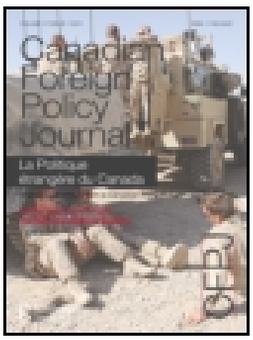

Canadian Foreign Policy Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcfp20

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To cite this article: Kim Richard Nossal, Stéphane Roussel & Stéphane Paquin (2021): Assessing the graphic turn in Canadian foreign policy, Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, DOI: 10.1080/11926422.2021.1969964

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2021.1969964

Published online: 15 Sep 2021.

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2021.1969964

Assessing the graphic turn in Canadian foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

This assessment of the graphic turn in Canadian foreign policy focuses on the visualization of our text, *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy* (*PCFP*). We note the apparent disjuncture between systemism as an approach to understanding society on the one hand, and the graphic exercise that is at the core of the Visual International Relations Project. Focusing on the latter rather than the former, we assess what the graphic visualization of *PCFP* demonstrates about our text. We find that the visualization not only accurately portrays the main lines of argument, but also clearly identifies some of the key weaknesses and silences in the text. We also conclude that a key utility of the visualization project lies in its contribution to pedagogy, providing students with ready and accessible guide to works in IR and instructors with a useful tool to assess possible course adoptions.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette évaluation du tournant graphique de la politique étrangère canadienne se concentre sur la visualisation de notre texte, The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy (PCFP). Nous notons l'apparente disjonction entre, d'une part, le systémisme comme approche de la compréhension de la société et, d'autre part, l'exercice graphique qui est au coeur du projet Visual International Relations. En se concentrant sur ce dernier point plutôt que sur le premier, nous évaluons ce que la visualisation graphique du PCFP démontre à propos de notre texte. Nous concluons également qu'une utilité clé du projet de visualisation réside dans sa contribution à la pédagogie, en fournissant aux étudiants un guide facile et accessible des travaux en Relations Internationales, et aux instructeurs, un instrument utile pour évaluer les adoptions possibles de cours.

Systemism, Sarah Gansen and Patrick James assure us in the introductory essay in this issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, provides a useful way to grapple with the increasingly complex field of IR that continues to expand and diversify. Through the use of a standard notation, systemism allows the easy portrayal of analytical reality, capturing the essential argument of a richly detailed historical analysis in a simple one-page graphic. In the case of *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy* (hereafter *PCFP*), a picture, it turns

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out, really is worth 172,000 words: as the authors of this introductory text on Canada's international policy, we found it at once sobering and edifying to see our book's essential arguments represented graphically in this way (see the PCFP visualization on p. 00). In this brief assessment, we look at the nature of systemism, its relationship to the visualization project, and what a graphic portrayal revealed about our textbook. We conclude that this graphic turn in the Canadian foreign policy field not only reveals analytical assumptions and key silences in the literature, but also provides significant pedagogical benefits for students and professors alike.

To assess the graphic turn, we begin with a brief excursus into the nature of systemism. Systemism was the name Mario Bunge, a philosopher of science at McGill University, gave to his particular approach to understanding society. Bunge posited an alternative to the dominant conceptions of "the nature of society" as either a collection of individuals who create social structures that do not have any systemic properties (commonly referred to as individualism) or "a totality transcending its membership" where "society acts on its members more strongly than they act on society" (or holism or collectivism) (Bunge, 1979, pp. 15–16). He argued that individualism paid too little attention to social relations, while for its part holism tended to ignore the impact of the individual. Bunge's preferred alternative conceptualized society as "a system of interrelated individuals, i.e. a system, and while some of its properties are aggregations of properties of its components, others derive from the relationships among the latter (*systemism*)" (Bunge, 1979, pp. 13–14). Over the next two and a half decades, Bunge refined his arguments about systemism and how it worked (see Bunge, 1996, pp. 264–281; Bunge, 2004).

