

# Bob Jessop

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## Social imaginaries, structuration, learning, and 'collibration' : their role and limitations in governing complexity

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Bob Jessop

## **Social imaginaries, structuration, learning, and ‘collibration’: Their role and limitations in governing complexity**

The natural and social worlds (and their interconnections) are far too complex to be *understood* in all their complexity in real time and to be *governed* in all their complexity in real time. This pair of statements is too simple: complexity is complex. This is reflected in the tendency for complexity to become a chaotic concept – especially in the social sciences, where mathematical formalization is difficult and metaphorical expression is common. Thus I must first reduce the complexity of complexity in order to connect it to problems of governance and meta-governance. Indeed, faced with complexity, simplification is essential for any operating system or agent to be able to ‘go on’ in the world. Ontological complexity enforces selection on natural and social systems alike. One way to study such systems is in terms of how they select selections. In the social world, complexity is reduced in two main ways. The first is simplification through semiosis (meaning- or sense-making), which is associated with specific systems of meaning and forms of representation, and tied to personal and collective identities. The second is simplification through various modes of structuration, which set limits to action repertoires and compossible sets of social relations in time-space, and through attempts to articulate (‘collibrate’) different forms of structuration. Governance is relevant in both respects: its success depends on the adequacy of social imaginaries to the complexities of the real world; and on the relevance of the modes of governance to the objects that are to be governed.

Given these remarks, my contribution to this special issue of *Zarządzanie Publiczne* will undertake five tasks: (1) present the key concepts

for an analysis of complexity and its reduction through semiosis and structuration; (2) elaborate the notions of lived experience (tied to personal identity or consciousness), social imaginary, and ideology (which involves more than social imaginaries); (3) introduce the key concepts for the study of structuration, including spatio-temporal fix, structural coupling, and ecological dominance; (4) introduce the notion of learning as a crucial intermediary between lived experience and social structuration; and (5) show how different forms of coordination of complex interdependence have developed to address these problems, how they fail, and how individual and social agents seek to address governance failure through new forms of imaginary and new efforts at ‘collibration’. My contribution ends with some remarks on a research agenda based on these arguments and a practical agenda oriented to better governance based on ‘romantic public irony’ as a way of ‘going on’ in a deeply complex world.

### **1. Complexity and its reduction**

John Urry (2002) suggests that sociological hypotheses about the real world are generated through metaphor and that, as the real world changes, sociologists should adopt new metaphors. Ignoring the seeming contradiction in this account and the risk that metaphors are used to tell ‘good stories’ rather than provide ‘solid arguments’, we can certainly agree that recent interest in complexity reflects a *Zeitdiagnostik* – right or wrong – that the social world has become more complex. This, in turn, has led social agents to search for new ways of reducing complexity and addressing its problems. Among the many reasons recently advanced for a dramatic intensification of societal complexity are:

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Lancaster University.

- increased functional differentiation combined with increased interdependence among functional systems;
- increased fuzziness, contestability, and de-differentiation of institutional boundaries;
- increased complexity of spatial and scalar relations and horizons of action, as national economies, national states, and national societies cease to be the main axes and reference points in societal organization;
- increased complexity and interconnectedness of temporalities and temporal horizons, ranging from split-second timing (e.g., computer-driven trading) to an acceleration of the glacial time of social and environmental change;
- multiplication of identities and the imagined communities to which different social forces orient their actions and seek to coordinate them;
- increased importance of knowledge and organized learning; and, because of the above,
- the self-potentiating nature of complexity, whereby complex systems generally operate in ways that create opportunities for additional complexity.

But recognition of growing social complexity – even assuming that this could be measured accurately and compared with earlier periods and/or across different kinds of societies in today’s asynchronous, unevenly developing world society – does not, *per se*, justify the appropriation of models of complexity from mathematics and the natural sciences without regard to the differences between the natural and social worlds. In particular, it ignores the meaningfulness of the social world and the scope for agents to respond reflexively to complexity (for the counter-view that perception, boundary-drawing, and meaning-making occur in all systems, see Barbieri 2008).

This suggests that we should distinguish complexity in general from specific modes of complexity. All complex systems share some features – or, at least for the sake of reducing the complexity of complexity, it makes sense to identify these features. These include non-linearity, scale dependence, recursiveness, sensitivity to initial conditions, and feedback. Even at this level of analysis, however, complexity can be studied in many ways, e.g., algorithmic, deterministic,

and aggregative analyses (Rescher 1998). While some complex systems can be modelled more or less adequately for given purposes, others are characterized by ‘deep complexity’, i.e., are hard to reduce in a ‘satisficing’ way, and therefore pose problems concerning the way of reducing this complexity (Delorme 2010). Social scientists must move on from ‘complexity in general’ to study specific modes of complexity (and deep complexity) in the social world and their interaction with the natural world. Such study includes the governance of complexity and the complexity of governance (cf. Jessop 1997).

