



Unraveling Complexity

Ben Moody

Learning Portfolio – Weeks 1 to 13

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Week 1: Unraveling Complex Problems

Reflections on the panel, readings and tutorial: Connections and observations.

As I was reading Boulton and Lucas (*What are Universities For?*), I was reminded of the experiences I have been through at university. Although, three years on, I sometimes feel that the process has been, in many ways, administrative – a process of endless jumping through academic hoops – the article reminded me of the genuinely educational experiences I have had at the Australian National University.

The overwhelming impression I have walked away from three years of studying International Relations and Political Science with is that my education has taught me something about how to try and understand an impossibly complex world. I feel I have learnt real things about how huge issues relate to individual emotions and aspirations, and how relationships between individuals, ideas, and ideologies intersect.

Learning about the concept of complex problems, and the potential of interdisciplinary study in the Week 1 panel opened my eyes to the potential for this kind of learning to be the centre of thinking, learning and research in the university. A salient example within my own discipline is the increasing use of cultural studies to assist in developing policies and theories of International Relations. The last fifteen years have seen a significant upswing of the amount of interdisciplinary work between International Relations practitioners and experts in culture and gender studies, in an attempt to move toward a model of ‘doing’ IR that is more understanding of contextual and unique issues than the ‘high politics’ models of the 20th century.

A question from the panel:

Ben Moody
U4515666

Presentations from the panelists on how complexity is dealt with in their disciplines emphasized for me the important difference between dealing with complicated and complex problems. Each discipline has its own ways of dealing with problems that are 'complicated', that is, problems which are difficult to resolve, but are knowable and identifiable. But, it seems that in a more complex world, defined by problems that sit at the nexus of national, cultural, political, technological, and communication issues, complex problems are those that cannot be clearly articulated and tackled with a disciplinary toolbox. This seems to necessitate interdisciplinary research and teaching, but I wondered during the panel how this would be possible, as it would surely necessitate developing ways of communicating very-discipline specific concepts in ways that would be meaningful to practitioners in other fields.

A good contemporary example is that of climate change. Scientific, economic, political, sociological, ethical, and business perspectives have all become an essential part of the challenge of developing, and marketing, a climate change mitigation policy. However, difficulties have emerged in communicating between public policy and scientific experts due to the political imperatives involved.

Week 1 Tutorial Ticket:

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Degree/Majors: Bachelor of Arts (Political Science/International Relations)

Education funding policy is a complex issue that political science can assist in managing. The variety of stakeholders involved, different ethical perspectives on funding models, and the long-term implications for other policy fields mean that political science, which focuses on examining relationships between institutions, individuals and centres of power in policymaking, is well positioned to assist in dealing with this complex problem.

Ben Moody
U4515666

Week 2: Wicked Problems: Coping with Complexity

Framing problems and disciplines

Reflections on the role of uncertainty in different disciplines.

Reflections from the panel, readings and tutorial: Connections and observations

The outlines of disciplines began to emerge for me in this discussion, in terms of contrasts between the way complexity is tolerated and managed in each separate discipline, and I found myself actively learning about, utilizing and, often, struggling to break away from, one of the key tools my discipline has developed to allow its practitioners to manage complexity.

The process of grading problems into different degrees of complexity through an assessment of the number and variety of interests and parties involved, and the degree to which they conflict, was illuminating in so far as it provided a practical articulation of the difficulties described by Bammer and Smithson (*Uncertainty and Risk: Multidisciplinary perspectives*) and Bar-Yam (*Making Things Work*) in classifying complex problems and selecting appropriate strategies for responding to them. Each of the problems we attempted to classify and respond to in class – as diverse as public planning issues and the role of religious symbols in public life – highlighted the principles expounded by Head and Alford (*Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Management*): Wicked problems are unique, the problems themselves often cannot be definitively formulated, let alone the solutions.

The attempt to evaluate the complexity of problems gave rise to an interesting conflict between different disciplines working within my tutorial: the extent to which uncertainty could be tolerated was a major point of contention. In my discipline theory and ideology are used as frameworks for decision making. They include certain assumed knowledge and perspectives on connections, relationships and cascade effects in International Relations. For instance, Realism (the dominant

Ben Moody
U4515666

paradigm of International Relations thinking in the 20th century) assumes that relations between states are essentially anarchical because the international system lacks an ultimate arbiter of order, and human nature is essentially conflict-prone. Making these assumptions about the operation of the international system, which is too complex to be easily understood given the cognitive limitations of individuals, allows decision makers to tolerate some level of uncertainty in their decision making and move forward in scenarios where pure reductionism may be possible due to the complexity of the relationships involved.

A contemporary example of different decision making frameworks operating in conflict is decision-making over the conflict in Iraq. Decisions to increase troop deployments, to increase the absolute use of firepower, or to, conversely, attempt to transfer control of the conflict to local forces, are examples of decisions informed by different assumptions about the nature of counter-insurgency operations, the psychology of the enemy, and the operation of public opinion domestically.

A question from the tutorial: Putting limits on frameworks?

I was interested to note how many members of my tutorial believed this kind of approach would only produce simplistic solutions. While their disciplines seemed to emphasise the need for the best available information in decision making, and the isolation of problems, mine seemed much more focused on frameworks for making quick progress. This was an interesting observation for me because it highlighted the way in which a wicked problem could be defined differently by different disciplines, and the ways in which different disciplines dealt with the phenomenon of complexity.

The consequences of the International Relations approach to eliminating complexity can be severe. When studying International Relations Theory in the first semester of this year, we discussed the ways in which a particular ideological framework – namely American Neoconservatism – made assumptions about the nature of moral conflict in the world that justified, and even encouraged violent conflict. Hence, it seems my discipline could increasingly benefit from interdisciplinary learning. This process has already begun, with the integration of elements of cultural studies and

anthropology into International Relations. These changes allow far superior intercultural understanding than the purely technical Neorealism of the late twentieth century. This raises the question of how stronger links with other disciplines might be fostered, so that International Relations does not succumb to the easy tendency of limiting its acceptance of complexity.

Tutorial Ticket

I was interested in the links between Head and Alford's paper on the implications of wicked problems for public management, and Bar-Yam's book, 'Making Things Work'. The potential to resolve complex issues relating to systems by synthesising solution-providers (technical experts, managers, etc) into systems capable of superseding the complexity of individual knowledge is fascinating, but the development of these kinds of solutions seems like an overwhelmingly difficult task, though, given that communication of the amount of information contained in such a solution system must be essential for its productivity. In some cases, if not all cases to an extent, (the emergency response scenario comes to mind), communication through all parts of the solution system must be close to impossible. How can an acceptable level of uncertainty for each stakeholder in the solution be defined in order to keep the system operational?

Week 3: Engineering and Collapse in Systems and Networks

Reflections on networks

This week it was interesting to reflect on different ways of using networks to understand complex ideas, in terms of wholes or parts.

Reflections on the panel, readings and tutorial: Connections and observations

For me, looking in depth at networks, particularly the process of breaking networks down into their component structural parts of nodes and connectors, was a perspective on complex systems that I came to realize I have often overlooked in my discipline. This conceptualization was initially introduced in the lecture given by Dr Shayne Flint, who brought a perspective I had never been privy to, that of Engineering, to the question of complex problems. The idea of decomposition – breaking a system down into its component parts to understand it and develop solutions – is a necessary part of the study of International Relations to an extent. To understand international conflict and diplomacy we look, to some extent, at the composition of states as self-contained units. But in International Relations, and in politics more generally, it is difficult to study anything in perfect isolation.