In their introduction, Gansen and James maintain that systemism is an *approach* rather than a *theory*. Indeed, they argue that very utility of systemism lies in the use of graphics as a means of arriving at explanation. They suggest that the use of a standard notation allows the transcendence of methodological quarrels (qualitative vs. quantitative, for example) or even rival sets of theoretical assumptions. Gansen and James also claim that "the essence of systemism is its emphasis on *graphic* communication" as a means of explanation (202X, 00). Indeed, the graphic component is a key element of the systemist approach: "systemist graphics can convey arguments from any source." Moreover, because of the approach's "rigor and lucidity, results in them being more comprehensible in comparison to appearance in words alone" (202X, 00).

To be sure, when Gansen and James assert that systemism is an approach rather than a theory, they are faithfully reflecting Bunge's contention that "systemism is only an approach," and not a theory. Systemism, he maintained, should be seen as "just a skeleton to be fleshed out with specific hypotheses and data" (Bunge, 1996, p. 265). However, systemism is hardly atheoretical. As Andreas Pickel points out, systemism is an attempt to provide a "dialectical solution" to the problem of the deep ontological divisions in social science over whether holism or individualism more accurately captures social reality: "Bunge's solution to this problem, implicitly practiced by many who intuitively sense the inadequacies of both positions, is to reject yet affirm both" (Pickel, 2001, p. 73).

But the positing of a third option that both rejects and affirms holism and individualism does not necessarily resolve the original theoretical tension between these two approaches. Slava Sadovnikov, for example, uses the case of the role of Mikhail Gorbachev in accounting for the collapse of the Soviet Union to suggest that systemism might "assimilate well both individualism and holism but does not reconcile them" (2004,

pp. 559–573). Systemism may provide a skeleton, but that skeleton is still very much shaped by theoretical assumptions: systemism assumes that what is to be explained are *systems*, with properties that are linked to its component parts but do not characterize them; systemism seeks to account for both individual agency and social structure; and that explanatory variables operate at both the macro and micro levels. In short, systemism is more than just an approach.

Central to Gansen and James's exploration of Canadian foreign policy in this issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* is the use of graphics. But here we find an odd disjuncture. Gansen and James assert that "the essence of systemism" is its graphic representation; the clear implication is that the graphic elements outlined in the systemist notation have been derived from Bunge and his work. In fact, the notation system outlined in Gansen and James for this issue of the *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* was adapted from recent work by James (2019) and James and Michael R. Pfonner (Pfonner & James, 2020) for a larger project of which this collection is a small part – the Visual International Relations Project (VIRP).

In other words, the notation system used by James and his collaborators to visualize IR scholarship in the VIRP appears to have been *inspired by*, rather than *taken from*, Bunge. While James might argue that the *shape* of the visualization system – stressing explanatory completeness and an insistence on links between macro and micro – reflects Bunge, in effect the genealogical links between Bunge's work and the VIRP are quite indirect. One small indicator of this is the use of graphics in Bunge's systemist scholarship. The only graphics in the 1979 article that first outlined systemism were the mathematical symbols Bunge used to express his understanding of the nature of society as a formal model. By 1996, Bunge was still using a mathematical approach, but the exposition of his theory of systemism in that book was predominantly rendered in prose. Likewise, his effort in 2004 to explain the social mechanisms that were supposed to make systemism work was decidedly lighter on mathematical graphics; the commonest graphic in that piece was the causal arrow.

The notation system used by James and his team for the VIRP was developed relatively recently. While James has been a systemist enthusiast since the early 2000s, his earlier exploration of the contributions of Bunge's work to international relations – his examination of the potential of systemism for the assessment of scientific progress, using the International Crisis Behavior Project as a case study (James, 2004) – used none of Bunge's graphic stylings (in this article, there is but one graphic, and that one was borrowed from the ICB Project itself). It was not until much later that the notation system used for the VIRP was developed (James & James, 2017; James, 2019; Pfonner & James, 2020).

