The Politics of Global Complexity: Rethinking Governance, Power and Agency (2021-2022)

MA Module Code: 7PIRS025W
MA Module Code: 7PIRS025W  
(Level: 7, Credits: 20)  

Semester 1  

Lecture and Seminar: Thursday 10.00am-1.00pm  
Room 251, 309 Regent Street  

Professor David Chandler’s office  

Module Leader: Professor David Chandler  
(Room: Wells Street 504,  
email: D.Chandler@wmin.ac.uk)  

Module Summary  

Today the biggest challenge facing policy-makers appears to be the growing awareness of complexity. In a complex world, it is seemingly much more difficult to govern, and to act instrumentally, in order to fulfil policy goals. The module introduces students to the theoretical frameworks and practices of the politics of complexity, the debates that have been triggered, and the way that complexity understandings have developed, especially in the 2000s and 2010s. Emphasis is placed upon introducing students to some of the conceptual frameworks deployed in understanding system effects on political, economic and social life and how these enable us to rethink governance, power and agency. However, this module is also very practically orientated, it engages with how complexity is reflected in new approaches to policy-making and understanding, particularly focusing on how problems are responded to and the distinctions between preventive policy-understandings, resilience/bouncing back approaches and more transformative understandings of how to engage with a complex world.
Module Aims

1. To introduce students to the theoretical frameworks and practices of the politics of complexity, the debates they have triggered, and the way that complexity approaches have developed, particularly over the last decade.
2. To consider the changing framework of discussions of governance in relation to questions of who governs, how governance is legitimated, the processes of governance and the objects of governance.
3. To trace discussion of policy-making in relation to agency and the politics of complexity, in particular the changing understandings of agency with more diversified ranges of actors and more circulatory, asymmetric and flatter concepts of agency.
4. To consider some of the contexts in which understandings of political power are expressed within the framework of complexity.
5. To analyse reflexive forms of governing, resilience and adaptivity as responses to the problem of governing complexity.
6. To examine the changing nature and dynamics of democratic practices, and to facilitate the development of analytical skills that enable students to understand different democratic initiatives within a wider framework of complexity approaches.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, students are expected to:

1. Critically evaluate a range of theories of complexity as they affect political understandings of the role and practices of government.
2. Demonstrate a sound critical and advanced understanding of the different ways in which complexity thinking is deployed as both a limit to political power and also as a way of enabling political change.
3. Analyse how different conceptualisations of politics and complexity developed in relation to different bodies of theory, such as pragmatism, neoliberalism, assemblage theory, complex adaptive systems, post-foundationalism, new institutionalism, actor-network-theory, new materialism and posthumanism.
4. Critically evaluate how the politics of complexity interrogates and challenges liberal modernist binaries of politics/economics, state/society, public/private, subject/object, mind/body, human/nature, threat/security referent, inside/outside, means/ends etc.
5. Rigorously evaluate the link between democracy as this is understood in terms of formal representation and in terms of social or societal processes.
Teaching, Learning and Assessment

One 3 hour seminar space per week involving small group work and student led-discussions and optional Q and A session. Students are expected to prepare in advance as this involves discussion/interpretation of key readings.

Readings asterisked are available on Blackboard course materials.

The questions with each seminar presentation are to guide your thinking only; the readings will be at the centre of our discussion.

The 3 essential readings for each seminar will be discussed in groups or in class collectively, it is essential that you undertake at least your one group reading and preferably all three to make the most of the seminar discussion.

The assessment for this module is one article review of 1,500 words and one essay of 3,500 words.

The articles for review and the essay questions are available on pages 25-26 of this module guide.

The deadline for the review/article analysis is 1.00pm Thursday 4 November 2021 and the deadline for the essay is 1.00pm Thursday 16 December 2021.

