in global life entails the possibility of a “radical qualitative effect” (Richards 2000, 1). Thus, when it comes to the trends, patterns, and behaviors of actors and systems in global life, there are infinitesimal amounts of possibilities; yet not all of them are likely—in fact, very few are (Kavalski 2012a). The methodological value of CT for IR is to help identify those that are more likely. Therefore, the alleged arbitrariness of occurrences that mainstream IR might describe as the effects of randomness (or exogenous/surprising shocks) could (and, in fact, more often than not do) reflect ignorance of their interactions.

The Ethics (and Practice) of Political Action under Complexity

The cognitive patterns of the complexification of IR demand meaningful engagement with the self-organizing ambivalence of global life. In this setting, the contention is that ethically oriented political action requires both the acknowledgment of and responsible adaptation to the turbulent reality of international interactions (Rivas 2010, 217). For instance, Lebow (2010, 47) indicates that “ethical beliefs and expectations” inform our “understandings of the world and how it works.” The ethos of political action under complexity therefore demands acceptance of living with “the fundamental principle of uncertainty whilst moving away from the very modern idea [that] the role of reason [is to provide] certainty for decisions on human action” (Popolo 2011, 215). Such a framing also suggests the emancipatory potential embedded in and emerging from the “explanatory critique” of complexified IR (Wight and Joseph 2010, 23).

Normatively speaking, the ethics of political action under complexity demands the development of relevant knowledge about the minimal conditions for resilient and sustainable living. Thus, in summarizing the ethical implications of CT, it can be inferred that the ethos of political action discussed in the preceding chapters hinges on three principles: (i) precautionary principle—stressing the need to develop “the art of working with uncertainty”; (ii) humility principle—recognizing that “action escapes the will of the actor”; and (iii) resilience principle—developing the adaptive capacity to “expect the unexpected as the norm” (Cudworth and Hobden 2011, 184).

Such consideration of the ethical underpinnings of the complexification of IR suggests that political action does not occur in a vacuum, but in idio-
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By recognizing the pervasive uncertainty of global life, the complexification of IR furnishes the disciplinary inquiry with “concepts to act with” (Geyer and Rihani 2010). In terms of policy formulation, CT calls for an urgent change in both the structures of and ideas about decision making—or, to use “the language of complexity, it requires changes in both institutions and internal models” (Harrison 2006, 192). More often than not, such emergent capacities for political action have been associated with the concept of improvisation. Alfonso Montuori (2005, 237–55) points out that improvisation is usually conceived as an exception, “as making the best of things, while awaiting a return to the way things should be done.” As he demonstrates, however, improvisational policy making is neither deterministic nor arbitrary; instead, it reflects an ability “to make choices in context, which in turn affect the context.” Thus, the choice to improvise does not indicate an inability to conduct “business as usual,” but recognition that it is the cognitive patterns of “business as usual” (in particular, the belief in “the one correct way of doing things”) that are accountable for the current predicaments of global life, such as climate change.

Let’s take the experience of surfers (probably one of the most obvious socioecological relationships out there) as an example. Surfers go out into the ocean expecting to ride a wave whose size, speed, strength, and timing are completely unknown to them. In the ocean, they spend significant time (quite literally) dancing with the rhythm of the water. In this dance, the surfers learn to distinguish between the different ripples of the water and read which one is likely to be an “ankle buster” (a small wave), an “awesome” (a nearly perfect wave), or a “cruncher” (an impossible-to-ride wave). Premised
on their interpretative dancing with the unpredictable motion of the ocean, surfers decide whether they are going to take off or back down from a wave. Their fitness, in terms of adaptation to the movements of the ocean, allows surfers to make decisions that are crucial to their ability to catch and ride the wave. Yet, while waves are similar to each other, they are never exactly alike, and surfers never know—regardless of whether one is a “kook” (a newbie) or a “boss” (a pro)—how the ride is going to proceed and whether it is going to be successful at all. The acceptance of the normalcy of failure is part of the decision making of surfers. In essence, each ride is an improvisation combining the individual skills of the surfer and the unpredictable shape, motion, and breaking point of the wave (Kavalski 2012b).

Yet, it is this inherent insecurity of surfing that underpins its appeal. Having accepted unpredictability as a constituent ingredient of the surfing experience, surfers not only learn to live with it, but also gain the freedom to respond creatively to such uncertainty. In terms of policy making, the suggestion is that leaders need to develop a surfer-like ability to revel in ambiguity by perfecting the capacity to make decisions based on incomplete and constantly changing information, rather than try to control, constrain, and simplify the indeterminacy of global life. In this setting, policy heterogeneity—the simultaneous maintenance of diverse decision-making strategies (alongside the willingness and capacity to develop new ones) to address the contingencies of unintended changes in global life—reflects the demand for resilient modes of policy making. Improvisation, therefore, acknowledges the randomness of the decision-taking process, but it is “randomness for a purpose” that draws on behavioral versatility and policy experience to construct an appropriate response for a particular moment in time (Neubauer 2012, 11). The ability to generate a multitude of potential solutions through combinatorial process is a key feature of improvisation’s adaptive capacities (Vermeij 2008, 35).