One way to approach this task is through the tools of cultural political economy (Jessop 2004, 2009; Jessop and Sum 2001; Sum and Jessop 2013) which studies semiosis and structuration as essential mechanisms of complexity reduction in the field of political economy but, as I demonstrate below, its approach can be generalized to all social relations. These mechanisms are potentially complementary but possibly contrary or disconnected. For social agents to be able to ‘go on’ in the world, they must reduce complexity by selectively attributing meaning to some of its features rather than others, and also set limits to compossible sets of social relations through processes of structuration. Thus, actors (and observers) must focus selectively on some aspects of the world as the basis for becoming active participants therein and/or for describing and interpreting it as disinterested observers. These ‘aspects’ are not objectively pre-given in the real world, nor are they subjectively pre-scripted by hard-wired cognitive capacities. Instead they depend for their selective apperception (recognition and misrecognition) in large part on the currently prevailing meaning systems of relevant actors and observers, as these have been modified over time. In turn, meaning-making helps to shape the overall constitution of the natural and social world insofar as it guides a critical mass of self-confirming, path-shaping actions that more or less correctly diagnose the scope for the world to be different, and therefore contribute to realizing what was previously there only *in potentia*.

A recent illustration of the importance of complexity reduction (and its limitations) is the well-known confession by Alan Greenspan, Chair of the US Federal Reserve (1987–2006). Asked

by Representative Henry Waxman whether he thought that his ideology had pushed him into making decisions that he had since come to regret in the light of the continuing financial crisis, he replied: 'remember what an ideology is: a conceptual framework for people to deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to – to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not... I've found a flaw. I don't know how significant or permanent it is. But I've been very distressed by that fact... A flaw in the model that I perceived as the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak.' (Congressional Hearing, 23.10.08)

This ideology was the efficient market hypothesis, a key element in neo-classical economics, and the basis of his conviction that markets could and, indeed, should be left to manage themselves. If necessary, the state would step in later to clear up any problems. Of course, there are many other economic 'ideologies' or, as I prefer to call them, 'imaginaries', which simplify economic relations in different ways. And there are countless other ways of reducing complexity through sense-making that attribute meaning to other aspects of the natural and social world, construing them in one or another way in a this-worldly and/or other-worldly fashion. The latter would include, for example, spiritual and religious imaginaries.

But, while all social *construals* are equal (insofar as all social agents must engage in meaning-making in order to be able to 'go on' in the world), some interpretations are more equal than others in their impact on the social *construction* of the social world. The role of intellectuals is clearly important here, but we should not fall prey to the intellectuals' temptation to think that theirs are the only imaginaries that become hegemonic or dominant. The role of semiosis in this respect cannot be understood or explained without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that both enable meaning-making and make it more or less effective not only in terms of comprehension but also of practical action. This highlights the role of variation, selection, and retention in the development and consolidation of some *construals* rather than others, and in their embodiment and embedding in practices that transform the natural and social

world. As one moves from variation through selection to retention, extra-semiotic factors linked to specific communication channels and broader social configurations play an increasing role in determining which discourses or imaginaries are translated into durable social constructions and become part of actors' bodily and mental condition (*hexis*), shape their personal and social identities, promote certain social dispositions and routines (*habitus*), get enacted in organizational routines, or become institutionalized in various ways. Inquiring into such processes is especially important where meaning systems have become so sedimented (taken-for-granted or naturalized) that their socially contingent nature goes unremarked. Another intriguing question concerns the relation between micro-social diversity and stable macro-social configurations, and this is where structuration enters the investigation.

Structuration establishes possible connections and sequences of social interaction (including interaction with natural worlds) that facilitate routine actions and set limits to path-shaping strategic actions. While *structuration* refers to a complex, contingent, tendential process that is mediated through action but produces results that no actors can be said to have willed, *structure* refers to the contingently necessary outcome of diverse structuration efforts (for an influential sociological account of structuration, see Giddens 1984; for a more complicated interpretation, with a more nuanced analysis of structure-agency dialectics, see Jessop 2009). With its mix of constrained opportunities, recursiveness, redundancy, and flexibility, structuration facilitates social reproduction somewhere between an impossible stasis and the edge of chaos. Reproduction is not automatic but mediated through situated social action that occurs in more or less structured contexts. It involves complex assemblages of asymmetrical opportunities for social action, privileging some actors over others, some identities over others, some ideal and material interests over others, some spatio-temporal horizons of action over others, some coalition possibilities over others, some strategies over others and so on (Jessop 2009). In this sense, structural constraints always operate selectively: they are not absolute and unconditional but always temporally, spatially, agency-

and strategy-specific. Conversely, to the extent that agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation, they may be able to alter these selectivities.

