

Founding Editor's note

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1 ISCE

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Introduction

This issue of *Emergence* is an “emergent” in the truest sense of the word. We have made a major journey over the past six years. We were in print, then we were electronic, and now we are back in print. We were overly concerned with scientific relevance, then with managerial relevance, and now with “real world” relevance. We began with readers who needed to learn about the vocabulary of complex systems and have grown to have readers who need instead to be reminded of the limitations of that very vocabulary. We started with a fascination re the ubiquity of patterns observable as scale and context shifted and have evolved to a fascination with scale and context against which the relevance of those same ubiquitous patterns must seek coherence.

The current issue marks the shift to a new editorial team and a new editorial voice. The concern with management has yielded to a concern for human organizations. The shift is not merely one of words – for the very values implicit in “management” are but background to the relevant concerns of human interests and their very processes of organizing. The editors recognize that models alone do not a social science make and that in the absence of models analysis is but description, and a studied ‘system’ but the reflexive observations of an observer.

Half a decade ago it was a suitable question to ask if an examined situation was properly classified as a complex system. If the classification was “justified” then the implications of that classification were to be explored, models created, and the ubiquity of some overarching pattern revealed as “meaningful.” Today foreground and context have shifted position. We assume that all is part and parcel of a multitude of interwoven complex systems. The classification is no longer relevant and has little revelatory power. Instead we seek to examine how the complexity is simplified in the name of cognition and proffer alternative explanatory reductions or integrative abstractions. Relevance is not only measured by the degree to which a model or classification fits observed data, but also by the degree to which a chosen reductionism is able to produce “meaning.” Does the model give us the confidence or the willingness to act? If so, it is relevant. Fidelity to a Platonic purity is regarded as outmoded.

We have learned these six years that complexity is everywhere and that, that is an insufficient explanation. We have struggled to define the role of boundaries and reductions in a world of growth and emergence. The more we learn of the complex systems in which we are embedded the greater the observed uncertainty and the greater the desire for the very reductions we sought to overcome. Emergence and complexity have become intertwined in a saga of story telling and narrative in which the Holy Grail is explanatory coherence and its outpouring of sustenance is the will to act. We seek then to discover how various reductive strategies produce and effect such will.

It is a noble quest – fitting for an era of complexity – and a welcome salve to the omnipresence of uncertainty.