

Futures of Sovereignty

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Nothing is forever. Everything that is now once upon a time did not exist. Everything that exists now will eventually cease to be. Even things that seem most solid and certain and permanent do fade away to nothing, sometimes collapsing into nothing with scarcely any advance warning.

For example, once upon a time there was something called the Soviet Union. It was said to be a communist nation—which meant it was a very naughty place with very naughty people in it. Moreover, it had many other naughty nations and people allied with it, either by force or common cause.

Once upon a time--the same time--there was something called The Cold War. This was a term used to describe a contest between the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, that usually did not involve direct fighting between the two blocs, but rather a series of surrogate wars and mutual subversions.

From the creation of the Soviet Union in 1917 until roughly 1941, the Soviet Union and the United States were enemies. Indeed, the United States with some other nations invaded the young Soviet Union in 1918. It is important to know that though we invaded them, the Soviet Union never invaded us, though we claimed they were planning night and day to do so.

However, with the onset of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union suddenly declared they were Best Friends Forever. They became allies against the so-called Axis powers of Germany, Italy, Japan and some others. Nonetheless, with the defeat of Germany and then of Japan, both the US and the USSR rushed to claim territory and allies for themselves. The Cold War between the two power groups began almost as soon as World War II ended in 1945. By the 1950s, both nations were grotesquely arming themselves at enormous waste of trillions of dollars and of millions of distorted human lives, while organizing themselves internally as oppressive military (or military-corporate) welfare states, each fully prepared to blow the other and their allies off the face of the Earth, even if that meant destroying almost all other human and other life on the globe in the process.

It is said that the reason neither bloc directly attacked the other was because of a policy very aptly called "MAD"--Mutually Assured Destruction--which enabled both sides, even if massively and terminally attacked first, to retaliate and destroy the other. As a consequence, it was believed, a hot war never broke out.

For people who did not live during those times, it is probably impossible to imagine the hatred each set of sovereign nations had towards the other; the overwhelming power and single-minded determination that each imagined the other to possess. The US, for example, called the Soviet Union a Godless, Evil Empire. To arm ourselves properly, Congress passed legislation that required that the words, "In God we Trust", be written on all money and stamps. That way, we could enlist God in our fight against Godless Communism.

It must have worked, because one day and over a few brief months, the Godless Communists completely abandoned their system and its rulers, claiming, among other things, that the Communist East Germans could see that the Capitalist West Germans were eating bananas and other fruit in the winter, and they could not.

No fair!

Almost overnight the figurative and physical wall separating East and West (communism and capitalism) fell, without a fight, without anyone being killed with very few exceptions.

Godless Communist nations simply vanished in the vapors, with only Godly Capitalist nations remaining.

If I had told you before it happened what did happen, you would have called me crazy.

In fact, I did, and I was. I happened to be President of the World Futures Studies Federation during the 1980s and early 1990s. Because I was invited by presidents and communist party chiefs to visit almost every communist country, including North Korea, during that decade, I saw with my own eyes what was happening. Even the directors of Marxist-Leninist Institutes wanted to talk with me about bananas in the winter and consumer goods in department stores, and not about Marxism-Leninism, which is what I wanted to talk about.

I knew that huge changes were going on, and tried to tell folks in the US about it. But I was laughed at, ridiculed, or ignored. But to be honest, even I was surprised that the collapse happened so fast and especially so peacefully.

This is just one example of how quickly and completely unexpectedly changes can happen, and the consequences of not being prepared to deal with them when they do happen, even if they have been long desired and yearned for.

Another example, much drearier in my opinion, was the collapse of America as a moderately liberal welfare state and the rise of Reaganomics and eventually of global neoliberalism from the 1980s onward. From the end of the World War II, America was a widely admired (and deeply feared) nation, that one could imagine seemed on the verge of truly becoming a Great Society with some measure of income equity, environmental sustainability, race and gender blindness, and educational excellence. Of course, there were many entrenched interests to overcome, and enormous forces of resistance. But the trajectory of the US, and other nations, seemed clear to me--we were moving towards a world of income equity, environmental sustainability, racial and gender blindness, and educational excellence.

