

State of the State

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It is by no means obvious that anyone should be loyal to something called the "state" in contrast to other entities that might command one's loyalty. The "state" (and its companion, the "nation-state") was a clever and hugely successful human invention that emerged at a particular time to serve the needs of certain people as they understood those needs, and as ideologies and technologies of the times enabled the state to satisfy them.

But the state was only one solution to the challenges of the time. Other solutions were imaginable then, such as the globalization of the long-enduring Holy Roman Empire, or the triumph of other faith-based over territory-based loyalties, such as the *Ummah* which is the preferred governance system for Muslims then and now, and is a major reason why the concept of an "Islamic State" is at best a difficult fit and more likely an oxymoron.

Or, in contrast, there is no reason why a reinvigorated feudalism with loose and shifting boundaries, or even a kind of premodern tribalism, could not have adapted to fit the needs of capitalists and bourgeois citizens well enough for them to have resisted the pull of the emerging industrial place-based processes back to their roots in the soil of decaying agricultural societies, where concerns about "property" and "my land" reigned supreme.

But the state and nation-state system did win out, and (having been able to create and promulgate such helpful fictions as "legitimacy", "sovereignty", and--very importantly--the "right to a monopoly of the use of violence within a defined territory") engaged in processes of nation-building that included socializing "citizens" (another useful fiction) into unquestioning loyalty.

Of immense importance in achieving this were the various governance institutions that were invented in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most spectacular being those of the United States Constitution. The American Founding Fathers were faced with extraordinary and largely unique challenges in forming "the first new nation", and created a magnificent and overwhelmingly successful structural response to them. In doing so, they relied largely on recent European political ideas, contemporary technologies (especially the printing press), and their own creative genius to come up with a set of brilliant governance structures as solutions to the many daunting design problems that they faced. The solutions were so powerful that they still persist, despite their general obsolescence, into the present time, and in modified but essentially similar forms in almost every other nation on Earth.

Governance structures can be viewed, among other things, as communication technologies for enabling opinions and decisions to flow among and between citizens and decision makers. As such, the system of three branches of government, federalism, representatives, election districts, electors, and all the rest that was invented by the Founding Fathers in the American situation was a reasonable (but not inevitable) solution at the time, given the communication and transportation technologies available, and the small population spread out over vast and separate former colonies. But it is highly unlikely, if they were to sit down in Philadelphia in 2005, that they would invent anything at all like what they invented in 1787, given the technologies, ideologies, and knowledge about human behavior then and now. They might well come up with something that looks like a direct teledemocracy, perhaps not even confined within the boundaries of a single "nation."

Nonetheless, the nation-state system, functioning through largely indirect and only poorly-representative institutions (so misleadingly termed "democratic" that institutions as different from each other as those of the old Soviet Union, Iraq, Iran, India, Pakistan, Cuba, North Korea, Finland, Holland, and the United

States can all claim to be "democracies") has worked very well for its controllers for several hundred years. From its European roots, the nation-state system has expanded across the globe so that it governs all land masses and has intruded into the surrounding seas. This system might well have many more hundreds of years of life in it.

But nothing is forever. What came into existence at one time for one set of interests and on the basis of one set of technologies and ideologies will almost certainly eventually be replaced, transformed, or at least marginalized as new interests, technologies and ideologies come along.

So what might be ahead for the state/nation-state?

Toward the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, I made an extensive survey of the literature on the futures of governance beyond the nation-state system. I concluded that there were basically three "piles" of views. One (by far the largest, and reflective of most political science experts and political practitioners) assumed without question that the current nation-state system would continue into the foreseeable future with only incremental and inconsequential changes.

The second set argued that various forces of globalization (or "planetization" as it was sometimes called then) were rapidly eroding the ability of individual nations, or even the international system, to manage them (whether one liked it or not, and there were some observers who favored the development and others who did not). Of course at that time, hardly anyone imagined that "neoliberal globalism" would sweep the planet (Ronald Reagan had only begun his first term in office). Indeed, globalization then was seen largely (but not entirely) in *non-economic* terms, being driven by new technologies (especially in transportation and communications), functional necessity, global environmental issues, and a growing, positive desire of many people to create a peaceful and diverse world culture with processes of governance beyond the United "Nations" or those of regions, nations, or localities alone.

The third pile was composed of normative futures. In contrast to the first two, which simply forecast continuation on the one hand or function-driven change on the other, the perspectives of the third group contained preferred images of future governance from different ideological perspectives that would require affirmative action to achieve. Among those I specifically identified were "socialists, anarchists, libertarians, feminists, liberals, pacifists, [and] mystics..." "And surprisingly, while they might differ profoundly in their diagnosis of the past and the present, they are astoundingly similar in their preferences for the future as far as the political structure of that future is concerned: decentralized, locally-self reliant, nonbureaucratic, nonhierarchical, anti-statist, and positively anarchistic, yet globally linked and interactive."

But that was almost twenty-five years ago. What is the situation now? It is significantly different.