To note that the colourful notation system used in the VIRP (see Gansen and James 202X, Table 1, 00) was developed by James and members of the VIRP team rather than taken from Bunge is by no means a criticism. While the symbols and their linked connections do require learning, the VIRP notation system used to capture the essential arguments of the works they represent is considerably more accessible than Bunge's mathematical formulae: for example, the graphical representation of the totality of the social structure of a given society – $P(S) = \{ P_i(S) | P_i(S) = S/\sim_i \ \& \ \sim_i \in \sim \ \& \ 1 \leq i \boxed{?} n\}$ (Bunge, 1979, p. 20) – would be accessible only to those with expertise in formal modelling who also had engaged in a close reading of Bunge's textual explanations. As James

himself admits, with considerable understatement, mathematical models "entail high barriers to entry" (James, 2019, p. 785). By contrast, the VIRP's one-page visualizations are instantly and immediately understandable to a wide range of readers.

If we assess the VIRP exercise as an exercise in graphic depiction of IR scholarship in one-page summaries rather than as an attempt to operationalize Bunge's systemic approach to the social sciences, the utility of the visualization exercise becomes much plainer. As Pfonner and James have argued, the VIRP tries to go well beyond classical argument mapping by trying to create "a standardized graphic means of accurately conveying the logic of a theory" (2020, p. 200). Indeed, the one-page visualization of *PCFP* does lay out the logic of our approach well. But in the process it also reveals some of the weaknesses in our text.

Gansen and James identified one key gap in their introductory essay: the framework we use in *PCFP* lacks two important "downward" connections. First, we do not explore as explicitly as we should have the many ways that factors exogenous to Canada and Canadians affect foreign policy-making. Of course we all know that what happens outside Canada's borders always has a major impact on Canadians; but the influence of "the world" on Canadians is left implicit. The second "downward" connection that is not explored is the impact of the state in Canada on Canadian society. While *PCFP* embraces Nordlingeresque assumptions about the autonomy of the democratic state (Nordlinger, 1981; Nossal, Roussel, & Paquin, 2015, pp. 11–12), we do not examine the many ways the autonomous democratic state can and does shape civil society.

But further gaps are revealed by the visualization. The VIRP exercise seeks to show a work's theoretical assumptions, and the one-page visualization for *PCFP* reveals the degree to which it is a text very much in the mainstream, undergirded theoretically by an admixture of statism and realism, both neoclassical and English School. By the same token, however, significant silences are also revealed in the variables that do *not* show up in the visualization. It is, for example, immediately clear that *PCFP* does not explore foreign policy in Canada from a gendered perspective, even though there were the beginnings of a gender mainstreaming turn in Canadian foreign policy well before the fourth edition was published (von Hlatky, 2020). That silence in *PCFP* reflects a broader tendency, identified by Keeble and Smith (1999), for Canadian foreign policy analysis to exclude women and gender, often attributed to the dominance of realism in theorizing about international relations. In the case of *PCFP*, however, Deborah Stienstra, Claire Turenne Sjolander, and Heather A. Smith argue that it is *PCFP*'s unambiguous mainstream definitions of what constitutes the appropriate focus for the study of Canadian foreign policy that excludes gender theorizing (2003, pp. 5–6).

Likewise, the 2015 edition of *PCFP* has just four mentions of indigeneity, all *en passant*, reflecting a common observation that Canadian foreign policy analysis has been almost completely silent on Indigenous peoples (Beier, 2010; King, 2017; Sarson, 2020). Given the glancing treatment afforded to Indigenous politics in *PCFP*, it is hardly surprising that indigeneity does not feature in the VIRP visualization. But there a deeper silence than that at work. J. Marshall Beier (2010, p. 186) reminds us that the study of Canadian foreign policy is deeply state-centric, and thus "treats as settled those questions regarding who or what count as legitimate actors in global politics and what may constitute meaningful diplomatic practices." In this framing, Indigenous politics is not assumed to play an important role in understanding Canada in the world. Hayden King goes further, arguing

that a text like *PCFP* "normalizes and affirms settler colonialism" by "crafting a common sense around what counts as a legitimate politics of the international" (King, 2017) – articulating, legitimizing, and perpetuating assumptions about the Canadian state, state sovereignty, and the "national interest" in an "anarchic environment." As the VIRP visualization makes clear, *PCFP* does not come close to acknowledging what Leah Sarson accurately calls the "Janusian tensions" in Canadian foreign policy analysis (Sarson, 2020, pp. 190–194).