This arose specifically around the network diagram that I produced for my tutorial. I chose to draw on my discipline by visually representing the network involved in the complex problem of finding an enduring settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict is a conflict between the Nagorno-Karabakh republic, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. An attempt to study a ‘node’ – for instance, one of the

Ben Moody
U4515666

states of the transcaucasus – as a discrete entity can lead to the overlooking of significant factors. If Armenia is to be studied in isolation, is the impact of Soviet proletarian internationalism on its national politics and character to be excluded? Is the impact of relations with Azerbaijan, historical and contemporary, to be ignored? Is even something more concrete, such as the impact of the stationing and retreat of the Red Army on Armenian territory, a factor that cannot be included in the study of the 'node'.

Decomposition is difficult in politics. Despite the attempts of Neorealism in International Relations and American power theorists in Political Science to develop the disciplines into objective pseudo-sciences in the 20th century, International Relations Theory returns, inevitably, to systems. Without connections, without an appreciation of factors in International Relations as connected and dynamic, the study of International Relations is just the study of 'International'. The study of the International system becomes impossible. International Relations is perhaps the ultimate example of a complex system. It is a network of immense depth and complexity, filled with relationships drawn between, and defined by, ethnicities, cultures, religions, historical experience, technological development, philosophy, weaponry, and interpersonal relationships.

To attempt to understand my discipline in the context of an approach, a technique, that seemed so natural and unassailable to the science, engineering, and information technology students in my tutorial, seemed impossible to me. I came away from the experience with an appreciation for what it is that, ultimately, defines my discipline, and what may now be informing other disciplines.

To study in isolation is sometimes limited. In complex societies it is the connections between things, between states, cultures, people, and concepts that make them meaningful. It is these connections that allow them to communicate with each other, and with the broader artifice of knowledge and learning. This is, ultimately, what I feel my education in Politics and International Relations has given me. It has taught me about the world, which is different to learning how to write a cost benefit

Ben Moody
U4515666

analysis or rather a spanner. It has taught me how to understand the connections between things that make our lived world possible.

A question on the panel:

I wondered to what extent it is possible to research or learn meaningfully about a topic without an appreciation of its links to other topics, and to the world around it. To what extent are the kinds of techniques described in the panel being affected by interdisciplinary work?

Tutorial Ticket:

Terms

- Endogeneity
- Theory of infinitely repeated games

Discipline Network Concept

Discipline: International Relations

My diagram represents networks between actors in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Caucasus region. The complexity of the issue lies in the diversity of stakeholder views and interests, both long and short term, cultural, historical, and political in nature. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a conflict between three key parties, but which involves many intertwined relationships.

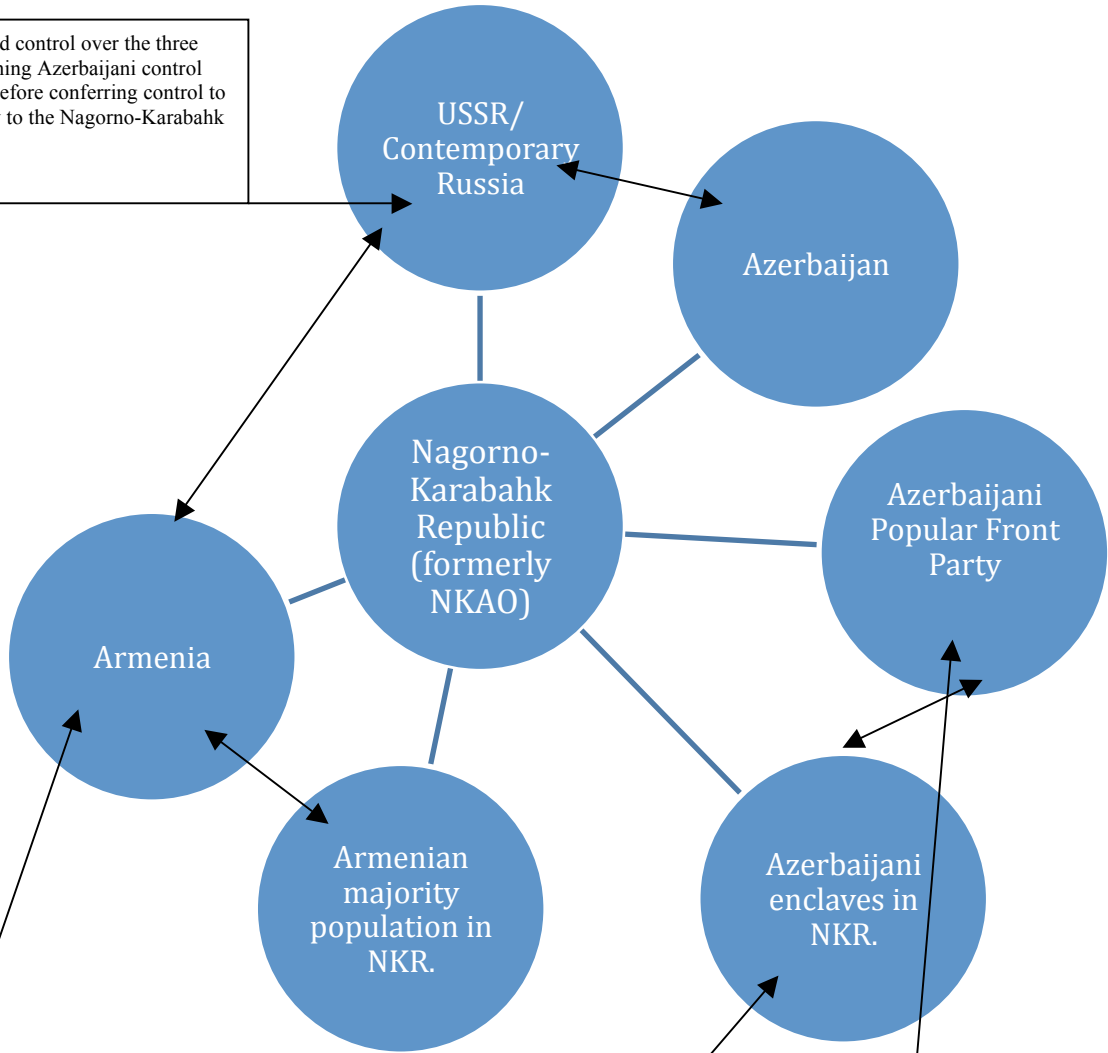
The conflict arose between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in the early 1990s, as the primarily Armenian population of the Nagorno-Karabakh area (a semi-autonomous region under the control of Azerbaijan) attempted to secede and transfer control of the region to Armenia. Azerbaijan resisted this in an attempt to control its territorial integrity. The Autonomous Oblast administration also sought to break the NKAO into an independent territory in its own right.

Ben Moody
U4515666

Core Actors:

- The USSR
 - Responsible for arbitration of initial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and transfer of the NKAO territory.
 - Armenia
 - Claim to territory based on large Armenian population.
 - Azerbaijan
 - Claim to territory based on historical attachment.
 - Armenian populations in the NKAO
 - Responsible in part for initial growth of the secession movement, for persecution of Azerbaijani enclaves in the NKAO, etc.
 - Azerbaijani enclaves in NKAO
 - Subject to, and instigators of ethnic cleansing in different areas of the NKAO.
 - Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast Assembly
 - Responsible for attempts to establish N-K as an independent territory.

USSR exerted centralised control over the three parties, initially maintaining Azerbaijani control over the N-K territory, before conferring control to Armenia, and eventually to the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.