Where these two forms of complexity reduction complement each other, they transform meaningless and unstructured complexity into meaningful and structured complexity. In terms of societal configurations, this involves hegemonic imaginaries and institutional and spatio-temporal fixes that together produce zones of relative stability based on active or, more likely, passive consent and structured coherence (Section 3). The social and natural world becomes relatively meaningful and orderly for actors (and observers) in so far as not all *possible* social interactions are *compossible* in a given time-space envelope. This excludes many other meanings and many other possible social worlds. This does not prevent competing imaginaries concerning different fields of social action or, indeed, rival principles of societal organization more generally. For, in a social world characterized by exploitation, oppression, and exclusion, there are many possible standpoints for construing the world and many sources of social disruption. How relatively stable social orders emerge in particular time-space envelopes in the face of such complexity is one of the enduring challenges in the social sciences.

## **2. Lived experience, social imaginaries, and ideologies**

Semiosis is an umbrella concept for all forms of the production of meaning that is oriented to communication among social agents, individual or collective. An imaginary is a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world. There are many such imaginaries and they are involved in complex and tangled relations at different sites and scales of action (see Althusser 1971; Taylor 2001). As noted above, without them, individuals cannot 'go on' in the world, and collective ac-

tors (such as organizations) cannot relate to their environments, make decisions, or pursue more or less coherent and successful strategies in a complex, often deeply complex, environment.

While some social imaginaries are organized around (oriented to, help to construct) specific systems of action (e.g., economy, law, science, education, politics, health, religion, art), others are more concerned with different spheres of life, the 'lifeworld' (broadly interpreted) or 'civil society'. The latter kind of imaginaries may nonetheless acquire system-relevance through their articulation into the operation of system logics (e.g., the use of gender to segment the labour force, the mobilization of 'racial' identities to justify educational exclusion). System-relevant and lifeworld imaginaries provide the basis for identities and interests, whether individual, group, movement, or organizational. Agents normally have multiple identities, privileging some over others in different contexts. This has prompted the recent interest in 'intersectionalism', i.e., the study of the effects of different mixes of system-relevant and 'lifeworld' identities.

Given this multiplicity of identities, their differential intersection, and the problems that this poses for social mobilization, effective social agency often depends on strategic essentialism (Spivak 1987). This involves the discursive and practical privileging of one identity over others for the purposes of collective action in particular conjunctures even though this temporarily ignores or suppresses real differences within a movement. Examples include the appeal to nationalism in inter-imperialist wars, successive waves of feminism, or the mobilization of regional identities to create the social as well as economic bases of regional competitiveness.

Because meaning-making is the basis of lived experience, everyone is involved in social construction. But not everyone makes an equal contribution to the social construction of social relations. Each system and the different spheres of the 'lifeworld' have their own semiotic divisions of labour that overlay, differentially draw on, and feed into lived experience. Some individuals and/or collective intellectuals (such as political parties, and old and new social movements) are particularly active in bridging these different systems and spheres of life, attempting to cre-

Table 1. Imaginary versus Ideology

Imaginary	Ideology
Imaginary is not ‘true’ or ‘false’ but may be more or less adequate for ‘going on’ in the world	Ideology is linked to ‘truth regimes’ that privilege ideal and/or material interests
Imaginary can lead to learning based on reflexive interpretation of successive experiences ( <i>Erlebnis</i> → <i>Erfahrung</i> )	Ideology frames and limits <i>Erlebnis</i> (lived experience) and the scope for <i>Erfahrung</i> (learning appropriate lessons)
Plurality of imaginaries is based on different entry-points and standpoints	Competing ideologies privilege some entry-points and standpoints over others
Reflexive agents can adopt different perspectives to open space for varying degrees of self-reflexion	Ideologies may be formed and promoted intentionally and, even when they are emergent, tend to block (self-)reflexion

ate hegemonic meaning systems or to develop sub- or counter-hegemonic imaginaries. And, of course, increasingly, semiosis is heavily ‘mediatized’, i.e., influenced by mass media and social media. Given the diversity of systems and the plurality of identities in the ‘lifeworld’, it would be mistaken to assume that one type of social actor will be the leading force in semiosis in general or hegemony-making in particular. Likewise, given competing societalization principles, there can be no guarantee that one principle of structuration will dominate the others.

What is the relation between lived experience, social imaginaries, and ideology? We should not short-circuit the analysis and move from semiosis to ideology too hastily. At stake in a serious ideological critique are the sources and mechanisms that ‘bias’ lived experience and imaginaries towards specific identities, and their changing ideal and/or material interests in specific conjunctures. The ‘raw material’ of ideology is meaning systems, social imaginaries, and lived experience. However, these are all essential aspects of actors’ ability to ‘go on’ in the world in the face of complexity. They involve, wittingly or not, specific entry-points and standpoints to make the world calculable through selective observation of the real world, reliance on specific codes and programmes to interpret it, the deployment of particular categories and forms of calculation, sensitivity to specific structures of feeling, reference to particular identities, justification in terms of particular vocabularies of motives, efforts to calculate short- to long-term interests, and so forth. These simplifications are designat-

ed by the term ‘social imaginary’ and they are the basis for lived experience.