There are a number of other silences revealed in the visualization: variables like class, political economy, or race do not appear because *PCFP* does not explore these factors or attribute explanatory power to them in its analysis of Canadian foreign policy. For alternative (and often contradictory) analytical/explanatory insights, one would need to go to other scholars, and other texts: Jerome Klassen (2014) on class and political economy; J. Marshall Beier and Lana Wylie (Beier & Wylie, 2010;Wylie 2020) on critical theory; or Madokoro and McKenzie (2017) on race. We acknowledge that the silences revealed so clearly by the VIRP visualization have broader political implications, particularly when books are used as course texts (Smith, Stienstra, & Sjolander, 2003, pp. 13–17). As Heather A. Smith and Jérémie Cornut remind us, "By asking certain kinds of questions, directing students to look at some issues or ignore others and providing them with certain conceptual tools and methods, teachers have an important long-term influence on them" (2016, p. 228).

Finally, graphic visualization also can identify key variables that should be there but are not. The visualization reveals how ambiguously *PCFP* treats the role of individual decision-makers in shaping Canadian foreign policy. The "idiosyncratic variable," as James N. Rosenau originally called the impact of the individual on foreign policy outcomes (1971, p. 108n), is not explicitly identified in *PCFP*, suggesting that broader structural variables should be privileged in an exploration of Canadian foreign policy. But the fact that the individual variable is absent from the visualization reveals a key weakness in how *PCFP* represents the impact of individual policy-makers. For a reading of *PCFP* reveals in fact that foreign policy outcomes often depend on *who* is in office at the time. Implicit in our analysis is our belief that every policy-maker – whether elected or bureaucratic – has particular conceptions of the national interest, particular ideological perspectives, particular abilities to generate followership, and particular personal foibles. Implicit in our discussion of policy is the assumption that every policy-maker involved in shaping policy outcomes has very particular power, authority, and influence, and that therefore it *matters* who is involved in the process. And yet, we do not provide any overt discussion in *PCFP* of the role of the individual; in failing to provide readers with an account of the relative importance of individual versus structural factors for explaining outcomes, we are as ambiguous as Bunge on this issue (Sadovnikov, 2004). Instead, the reader is left to absorb the inference – how? by osmosis? – that foreign policy is not robotically or automatically shaped by structure; but the reader is also left to try to figure out precisely what the impact of the individual and individual agency is.

In sum, the visualization exercise's utility is that it exposes at a glance the main elements of a work's theoretical approach. It also exposes the gaps and silences. That one-page "reveal" may provide the kind of benefits identified by Pfonner and James, such as providing a common means of communication for conversations within an IR

field that continues to become more eclectic, more global, and more complex, reducing the "cognitive load" on scholars (Pfonner and James, 2019, p. 211).

But in our view, more immediate and more substantial benefits will be realized in the realm of pedagogy, just as Gansen and James suggest. There can be little doubt that students will find this approach useful. The VIRP project will provide for international relations students, from undergraduates to doctoral students, a summary-at-a-glance, capturing immediately the essence of a work and its major arguments. But the VIRP visualizations are not some kind of Coles Notes/SparkNotes/CliffsNotes for IR. Unlike study notes, which often dumb down the work they are summarizing and often prompt students to think they do not need to read the original, the VIRP visualizations are in essence a read-along guide for students as they read the original.

But we should not forget the other side of the pedagogical coin: the archive will have considerable utility for course instructors who are looking for readings to assign their students. The graphic representations in the VIRP archive could readily be used to winnow the field in the search for works that fit the instructor's desiderata, of the precise sort that the VIRP visualization revealed in *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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