Thus, rather than reducing uncertainty, the ethics of improvisation demands political action capable of continually imagining global life other than what it currently is. In this respect, and paraphrasing Haas, rather than an inflexible steering of the ship of state, a policy maker has to have a surfer-like capacity for “zigging and zagging” through the turbulent reality of global life in which “old objectives are questioned, new objectives clamor for satisfaction and the rationality accepted as adequate in the past ceases to be a legitimate guide to future action” (Haas 1976, 184–93). At the same time, it cautions that even if adapting appropriately, improvisation is not boundless. It can be quickly undone by external surprise. For instance, going back to the surfer’s metaphor, the unexpected appearance of a shark riding
the same wave infuses the decision-making context with emotions ranging from panic to an adrenaline-fueled exhilaration. At any rate, such surprises (and the emotions that they provoke) impact on the surfer’s investment in a successful ride (from the one prior to the appearance of the shark). Hence, while those who are afraid of sharks most probably should not go into the ocean, the knowledge that sharks inhabit the same waters and, thereby, are not unlikely to be encountered when surfing encourages an awareness that assists in the development of a capacity to respond appropriately when confronted with rapid change and surprises.

*The Art of Acting Politically*

The discussion of improvisation above backstops the normative suggestion of the complexification of IR—namely, that the capacity to respond to the contingent interaction of global life requires learning the art of acting politically. The proposition is that such investigation responds to the query posed by Sir Alfred Zimmern, the first holder of the title of professor of international politics at Aberystwyth, “How could we get the interdependent but chaotic world to work together?” (Zimmern 1934). The suggestion here is that in lieu of a precommitment to particular models, responding to the turbulence, surprises, and unplanned occurrences defining global life demand strategies embedded in nonlinear intuition (Eoyang and Holladay 2013; Goldstein 1994; Olson and Eoyang 2001). In other words, ethical political action requires responsible creative adaptation that addresses the complex interactions of global life while maintaining the coherence and continuity of socioecological systems. The contention is that decision making under the conditions of complexity engages individuals as conscious subjects in a responsible and sustainable interaction with their environment.

Normatively speaking, the complexity of global life confronts IR with the “political effects of agents that are not conventionally perceived as ‘political’” (Prins 1995, 819). Hence, the “threats,” “dangers,” and “insecurity” emanating from nonhuman systems are not conventionally perceived as intentional—that is, there is no conflict of wills between distinct (and opposing) strategic actors (Wæver 1997, 230). For instance, the so-called “Frankenstorm” Sandy which hit the East Coast of the United States in the days prior to the 2012 presidential election provided one such instance of the political effects of such “nonpolitical” agents. The question is: How can we all participate meaningfully in something that can plausibly, but still only vaguely, be called international politics populated by actors whose subjectivity lacks “agential intentionality” (Cudworth and Hobden 2011, 140–168)?
While this question does not have a singular and definitive answer, a crucial feature of the responses suggested by CT demand an ethos willing to accept and engage with the ambiguity of global life.

Thus, as Edgar Morin suggests, the recognition of complexity has important effects on the ethics of political action: (i) its “multiplication of alternatives” creates favorable conditions for innovative strategies; (ii) its randomness underscores the increasing significance of individual decisions, which can lead to irreversible and unpredictable changes for the entire process. Thus, just because an action is irreversible does not mean that it should not be undertaken. Instead, acknowledging this “ethical complexification,” the art of acting politically engages in an “ecology of action,” which Edgar Morin calls “living life”—that is, “not just living,” but “knowing how to resist in life” by “daring the acceptance to risk” (Morin 2004, 43–44; 2006, 143). In other words, the ethics of resilience suggests that “the search for a single ‘optimum’ strategy may neither be possible nor desirable. Any strategy can only be optimal under certain conditions and when those conditions change, the strategy may no longer be optimal” (Mitleton-Kelly 2003, 14). Said otherwise, while global life keeps on asserting its complexity, our policy making seems to be invested in stringent models insisting on staying the course. Hence, perhaps ironically, the development of more adaptive decision making has been hampered by the criticism of (what is perceived by electorates and mainstream media as) “flip-flopping.” Policy fluctuations responding to the continually changing circumstances of global life are marked by “the lack of absolute [decision-making] control over the outcome of the actions undertaken by the actors” (Adler 2005, 44). Thus, changes in policy rather than “flip-flopping” indicate such adjustments to alterations triggered by the interwovenness of global life.