But somehow a B-grade movie actor who knew how to read convincingly any script presented to him was elected President of the United States. He rode into town on a white horse, called Voodoo Economics, that, in the first two years of his presidency, reduced the United States from being the number one creditor nation in the world into being the number one debtor nation in the world, where we still reside. And so America sped off instead in the direction of gross income inequity, environmental degradation, vicious racism, rampant sexism, and educational mediocrity bent on being sure that no child was left alone, and that only reading, writing, arithmetic, and discipline mattered.

I tell you, I did not expect that to happen. I thought the gains of the 60s and 70s would be sustained and widened. I could not believe for an instant that America would eagerly proclaim itself to be a ruthless empire that proudly invaded nations for hell of it, make greed and self-centeredness prime virtues, and replace rigorous knowledge with faith-based fantasies.

The good news of course is that global neoliberalism collapsed in 2007-2008, and probably will not recover in spite of its current spasms of *rigor mortis* which are misidentified as being signs of life and recovery. Simultaneously, the incredible farce unfolding before the world in the form of the Republican Party's struggle to nominate someone to run against the current occupant of the White House makes me embarrassed not only to be an American, but also embarrassed to be a human being.

Some of you know that my name, Dator, means "computer" in Swedish; that I may be, in fact, a beta version of robotic artificial intelligence, and a founding member of the Robot Liberation League. If humans persist in acting as stupidly as they are now, I intend to renounce my honorary membership in the human race, and renew my fealty to the robots who are in the process of taking over the world anyway.

What, you might ask, has this to do with sovereignty and its futures? When futurists look at the futures, they first start with an attempt to understand the past and present. Or they should. That's why I started with the two stories I just told.

Moreover, in the flyer announcing this talk, I laid out my basic understanding of the past of sovereignty, slightly modified here:

"Sovereignty" was a concept invented by Europeans and subsequently used by European powers at a specific time in history to solve certain problems and to consolidate specific political arrangements and power on the basis of cosmologies and technologies of the time. It was unknown in the rest of the world at the time, and unknown earlier anywhere. There is no notion of national sovereignty in Greek, Roman, European Medieval, or any dominant Asian political tradition that I know of. The concept and its practice spread as a result of European global imperialism (its technologies and cosmologies) and not because of any inherent correctness or superiority of the concept over other concepts (such as Christendom for Christianity, the Ummah of Islam, or core/periphery practices of China and India).

While what is known as "Westphalian sovereignty" (from the European Peace of Westphalia of 1648) dominates international political theory and national practice now, it does not suit most Confucian, Hindic, Islamic, and indigenous governing preferences, and is used primarily now by political actors of those persuasions not only as a tactical defense against further western intrusion but also as a "legitimate" basis for internal political domination by whatever group controls the apparatus of the "nation-state" over other political contenders.

Finally, while the Westphalian system still seems firmly in control and unalterable, there are many reasons to believe that the system is obsolete, ineffective for addressing many current and future challenges, and a positive hindrance to good governance everywhere.

So what are the alternative futures of "sovereignty"? I will briefly touch on some of them, basing my remarks on different assumptions about the varying consequences of future technologies, cosmologies, and objective conditions.

In the late 1970s and early 80s, many futurists, including myself, thought that the days of the nation-state were numbered--perhaps soon to be over. We felt this way because we believed that technological, environmental, and resulting ideological forces were pushing challenges and opportunities beyond the nation-state to the global level, rendering even the biggest nation-states too small to deal with them.

At the same time many nation-states were too big, denying to varying groups of people somehow within their national boundaries the right to live peacefully in ways they might prefer, compared with the ways they were being forced to live by national policies.

Such dysfunctional entities surely could not continue to exist, we reasoned.

There were many studies and movements at the time based on the fact that the telephone, cinema, radio, television, and the airplane were creating global people with global interests well beyond those of their locality or their nation state. I certainly felt I was one of those kinds of people. My friends and enemies were mainly not people physically near me, but were spread all over the world. Nonetheless, I was able to be intimately and

frequently with them by way of current and emerging communication and transportation technologies previously unknown.