N-K has a majority Armenian population. This population has had strong links to Armenia, and Soviet era conflict (the basis of the ongoing conflict) initially escalated when the Armenian population accused the NKAO government of ethnic cleansing and attempted to have the territory transferred to Armenian control.

Azerbaijan backed and protected enclaves of Azerbaijanis in the NKR during the NKR/Armenian secessionist movement.

Relationship with USSR defined by resistance of centralised control. Opposed to the NKR's autonomy, and in full support of Azerbaijani enclaves. Partially responsible for instigating conflict in 1988.

Week 4: Empires and the collapse of complex systems

Reflections on the end of complex systems in my discipline.

This week's topic provided an interesting alternative model for understanding complex that I found useful in my own discipline.

Reflections on the panel, readings and tutorial: Connections and observations

This week's topic focused on the question of collapse in complex systems, drawing on the idea of empires, from a historical perspective, to explore the ways in which collapse can be understood.

One of the key observations that emerged from both the panel and the readings for this week was the idea that decline in empires, and, by extension, complex systems more broadly, might not be explainable through a retrospective narrative of decline, but through the destabilization of a complex system from changes in its environment or sudden shocks. I thought this perspective, expounded in the Ferguson article in this week's readings, and suggested in Dr Paul Burton's lecture, was an interesting take on the way empires operate as complex systems, and a compelling alternative to the possibly counter-factual retrospective narration of collapse that is better exemplified by the Kennedy reading. Examining empires specifically seems to be an excellent way of gaining insight into how complex systems, defined by a multitude of relationships and nodes, function, and their patterns of vulnerability. Within my discipline, the most obvious example it applies

to is that of the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 is generally attributed to a narrative of long-term economic decline and military overstretch, similar to that expounded by Kennedy. However, an alternative narrative, which highlights the potential applicability of Ferguson's insights into collapse of the USSR, has developed. This narrative was explored in another course I am currently undertaking, *New States of Eurasia*, which explores the security and statebuilding implications of the collapse of the USSR. It argues that collapse was not necessarily the product of imperial overstretch, but more so of a specific set of decisions taken by high level Soviet bureaucrats in the early 1990s to attempt to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev, the then-leader of the Union. These decisions were intended to temporarily collapse the system for a few days, before its constitution was re-drafted and the union was re-established, but once the system had been initially collapsed leaders in Moscow lost control over relationships with leaders in satellite states.

In this narrative, it is the inability of leaders to maintain control over relationships in a complex system after a sudden change in direction, not the phenomenon of imperial overstretch described by Kennedy that led to the collapse of the complex system. The value of supplementing traditional explanations of collapse with the kinds of narratives described by Kennedy may lie in avoiding retrospectively creating justifications for collapse, and instead searching for sources of sudden collapse. Investigating the potential for sudden changes in the external environment, or in the dynamics of a system to cause its collapse can highlight its weak points. An example might be emergency response services, as described by Bar-Yam (*Making Things Work*). Thinking about a system like this in such a manner may highlight the potential for sudden shocks to cause collapse at weak points in the system.

A question from the panel

Interestingly, the same principle may seem to apply to ideas in general. In our tutorial, we reflected on the way once-dominant ideas and traditions in our

Ben Moody
U4515666

disciplines had changed over time, some slowly as new evidence came to light, others very quickly as they were rapidly discredited by changes in the world or the discipline. I would have been interested to learn more about this in the panel, as it seems that looking at intellectual and disciplinary trends in this way could reveal things about how knowledge and information are created inside different disciplines.

Reflections on a recent public lecture:

A recent public lecture given by Admiral Di Paola on the second of August. The Admiral discussed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's new strategic concept, and its attempts to reposition itself and respond to changes in the security landscape in which it operates. I was reminded of this lecture when discussing Empire, as NATO seems to be a very topical example of a contemporary empire struggling to maintain itself as an effective network in the face of serious changes to its external environment. If we assume NATO to be a kind of modern 'security' empire, as it once provided the US and Western Europe with considerable control over their international security, they seem now to be struggling not because of overstretch, but because their system does not stretch far enough to be able to respond to global challenges. For me this raised questions about contemporary, non-military empires. Can the dilemma of economic and military overstretch apply in cases of empires built on 'soft power'. It seems that contemporary empires, being defined more by influence of different kinds, may be less susceptible to the kinds of decline discussed by Kennedy.

Tutorial Ticket

Main points and assumptions from the Kennedy article:

- Empire is primarily constructed through relative increases in productivity that allow the subjugation of competitor nations in the international system.

- The longevity of empires constructed in this manner is subject to
- Kennedy's analysis of 'power centres' is predicated on an assumption about the superiority of different cultural and governmental norms (namely, diffusion of sovereignty in Europe) that would be argued as tenuous in a contemporary analysis.

Modern empires

- Rupert Murdoch's *News Corporation* is an obvious example of a contemporary empire, given that it holds significant enough stakes in Australian and U.S. media outlets to control the dissemination of conservative media perspectives in both countries.

A concept in my discipline

- Nuclear strategy is a concept in my discipline that has evolved constantly since its conceptualisation in the 1940s. It has evolved from unipolar nuclear dominance, in which the United States was the only nuclear weapons holder, to "Mutually Assured Destruction", a deterrence strategy predicated on the notion that if both the US and USSR believed the other had the capacity to destroy the other, neither would use nuclear weapons. It then evolved into "Nuclear Utilisation Target Selection", a limited strike precision nuclear warfare strategy, before, following the end of the Cold War, and the diffusion of proliferation, non-proliferation and disarmament were increasingly normalised.

Week 5: Development

Reflections on interdisciplinary work in development.

This week seemed to deal with what is a truly interdisciplinary topic, drawing in work from all fields.

Of all the topics discussed so far, Development is the one most relevant to my discipline. The topic of development seems to me to be highly relevant to the topic of network systems in Week 3. The articles set for reading this week, on Jeffrey Sachs' perspective on development, highlighted for me the way in which systems and networks are important in development. The perspective Sachs advocates – that of neoliberal institution building, seems to me to be primarily concerned not just with enhancing the performance of specific nodes in the economy (for instance, large aid donations to certain government departments or to food programmes), but with developing a stronger system overall. Once a stronger system is developed, through development of the capacity within the system (the economy as a whole) for stronger economic relationships, development will be more successful.

It struck me that Development is too often relegated to the fields of Development Studies, International Relations, and, to an extent, economics. These seem to be considered the appropriate disciplines to handle this particular 'complex problem'. I wondered if there might not be more focus on the role of engineering and scientific disciplines in Development, particularly in developing low-energy technologies, and in building technology transfer and learning relationships with the 'less developed' world. It seems few disciplines would be better placed to assist in building durable economic and technological systems in the developed world than engineering.

Perhaps this could be a role for the kinds of interdisciplinary engineering programmes discussed in the Week 3 lecture.

Ben Moody
U4515666

I was also struck by the connections between this topic and another topic addressed later in this course, that of addressing Indigenous Disadvantage in Australia. It seems to me that, perhaps as in international development, the relegation of this challenge to a specific public policy 'box' (in the case of this example, the NT 'Intervention') may be precluding the development of more intelligent, and enduring solutions.

A question from the readings:

I was curious as to whether the kind of development theory advocated by Sachs leaves much room for interdisciplinary work. It seemed to me to be a relatively narrow systems perspective, which had a solid foundation in economics, but did not seem to draw in much knowledge from other disciplines or areas of study.

