THE GLOBAL FORUM

Complexity Theory and Global Governance: Is More Different?

Conor Seyle and Roberta Spivak

COMPLEX SYSTEMS CAN DEMONSTRATE AN INTERESTING EMERGENT PROPERTY: coordinated strategic behavior at the level of the system as a whole that is found nowhere in the elements that make them up. This is true for biological systems such as anthills and the bodies of higher organisms (including humans), which frequently show coordinated and organized action at the collective level that allows for what looks like goal-oriented behavior and responses to challenges. This is true despite the fact that these organizations have no hegemon—despite Thomas Hobbes’s vision, the Leviathan of the human body has no sovereign coordinator, but is instead composed of a million individual cells and systems whose individual narrow focus interacts with the others to aggregate up to a collective whole. The title of “Queen” bestowed to the ant in the colony is anthropomorphizing: the ant so titled does not meaningfully direct the strategy of the colony.

Understanding these systems requires understanding the interaction of the units as much or more as it does understanding the individuals. At the level of the colony, ants engage in strategic behavior to identify threats or resources and take coordinated action to deploy resources and contribute to the survival of the system. This is true even though there is nobody directing the system: instead, this coordinated action comes about from the interaction of multiple entities following their own limited decision rules about where to go and what to do. Stanford University biologist Deborah Gordon writes: “One lesson from the ants is that to understand a system like theirs, it is not sufficient to take the system apart. The behavior of each unit is not encapsulated inside that unit but comes from its connections with the rest of the system.”¹ In complexity theory, one way of talking about this phenomenon is the idea that “more is different.” A few ants will wander more or less randomly, but a colony of ants following the same decision rules will display what looks like coordinated action. The critical mass of actors interacting with each other leads to collective action.

There may be lessons in this work for the study of global governance. Global governance is complexity theory compounded: humans, ourselves complex systems, organize ourselves into increasingly larger groups and systems that are all

ultimately captured under systems for global governance. This macro system is complicated and fraught: there are questions of jurisdiction and hierarchy. Who is in charge and what exactly is their mandate? By what right or system do they gain legitimacy? How do they protect their sovereignty while working toward shared goals? But these questions emphasize taking the system apart conceptually rather than capturing the performance of the whole.

Frequently, the tendency in analysis and practice has been to emphasize the challenges of coordination and the friction that comes from the individual actors pursuing their narrow foci without strong central orchestration. As Thomas G. Weiss tells us, this sort of thinking can lead down a slippery slope: “No matter how strong the contributions of informal and formal networks, no matter how copious the resources from private organizations and corporations, no matter how much good will from governments, we cannot continue to ignore and rationalize the visible absence of a central global authority.”² And while Weiss—a former editor himself and a frequent contributor to these pages over the years—acknowledges that this sort of thinking “qualifies one to be certified for an asylum,” a certain longing for a streamlined order makes sense given vast global challenges. But rather than lament the impossibility and undesirability of world government, we can look to another model. The study of complex systems suggests that in the absence of a hegemon or global sovereign, it is possible that the aggregate action of all the different institutions and systems operating in the global space can still generate effective coordinated action.

If it is true that global governing systems are complex systems in a technical sense, then the suggestion from complexity theory is that it is possible for effective goal-directed behavior to arrive even in the absence of a central global authority. What matters is the ability of these actors to engage in repeated interactions with each other over time, to shape their own behavior through these interactions, and to pursue individual and shared goals. The policy prescription that falls from this analysis is a call for embracing complexity: diversity in actors, in structures, and in the lack of an overall hegemon. The lessons of complexity theory that more is different suggests that if the global system embraces a model that brings multiple stakeholders, of all types, to the table to interact, the result may be effective collective action at the aggregate level. Processes and procedures that embrace multistakeholder networks for coordination may help improve the work of the UN specifically, and global governance more broadly.

This is not itself a radical idea, or an incredibly new one—the UN has embraced multistakeholderism in the Global Compact, in the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, and in many different public-private partnerships and multistakeholder processes over the past thirty years. The key insight from complexity theory is that what looks like a flaw in these systems—the lack of a central hierarchy enforcing a coordinated plan of action—may actually be central to their strengths. Humans are social animals and often comfortable with clear hierarchies in our interactions with each other and other institutions, but it is

possible that this preference is less a reflection of what works best in coordinated behavior and more a simple preference for simplicity.