When analyzing meaning systems, then, the three main analytical steps, required to avoid simplistic critiques of semiosis as always-already ideological, are: (1) recognize the role of semiosis as a meaning (or meme) pool in complexity reduction, i.e., regard signs and symbols as elements from which ideation and communication draw; (2) identify social imaginaries, i.e., specific clusters of meaning (or semiotic) systems, and describe their form and content – recognizing that they are never fully closed and are frequently re-articulated; and (3) analyze their contingent articulation and contribution to processes of structuration which secure specific patterns of exploitation, oppression, and domination that serve the particular ideal or material interests of specific individual agents or social forces.

### 3. Spatio-temporal fix, structural coupling, ecological dominance

Structuration sets limits to compossible combinations of social relations and thereby renders them more predictable and manageable as objects of social action. Just as semiosis as such is not ideological in form, content, and effects, structuration does not necessarily entail exploitation, oppression, and domination. This is something that must be established through rigorous theoretical and empirical investigation and/or through learning based on attempts to transform specific sets of social relations. It is also important to note that there are always inter-

stitial, residual, marginal, irrelevant, recalcitrant and plain contradictory semiotic and extra-semiotic elements that escape any attempt to identify, govern, and stabilize a given set of social arrangements or broader social order. While such elements can disrupt the smooth performance of instituted social orders and provide bases of resistance to the established order, they also offer a reservoir of semiotic and material resources that can be mobilized in the face of unexpected events or crisis (Grabher 1994).

Three useful concepts for investigating structuration are spatio-temporal fix, structural coupling, and ecological dominance. A spatio-temporal fix (which is also social and institutional) emerges when the conditions for relative social order are secured *within a given time-space envelope* thanks to the displacement and/or deferral of sources of instability elsewhere and/or into the future. In other words, *zones of relative stability* are typically tied to *zones of relative instability*: these may develop by chance or, more often, through more or less deliberate efforts to secure stability at the expense of other places and/or future problems. Such fixes delimit the main spatial and temporal boundaries within which structural coherence is secured, and externalize certain costs of securing this coherence beyond these boundaries. In this sense, however, zones of relative instability form the 'constitutive outside' of zones of relative stability. The risk of 'blowback' is therefore always present to a greater or lesser degree and, as we will see below, crises in governance are often related to the neglect of the 'constitutive outside' and its contribution to an always temporary, partial, and fragile governance regime. Even within these boundaries, some classes, class fractions, social categories or other social forces located inside the relevant zone of relative stability are marginalized, excluded, or oppressed.

Structural coupling refers to the 'blind co-evolution' of different sets of social relations resulting from their co-existence or interpenetration in the same time-space envelope and/or its 'constitutive outside'. The *construal* of different institutional orders as more or less clearly demarcated from each other (e.g., markets and states) does not mean that they are separate in the real social world. On the contrary,

they can be related in many complex and unpredictable ways that may in turn become factors in the failure of efforts to govern an 'imagined' economy (i.e., the subset of economic activities and their extra-economic conditions of existence that is identified as the basis for economic calculation, steering, management, etc.), because the effects of structural coupling go unrecognized and, for some actors, are even unimaginable (as shown by Alan Greenspan's above-cited confession). Other examples of failure to govern 'imagined' sets of social relations (e.g., the family, youth culture, migration, health, anthropogenic climate change, industrial relations, fiscal crisis, sovereign debt, etc.) may be explicable in similar terms. Structural coupling should not be confused with attempts to engage in the strategic coordination of different sets of social relations (see Section 5), although such attempts may seek to rely on structural coupling to produce their effects and, as noted, in failing fully to anticipate them, fail.

Finally, ecological dominance refers to the relative importance of different instituted social orders (economic, legal, military, political, religious, educational, scientific, etc.) as problem-makers and problem-takers in the social ecology formed by the co-existence and structural coupling of different self-organizing social orders. Whereas orthodox Marxism suggests that the economy (more precisely, the dominant social relations of production) are determinant in the last instance, the concept of ecological dominance allows for different sets of social relations to be primary in different periods or specific conjunctures. In this respect, the principal obstacles to effective governance will derive from the structural contradictions and strategic dilemmas that are associated with the ecologically dominant set of social relations. These could be the contradictions of the capital relation and the dilemmas that they generate for social forces in particular contexts. But they could also be the contradictions involved in civil-military relations when armed conflict is the chief problem-maker, and the dilemmas this poses for the elected government's accountability to citizens, and the centralization involved in military command structures. No doubt readers can think of other examples. This has important implications

for the adequacy of different social imaginaries as bases for governance, as well as for the adequacy of different approaches to governance in particular periods and conjunctures.