Tutorial Ticket:

Jeffrey Sachs and Development:

- Jeffrey Sachs has a dependency-based liberal view of aid and development, which focuses on the attempt to build market economies in underdeveloped countries through infrastructure and industry investment, thereby avoiding dependency on aid donors and 'handouts'.
- He is critical of the commitment of developed governments and multilateral institutions (such as the G8) to seriously commit to constructive aid and development projects. He sees the aid systems currently in use as prone to under delivering on aid commitments and emphasising short-term emergency relief commitments over long-term assistance in developing functioning market economies.
- Sachs believes these problems can be solved with a freeze on debt payments for developing nations, and a focus on helping them craft durable neo-liberal

markets and institutions that will, despite short term difficulties, allow them to develop successful economies in the longer term.

Week 6: Financial Crises

Black Swans, Grey Swans and the Policy Process

The aspect of this week's topic that really interested me was the different ways in which uncertainty was manifested in this case study, and the impact that these different kinds of uncertainty had on the potential to deal with complexities that arose. In turn, this made me reflect on a recent public panel I attended, and the relationship between politics and finance in terms of uncertainty.

The interrelated concepts of 'black' and 'grey' swans and the dynamics of contingency planning struck me as particularly relevant concepts to this week. In the panel and tutorial we discussed the possibility of pre-empting, and planning for crises. One argument is that the financial crisis was a 'black swan' scenario – the possibility of such an occurrence was totally unknown, there was no understanding of a possibility, let alone a likelihood of its occurrence. The alternative perspective might be that the financial crisis was not a 'black' swan, but a grey swan. That is, the possibility of such an occurrence was known – it was *conceivable*, but not *knowable*. The perspective one takes has significant implications for the perspective taken on regulation and regulatory reform in the financial system. A perception of a crisis as a 'black swan' occurrence tends to inform an understanding of these crises as phenomena that cannot be planned against because they are not conceivable.

If these crises are seen as conceivable, but not knowable, it will be possible to try

Ben Moody
U4515666

and plan for contingencies. While prevention might not be possible, renewal may be easier. A perspective that sees these kinds of occurrences as 'black swans' would therefore not advocate a high degree of regulation, as it would not see regulation as capable of making a significant difference. This suggests an obvious connection to previous topics was that to empires, collapse and resilience. In that topic we were introduced to the analysis of collapse in terms of the vulnerability of systems. The question raised was whether or not systems entered into a long process of decline, or whether this was often retrospective narrative, and whether complex systems tended to collapse instead because a sudden shock spread quickly through them and caused a cascading effect of disarray. When applied to the context of the financial system this raises questions about whether the sources of financial crises are structural – that is, related to the way in which the system operates over the long term, its norm, values, etc, or whether they are simply the result of a sudden shock, and not reflective of any structural failures in the system.

A question from the panel and some reflections on a public lecture:

This made me think about the impact human behaviour has on these kinds of systems. I was reminded of this topic when I attended the Middle East Learning Community public event: Trade politics - Australia's relations with the Middle East. Discussion at this event made me question the notion of financial systems in the abstract, and reflect on how much of an impact politics might have on the stability of financial markets. For instance, in the Middle East the performance of financial markets can be dictated to an extent by the intertwining of government and business – often the same individuals who hold positions in government also hold positions in key business or financial institutions, so there can be direct influence between government and financial markets. But to what extent is the stability of financial markets actually affected by changes in government or policy around the world, for instance, election of a higher-spending democrat government in the USA?

Ben Moody
U4515666

Tutorial Ticket

Complexity in the Financial system:

* The irrationality of actors: The tendency for actors to make decisions based on less than perfect logic adds a layer of complexity and unpredictability to the operation of financial systems that makes them difficult to analyse.

* The imperfection of information: The inability of actors to accurately judge the intentions of other actors adds another layer of complexity to these systems.

* Cultural consumer expectations: The expectations and cultural norms that influence consumers toward different approaches to consumption, and therefore promote different kinds of economic activity, add further complexity to these systems.

Response to the readings

The readings by Hamilton and Daly highlight the importance of looking at the broader contexts in which systems operate, and analysis of a wider array of factors that may have an impact on shaping the performance or potential of those systems. In the case of Daly, it is the ecological system, of which the macroeconomy is a subset, that is important. In Hamilton's writing, it is the cultural norms governing consumption and economic expectations that are an important contextual consideration for the financial system.

Week 7: Addressing Indigenous Disadvantage

The human impact of framing policy problems

This week the lesson I took away from panels and tutorials was related to the framing of complex issues, and how this can exclude or include whole arrays of different concerns in the policy process.

One of the issues that most immediately struck me as lending a particular layer of complexity to this issue was the question of framing issues related to indigenous disadvantage. The question of framing these issues is problematic because there seem to be disadvantages, in terms of biasing decision-making processes, between explicitly framing the issues involved in terms of indigenous disadvantage, or framing them in terms of the specific issues and regions involved.

In his address at the University of Sydney on the topic of Indigenous disadvantage, Noel Pearson argues that framing the low quality of life of Indigenous communities in terms of specifically Indigenous disadvantage is misleading. He claims that this is an ideological approach that ignores the fact that in many cases disadvantage is not related to race, or to racial issues in the past, but is related to the perpetuation of the poverty cycle by a generation of indigenous youth who have little connection to Indigenous culture and are simply immersed in the same poverty cycle that traps other groups of at-risk youth.

While I don't necessarily agree with Noel Pearson's assessment, it raises an interesting point as to how these kinds of disadvantage should be framed. On the one hand, framing disadvantage in these communities as specifically indigenous disadvantage may run the risk of sidelining other important factors in the policy analysis process, and may run the risk of becoming racial in itself, paternalistic and

Ben Moody
U4515666

counter-intuitive. On the other hand, failing to acknowledge this element, and framing these issues instead in terms of 'rural disadvantage', 'urban poverty', 'drug abuse', etc, may fail to appropriately acknowledge the connection between historical racism, the continuing, and equally racist association of Indigenous Australians with poverty in the collective Australian consciousness, and contemporary disadvantage.

The need to appropriately acknowledge the factors on each side of this framing issue is essential to making sure appropriately policy can be constructed, but it is also important that this debate be resolved to prevent disorganisation within government and bureaucracy over the issue and failure to move forward at all.

Another issue that came up in both panels and tutorials was the dilemma of facilitating ownership of processes. Top-down approaches to these policy issues – such as the NT Intervention – are problematic in terms of being heavy handed, discriminatory, and their difficulties involved in building lasting ownership of the process or a sense of its legitimacy amongst the involved communities. The question then is how to generate participation in, and legitimacy of, bottom-up approaches, when there can be a perception that participation in these processes is antithetical to the social interests of the community

In some ways the discussion of framing these issues seems reminiscent of the dilemmas associated with creating regulation for financial systems. In that instance the question was whether or not policymaking on financial regulation in the wake of the global financial crisis would frame the issue as something systemically wrong with the way this system operated, or simply an aberration caused by temporary, one-off failures. Although the issues are vastly different, the problem of framing seems quite similar, as each way of understanding the problem will lead to seriously different solutions.

Similarly, this issue is very prevalent in my own discipline, where the framing of

Ben Moody
U4515666

issues in terms of different ideological and theoretical understandings shapes the way in which diplomatic policy is made. In the majority of twentieth century International Relations problems have been framed by dominant powers in terms of Realist strategy and theory, which in turn has led to the interpretation of only certain facets of these problems – i.e., their relation to the exercise of military power and the threat of force. As constructivist and critical theory have demonstrated, a reframing of these issues in alternative terms makes the proliferation of solutions that are multilateral, identity-focused, or grounded in cultural solutions, more acceptable and more legitimate in policymaking circles.