Over the past quarter century--from the time of Reagan until the second Bush became president--the official future foreseen for governance was the clear, forward trajectory of neoliberal globalism that was thought progressively and properly to diminish the role, importance, and efficacy of nation-states and the international system, while increasing the likelihood of some kind of economics-attuned global governance. But the neoliberal globalized future, with all states including the US diminished in power and influence while neoliberal economic processes and actors reign, is no longer seen as inevitable or even desirable by many people in the US and, in imitation, elsewhere. Neoliberal globalization is no longer "the most likely future". It still is viewed as a desirable possibility by some people, but the current Bush administration, which intended from the start to shift policy in a new direction, used the events of September 11, 2001 to put the US and the world on a new road of enhanced nationalism while at the same time (by lowering taxes and increasing debt and trade imbalances) diminishing the ability of the state to serve its citizens, on the belief that citizens can best serve themselves. In foreign affairs, America seeks unilateral solutions via military actions, or bilateral agreements with current friends, rather than multilateral treaties or UN processes. Thus, a new kind of hypernationalism with a weakened state has emerged in the US and may by imitation emerge elsewhere. It is an interesting experiment.

This combination may succeed for the foreseeable future, but it is also possible that the state will eventually, perhaps soon, become too weak. People could be loyal to their nation when its welfare state took care of them in return for their loyalty by guaranteeing such things as superior education, unemployment compensation, job retraining, medicare, social security, sturdy roads and bridges, pure water, and a clean and safe environment. But in an ownership society, where every good citizen is to take care of himself with no help from the state, there are diminishing incentives for him to be loyal to the nation. If the only part of the state that remains is the military and paramilitary, and if these institutions are manned by mercenaries, there is additionally less incentive for citizens to be loyal. Moreover, a drafted army may be even more problematic if it is used to carry out overseas adventures that many people don't support and that cause their only-children to die. Loyalty could fade, quickly turning distrust of the state into active rebellion against the nation. Or, though loyalty wane, a kind of apathetic acquiesce might linger in the absence of perceived better alternatives.

After the collapse of the Soviet system, and before 9/11, many officers of the American state were concerned about internal terrorists--militiamen and patriots on the right and subversives on the left--both of whom strongly denied the legitimacy of the American state. The great middle and working classes were loyal to the state because of the protection and services it provided, while the upper classes were gazing elsewhere, locked in the lure of neoliberal globalization. Though seldom mentioned now, the internal terrorists have not gone away. The increasing inability of the purposely-weakened state to provide protection, infrastructure, services, a stable economy, and a clean environment could well quickly erode the loyalties of more Americans, leading them to embrace separatist views of either the right or the left.

It did not take much to turn "the land of the free and the home of the brave" into a nation of people willing to take their shoes off at security check points, and from citizens who long insisted "that government is best which governs least" overnight into accepting the creation of a huge and expensive homeland security bureaucracy. Their loyalty to the state and nation also might not be as deep and enduring as it may seem.

Americans have been told repeatedly that while the nation is great, the state is bad, and many seem to believe that. At some point, the frailties of the state may undermine loyalties to the nation.

Or look at it from a different point of view--the creation of the European Union out of nations that have had a long, proud history of fighting one another almost continuously, and which are even now still very popular and successful welfare states. Who would have guessed that the citizens of those nations would so cheerfully and quickly transfer their loyalty to something that does not yet have a generic organizational name--not a super state, and not a federation, but something new under the political sun?

Of course, the EU is not completed yet, and may fail. Or it may fall apart after it is created. But for now, it does show that even very successful nation-states might peacefully transform into something that is perceived as being even better.

Even though it is energized in part by common experiences enabled by modern technologies, the EU is still profoundly based on territory, and is to that extent nothing new. Indeed the way it was created (autocratically and via mountains and mountains of words interpreted by thousands of bureaucratic drones--ratifying national referenda to the contrary notwithstanding) is as retro as are its resulting place-based political institutions.

Of greater promise for the futures are those few brave visionaries who have written about "imagined communities", "teledemocracy", and "nonspatial" or "virtual" governance. Especially attractive are those who propose that governance functions that must be done physically and geographically should be stripped off from all the other many services that can be done electronically from and to anywhere on the planet. Territorial and physical serves will be provided and governed locally while everything else will be done from anywhere on Earth.

This may be beginning to happen as some American states outsource--let's say to India--government jobs that were once done by Americans at home--let's say in Indiana. At some point in the not too distant future, some of the workers in India might propose to their bosses in Indiana a change here or there in the policies

they are administering, and--who knows?--eventually request or even demand the right to have a hand in making other policies until then reserved to the citizens of Indiana, so that eventually portions of governance in India and Indiana governance are combined.

Far fetched? Well, tell that to King George who scoffed at the hubris of the motley American terrorists, or to the free-spirited East Germans who began hacking away at the Berlin Wall with screwdrivers, eventually bringing down the entire Evil Empire with hardly a shot being fired.

And then there is an even smaller number of folks who are beginning to think about governance systems for settlements on Mars and elsewhere that might require cooperation between humans, cyborgs, and varieties of artifacts. What might be the relation of those settlements to Earth, and how might martian experiences influence earthly governance--concerns for 2050 perhaps, and not 2010 or 2015. But who knows? Ideas are powerful, and when combined with enabling technologies, very difficult to resist forever.