#### 4. How Learning mediates lived experience and structuration

*Learning* has the same selectivities (semiotic, structural, technological, and agential) as semiosis in general, and also undergoes variation, selection, and retention. Learning depends on a dialectics of *Erlebnis* (immediate experience) and *Erfahrung* (lessons learnt) that has its own temporalities. I suggest that learning is an important bridge between semiosis and structuration in so far as it results from the interaction of more or less reflexive, sense-making social agents with a complex natural and social world that is not fully, let alone immediately, accessible to observation and comprehension. It is in this sense that one can talk of a 'unity of theory and practice' or, better, of expectations based on instituted or emerging social imaginaries and personal or collective experience based on attempts to 'go on' in the natural and social world through practical action. I will explore the relevance of this dialectic to governance in the next section. But first, I want to show how learning operates in the face of shocks to social imaginaries (Greenspan's 'ideologies') that result from the profoundly disorienting impact of crises that are unexpected, even unimaginable, and that render established crisis-management routines ineffective or inoperable. In adopting this line of investigation into learning, I do not suggest that learning occurs only in crisis or that crisis always produces learning. But crises do provide interesting insights into the more general mechanisms of learning as a potential bridge between sense-making and structuration.

When crises call established modes of learning into question, learning can pass through three stages: learning *in* crisis, learning *about* crisis, and learning *from* crisis (Ji 1996; Jessop 2013). Each stage is likely to involve different balances of semiosis and structuration as well as different degrees of reflexivity, i.e., learning about learning. The latter occurs when actors be-

lieve that new imaginaries are needed because inherited approaches have not worked well, and therefore reorganize information collection, calculation, and embodied and/or collective memory. Shifts in strategic learning and knowledge production often require a shift in the balance of forces in wider social relations.

Crises of crisis-management are especially likely to disrupt learnt strategic behaviour and lead to an initial trial-and-error 'muddling-through' approach. *Learning in crisis* occurs in the immediacy of experiencing crisis, considered as a moment of profound disorientation, and is directed to the phenomenal forms of crisis. It involves attempts to make sense of an initial disorientation (at some level of everyday life, organizational and/or institutional and/or policy paradigms, disciplinary or theoretical framing, and meta-narrative) in order to 'go on' in the face of the crisis as it is experienced (*Erlebnis*). Three points merit attention here. First, social actors have different social, spatial, and temporal positions as well as reflexive capacities and past, and will live the crisis in different ways. In this sense, actors' strategic learning does not come directly from the crisis as a whole, but from their own circumstances and crisis experiences. This can lead to different strategic responses (strategic variation); and their results vary in terms of success or survival under certain structural and conjunctural conditions (strategic selection). Second, actors vary in their capacities to 'read' the crisis and to respond to it in the short term. At one extreme, we find wilful blindness or repeated bouts of 'crying wolf' that lead to the dismissal of real crises; at the other extreme, crises may be manufactured (or crisis-construals may be deliberately biased) to force decisions favourable to one's own interests. Lastly, in critical realist terms, learning in crisis is more likely to address the empirical and actual dimensions of the crisis than to deal with its real causes (especially in terms of their spatio-temporal breadth and depth).

*Learning about crisis* occurs as a crisis unfolds, often in unexpected ways, with lags in real time as actors begin to interpret the crisis in terms of underlying mechanisms and dynamics. It goes beyond the 'phenomenal' features of a crisis to its 'essential' characteristics in order to develop



more effective initial responses and a more effective mid-term strategy. It is most likely where the routine crisis-management procedures adopted by actors prove, or seem to be, inadequate or inappropriate, with the result that policy-making and implementation must engage in experimentation. This stage differs from learning in crisis because it takes more time to dig beneath phenomenal features (if it did not, then this would not be a 'crisis' that is disorienting at the level of theoretical or policy paradigm, and it would be possible to engage in usual crisis-management routines) and/or to scan the environment for analogous events in past or present. Social actors learn through trial-and-error in specific conditions and, in this sense, through learning about crisis, they also embark on learning from crisis.

*Learning from crisis* occurs after a crisis is (temporarily) resolved (or changes its form, e.g., from liquidity crisis to sovereign debt crisis or fiscal crisis) and includes preventive or prudential actions to forestall repetition, to improve crisis-management routines, and so on. It may lead to revisions in imaginaries, whether these take the form of meta-narratives, theoretical frameworks, policy paradigms, or everyday expectations and routines. In this phase, strategic lessons are retained after the surviving social actors have had time to reflect on the new, post-crisis realities. Only then is overall strategic reorientation and path-breaking likely to be accomplished.