It seems to me that until the right balance can be struck in terms of framing these issues, policies will fail to be effective or to appropriately acknowledge the connection between contemporary and historical disadvantage.

A question from the panel

I was curious regarding the extent to which our panellists believed the kinds of framing that occurred on these policy issues was deliberate, or whether it just reflected dominant ideological trends in policymaking more broadly.

Tutorial Ticket

Combating Indigenous Disadvantage

Issues identified in each article:

- Noel Pearson identifies the availability of drugs and alcohol in these communities, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms as contributing to social decline. He argues that availability makes the choice to revert to abuse too 'easy'.

Ben Moody
U4515666

- Andrew Stojanovski identifies the combination of cultural factors and drug and alcohol abuse. He contends that certain cultural relationships make avoiding drug and alcohol abuse harder for community members.
- Gary John identifies cultural factors, such as models of relationships in Indigenous communities, and the preference amongst policymakers for preserving culture, as an impediment to economic integration and, hence, a barrier to cultural integration.

Contextual elements:

- Stojanovski's article is based on personal experiences of working in indigenous communities, hence is anecdotal, but does not, like John's article, which is written from a public policy perspective, sacrifice as many of the human elements of the wicked problem under discussion. Pearson's piece is a combination of these viewpoints, as it provides a public policy perspective informed both by personal experience and conservative values.

Convergent elements:

- All texts seem to share a similar perspective on the failures of past government policy. There seems to be a consensus among the pieces that at least some measure of negative welfare dependency has been created.

Week 8: Environmental Policy

Reflections on stakeholder management and building common ground

This week I was reminded of some of my personal experiences working with NGOs on environmental issues in the Upper Clarence Catchment, and the difficulties involved in bringing people together over environmental issues.

I reflected on the panels on this issue very much in light of my personal experience in the field, and in terms of a central theme I took away from the panel and the tutorial - holistic. In the panel Professor Stephen Dovers discussed the need for environmental policy development to occur in terms of a holistic approach to the component parts of an environmental system. For instance, water policy cannot be divorced from soils policy, which in turn cannot be divorced from management of vegetation, etc, etc. From my work with local non-government organisations in the Upper Clarence Catchment, however, I have observed first hand the difficulties in developing this kind of management into coherent policy.

Although there are real advantages to synthesising an approach to environmental policy, implementing this kind of policy can often be difficult due to issues relating to stakeholder management – the topic we covered in our tutorial. Often it can be difficult to convince land users of the need to implement holistic changes to their land management strategies in order to remedy what can be seen to be an isolated problem, particularly when they cannot see any direct benefit to the productivity of their land or businesses. This highlights the need for another important kind of synthesis when dealing with environmental policy – the synthesis of stakeholder perspectives.

In our tutorial one of the complexities we encountered was the tendency for

Ben Moody
U4515666

stakeholders to develop a zero sum mindset regarding compromising on their priorities. Any concession to another stakeholder, even when not directly opposes, tended to be seen as potentially damaging to the initial stakeholder's interests. The challenge we faced was framing environmental policy problems in such a way that stakeholders were able to move past this and see their interests as, while not necessarily compatible, at least open to some modifications that would allow them to co-exist. This is a huge problem that I encountered constantly in my work with NGOs in the Upper Clarence. The existing political discourse was so adversarial regarding environmental issues, that often a whole process of dialogue was necessary just to convince landowners and environmentalists that they might have common ground on issues.

During the tutorial I reflected that this phenomenon tends to go back to a deeper expression of the way people in Australia think about the environment. Our conceptualisation of the natural environment is so heavily based on the idea that we each own distinct parts of it, and that we have total control over it, that we resent anything we see as an attempt to control our 'piece' of the environment. We perceive these activities as intervention into our private property, rather than collaboration over a valuable common resource.

This kind of attitude is a huge problem in one of my disciplines, International Relations. The state-based system reinforces and perpetuates these kinds of distinctions, with negative impacts for environmental management. It becomes difficult to take a holistic approach to managing a river system (like the Danube river system, for instance), when so many countries are contributing to environmental damage, and are wary of entering a 'prisoner's dilemma' scenario, in which they alone are bearing the cost of better environmental management.

Tutorial Ticket

These examples look at problem solving in terms of information flow. The Dovers et al piece seems to suggest that synthesis of problem-solving organisations might achieve better results through information-sharing. The Barr article, however, suggests that information alone is not a problem-solving mechanism at the grass roots level. Social norms change, and increases in the convenience and ease of use of environmental damage reduction mechanisms are necessary to increase uptake. This suggests that the main priorities of the Individuals/households group are:

1. Maintenance of short-term quality of life.
2. Convenience (of solution options).
3. Relevance of solutions to local context.

Week 9: Maths

Self-similarity and feedback loops in policy and politics

I was interested in applying some of the concepts from this week to my own discipline, and seeing how they could improve my understanding of problems in these disciplines.

Professor Michael Barnes' explanation of feedback loops raised some interesting questions for me about the public policy decision making cycle. Professor Barnes explained the way that seemingly very simple systems, such as single-factor feedback loops, can become increasingly complex because of the uncertainty involved in feedback and the delayed response of the system. The system itself is a 'black box', the actual processes through which feedback is generated and interpreted are not analysed in themselves. It is simply the changes in the system, the 'feedback' that are considered important.

Public policy decision making often seems to operate in a similar way. Decisions about the appropriate level of funding to be put back into a system, or the manipulation of other variables, tend to suffer from a similar delay and chaos problem. For instance, in the case of policymaking on environmental regeneration, funding amounts and criteria for tendering will be set by departments at the start of a year, and altered at the next year if the goals set in the previous year have not been reached. An understanding of the dangers inherent in feedback loops raise questions about the creation of public policy. Particularly, should public policy take a lesson from these scenarios by minimising 'black boxing'. Instead of treating

Ben Moody
U4515666

public policy scenarios as a 'black box' scenario, more consideration of exactly how feedback is created might lead to more tailored solutions. The reverse of this, however, is that the policymaking process might become unwieldy and complex as more and more intricate factors are brought into consideration.