Capital was global. Labor flowed across national borders, pollution knew no boundaries so that acid rain produced in one nation damaged the health of people in other nations whose nations were helpless to protect them. Clearly, national boundaries and policies were a severe hindrance to many people's global preferences and concerns. Global governance was needed, many voices, including mine, maintained.

We did not want a huge, bureaucratic cumbersome global government, we said, but rather a flexible, systemic, adaptive global governance. Although some people proposed a world parliament with a world president and a world judiciary and military, more cautious observers wanted instead to increase the number and networking of existing transnational institutions such as the International Postal Union, The International Telecommunications Union, International Civic Aviation Organization, and International Labor Unions--if unions would become truly international so they could wield sufficient power to balance that of the transnational corporations.

In other words, for the first twenty years of my experience, ideas of globalization beyond the nation-state, and the limitations of the notion and policies of sovereignty, were primarily inspired by and focused on the impact of globalizing technologies, environmental problems, spiritual communions, labor mobility, and entertainment and sports activities.

But all of that changed with the enchantment of voodoo economics and the to-me surprising emergence of neoliberal economic globalism. In many ways, it was easier for me to believe that communism would fade peacefully away than to imagine that ideas as plainly whacky—as narrow, mean and pernicious—as neoliberalism would take its place. Whereas under communism civil society had been overwhelmed by “politics”, now civil society was buried under the fantasies of “free market economics”. *Zoon politikon* transformed overnight into *homo economicus*, leaving no trace of plain old fun-loving “human beings” to be found.

Suddenly globalism and globalization became something we had to decry and resist, since the intention of neoliberalism was, and is, to destroy the nation-state so that global economic corporations can more freely rule unencumbered by national borders, laws, and regulations of any kind. Every activity had to be monetized and valued accordingly. For the past thirty years, with one brief interlude, the trajectory of the world has been clearly towards global corporate rule against the feeble resistance of some nation-based entities struggling to demonstrate sovereignty by retaining local jobs.

I said there was one exception to the trajectory beyond national sovereignty towards global corporate rule, and that occurred during the earliest days of the reign of George Bush the Lesser. Although it has been obscured by the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent internal war on the American people disguised as an endless and borderless war on terrorism, the Bush administration's first year began with a set of

policies and actions intended to strengthen American sovereignty internally by protecting American industries and agriculture, and externally, by projecting American power outward as a war-exporting global hegemonic empire.

For those who doubt this, I refer you to the *Statement of Principles* of a group called The Project for the New American Century promulgated on June 3, 1997 while Clinton was a second-term president and while there was no clear Republican contender in sight. The Statement of Principles stated very clearly that America should become the global hegemon fully in control of its internal and external affairs, and willing and able to project its interests worldwide by swift and overwhelming military power whenever and why-ever it wanted to.

This was something new and utterly counter-intuitive at the time. Suddenly, a kind of nationalism was back in favor again, and with it, a completely new kind of globalization based on American global military imperial dominance. This was clearly at odds with neoliberal economic globalization which wanted no strong nation-states at all, certainly nothing like the American maniacal bully.

If you don't know already, you might be interested in learning who signed this 1997 document. Among the names of people you will recognize were: Elliott Abrams, Gary Bauer, William J. Bennett, Jeb Bush (but most decidedly NOT George W Bush who was understood to be a simpleton), Dick Cheney, Eliot A. Cohen, Midge Decter, Paula Dobriansky, Steve Forbes, Aaron Friedberg, Francis Fukuyama, Frank Gaffney, Fred C. Ikle, Donald Kagan, Zalmay Khalilzad, I. Lewis Libby, Norman Podhoretz, Dan Quayle, Peter W. Rodman, Stephen P. Rosen, Henry S. Rowen, Donald Rumsfeld, Vin Weber, George Weigel, and Paul Wolfowitz.

When the US Supreme Court declared George W. Bush President of the United States, and Richard Cheney Vice President, and when Cheney then became the head of the transition team responsible for choosing the major figures in the Bush administration, these people found themselves in positions of governmental power that enabled them to turn their 1997 fantasies into 21st Century realities.