*Lessons from the past* are often invoked in the course of all three learning types. This involves the use of history to make history or, put differently, the effort to define appropriate historical parallels as a basis for responding effectively to the crisis in real time. Such lessons often interact with 'spatial' dimensions, such as policy transfer across different fields, sites, levels, and scales of policy-making.

## **5. (Meta-)governance of complexity and complexity of (meta-)governance**

Interest in governance, theoretically and normatively, is linked (correctly or not) to increasing recognition of the growing complexity of social life (Section 1). 'Governance' sometimes covers

all possible modes of coordination of complex and reciprocally interdependent activities or operations. The most commonly identified modes of coordination are the anarchy of the market, imperative coordination, reflexive self-organization, and solidarity. In each case, successful coordination depends on the performance of complementary activities and operations by other actors – whose pursuit of their activities and operations depends in turn on such activities and operations being performed elsewhere in the relevant social ensemble. Sometimes the term refers mainly to reflexive self-organization.

Interest in the latter mode of governance developed because it is alleged to integrate the phenomenon of complexity more explicitly, reflexively, and, it is hoped, effectively than reliance on markets or command. Indeed, far from just responding to demands from social forces dissatisfied with both state and market failure, state managers themselves have actively promoted these new forms of governance as adjuncts to and/or substitutes for more traditional forms of top-down government. They have done so in the hope and/or expectation that policy-making and implementation will thereby be improved in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency, and also made more accountable to relevant stakeholders and/or moral standards, leading overall to 'good governance'. This is reflected in growing concern with the role of various forms of political coordination which not only span the conventional public-private divide but also involve 'tangled hierarchies', parallel power networks, or other forms of complex interdependence across different tiers of government and/or different functional domains. More generally, new forms of partnership, negotiation, and networking have been introduced or extended by state managers as they seek to cope with the declining legitimacy and/or effectiveness of other approaches to policy-making and implementation. Such innovations also redraw the inherited public-private divide, engender new forms of interpenetration between the political system and other functional systems, and modify relations between these systems and the lifeworld as the latter impacts upon the nature and exercise of state power.

Nonetheless, self-reflexive organization also fails. Among the reasons for this are the inadequacy of the definition of the object(s) of governance, the general turbulence of environment, the time required for continuing dialogue, the existence of governance projects competing for the same object of governance, and the specific dilemmas in particular forms of governance arrangement. Recognition of this failure in the 1990s (following disillusion with the turn to 'more market, less state' in the preceding decade) was followed from the mid-1990s onwards by growing theoretical and practical interest in meta-governance (for a comprehensive review of the theoretical and policy literature on meta-governance, see Meuleman 2008). The latter has been defined as the organization of self-organization, the regulation of self-regulation, the steering of self-steering, the structuring of the game-like interaction within governance networks, and interaction among actors to influence parameter changes to the overall system. In its most basic and general sense, used below, it denotes the governance of governance. This is reflected in attempts to redesign governance mechanisms and in the recurrent switching among different modes of governance (cf. Dunsire 1996). In all cases, despite significant differences between their respective modes of complexity reduction (which always and inevitably marginalizes some features essential to effective governance), the continuing excess or surplus of complexity – especially deep complexity – is a major cause for failure.

How is governance articulated to broader patterns of social domination? Foucault and his followers in the field of governmentality studies have considered questions of problem-definition, power asymmetries, and domination, and explored the effects of specific modes of calculation, institutional assemblages, and social practices. This approach does not focus on the state, understood as a centralized locus of rule, but examines instead how programmes and practices of rule are applied in micro-settings, including at the level of individual subjects. Such work has been a productive approach in a period marked by a shift from government to governance. But it neglects the parallel shift from governance to meta-governance or, phrased differently, the role

of statecraft understood as a complex art of government that encompasses the 'governance of governance' within and beyond the (changing) formal boundaries of the state (cf. Lemke 1997).

A more satisfying answer to the question of how governance is articulated to broader patterns of social domination can be developed by drawing on Antonio Gramsci. He famously remarked that 'the general notion of the State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that the State = 'political society + civil society', in other words, hegemony armoured with coercion)' (Gramsci Q 6, § 88: 763–4). His approach to the state (at least in the 'West') went beyond the traditional state-theoretical triplet of territory, apparatus, population, beyond a Weberian concern with imperative coordination, and beyond a Leninist reduction of the state to a repressive apparatus. Gramsci regarded the state as a complex social relation that articulates state *and non-state* institutions and practices around specific economic, political, and societal projects and strategies. 'Civil society', understood as a domain of associations that are normally regarded as private, was critical to this analysis, and much of his theoretical and political analysis was devoted to the place of private institutions, organizations, and movements in the exercise of state power. However, in marked contrast to mainstream governance research, he linked these analyses directly to class analysis and the critique of domination. Thus he proposed that 'the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its domination but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci Q 15, § 10: 1765). This account merits further development.

