

The Complexity of Self Government

The Complexity of Self Government represents a revolutionary approach to political science. Bottom-up theory turns political and social analysis upside down by focusing analytic attention not on vacuous abstractions, but on the individual men and women who either consciously or inadvertently create the institutions within which they live. Understanding this practical level of human activity is made possible through complexity theory, recently developed in computer models, but of wider use in understanding everyday human behavior. To this complexity framework the book adds social science to give life and color to the analytical picture: micro-sociology from Garfinkel and Goffman, anthropology from Bourdieu, and nontechnical game theory based on Thomas Schelling's microanalytics, to give rigor and bite. Theoretical examples include India's Mumbai, Iran, the marshes of southern Iraq, Berlusconi's Italy, backcountry China, Zimbabwe, and Nelson Mandela's revolution in South Africa.

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Politics from the Bottom Up

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Preface

Democracy has become a one-word oxymoron, internally contradictory and probably not the culmination of all history, as is sometimes claimed. But if democracy has lost its freshness as a political concept, it gracefully directs attention to an old idea, self government, which opens new human horizons in respect to politics if it is investigated with new methods and a new theory.

Complexity theory directs inquiry to the *bottom* of the sociopolitical world, where new growth is possible in respect to the rights, responsibilities, prospects, and promises of self government because it defines politics as ubiquitous in human affairs, present everywhere and all the time, and not just restricted to far-off, large and important institutions.

While complexity theory started as a computer-based technique and can be highly technical, it is also very simple and accessible as an innovative way of considering the puzzles to which years of stable democratic government have brought its citizens: the disillusion with democratic politicians, policy, and performance that is found in all parts of the political spectrum.

Complexity theory, working from the bottom up, revolutionizes the way people look at their political worlds and opens new territory for the exploration of real self government.

- Complexity theory clears the deck of ideological rhetoric.
- It shows that the political exists in daily life, not just in official institutions and forums.
- It defines politics as including all interactive activity, from the highest to the lowest.

- It explains how justice and injustice arise and why neither is stable.
- It argues that societies create themselves accidentally, when many were inattentive;
- and that for that reason, societies need to think more carefully about what they have done.
- It shows how to explain, and perhaps control, human interactions.

Reformers exhort democratic citizens to vote more regularly as a way of fulfilling their democratic duties of public participation. Complexity theory suggests everyone is already participating 24/7 and might be interested to understand more fully exactly what they are engaged in, for better or worse.

Complexity theory gives new clout to the old phrase, *eternal vigilance is the price of liberty*.

THE GENERAL ARGUMENT

Democracy is a cage; it cuts its citizens off from a rich panorama of personal and sociopolitical life and restricts them to a narrow and increasingly meaningless activity. That one allowed activity is voting, and it occurs in elections dominated by campaigns that range from charade to circus. Granted, elections – regular and fair – are essential to keeping government in line. But they are an inadequate response to the vastness of political reality that surrounds everyone throughout every interaction.

Self government is sometimes mistakenly used as a synonym for democracy, but it is in fact quite different, because democracy, as an official journal of *The American Political Science Association* has recently proclaimed, is actually oligarchy – rule by the few in their own interest. Democracy may be a useful start but it is not the end of the journey.

If self government is to be taken seriously, no one can write a book about it; everyone will have to figure out on their own how to govern themselves; advice from the outside would be insulting. But it may be possible to investigate some of the issues underlying the search for self government, and that is the purpose of this book.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (*Stealth Democracy* 2002) have argued that Americans, despite constant exhortation to the contrary, have no desire to participate in government, or even in voting, because they are not interested in politics and simply want the country to be well run. I concur, but because the democratic state is not being well run, by anyone's standards, I take heart from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's marginal comment that despite Americans' disinterest in the state, everyone loves a good fight: they love

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contests, athletic competition, “television shows pitting one side against the other.” Civics courses, urging volunteerism and civic responsibility, are quite hopeless in this regard (Hibbing and Theiss Morse 2002: 224–225).

What is the alternative to civics? It is politics, properly understood as including both the beautiful and the ugly, and as occurring everywhere people interact, whether they are cooperating or fighting, as the case calls for, attempting to achieve their personal and social goals. Using this broad definition, lessons learned in backyard negotiations with friends and neighbors may be applied to and compared with behavior observed in larger and more official sociopolitical institutions, and may produce a greater appreciation of the *political* in its infinite scope and infinite detail.

The possibility that there is life after democracy has not yet captured the best-seller lists. Europeans seem to be ahead, including Colin Crouch’s *Post-Democracy* (2004) and Pierre Rosanvallon’s *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (2008). In terms of complexity theory books for the general reader, recently there is *Complexity and the Art of Public Policy: Solving Society’s Problems from the Bottom Up* (2014) by David Colander and Roland Kupers. James C. Scott’s *Two Cheers for Anarchy* (2012) has something of the same bottom-up flavor, encouraging people to jaywalk occasionally to escape what Max Weber called the cage.

The books that criticize democracy, or try to salvage it, or weep over its failures, or scold voters, are infinite in number but not relevant to the current thesis (some of this literature is included in Chapter 1), which takes all that background for granted and searches for new insights and new perspectives. It is perhaps useful to note that I do not here criticize democracy as a system; it is a beacon when people lack it, and will continue in that role. Yet it would seem a rather dismal conclusion if it were considered the end of the story (Fukuyama 1992).

APPROACHES USED IN THE BOOK

The complexity theory theme pervades the book, first as the rationale for the “bottom up” theme, which argues that the human interactive world *looks* entirely different if viewed from below rather than summarized under vague and often misleading top-down abstractions (such as democracy). Complexity theory also brings together into a single analytic package works from the behavioral and social sciences that utilize micro-sociology and microeconomics but had not been seen as part of a single approach until the new complexity method appeared, potentially revolutionizing approaches to politics and self government.