Policy making under complexity, therefore, calls for “a higher level of reflexivity” and indicates that contingent events bring about opportunities for developing new governance skills and norms (Whiteside 1998, 652). Since political action takes place in a self-organizing context, policy makers need to accept that their decisions will have unpredictable and (oftentimes) unintended outcomes. The complexity of global life demands intellectual flexibility “in order to avoid a dogged, single-minded pursuit of an effect that is no longer important or even obtainable in the evolutionary system of strategic interaction . . . Flexibility requires error, tolerance, and avoidance of over-control” (Sakulich 2001, 38). Decision making free from the aspiration to control change rests on a choice to generate “desirable pathways” in the face of rapid and fast alterations and pervasive uncertainty and risk (Cudworth and Hobden 2011, 181). Therefore, the claim here is that the art of acting politically under complexity attests to the ethical choices demanded
by a decision-making “dancing to the rhythms of global life.” Such normative understanding borrows from what John Keats has termed the poetry of “negative capabilities”—the “capabilities of being in uncertainty, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”—which demonstrate an ability to think “under fire,” live with ambiguity, remain “content with half-knowledge,” and engage in a nondefensive way with change, while resisting the impulse (merely) to react (Keats 1970 [1818], 43).

In short, the recognition of the complexity of global life demands thoughtful action framed by an ethics of adaptation.

The goal is to anticipate the form adaptation is likely to take under specified conditions, but this is not to say that adaptation is a predetermined process to which decision makers unknowingly succumb. Societies are not like cats which automatically adjust their distance from a blazing fireplace in such a way as to stay warm without getting burned. Some do get too close to the fires of world politics and wither, while others remain too remote from them and freeze. In other words, societies can engage in maladaptive as well as adaptive behavior, and the resulting movement back and forth between the extremes of the adaptive scale suggests the central role played by human choice. Such choice is no more random than is any human choice, but it grows out of historical, cultural, and other immediate and remote factors. The point being made here is simply that choice is part of adaptation and not precluded by it. (Rosenau 1970, 386)

In fact, it can be argued that such ethics recover the injunctions of some of the founders of IR who argued that the “realization of the complexity [of world politics] should make for a more tolerant and broad minded attitude to foreign policy” (Gettell 1922, 330). Thus, the reference to the art of acting politically reveals that the study and practice of IR should not aim at reducing (and controlling) the complexity of global life, but by acknowledging its interwovenness develop adaptive capacities for tolerating and working with change.

Conclusion

It has become expected of policy makers, pundits, and scholars to refer to a whole raft of global problems—from the economic downturn to climate change—as complex. While the complexity of these issues is indeed stag-
gering, the term “complexity” is used, more often than not, merely as a descriptor of the intricate nature of these challenges. The contributions to this volume have demonstrated that complexity is not an accidental word, but a key to the understanding and explanation of global life. It is for this reason that the contributors have consciously positioned themselves within the small but resilient oeuvre intent on complexifying IR.

A key feature of this literature is its rejection of the linear reductionism dominating the IR mainstream. In fact, some proponents of CT have suggested that such pandering to a truncated representation of the reality of global life has turned IR into a “miserable science” (Geyer and Rihani 2010, 73). As I have sought to demonstrate in this concluding chapter, at the heart of this misery is IR’s conception of “science,” which has no space for the uncertainty and randomness of global life. This ambiguity was not lost on the so-called fathers of the discipline. For instance, Hans Morgenthau was well aware of “the inevitable gap” between “the science of political science” (or what he also called “good—that is rational” international politics) and the fact that the “political reality” of world affairs “is replete with contingencies and systemic irregularities” (or what he labeled, international politics “as it actually is”) (Morgenthau 1973, 8).

It seems that IR has forgotten Morgenthau’s injunction that reality is far more complex than his account suggested. As the contributions to this volume evidence, CT provides a much-needed corrective to the “deep Newtonian slumber” dominating the mainstream of IR. While exposing the “scientific fallacy” of the discipline, CT demonstrates that “an alternative understanding of IR” is “not only possible, but also necessary” (Yavlaç 2010, 168). A critical feature of this alternative understanding is the open, nonanthropocentric ontology of complexified IR. It asserts that “thinking beyond the human condition can allow us to fully appreciate history as becoming, as the nonlinear process which fully reflects the nature of the vortex of time” (Popolo 2011, 28–29). At the same time, the complexification of IR offers nonlinear engagements with the turbulent dynamics of global life involving the coincidence, extensive connectivity, and interaction between highly coupled human and natural system, rapid technological change, and a whole host of social, political, and economic institutions (Kasperson 2008). As the contributions included in this volume indicate, while such complexification frames the future as uncertain and the present as irreversible, it nevertheless stringently refuses to securitize them.

Thus, going back to the query with which this concluding chapter began (Is IR a science?) the CT perspectives outlined in the preceding chapters suggest that it is much more pertinent to respond to the following questions: “What kind of science?” and “Science to what ends?” The contributions
to this volume provide distinct yet veritable paths through which these issues can be interrogated. It is expected that to the buffs of the complexification of IR this collection makes available superbly researched accounts of the diversity of CT perspectives and issues. To the neophytes, the analyses on the preceding pages offer rarely comprehensive and insightful glimpses into the diverse perspectives, experiences, concepts, practices, and issues of the complexification of IR. In other words, the conversations included in this collection try to chart the turbulent waters of a complex and uncertain global life. Most poignantly, perhaps, they; reveal that the cognitive crisis in the conventional study of IR becomes the beginning of its complexification.

Bibliography


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