Of particular interest here is how new forms of governance fit into the overall configuration of class power and, more generally, political domination. By analogy with Gramsci's own definitions, I argue that 'the state in its inclusive sense' could also be defined as 'government + governance in the shadow of hierarchy'. In these terms, state power involves not only the exercise of state capacities that belong specifically to the state (e.g., legal sovereignty, a constitutionalized monopoly of organized coercion, taxation pow-

ers); but also resort to practices of ‘collibration’, i.e., the rebalancing of different forms of governance within and beyond the state in the shadow of *hierarchy*. ‘Collibration’ is more than a technical, problem-solving fix: it always involves specific objects, techniques, and subjects of governance, and it is tied to the management of a wider ‘unstable equilibrium of compromise’. Indeed, it is typically conducted in the light of the ‘global’ (or most general) function of the state, i.e., maintaining social cohesion in a class-divided (or, better, socially divided) social formation. In other words, governance and meta-governance cannot be reduced to questions of how to solve issues of a specific techno-economic, narrowly juridico-political, tightly focused social-administrative, or otherwise neatly framed problem. This is not only because of the material interconnections among different problem fields in a complex world but also because every governance (and, *a fortiori*, meta-governance) practice has implications for the balance of forces.

Generalizing his arguments, reflexive self-organization based on stakeholding or public-private partnerships can be seen as a form of ‘passive revolution’: as an attempt to absorb the energies and expertise of leading figures in subaltern groups and, indeed, of whole ‘stakeholder groups’; to defuse a loss of political legitimacy; to recuperate problems of government overload; to turn potential sources of resistance or obstruction into self-responsibilized agents of their own subordination; and to enhance the efficiencies of economic, political, and social domination through forms of micro-management that penetrate into the pores of an increasingly complex social formation that is non-transparent to any single point of observation, command, and control and that cannot be left to the invisible but benign hand of market forces.

Given that all forms of governance fail, it is hardly surprising that meta-governance is also failure-prone. This could lead to a fatalistic, passive resignation; a stoical, ritualistic approach; self-deluding denial and/or the spinning of failure as success; or cynical opportunism as some actors exit well ahead, leaving others to carry the costs. To avoid such outcomes, and building on the preceding sections of this contribution, four interrelated strategies can be recommended:

- 1) Establishing a common worldview (social imaginary) for individual action and stabilizing key players’ orientations, expectations, and rules of conduct. This permits a more systematic review and assessment of problems and potentials, resource availability and requirements, and the demands of negative and positive coordination.
- 2) Simplifying models and practices that reduce the *perceived* complexity of the world, but have sufficient variety to be congruent with real world processes and to remain relevant to governance objectives. These models should simplify the world without neglecting significant side effects, interdependencies, and emerging problems.
- 3) Developing the capacity for dynamic interactive learning about various causal processes and forms of interdependence, attributions of responsibility and capacity for actions, and possibilities of coordination in a complex, turbulent environment. This is enhanced when actors can switch among modes of governance to facilitate more effective responses to internal and/or external turbulence.
- 4) Building methods for coordinating actions among social forces with different identities, interests, and meaning systems, over different spatio-temporal horizons, and over different domains of action. This depends on self-reflexive self-organization to sustain exchange, hierarchy, negotiation, or solidarity as well as on the nature of the coordination problems engendered by operating over different scales and time horizons.

Enough has already been said here and elsewhere on the first condition. Regarding the second, the need for flexible ‘requisite variety’ (with its informational, structural, and functional redundancies) is based on recognition that complexity excludes simple governance solutions. Instead, effective governance requires a combination of mechanisms and strategies oriented to the complexities of the object to be governed. Combining strategies and tactics reduces the likelihood of failure, enabling their re-balancing in the face of governance failure and turbulence in the governance environment (Meuleman 2008). Efforts to maintain requisite variety may seem inefficient in economizing terms because this in-

roduces slack or waste. But, as noted above, it also provides major sources of flexibility in the face of failure. For, if every mode of economic and political coordination is failure-prone, if not failure-laden, longer-term success in coordination depends on the capacity to switch modes as the limits of any one mode become evident.

