

# The political significance of small things

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## Abstract

In this paper I would like to pay attention to two items: First, to how I understand complexity, expressing some ideas through eight theses that summarize this understanding. Second, hardly touching the surface of human-social complexity, to do it from the perspective of that part of reality that we call Third World, and drawing near to it from the disciplinary problematic of the social sciences, specially political science. To consider complexity from the human-social standpoint means, first of all, to see ourselves – researchers – as people who participate in social life in a context, and not as transcendental subject owners of a privileged and neutral epistemological position that endows us with a definitive knowledge.

## Understanding complexity

I want to summarize in eight theses some elements which I consider unavoidable when thinking about complexity from my position as a philosopher and citizen. I do not pretend that these theses point to how we are bound to think about complexity, but to present clearly a way to understand it; at least the way to which I feel myself committed. I hope that these ideas contribute to the shared thinking of the paper's audience.

- We are immersed in a scientific revolution that has a public face. It is identified with the advances in knowledge in many sciences, but above all in three of them: in microworld physics, in biotechnology and in cybernetics.
- This revolution includes, affects and transforms science, technology and the everyday life of human beings.
- Besides its public face, the scientific revolution has another more intimate face, or, if you prefer, a private, underground, basic one: The change in the way in which reality is comprehended, in the notions of knowledge, objectivity, determination, prediction, and certainty. In a word, the ideals of science are changing.
- I position the ideas concerning complexity as taking part in the core of that change in our ideal of rationality, side by side with other theoretical manifestations of no less importance. To me then, the ideas of complexity are part of a greater context of ideas. Ideals are changing along with the ideas about complexity, but not only along with them.
- At the present time, in my judgement, a new scientific rationality is breaking its way through in, at least, four directions that share concerns, ideas, desires and new ideals of Knowledge. The lines of rupture that I have been able to identify, although I suspect that they are not the only ones, are environmental holism, the Bioethics founded by Van Rensselaert Potter, the debates that arose from inside epistemology and, of course, the world of ideas that are invoked under the name of complexity.
- The new, nonclassical rationality stems, on an equal basis, from the theoretical debates that took place inside science and epistemology and from outside, from the concerns and careful work of men of science and of citizens; stemming thus from both science and from life. If the new ideal of rationality is presented to us by the studies of complexity and by epistemology (as stemming from the theory of knowledge), Potter's bioethics and environmental holism have provided an outline from the practical side of life. This new ideal thus includes, as its sources and constituents, the theory of knowledge and the practice of knowledge. The scientific revolution is not a matter only of specialists, but has its place in homes, in the education of our children, in the forms of communication and life; we eat it and drink it, we embody it in our flesh and our bones, it accompanies us during our sleep and wakefulness. As specialists, many responsibilities attain us, but none of them are on bad terms with our condition as persons included in the social fabric, where we can communicate as equals. The condition of specialists is only one of the forms of our social connectivity, to which we dedicate most of our time and effort – true – but it is not the only one that links us to science and to the scientific revolution. Unfortunately, we often feel ourselves so committed with our professional viewpoints that we are not capable of a dialogue with other specialists and claim the privileged possession of truth; and, above all, we are not capable of dialoguing with everyone else, with the common man, who certainly is not a specialist, but has something to tell us, because he is totally involved in the scientific revolution. I do not refer to something abstract. I know specialists from a particular discipline who are uncomfortable, and even disgusted, because of the intrusion of a specialist from another discipline; it even seemed to me more than once that I heard Newton's ghost whispering: "Physics, beware of metaphysics".

The new scientific rationality does not correspond only to scientific concerns and interests. As such, the scientific dialogue has to open itself to human beings, it cannot continue showing them its back.