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The dangers of simplicity in a complex world



FEBRUARY 3RD, 2017

The recent ban on immigrants to the United States is a dangerous and simplistic step that ignores the complexity of our networked world.

The historian Isaiah Berlin declared, "We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail irreparable loss." We live in a complex world where there are few benefits without costs, and where unintended consequences multiply.

In a complex world, cooperation, collaboration, discussion, evidence, and diversity become the pillars upon which we build society. The free exchange of ideas, the rigorous pursuit of knowledge, and the maturity that comes with abandoning simplicity, ideology, and prejudice lead us toward a better world for everyone. This is the wish of all of our political parties.

In recent weeks we have seen complexity cast aside, and national and economic simplicity pursued without debate, with scant consideration for the human and institutional repercussions that this will produce.

Over the last 30 years the Santa Fe Institute has helped to build tools and theories, train students, faculty, and representatives from numerous companies around the world, and confront and deal with seemingly insurmountable complexity — from economic collapse to the devastation of global pandemics.

If there is one thing that we have learned, it is that however hard we try, complexity does not go away and we ignore it at our peril.

Let's face up to truly threatening challenges, and come together to solve the hardest problems that endanger the Earth itself: economic inequality, market catastrophes, antibiotic resistance, spiraling technological instabilities, cascading conflicts, and the numerous challenges of global population, energy, and climate.

There is only one earth and we shall never improve it by acting as if life upon it were simple. Complex systems will not allow it.

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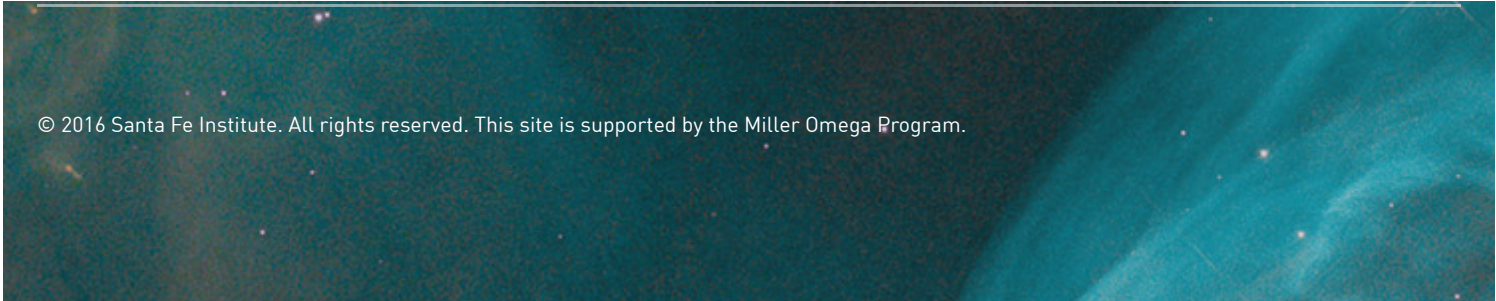
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