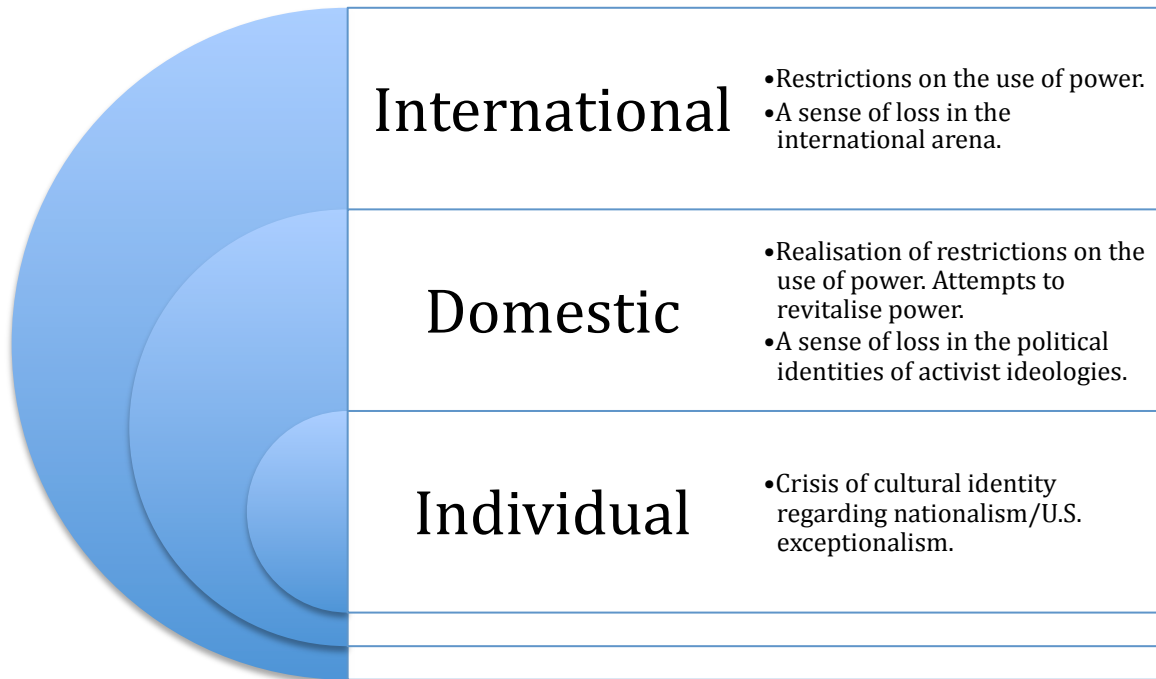
Another aspect of the Mathematics topic we discussed in my tutorial that I found useful in terms of my own discipline was the notion of fractals and self-similarity. The idea that a system can be self-similar, and cannot be simplified by magnification, has useful implications for understanding cultural phenomena in political science. For instance, the 'Vietnam Syndrome' in U.S. society and politics can be explained as a self-similar pattern in some ways, as it operates at an individual level, and at different collective levels in a very similar way.

At an international relations level, it is the sense that the experience of the United States in the Vietnam War made the limits of the exercise of U.S. Power obvious and reinforced the idea that there is a need for the U.S. To make more careful, less ideological decisions about its international engagements. This 'syndrome' is replicated at different levels throughout U.S. Society. At the level of political parties, it is represented in the debate between the two over the appropriate way to respond to this 'syndrome'. This 'syndrome' is replicated at every level of strategic decision making, down to the individual level, as it is reflected in the way ordinary Americans view their country and understand its role in the world. This kind of scenario seems to display some elements of self-similarity. Self-similarity could be a useful concept for understanding these kinds of phenomenon, as it means that understanding the issue at one level (the individual psychological, social psychological, or international relations level) can give us insight into how it operates at every level.

In this sense the concept could be applied to many of the previous weeks, particularly aid and development. In the aid and development context corruption

Ben Moody
U4515666

could be explained through self-similarity. Patterns of corruption that operate on a whole-of-government, or a central government level are often replicated at lower levels of government. Patterns of patronage and systems of distribution may be mirrored at lower levels throughout government.



Self-similarity in political culture.

A question from the panel:

I was curious as to the extent that these concepts were actually part of analysis in other disciplines, particularly in the social and policy sciences, and whether there tended to be an interdisciplinary integration regarding the use of these tools.

Tutorial Ticket

Election campaigns might be an example of a complex system that displays sensitive dependency on initial conditions.

* When an election campaign begins, any number of factors may significantly impact on its final result, including any economic indicators, an unfavourable change in party dynamics, or a spate of negative news coverage.

* The array of intersecting initial conditions factors over the period of time the campaign runs for make it impossible to determine the precise impact any specific condition will have on the outcome.

Week 10: Health and Development

Reflections on talking about complex problems.

This week I reflected on the tools that we use to talk about complex problems, and the interrelationship between different areas of public policy.

One of the most interesting points raised in the tutorial was the importance of vocabulary and framing in dealing with complex problems. Vocabulary is an essential element of public health, as it is a discipline that is at once complex due to technicality and detail, and due to scale. The development of an appropriate vocabulary is essential to be able to communicate the concepts associated with the ethics and politics of public health in context – for instance, the language of Kantian ethics is specific and different to that of Utilitarianism.

I believe this is one of the most important things I've learnt at university, and this exercise reinforced for me the significance of vocabulary to disciplines. Having a discipline specific vocabulary that can convey highly technical concepts is not the only important facet of this. Vocabulary is also significant because an appropriate vocabulary, even if simple rather than highly technical, can use allusion and connotation to frame the way issues are perceived and understood. This in itself can make the process of understanding complex issues easier, as a series of concepts that can seem disparate and unconnected in isolation can become connected and framed in similar terms.

I was also struck by the significance of social factors in public policy, and how this could relate to the need for well thought through interdisciplinary policymaking in the field. Public health issues carry significant social implications, in terms of

Ben Moody
U4515666

control, but also in terms of the social implications of public health decisions. The way public information is disseminated regarding public health issues, and the kind of social stigmas built up around particular public health phenomena can have huge implications for social isolation and exclusion. Similarly, certain social conditions can increase the incidence of certain public health conditions. For instance, the stigma surrounding homosexuality during the 1980s and 1990s meant information about the transmission of aids was limited, which meant that in turn aids became perceived as associated with the gay community.

This seems to highlight the importance of drawing on interdisciplinary knowledge to develop appropriate public health solutions. Tailored public health solutions require input from the social sciences and public policy research to ensure that there will not be negative social impacts from public health policy decisions. This seemed to me particularly important in the context of the Indigenous issues. The framing of dealing with public health issues such as obesity and drug abuse in indigenous communities as specifically 'indigenous' problems related to the values and attitudes of those communities has significantly changed the way those issues are perceived in public debate. A reframing of these issues, in a different vocabulary, could possibly help to combat some of the exclusionary effects of looking at these problems in that way.

Public health issues are also a significant part of my own discipline. Major public health issues, such as epidemics, and the potential for transmission, can have serious impacts on the way international relations is conducted. For instance, border control policy is often significantly based on the need to prevent transmission and attempts to quarantine certain diseases. Aid policy can be based on these kinds of considerations as well, as aid donations may be thought to be more effective going toward vaccine development rather than other causes.

Tutorial Ticket

Patents seem to be a necessary evil, as they allow innovators to feel comfortable releasing a product onto the market, and provide incentives for the development of such products. At least in a market based economy, they seem to be both an essential restriction and incentive-creation mechanism for the protection of innovators.

The kinds of tools discussed in Week 9 (Maths) on understanding seemingly random and chaotic systems might be useful to help in understanding the spread of diseases. Similarly, the discussion of networks in week 3 might be useful in understanding patterns of contagion.

An example of ethics complicating an issue in my discipline:

The development of ethics of war, and their continued dialogue with new forms of warfare, complicates the process of international conflict (for the better!), as it means there is an active ethical dialogue between states and the institutions of international law over what is acceptable practice in conflict, and what are acceptable rationales for conflict.

Week 11: Law

Reflections on how the law teaches us to synthesise information and work through complex moral issues.

I facilitated this week's topic. We attempted to use the topic to show how the law can give us tools to synthesis complex information, and to interpret complex social and moral scenarios.

Simon Rice's lecture on complexity in the law raised an important point for me that I struggled with when formulating the plan for the tutorial I facilitated on this topic. I struggled to conceptualise of the interaction of the law as a system with other 'systems' at it influences, and is influenced by. I struggled to separate and delineate my understanding of *how the law deals with complexity*, and *how the law is complex*. Simon Rice's exercise on legal reform changed my perspective on the issue. I realised that initially I was trying to understand the law as a system that interacted with the resut of the world at only certain points, certain times when legal 'issues' arose. This exercise demonstrated to me that I had been missing the point of studying the law and complexity.