The signers did not favor stateless, free-market globalization dominated by transnational corporations most of which were not even controlled by Americans. They intended to replace it with American global military-backed imperialism that supported American economic interests and those of their tightest allies only. They immediately ushered in many acts of trade and agricultural protectionism, and abolished many multinational treaties.

Then, when what I hope were the entirely unexpected events of 9/11 instantly transformed brave, trash-talking Americans into quivering cowards and sniveling bullies, these same men seized the opportunity they said they had been waiting for and launched the Iraq war as their most dramatic first step toward American global imperialism. One of the more amazing asides in the document wondered how they could persuade the

American public to support America becoming frankly an imperialist hegemon—unless “something like Pearl Harbor” were some how to occur and change their minds.

Golly, what a coincidence!

At the same time it must be understood that since the 1980s, and especially since 2001, successive governments of both parties in the US expanded domestic policies aimed at weakening the STATE (that is to say, the governing apparatus of the US), while strengthening the NATION. They promoted super patriotism, ultra-nationalism, the Constitution as a perfect, sacred symbol, with God blessing us all, while at the same time making it impossible for the State to do anything positive for its citizens because of humiliated personnel, grossly inadequate taxes, and an increasingly-crushing national debt. That is to say, the national debt was not an unfortunate accident or byproduct of needed legislation. It was the result of specific policies designed to make it impossible for government to become effective again by raising taxes and hiring more and more competent personnel. The national debt was intended to be the final nail in the coffin of effective national governance in the US forever.

If any thing needed to be done, the government could no longer do it. Instead, under the new Shock Doctrine of Disaster Capitalism, as Naomi Klein correctly labeled it, private corporations specializing in disaster relief and crowd control would provide their services to those who could pay for it, and the rest of us would just have to take care of ourselves as best we could.

The collapse in 2007 of the global neoliberal financial system did nothing to change these policies, though certain types of mortgages and debt-financed shopping got more difficult for many people. Rather, the would-be destroyers of the America State shamelessly called upon the State to bail them out, which the State disgustingly did under Bush and continues to do even more disgustingly under Obama, by further and more massively indebting future generations of Americans. Absolutely nothing has been done to tame, much less to reform, the financial system, or to empower and strengthen the collective voice of the American people through their national government. The sovereignty of the US--its ability to control events within its own borders--has effectively vanished, just as it was supposed to do. At the same time, America has increasingly out-sourced its military capability overseas to uncontrollable mercenary thugs, rendering the US no longer capable of furthering its foreign policies by projecting its own military force abroad. Drones and robots might serve well and loyally as America's overseas military eventually, but as of now, sovereignty for America, very much like its economy, seems inspired by Blanche DuBois. It is very much dependent on the kindness of strangers.

I do not have time to turn this analysis to Europe where the attempts to form a European Union present a very different picture leading, nonetheless, to the end of traditional sovereignty there. Nor can I talk in detail about the situation in the BRICs--Brazil, Russia, India, and especially China--but in each one I believe the story is basically the same--failed neoliberal economic fantasies and policies still prevail, and only in China does there seem to be a government, and people loyal to it, capable of surviving--but, as I

said before, traditional concepts of sovereignty do not really fit the sense that China has of itself and its relation to others. It does not call itself the Middle Kingdom, or more properly the Central Country, for nothing. And of course the future of China's current government is highly dependent on the future of its economy, energy supply, and environment, all of which are clearly unsustainable it seems to me. Huge China—and perhaps even India—might “decentralize” as well.

Is this all that can be said about the futures of sovereignty? That it is declining everywhere, as global neoliberalism intends? But how can that be if global neoliberalism itself is effectively dead as a positive force for global governance, as I have maintained?

First of all, I need to remind you that one conclusion from my almost half a century in futures studies is that it is not possible for anyone to predict the future, in the sense of accurately saying beforehand what will happen in any significant way. Once upon a time we did live in communities where predicting the future was possible, and many of us still tend to believe we should be able to do so now. But we can't.

The best anyone can do is to forecast--not predict--alternative futures. A forecast is not intended to be true (nor to be false, of course). A forecast is intended to be logical and useful.