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<tr>
<td>Article Review/Analysis (1,500 words)</td>
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# Lecture Programme

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| Week Nine: 25 November | Implications for Governance 2: Resilience and Adaptation  
**Discussion of essay questions and preparation** |
| Week Ten: 2 December   | Implications for Law and Democracy                 |
| Week Eleven: 9 December| Implications for Knowledge                         |
| Week Twelve: 16 December| Conclusion: Beyond Complexity?                    |
| **16 December**        | **Essay Deadline 1.00pm**                           |
Essential Reading

Key Texts

Background Reading
Politics of Global Complexity 2021-2022


**Periodicals and Other Sources**

- Resilience: Policies, Practices and Discourses
- Security Dialogue
- International Political Sociology
- Constellations
- Ecology and Society
- Economy and Society
- Theory, Culture and Society
- Millennium: Journal of International Studies
Week One: 30 September 2021

Introduction 1: The Politics of Global Complexity
- Discussion of Assessment Regime and Seminar Allocation

This session intends to introduce students to the module as a whole and to the problematic governing complexity. We will begin to engage with the problematic at the most general level, especially as most of the class will not have had the chance to do much of the readings and discuss what complexity might be, how it might be measured and what the implications of complexity might be for governing and for our understandings of power and agency and also for critical theorising.

Questions

How can things be made more complex? What needs to be added or taken away?
What is the relationship between complexity and causality?
What is the relationship between complexity and agency?
Is complexity a solution or a problem?

3 Essential readings

Danile Clausen, ‘Crude Thinking — 7 Ways of Dealing with the Complex in IR’, E-IR, 29 January 2016

Powerpoint Complicated or Complex?

Readings

Anything on complexity or recent thinking in political theory, IR, philosophy, human geography and the social sciences more generally will be fine. There are some more specific suggestions below.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03ls154
M. Mitchell Waldrop, Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos (Viking, 1993)
Week Two: 7 October 2021

Introduction 2: Complexity and the Coronavirus

This session will look at complexity and the coronavirus. Steve Hinchcliffe highlights the problems of modelling as too deterministic, introducing the idea of (non)linear causality. Searle and Turnbull challenge the idea that nature benefits from the human lockdown as if humans/nature were separate and homogenous rather than entangled and differentiated. Tobias Rees takes this further arguing that the simplifying binaries, cuts and separations that enable modernist liberal constructions of the human are problematised by the coronavirus, which does not distinguish humans from other animals, highlights how viruses challenge linear views of evolutionary change, deconstructing the human as part of multi-species entanglements/environments/systems/assemblages within others (see also Connolly). Rees sees this framing or shift as one of ‘un-differentiation’ however for other approaches to politics and ethics, complexity is about ‘differentiation’, see Chandler and Horton.

Questions

Why does Coronavirus challenge our modern conception of the human and the political?

How does the Coronavirus enable us to think about difference differently?

What is the problem with modelling approaches to disease containment and prevention?

3 Essential Readings


Readings


Week Three: 14 October 2021

Introduction 3: Complexity and the Anthropocene

This session will discuss whether complexity is new or not. You may have come across the term ‘the Anthropocene’, this is a term for a new geological epoch, one in which human activities can no longer be seen as separate from the Earth's ecosystems, heralding a paradigm shift in governance theory and practice. This understanding of the end of an ‘outside’—that human understandings of progress have reached a limit—is crucial for understanding complexity. The entanglements of human actions with environmental processes is captured well in the work of sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. For these theorists the complex world is understood as ‘late-modernity’, the ‘second modernity’, ‘risk society’ or the ‘globalised world’ and is a relatively recent phenomenon. Another position, that these entanglements of complexity are not new but merely involve the recognition that modernist assumptions rested on a false, reductionist set of
understandings is perhaps most boldly articulated by Bruno Latour. What does Bruno Latour mean when he says: ‘Put quite simply, second modernity is first modernity plus its externalities: everything that had been externalized as irrelevant or impossible to calculate is back in – with a vengeance’? (Is Re-modernization Occurring’, p. 37)

Questions

Is the Anthropocene a threat or an opportunity?

How does the linking of culture/environment; human/nature change modernist thinking?

It seems that stratigraphers are engaged in similar debates to social scientists on when the divide between culture/nature was breached, what is at stake in this debate?