The law is not a 'silo' that interacts with the rest of society only when explicitly needed, it is in a process of constant interaction with the wider 'system' of society. Hence complexity 'of' the law is not distinguishable from complexity 'and' the law. The complexity of the systems and issues that the law interacts with result in complexity within the law.

Two ideas came out of our workshop on the law and complexity that I drew on in my understanding of the panel and my understanding of the broader topic. One of

Ben Moody
U4515666

the concepts that was raised in our workshop that really struck me as a useful lesson to take away from the law about dealing with complexity was the application of legal decision making techniques to synthesising information. We reflected on the method the U.S. Supreme Court uses to reach decisions, in which the opinions of the different justices are synthesised to produce just one affirmative decision. We used this as the basis for an exercise aimed at testing how information can be synthesised in this way, in which different groups in the tutorial took on different sides in a mock debate and had to formulate their opinions by coming to one judgement based on the synthesis of interdisciplinary knowledge. It seemed to me that this offered some useful food for thought on whether or not trying to meld interdisciplinary knowledge into the one perspective is a useful tool. While synthesising information in this way can lead to a better integration of interdisciplinary perspectives, it also diminishes the opportunities to attain depth of analysis, as often questions are closed off in each disciplinary field by the synthesis process.

I was also really interested in what the law can teach us about analysing and understanding values and institutions in the law and how the continuity between values, institutions, and the law is maintained or broken. A good example from my own discipline is the continuity between the values and ethics that underpin Just War Theory, and the fragile connection of these values and ethics to the institutions and laws designed to translate them into enforceable practice. Because social norms are not such that a structure has been developed that makes these laws consistently enforceable, the connection between the values of Just War Theory and the international laws of war is broken up by the fact that none of the institutions designed to enforce these laws, for instance, the Security Council and the International Court of Justice.

Workshop Ticket

Ben Moody
U4515666

The topic of Law and unravelling complexity pertains primarily to the use of regulatory mechanisms to mitigate the potential harm caused by complex situations. Mainly, it relates to the use of regulation to assist in dealing with uncertainty and providing frameworks for risk and harm minimisation in incomplete information scenarios.

Key Issues

The appropriateness of the Precautionary principle as a legal principle

- Many of the major issues raised by this week's topics relate to the appropriateness of the precautionary principle as a principle for lawmaking and development of regulatory systems. Addressing some of these issues might provide a useful starting point for discussion.
- **Paralysis:** Sunstein argues that the precautionary principle may lead to paralysis, as decision makers are unable to mediate between the transfers of risk involved in different choices. Decisions regarding the implementation of new technologies, etc, would be held up out of fear. Examples might be the introduction of a carbon tax being delayed due to fear of economic damage, and the subsequent benefit trade-offs involved.
- **Development of the balance of proof regarding the precautionary principle:** Andorno highlights the fact that the development of the precautionary principle as a legal principle challenges traditional legal standards, where the burden of proof has sat with regulators. He contends that the precautionary principle argues that the burden of proof be with those potentially creating a risk to prove that the risk is not significant, or that precautions have been taken. This effectively creates a 'debt to society' on the part of these actors, and the appropriateness of this might be a useful starting point for discussion.

- **The Development of a legal system to deal with uncertainty in the future:** Wiener contends, in his article on Sunstein, that Sunstein is seeking, through a combination of minimalism and incrementalism, to develop a kind of law that relies less on precedent, and is able to respond to anticipated, rather than long-established challenges. A useful point of discussion might be whether the precautionary principle, contrary to Sunstein's arguments, has a role to play in this regard.

Suggestions for Tutorial Structure

- The tutorial would benefit from moving away from discussion of these issues at a purely abstract level and providing concrete examples for the consideration of the law's role in minimising the risks associated with complexity. The WTO dispute between the EU and the US referred to in Andorno's article might be a useful basis for elucidating arguments for and against through a tutorial debate.
- Given the sometimes difficult nature of the topic, relating it to the disciplines of all participants would be essential, so initial exercises might involve discussion of how the application of the precautionary principle, or some of the other concepts, such as probability neglect, relate to individual disciplines.

Suggestions for reading:

- I would aim to promote tutorial members to consider the potential for the law to anticipate complexity, and the potential role of the precautionary principle in this context. To this end, I would suggest readings oriented around one specific topic, preferably in environmental law, and would ask

classmates to come prepared to apply their understanding of the key issues from the readings to this issue. The use of sustainable development might be effective, so I would suggest extracts from the UK Sustainable Development Commission Paper 'Prosperity Without Growth' (<http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/redefining-prosperity.html>) if using this topic.

Use of a Journal Article

- Following on from the readings for this topic, I read 'Probability Neglect: Emotions, Worst Cases, and the Law' by Cass R. Sunstein, *Yale Law Journal* 112: 1. October 2002.
- This article deals with the phenomenon of 'probability neglect'. Probability neglect occurs where persons attempting to implement the precautionary principle do not take proper account of the actual risks involved. Instead, because the risk itself is emotive, despite its low probability of occurrence, these actors err on the side of caution, and are paralysed by their incomplete risk assessment. Sunstein argues that the implementation of a precautionary principle in regulatory terms will always be hampered by this phenomenon, as public response to these risks will cause political issues for regulators who have conducted full risk assessment.
- This is relevant to the topic as it provides a clear and compelling argument for the difficulties involved in utilising the precautionary principle as a legal principle.

Secret Plan

Secret Plan – Law and Uncertainty – Thursday 1-3, Elouise Fowler, Ben Moody

Ben Moody
U4515666

Icebreaker: Basic questions on the law and complexity on the whiteboards. Separate into groups. **Questions:** What can we learn from law to apply to the issue of solving complex problems? What is law?; How is the law complex?

Aim: To get people thinking about the relationship between complexity and uncertainty and the law, and the relationship of the law to society.

Execution: Write questions on the three white boards, and have people filter into groups to fill them out as they go. Have people rotate around the groups. Tell them to start thinking about how this will contribute to the 'toolbox'. While they are thinking about this, we go onto...

Introduction: In light of Simon Rice's lecture, in which Simon addressed the complexities related to the lawmaking function of the parliament, we will focus on how the courts deal with law and create law. Debate exists around the extent to which political factors, and interpretations of social values influence the way in which judiciaries will interpret and use existing law.

Aims:

This tutorial will focus on **how complex factors are dealt with in the legal system**, and what this can teach us about dealing with complex problems.

We will explore this facet of complexity and the law by investigating the way decisions are made in judiciaries, and the role different values systems, philosophical approaches, and decision-making systems affect outcomes.

Learning Goals:

To understand legal outcomes by understanding legal decision making processes.

To understand how the law as a complex system interacts with society.

To take insights and tools from the way the law deals with complexity that help us understand how complex social factors can be mediated.

Interdisciplinary exercise

- **Aim:** Help people understand the ways in which the law affects different disciplines.
- **Execution:** Have people explain what they wrote on their tickets for an area where the law has dealt with a complex problem in their discipline to a partner.
- **Segue:** Get into groups of 3 and pick one example to use in the regulatory pyramids exercise.