There are literally an infinite number of possible alternative futures before us at every minute of our lives. But over the years, I have concluded that each one of the infinity of alternative futures is a specific example of one of four generic images of the future.

The four generic images of the futures are:

Continued Growth--the official view of the future that I imagine most of you hold, even if you do not favor the current capitalist system—that the post-WWII, post-1980 world will continue, with perhaps the US less powerful, but still sufficiently so, as Europe and the BRICs rise.

Collapse--an image that is growing in popularity because of fears that we cannot, or should not, continue to grow in the way we are currently growing—primarily because we are running out of oil before equally cheap and abundant energy sources can come online to replace oil--but we will continue wasting resources, and so will collapse—though collapse can come from other causes as well—environmental, economic, moral, extra-terrestrial....

Discipline--often currently called "sustainability"--which maintains that since we cannot or should not grow, and yet since we also want to avoid collapse, then we need to conserve, preserve, restrain, sustain ourselves cautiously instead. We need to discipline ourselves, in many ways.

And the fourth generic image of the future

Transformation—a view I once enthusiastically supported, and still prefer, though I see it of diminishing probability, in which certain so-called high technologies transform humans and their environments into something profoundly different from what they are now and what they have ever been. The driving forces of a transformational future are electronic, biological, and nanoscale technologies leading to complete automation of the production and distribution of goods and services without human manual or mental labor or attention—a world of abundance and full unemployment; of autonomous artificially-intelligent beings; of transhumans and posthumans; and of flourishing space settlements in Not-Earth environments—all or any of which will transform us and our institutions into something quite different from the present.

Left to my own devices, I normally would now launch into a more detailed description of each of these four alternative futures and the futures of sovereignty in each, instead I am briefly going to consider three options for the futures of sovereignty and the nation-state system as they relate to the four alternative futures:

1. that national sovereignty will be retained and perhaps strengthened;
2. that national sovereignty will have a weakened role in a hybrid system of the futures; and
3. that both sovereignty and the nation-state as currently or historically experienced are coming to an end to be replaced by something else.

1. Sovereignty and the Nation-State System continue to dominate

Under Continued Growth and Conserver assumptions of the futures, there are at least four arguments for the continuation of sovereignty and the nation-state system:

First, it may in fact be the case that though the nation-state system is not perfect, it is the optimal form of government. Some current nation-states may be too big while many may be too small, but that may now be in the process of self-correction as big nations continue to fracture into smaller states as the strain becomes too great, while small states federalize into larger nation-states in order to enjoy the advantages of scale.

Second, even though the nation-state system is very dysfunctional in many ways, it may continue successfully to socialize its members into loyalty and to provide just enough needed services that most citizens are unable to imagine anything better and so are not disposed to tamper with something that works better than nothing.

Third, there may be a continuing supply of communities that want to rectify past injustices by creating their own sovereign nation-state to assure that the form persists into the foreseeable future, especially since the supply of people who want to move beyond the nation-state form seems insufficient to prevail. Moreover it seems there may be enough international lawyers who want to see that their expert knowledge of the arcane system is still amply rewarded to keep it going forever.

Finally, the appeal of the geographical may continue to dominate over the appeal of the virtual. People may continue to be primarily defined by where they physically are or want to be rather than by where they electronically or mentally may more often be.

In a collapse scenario, the local and regional probably will become vastly more important than the national or global, and while classical sovereignty and the nation-state system (and current international law) probably won't exist in a collapse future, something functionally similar to them probably will emerge.

2. Sovereignty weakens and diffuses, but does not die.

The strongest form of this hybrid approach was presented in a paper some years ago by the futurist Bruce Tonn titled "NonSpatial Governance". Once upon a time, all forms of governance (and everything else) had to be done geographically locally. There was no other choice. Gradually, changes in communication--especially the invention of writing; in transportation; and in killing technologies made it possible for the first time for states, and eventually empires, to exist wherein a central authority effectively controlled people scattered over vast expanses of land and sea. The printing press, the steam engine, and eventually railroads and ships fueled by cheap and abundant oil played similar roles in the creation of the modern nation-state.