3 Essential readings


Readings

Some awareness of the Anthropocene and any books or articles by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck and/or Bruno Latour will be fine for this session. These are major social theorists and their work is easily accessible. Some suggestions are below.

http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0305829816636674
http://www.nature.com/news/anthropocene-the-human-age-1.17085
Ian Sample, ‘Anthropocene: is this the new epoch of humans?’, Guardian, 16 October 2014.
Week Four: 21 October 2021

Complex Life 1: As Limit - From Linear to Non-Linear Causality

In modernist understandings of governance, there was an assumption that certain sets of policies could be applied to achieve certain desired results. This was implied in the capacity to learn lessons from policy
failures and the ability to export governance systems elsewhere in the world, from the spread of ‘civilisation’ under colonial rule to the contestation between liberal market economies and socialist state-based economic systems. However, these modernist views of linearity have been increasingly challenged by non-linear understandings of social causality which emphasise difference, plurality and social processes. For non-linear approaches, difference makes a difference. Firstly, differences in time, space, culture, law, politics, religion, economy etc mean that there is little ‘linear’ in the relation between cause and effect. Different contexts or states of affairs will be affected differently with different outcomes. Secondly, differences make a difference in terms of the direction of time, previous states of affairs, decisions etc impact on the responses to later events, this directionality of time is often called ‘path dependency’. Non-linear approaches were associated from the late 1970s with new institutionalist and neoliberal understandings, particularly in the field of international development (where North develops and applies Hayek’s approach). Non-linearity is at the heart of complexity understandings and is also associated with a radical or left critique of linear assumptions (see the Scott reading).

Questions

What is a ‘linear’ understanding? Why is it ‘mechanistic’ or ‘reductionist’?
Why does North say that “every effort at producing change in the system has usually produced almost exactly the reverse consequences downstream”?
What conditions are necessary for linear cause-and-effect outcomes? What are the consequences of this?

3 Essential readings


Powerpoint Complex Life/Complexity

Readings

David Chandler, Resilience: the Governance of Complexity (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) chapters 1, 2 and 10.
What are the implications of complexity for power? Some analysts suggest that power is not what it was, that maybe its location has shifted and that power has become more distributed and diversified or shifted to other (lower) levels. For other analysts, power needs to be understood as a contest between the constituent power of life, potentia, vis-à-vis the constituted power of government, potestas. We shall discuss how constituted power is seen as unable to grasp, direct or control social processes and outcomes. The discussions of the constitutive power of autonomous organisation can be understood in modernist or anthropocentric register of post-Marxism, for example, in the work of Hardt and Negri, and/or in the less modernist, posthuman, register of more contemporary theorists. The later are perhaps more relevant for our module, see Burke and Fishel (in the essential readings) as well as Cudworth and Hobden.

Questions

**What is problematic about constituted power?**

**What is the link between complexity and posthuman or ‘more-than-human’ approaches?**

**What is meant by the distinction between ‘transcendent’ and ‘immanent’ understandings of power?**

3 Essential Readings


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**Powerpoint** Constitute vs Constituted Power

**Readings**

http://www.politicalconcepts.org/constituentpower/


https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/complexity-ecologism-and-posthuman-politics/9CD4F0DBEE28137101F9313A87D286B2


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**Week Six: 4 November 2021**

**No class - Reading Week**

**Week Seven: 11 November 2021**

**Complex Life 3: As Problem-Solving - Emergence and Differentiation**
In week 4, non-linear approaches introduced us to the problem of complexity as a problem of knowledge. Adding differences of time and space made causal understandings more difficult. But not necessarily impossible, instrumental policy interventions were still possible even though the emphasis shifted from the policy-maker to the object of policy itself. The key shift in complexity understandings over the last couple of decades have involved a shift from a problem of knowledge of complex determinations to a question of the ‘emergent’ nature of reality itself. This understands complexity in a more ontological way, as not a problem of knowledge of determinations but of a reality which emerges more contingently without hidden determinations. This view of complexity is seen as advancing scientific knowledge in some US approaches, particularly those based at the Santa Fe Institute which seeks to apply complexity understandings to social problems, and as less ‘scientific’ and more open and creative in more ‘European’ critical social thought.

**Questions**

**How is complexity positive and enabling?**

**What is a complex adaptive system? What is an assemblage?**

**How does complexity open up new avenues for research and understanding?**

**3 Essential readings**


**Video** ‘How Wolves Change Rivers’ narrated by George Monbiot
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q&app=desktop

**Readings**


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Articles from the Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 41:3 (June 2013) special issue ‘Materialism and World Politics’.