4. Regulatory pyramids exercise

- **Aim:** To illustrate the way in which the law incorporates values, ethics, social norms, and informal laws. This will lead on well to consideration of different judicial reasoning techniques later in the tutorial.
- **Execution:** Split into groups of three, decide on the issue to focus on from the ticket, and then complete a regulatory pyramid on the issue.
- **Segue:** Explain learning goal, and intention of next exercise.
 - The regulatory pyramids exercise is about showing people the values that underlie a piece of law. The next exercise will be about showing one of the ways the law can move from diverse values, perspectives, etc, toward one coherent point of law.

5. Information synthesis exercise

- **Aim:** To show how the law provides different tools for synthesising information to solve complex problems, and that this can give us insights into how to deal with lots of information and conflicting perspectives.
- **Execution:** We will give the tutorial the problem of the Emissions Trading Scheme, and split them into two groups. One group will be for, and one group will be against the scheme. We will ask everyone to form an argument in line with this based on their own disciplinary knowledge, and then synthesise their perspectives to come to a joint decision, as in the U.S. Supreme Court.
- **Post-tutorial discussion:**
 - Instigate some discussion about the merits of synthesising

interdisciplinary information. Is it always good to try and incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge, and is there sometimes a hierarchy of knowledge?

- **Segue:** Restate intention. Go to break.

Break

6. Legal interpretation exercise

1. **Aim:** To show how judiciaries have developed different ways of dealing with complexity in the law and society, and attempting to overcome both, and what this can teach us about dealing with complex emotive and social issues.
2. **Explanation:**
 1. **Separate the tute into their groups.**
 2. **Give them the text of the second amendment**
 3. **Explain the underlying assumptions of the perspectives: “We'd like you to look at the problem from the perspective of the approach to the law your group is looking at.”**
 1. **Progressive activism: Social justice, equality, large state, progressive agenda.**
 2. **Conservative activism: Individual rights, social tradition, etc.**
 3. **Legal formalism: Legal history, due process, impartiality.**
3. **Execution:** This exercise will be heavily based on the readings we have set on different legal reasoning approaches. We will split the class into three groups – conservative legal activism, progressive legal activism, and legal formalism. We will then give the class the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (as in *Columbia v. Heller*, which the readings are on), and ask them to come to positions on the issue from the perspective given to them in reasoning.
4. **Conclusion:** Get them to explain the values they drew on from the perspective they were given.

5. **Segue:** Explain that we've now looked at complexity and the law and are going to try to develop what we've learn into a toolset for unraveling complexity.

Toolbox exercise

1. **If we run out of time, tie the reflection exercise into the toolbox exercise.**

1. **Aim:** To take what we have been over in the tutorial and synthesise into a tool for the 'complexity toolbox'.

2. **Potential tools:**

1. Synthesis: The ability to work in multiple perspectives
 2. Value-awareness: Awareness of the values that underlie decision making process.
 3. Historical analogy: A useful process for understanding the present.
 4. Incrementalism
3. **Execution:** Ask everyone to contribute something from the examples they felt was useful in dealing with complexity.
 4. **Segue:** Conclude and explain next exercise.

8. Reflection exercise:

1. **Aim:** To encourage reflections on interdisciplinary contributions.
2. **Execution:** Ask each person to reflect on something someone else contributed that they thought gave an insight into dealing with complexity.

9. Conclusion

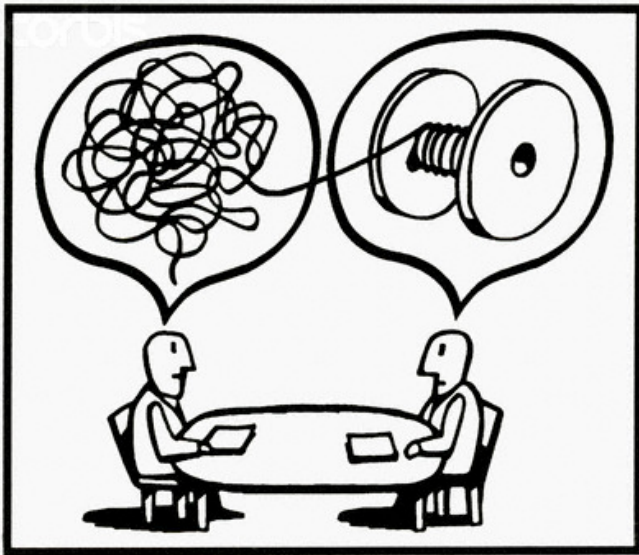
1. Outline what we were hoping to demonstrate in the tutorial:
 1. Uncertainty can be a positive or negative thing – a source of change or of paralysis.
 2. The law gives us an insight into ways of synthesising different disciplinary perspectives, and that synthesising disciplinary insights in this way can be useful for unraveling complex problems.
 3. The way the law deal with uncertainty and complexity gives us an

insight into the extent that social values can be integrated into the decision making process, and forces us to reflect on the appropriate extent thereof?

8. Housekeeping:

1. Let Chris talk about next tute, etc.

Developing our Policy Brief



The policy brief exercise was an interesting exercise in both synthesising the tools we had discussed throughout the previous weeks, and in organising a group project. Our policy brief suffered from a lack of leadership throughout the process. One of the real problems with a decentralised, consensus-based decision making process is the difficulty often involved in laying down clear direction for the process in question. Before we started working on our question we had to decide how to frame the problem we were given, and break down the process of constructing an answer into a workable structure.

The problem with this was that making decisions on the kind of framing we would use or the directions we would take the process in had the potential to create resentment amongst the group. It was necessary for someone to take leadership of the process so that we could make steps on developing a structure, and it was often necessary to prevent the group from going backwards and re-thinking decisions that had already been made. However, as there was no clear hierarchy within the

Ben Moody
U4515666

group, the group dynamic could become uneasy when there was a perception that some members were trying to force, or take control of, the decision making process.

In some ways, this difficulty was reminiscent of the topic we were actually covering – the Murray Darling Basin Authority’s Guide to the Draft Plan, and the management of stakeholder concerns in the Murray Darling Basin. While in the case of Basin Management there is a risk that some stakeholders feel the decision making process does not adequately incorporate them, the same phenomenon was present at a smaller scale in our experience, sometimes group members felt let behind by decision making process.

Working on this exercise brought into focus a lot of the tools and issues we’d dealt with throughout the last thirteen weeks. Because our topic was directly related to environmental policy, it was easy to clearly see the themes of holistic management and balancing stakeholder interests that came out in that week. What was more interesting was the way that the issue of framing that we dealt with when discussing Indigenous disadvantage came through so clearly. In the end, our proposal was heavily based on the need to reframe an issue so that stakeholders could find the common ground in it, something very similar to the notion that framing indigenous disadvantage in different ways justifies different responses.

If the policy brief exercise demonstrated anything to me, though, it was that unravelling complexity requires decisions to be taken with severely limited information. It requires structured thinking, and it requires the ability to recognise the limits of the actors and processes involved in solving a problem. At the end of the day, the lesson I took away from this experience was one of the first things I took away from this course. There are no surefire ways to deal with complexity, so often it’s important to be able to recognise where limits exist, and to be able to make steps forward without being paralysed by indecision or by appreciation for the magnitude of the issue being dealt with.

Ben Moody
U4515666

This was effectively the kind of scenario we addressed in our policy brief, and I feel has been the kind of situation dealt with in each of the topics discussed. More than anything, I think I have learnt from this activity, and this course in general, the importance of leadership, and of a structured, analytical approach to decision making. Coming to this conclusion has given me a renewed appreciation for my main undergraduate studies, as I now see how the kinds of assessment, and the kinds of thinking I was taught with, have been aimed at helping develop these qualities in students.

Ben Moody
U4515666