

Chapter 1.

Complexity Theory as a New Lens in IR: System and Change

Luis Tomé, Ph.D.

Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa-Portugal, OBSERVARE-Observatory of Foreign Affairs

Şuay Nilhan Açıklan

Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara-Turkey

Abstract

Discussions over shifting from linearity to nonlinearity in natural sciences have led to unexpected reflections in social sciences. Nonlinear theories have gained a new momentum in our understanding of complex and complicated social events. Similarly, the changing patterns of international relations (IR) encourage us to reconsider the dimensions of international systems and discuss the concept of change and order. This paper seeks to explain the contribution of complexity theory to the understanding of the international system and its change. Firstly, it justifies the need for a new approach in IR theorization in the light of the limits of conventional IR theories as well as of the changing patterns from linearity to nonlinearity. Then, it demonstrates the usefulness of complexity theory's core assumptions to define the international system, the idea of change and the agent-structure debate.

Introduction

Theories of International Relations (IR) have always had the problem of bridging the gap between reality and its theorizing. This is mainly because the international reality is much more complex and unpredictable in its evolution than those aspects that are in keeping with cognitive structures and "natural expectations" of conventional IR theories. This dilemma is all the more evident in the characterization of the international system and the explanations for both its change and its impacts on the international actors.

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Regardless of how discussions around the international system evolve, most scholars of IR are rethinking their approach under more complex, multifactor-structured, interdependent and nonlinear assumptions. Furthermore, events such as the end of the Cold War, globalization, 9/11, the Arab Spring or the global rise of the so-called Islamic State have had a significant impact within the scope of IR theories on the encouragement of rethinking that our world naturally and inherently possesses unpredictability. That is why IR theory needs to be revisited in accordance with the dynamics of nonlinearity.

This need can be complemented by complexity theory. In order to understand it and its effects on social sciences and especially on IR, setting an ontological ground from linearity to nonlinearity is essential. Complexity theory and its application to the social sciences has been a rising phenomenon for the last fifteen years, although there are few scholars who work on complexity theory and IR.

This article intends to contribute by explaining how complexity theory can be an added value in the theorizing of IR, in particular in our understanding of the international system and its change. Firstly, it justifies the need for a new approach in IR theorization in the light of the limits of conventional IR theories as well as for changing patterns from linearity to nonlinearity. Then, it demonstrates the usefulness of complexity theory's core assumptions to define the international system, the idea of change, and the agent-structure debate.