Week Eight: 18 November 2021

Implications for Governance 1: International Interventions

There are few areas where complexity and the awareness of nonlinearity (the gap between intentions and outcomes) is growing faster than that of foreign policy, particularly with regard to the difficulties of exporting Western norms or in terms of interventions in the cause of peace, development and democracy. In the 1990s universal approaches were popular, in the fields of humanitarian intervention, human rights promotion, international peacebuilding and statebuilding etc. Today, these approaches to international policy intervention are seen to be much more problematic. In this session we hope to discuss how our understandings have shifted so rapidly, perhaps leading to scepticism towards any attempt at international problem-solving.

Questions

Why might humanitarianism be problematic even if it could be objective and politically neutral?
Is it possible to separate the fields of peace, development and rights?
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How can international interveners ensure that the unintended consequences don’t undermine the intended ones?

3 Essential readings


Readings

Cedric de Coning (17 minute YouTube video) ‘Coping With Peacebuilding Complexity’. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_n9dNELJ-qc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_n9dNELJ-qc)


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Week Nine: 25 November 2021

Implications for Governance 2: Resilience and Adaptation

In a more interconnected world, it is held there is less separation between governance policies and objects/subjects to be governed/secured. Often policy-making involves a greater understanding of our own relations/entanglements. Resilience has become a major field of policy-making through which these new, more relational understandings have been worked through. There are many possible examples, perhaps one useful one is that of resilience in relation to disasters. Disasters were once seen as external events or shocks, and which necessitated recovery and ‘bouncing back’, but now are increasingly understood rather differently. Disasters are part of a learning/developmental/governmental process in ways in which they were not before. Disasters are reinscribed as the final point of processes which were previously hidden to us, or which we lacked awareness of; processes (or assemblages, in current parlance) in which we were all the time and already embedded within as actors with agency. Thus, in reflexive resilience-thinking, disasters do not require ‘bouncing back’ to the status quo ante, but rather require self-reflexivity, in the awareness of how to bounce back differently: how to learn from the bad forms of governance that the disaster reveals and thus to prevent or limit such events in the future.

Questions

What happens when the security threat and the referent object of security are blurred?
What is the relationship between resilience and complexity?
What is coercive resilience?

3 Essential readings


Readings


Peter Rogers, *Resilience and the City: Change, (Dis)Order and Disaster* (Ashgate, 2012).


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http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/feb/06/school-young-people-resilience-failure

The Future of Disaster Risk Management, FLACSO/UNISDR, April 2013.
http://www.preventionweb.net/files/35715_thefutureofdisasterriskmanagement.pdf

Week Ten: 2 December 2021
- We will also be discussing essay questions and preparation

Implications for Law and Democracy

In Weeks 5 and 6, we have seen how approaches of complexity uphold an understanding of power as emergent and fluid. There, life is conceived as a productive, performative and enabling force, which is always in excess with regard to the rigid and constraining structures of the formal power of potestas. This week’s session enquires what the implications of this conception of complexity are for knowledge, particularly our understanding of politics, law and rights. How can the traditional modern tenets of constitutions, representation and decision-making be reformulated in order to attend to the relational complexities of a natural-and-social world? How can the universality of rights be reconciled with the assumption of life’s infinite difference and plurality? How can the rigidity and generality of the law become responsive to the fluidity of emergent global processes? In a Spinozian fashion, some authors identify strategies of empowerment and development with the enhancement of individuals’ self-fulfillment and freedom (Sen). Others discard a paradigm of representation built on identity and focus on beings’ capacities of doing and becoming (Grosz, Sharp). In the domain of law, finally, there emerges a growing need to adjust existent normative frameworks to the fluidity and fleetingness of new global societal dynamics. Despite their variety, the many perspectives explored in the session seem to converge on a common trend. They express a move away from an understanding of politics as the constructed and artificial sphere of human institutions and concerted action towards one that is increasingly searched at the level of everyday interactions, relations and practices.

Questions

What is freedom? Is it a state of being or a process? Why does it matter?
What does liberation, emancipation or autonomy mean in an entangled world?
Are all forms of representation problematic? What is problematic about representation per se?

3 Essential Readings

https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/democratic-theory/7/2/dt070221.xml
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  https://t.co/tB4oXcx5WS?amp=1

  https://t.co/iojZfXVtd2?amp=1

Powerpoint What is Freedom?