But geography still dominated. Governmental apparatus was overwhelmingly place-based and geographically rooted. This was certainly the case when the first modern governments, beginning in the UK, the United States, and France, were created, and their obsolete structures, bolstered by hordes of constitutional lawyers, still serve as models for almost all governments everywhere in the world today.

But even these profoundly place-based governments are now slowly incorporating electronic technology into some of their activities so that people often do not need to go physically to a place to obtain a license, fill out a form, or receive a legal writ. Moreover, some polities are outsourcing these and many other governing activities to people in foreign countries so that a license to fish in Dixie Lake, Georgia, might be processed in the European nation-state of Georgia, and not in the American state of Georgia, and no one knows or cares.

More and more of the governing activities that once had to be performed locally can now be performed anywhere. A dwindling number of certain specific activities still need to be carried out geographically. Most people would probably prefer, if their house is on fire, that it be extinguished geographically and not virtually. But who cares if the command to send the local firemen comes from Timbuktu—or that the local fireman is a robot?

It seems to me that the increasingly positive experience of nonspatial governance will contribute to persuading people to move beyond local, geographical loyalties and services. However, it may take a while for that acceptance to work its way through successive age-cohorts so that hybrid geographical and virtual systems might persist for quite a while.

There once was also a great deal of talk about cybercitizens, netizens, and cybernations. Some examples still exist, and social media might spur them back into life as well. At the present time, however, attempts by nations to control and contain the net via global surveillance seem to be winning over attempts to use it to move beyond the nation-state. There probably will be no clear "winner" but rather a protracted period of tug of war until one or the other transforms or fades away.

Much was also made early on about the possibility that transnational corporations and their employees would gain power and loyalty over states and their citizens, though the topic is not nearly as hot now as it once was even as the reality of transnational corporate control grows. On the other hand, the *Citizens United* case and other US Supreme Court decisions, some yet to come, on corporations as having human rights, may reignite interest in the topic, both pro and con. Moreover, if global neoliberalism can somehow surge back into life and supremacy, transnational corporations might indeed rule the world *de jure* as well as they *de facto* do now.

3. Finally, national sovereignty might end and be replaced.

Perhaps the most plausible scenario for the end of sovereignty and of loyalty to the nation-state finds successive age cohorts, each ever more accustomed to global interest affiliations because of improved transportation and communication media, and their positive experiences with nonspatial governance, ultimately supporting global over obsolete national and local governance loyalties and structures.

At the same time, the repeated inability of nations and the nation-state system to address urgent economic, resource, and environmental global issues at all, much less to do so successfully, perhaps mixed with the frustrated desire of global institutions to address them, might end national sovereignty, and lead to successful global governance.

Both of these assume a continued growth future.

Of course, in a fully transformational future, robots and artifacts should know no nations and might lead humans to global governance before humans themselves do. But that is not inevitable. It is certainly possible that different cultures of robots, based in part on the cultures of the humans who made them, could just add robot nations into the old mix.

Finally, even though it does not appear the US will be a leader in helping humans move to the Moon, Mars, and beyond, Russia, China, India, Japan, Brazil, Europe and many other nations and private organizations—especially corporate and religious organizations—seem bent on doing so with or without American national participation.

Will space settlements and the posthuman species who will eventually live in them finally enable humanity to understand that while the Earth is our cradle, the inner solar system is our home, and the entire solar system our neighborhood? Will we finally leave all of the petty narrowness of geographical, ethnic, national, global, and even human

identity behind as we become the Star Children we actually are, since we all are created by the elements that sprang into being with the Big Bang--or if you prefer from the fingers of Allah or the arms of Shiva.

From my point of view, sovereignty is about over both as a concept and as a political power. Whether localism triumphs over nation-state sovereignty depends in part on whether we collapse or transform. If economic, political, and environmental collapse occurs, as I suspect it will, then societies of new beginnings and hope might emerge whose boundaries might be very fluid once again. If we survive long enough to transform, as I hope, then what Ben Finney calls the cosmicization of humanity and our tiny Earth should end all national sovereignties everywhere and forever.

Which will it be?

I don't know. I already told you I can't predict the future. But I know what I want and am still striving towards: *Ad Astra!*

Thank you.