The Collective Behavior of *Global Governance*

We understand that these few pages are not your typical Global Forum. However, when we put in our bid to manage the administration of *Global Governance* several years ago, one of the things that impressed us was the multidisciplinary nature of the journal, which had started with the first editors (Craig Murphy and Roger Coate) and continued afterward with three subsequent teams (Andy Knight, S. Neil MacFarlane, and Thomas G. Weiss from 2000 to 2005; Barry Carin, Richard Higgott, Jan Aart Scholte, Gordon Smith, and Diane Stone from 2006 to 2010; and our immediate predecessors, Tom Farer and Tim Sisk). We saw an opportunity in our bid to extend this multidisciplinary to a truly multisectoral partnership similar to the model discussed above. As a foundation rather than a university department, our participation in *Global Governance* was a stretch beyond the existing partnership models to a new one bringing new stakeholders into the governance of the journal. We realized that this made our proposal new, and probably uncomfortable to some. To compound this, the model we suggested was different than previous editorial approaches. We were proposing to assemble a group of scholarly editors who lived in different countries (Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Argentina). The administrative office would be housed in a small town on the front range of the Colorado Rockies. There was hesitation about this arrangement, something the journal had never done before. But what we were proposing was actually not all that different from how *Global Governance* has successfully operated since its inception. There has always been a diffusion of responsibility and authority. The journal operates in a respectful partnership between Lynne Rienner Publishers (and now Brill Publishers, as of this issue), ACUNS, the team of editors, and the host institution—there is no hegemon! It has managed to do this for twenty-four years. Our bid extended this model only slightly, expanding the circle of what kinds of institutions participate in the journal and how the editorial team operates.

It is not that disagreements over policy or direction do not arise. They do. But in our structure as in previous editorial teams, there is an acknowledgment and respect for those who have the authority in each domain to take necessary steps and make necessary decisions, without the need for one universal final authority. The journal has always functioned, in part, as a coordinated network of diffuse actors sharing a common goal. Our bid made this fact more formal and brought in a new sector in the form of our foundation as a civil society organization. We hoped that our tenure would underscore the value of network-based approaches in the *Global Governance* space as a model for the global governance space as well. We think it may have and we are happy with the results of our tenure—and grateful for this five-year partnership.

We want to take this final Global Forum as our opportunity to thank those who worked to make this project a success. To Lynne Rienner, Martha Peacock, and their team, who made clear their high expectations without ever frowning on any of our proposed articles. Their professionalism made all of our work possible.

To our wonderful partners at the ACUNS Secretariat, we begin with Alistair Edgar, who besides being a truly wise counsel, respected scholar, and one of the hardest-working people we know, is a hell of a nice guy (and we hear, a decent goalie). If you're ever feeling down, go to the annual ACUNS meeting where they will shower you with praise and, dare we say, affection. It has been a real joy to work with this team. Our thanks go especially to Brenda Burns and board chairs Lorraine Elliot and Roger Coate. We also must mention Gregory Chin, Jorge Heine, Peggy Karns, and Tom Weiss, who did far more than their fair share of reviews, often when we were in a pinch.

We are grateful to our superb team of editors—Brian Job, Mónica Serano, Ramesh Thakur, and Diana Tussie—who were the heart and soul of the whole operation. Ramesh, our editor-in-chief, is the most decisive leader we have known. His ability to make decisions quickly, yet thoughtfully, while soliciting advice from the whole team was invaluable in keeping us moving forward. Leslie Ochreiter, who came on board to assist with the journal management while completing her PhD dissertation, was a vital asset to the whole endeavor. Our faithful book reviewers, especially Eamon Aloyo and Scott Wisor, kept us abreast of new and important work in our field. It was an honor and a joy to work with each of you.

Finally, we thank Marcel Arsenault, the founder and chairman of One Earth Future, who pushed us to think big. The UN discussion series comes from a simple question that he asked years ago: “Is there anything practical or useful that these authors are writing about?” Our emphatic “yes” met with his challenge to “then find a way to get the ideas out there to the people who can use them.” With his encouragement and our partnership with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York, we were able to bring several *Global Governance* authors to the UN to discuss their work and foster necessary conversations.

The truly astounding feature of this partnership—the way it in many ways mimicked a system defined by collective behavior—is that it was always in service to a shared goal, in this case the readers of *Global Governance*. Our efforts were focused on serving the scholars and practitioners who devote their careers to understanding and mitigating global problems in the hopes of creating a more peaceful world. We thank you for allowing us to participate in this community. While we are no longer stewards of the journal, we will continue to be fellow students and practitioners of global governance. We look forward to the new directions that undoubtedly will be introduced by the next team of editors. 🌐

Notes

Conor Seyle is a political psychologist and director of OEF Research, a program of One Earth Future. His work focuses on how nonstate actors and governance systems support sustainable peace and the long-term impact of conflict and mass traumatic events on survivors. He is coauthor or editor of several books, including coauthor (with David Cortright and Kristen Wall) of *Governance for Peace: How Inclusive, Participatory and Accountable Institutions Promote Peace and Prosperity* (2017). Roberta Spivak was managing editor of *Global Governance* from 2014 to 2018. She is a project manager at OEF Research and coauthor of *Maritime Piracy* (2012), part of Routledge's Global Institution Series.

1. Deborah M. Gordon, "Collective Wisdom of Ants," *Scientific American*, February 2016, <https://web.stanford.edu/~dmgordon/articles/other/Gordon%20Scientific%20American.pdf>.

2. Thomas G. Weiss, "Global Governance: A Philadelphia Moment?" One Earth Future Discussion Paper (2013), http://oefresearch.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/Weiss-Philadelphia-Moment_0.pdf. Broomfield, CO: One Earth Future.