Readings

  https://t.co/hLskhOJP6d?amp=1

* Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Intro and Chapter 1

  http://my.ilstu.edu/~jkshapi/Grosz_freedom.pdf


http://projectlamar.com/media/grosztime.pdf


Leo Benedictus, “The nudge unit – has it worked so far?”, *Guardian*, 2 May 2013.
http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/may/02/nudge-unit-has-it-worked


Week Eleven: 9 December 2021

Implications for Knowledge
How do we know things under complexity? What type of knowledge do we need? Many people argue that the type of knowledge needs to be context specific and real time. What is the difference between modernist forms of generating knowledge, through statistical generalisation and complexity approaches based upon ‘drilling down’? Can knowledge ever be ‘real time’ and, if it was, would it make a difference?

Questions

Why is it argued that correlation can replace causation?

Why is the situated perspective more ‘objective’ than a ‘God’s eye’ view?

Why is it argued that Big Data can resolve problems? How does this work?

3 Essential readings


Powerpoint Knowing Differently


Powerpoint Research methods and assumptions


Readings


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http://bds.sagepub.com/content/1/1/2053951714528481

Stefano Canali, ‘Big Data, epistemology and causality: Knowledge in and knowledge out in EXPOsOMICS’, Big Data & Society, 3(2), 2016: 1–11  
http://bds.sagepub.com/content/3/2/2053951716669530

https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/51103570/2053951715609066.full.pdf

Tim O’Reilly, Beyond Transparency, Chapter 22, ‘Open Data and Algorithmic Regulation’.  

http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/9944/


Week Twelve: 16 December 2021

Conclusion: Beyond Complexity?

In this concluding session we will reflect on the module as a whole and the implications of complexity for our understandings of governance, power and agency as well as considering whether the global world will continue to become more complex or whether complexity itself has limits and if so how these may be understood. Perhaps the fact that complexity now appears as something to be welcomed rather than feared indicates that the work of complexity is already achieved?
Assessment

Review/Article analysis Deadline 1.00pm Thursday 4 November 2021

Choose one of the following five articles. Write a 1,500 word review on how the article relates to rethinking governance, power and agency today (do not just provide a summary of the article, treat it analytically, explain and reflect upon the argument forwarded).

https://www.noemamag.com/from-the-anthropocene-to-the-microbiocene/


https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557570701574154?src=recsys

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/22405808.2016.1153773
Choose one of the following six essay titles

1. What are the implications of complexity approaches for our understanding of how governance should operate?

2. How does complexity-thinking disrupt or challenge our understanding of the human?

3. What are the implications of complexity approaches for our understanding of power?

4. How are resilience and complexity-thinking linked?

5. Do we still need knowledge in a world of complexity? What sort of knowledge?

6. What are the implications of complexity-thinking for our understanding of democracy and agency?
Assessment Rationale

The assessment regime is designed to encourage research expertise in the area of politics and complexity. It aims to develop advanced understanding of the concepts, frameworks and approaches of complexity thinking as applied to the rethinking of governance, agency and power. The assessment by essay and book review enables students to develop a critical understanding and to apply key theoretical accounts to current debates and problems with regard to the impact of complexity.

In particular, the book review is designed to develop analytical skills and to ensure that basic concepts and frames of debate are understood at an early stage of the module. The review encourages students to focus on their capacity to digest, comprehend and contextualise concepts, theories and policies key to governance and complexity.

The research essay allows students to develop an extended analysis of key concepts, theories and/or policies, to engage in an in-depth evaluation of competing interpretations and theoretical approaches, and to explore the application of governance practices both domestically and internationally. The essay challenges students to critically engage with their chosen topic and demonstrate their critical and analytical ability.

Further Information Regarding Coursework

In addition to the information contained in this Handbook, which is specific to the assessment for this module, you need to be aware of PIR’s general guidance and policies for coursework submission. The most up-to-date information is contained in the current version of the PIR Course Handbook, and includes guidance on:

- Submitting your work
- Late submission
- Plagiarism and referencing
- Mitigating circumstances
- Word limits

The current version of the PIR Course Handbook can be found on the Politics and International Relations Blackboard site.

Other important sources of information. For information about academic progression, condoned credits, referral opportunities and the calculation of degree awards, see the Handbook of Academic Regulations (section 17). As these are the overarching regulations at Westminster, they are very detailed and quite technical. If you need help interpreting the regulations, please email your Course Leader.
Notes