Third, complexity requires that reflexive observers recognize their inability to understand fully what they are observing and their need to make contingency plans for the unexpected. This involves inquiring in the first instance into the material, social, and discursive construction of possible objects of governance and reflecting on why this rather than another object of governance is dominant, hegemonic, or naturalized. It requires thinking critically about the strategically selective implications of adopting one or another definition of a specific object of governance and its properties, and, *a fortiori*, of the choice of modes of governance, participants in the governance process, and so forth. Thus, reflexivity involves the ability and commitment to uncover and make explicit one's intentions, projects, and actions, their conditions of possibility, and what would be an acceptable outcome in the case of incomplete success. It involves cultivating the ability to learn about them, critique them, and act on any lessons. Applied to meta-governance, this means comparing the effects of failure/inadequacies in markets, government, self-organization, and solidarity; and regularly re-assessing how far current actions are producing desired outcomes. This requires monitoring mechanisms, modulating mechanisms, and a willingness to re-evaluate objectives. And it requires learning about how to learn reflexively. There is a general danger of infinite regress here, of course; but this can be limited, provided that reflexivity is combined with the other two principles.

Fourth, given 'the centrality of failure and the inevitability of incompleteness' (Malpas and Wickham 1995: 39), how should actors approach the likelihood of failure? The intellectual and practical stance recommended here is that of 'romantic public irony'. To defend this, I distinguish irony from four other responses to governance failure: fatalism, stoicism, denial, and cynicism (see above). In contrast to fatalists, stoics,

those in denial, and cynics, ironists are sceptical and romantic. Recognizing the inevitable incompleteness of attempts at governance (whether through the market, imperative coordination, or reflexive self-organization), they adopt a 'satisficing' approach. Ironists accept incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life, but continue to act as if completeness and success were possible. The ironist must simplify a complex, contradictory, and changing reality in order to be able to act – knowing full well that any such simplification distorts reality and, worse, that such simplifying distortions can sometimes generate failure as well as enhance the chances of success. In short, even as they expect failure, they act as if they intend to succeed. Moreover, following the law of requisite variety, they must be prepared to change the modes of governance as appropriate.

Complicating matters further, a 'double irony' is present in romantic public irony. The romantic public ironist recognizes the likelihood of failure but chooses to act on the assumption that success is still possible – thereby 'thinking one thing and doing another'. And, faced with the likelihood of failure, she chooses her mode of failure. One cannot choose to succeed completely and permanently in a complex world; but one can choose how to fail. This makes it imperative to choose wisely! Given the main alternatives (markets, imperative coordination, self-organization, and solidarity) and what we know about how and why they fail, the best chance of reducing the likelihood of failure is to draw on the collective intelligence of stakeholders and other relevant partners in a form of participatory democracy. This does not exclude resort to other forms of coordination but it does require that the scope granted to the market mechanism, the exercise of formal authority or solidarity is subject, as far as possible, to decision through forms of participatory governance that aim to balance efficiency, effectiveness, and democratic accountability. Key substantive outcomes to be added here include sustainable development, the prioritization of social justice, and respect for difference. In this sense, public romantic irony is the best mechanism for working out which modes of governance to resort to in particular situations, and when 'collibration' is re-

quired. It is not the only method to be adopted in all and every situation.

#### 6. Closing Remarks in Guise of a Conclusion

The preceding section indicates the importance of exploring the dialectic between the complexity of the real world, the manner in which the real world comes to be interpreted as complex, and the forms of complexity reduction based on semiosis, structuration, and on their interaction. In terms of a research agenda on (meta-) governance, the preceding remarks invite the following questions. First, given the inherent complexity of the real world, what role does semiosis (i.e., meaning-making) play in reducing complexity and, *a fortiori*, defining collective problems? This is a field where critical discourse analysis has much to offer not only in understanding the discursive framing or construction of social problems but also in *Ideologiekritik*. Second, given the inherent complexity of the real world, what role does structuration play in limiting compossible social relations? This set of issues is one where a strategic-relational approach to structurally inscribed strategic selectivities and, *a fortiori*, to patterns of domination, has much to offer. Third, given the importance of disciplinary, normalizing, and regulatory practices in both regards, what specific modes of calculation and technologies of power/knowledge are involved in governance? There are some interesting and productive links here to Foucauldian analyses of governmentality and questions of power/knowledge relations. And, fourth, because of the lack of social closure in a hyper-complex, discursively contested, structurally underdetermined, and technically malleable world, what scope is there for social agency to make a difference? This is where questions of conjunctural analysis, strategic calculation, and social mobilization come into play.

Finally, in terms of practical recommendations on governance and meta-governance, I have advocated a principled and pragmatic reliance on romantic public irony combined with participatory governance. This is the best means to optimize the governance of complexity, because it recognizes the complexity of governance. It also subordinates the roles of market forces, top-down command (especially through the state), and solidarity (with its risk of localism

and/or tribalism) to the overall logic of participatory governance. Thus, while some theorists of governance rightly emphasize that governance takes place in the shadow of hierarchy, this should be understood in terms of a democratically accountable, socially inclusive hierarchy organized around the problematic of responsible meta-governance rather than unilateral and top-down command. This places issues of constitutional design at the heart of debates on the future of governance and meta-governance.

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