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Worlds without nation-states: Five scenarios for the very long term

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Abstract

This article develops five scenarios of how human society could be politically organized in 300 years, after nation-states have dissolved and nationalism as their foundational ideology has dissipated. The scenarios are based on sociological theories on how functional integration and differentiation shape the evolution of modern societies. All scenarios therefore assume that the basic characteristics of modernity will persist and explore only a small area of the theoretically infinite space of long-term futures. Also for the sake of manageability, the author envisions only one technological and economic basis for future political developments, which in turn will be constrained by the need to fulfil three basic functions: to provide public goods, collective defence and a political decision-making mechanism. The five scenarios differ, however, in whether these functions are assumed by states, how large these will be and whether their boundaries align with cultural difference. The author thus arrives at an anarchic scenario without any states, a scenario with a thousand or more mini-states based on shared cultural identities, an imperial scenario with a few states each claiming to represent an entire civilization, a world with culturally heterogenous and highly efficient Continental states and finally a world state.

KEYWORDS

long-term futures, modern society, political systems, postnationalism, State Theory/States and future studies

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Today, the nation-state and nationalism seem more entrenched than ever, withstanding many predictions of a post-national future. The Covid crisis dramatically illustrated the organizational power of the nation-state: Government after government shut their country's borders to international travel, mobilized national health and police agencies to stem the viral tide, and the newspapers faithfully reported delays or advances in this battle against the virus in terms of established nationalist narratives. Nationalists on the left and on the right blamed global integration, elite selfishness and/or neo-liberal laissez-faire for the extent of the crisis and sought refuge in a renewed reflection on national solidarity and common purpose.

And yet, the nation-state and nationalism are perhaps not here to stay. Looking back 300 years, neither the nation-state nor modern, popular nationalism existed. Rather, kingdoms and empires ruled the world in the name of God, a dynasty or a civilizational mission. Taking this past transformation as a key to our future, this essay asks how postnational futures could possibly look like, building these futures from a small number of blocks of theoretical plausibility and empirical possibility. The contours of our deeply nationalist present will come into sharp relief by juxtaposing them with these imagined postnational futures. To get started, I look for guidance on how scholars past and present have imagined the future.

2 | WAYS OF LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

One of the major cultural developments over the past millennium is how our ideas about time and history have changed. In the middle ages, people saw the present in relation to God's time: eternity. The time of the sacred and the profane resembled flat planes, one stacked upon the other. As the historian Benedict Anderson (1991) has shown, from the Renaissance onwards, philosophers and theologians imagined human society to move along a timeline, thus introducing the idea of history: one event pushing the next in an unfolding chain linking national origins to the present circumstances (see also from the point of view of the philosophy of history, Koselleck, 2004 [1979]).

Remarkably, during the enlightenment period, philosophers projected the idea of linear time not only backwards, towards the origins, but also forwards, towards imagined futures. Hegel predicted that reason (or the "world spirit," in his words) would eventually, after a series of dialectical perturbations, manifest itself in a rationally organized state. Kant saw a period of "eternal peace" at the horizon, brought about by a global contract between democratically governed states. Marx envisioned that capitalism and the bourgeois state would wither away in the communist end-stage of history.

Contemporary thinking has somewhat lost this capacity to imagine long-term futures in a systematic way, i.e. based on explicit theoretical principles and empirical assumptions such as the ones made by 18th- and 19th-century philosophers. Perhaps this is because with rare exceptions (Fukuyama, 1989), philosophers and social scientists no longer believe in an end state of history, as was characteristic of enlightenment thinking. In any case, this essay seeks to revitalize the earlier tradition by developing a vision of the very long-term future based on systematic social science understandings of how modern societies evolve.

Most contemporary thinking about the future, by contrast, either remains bound to a much shorter time horizon or largely frees itself from considerations of theoretical plausibility and empirical possibility. Traditional forecasters try to predict the outcome of the next election, economic growth rates or the probability of civil war, usually extrapolating contemporary trends for a couple of years (on forecasting, see Sardar, 2013, chapter 5). Demographers who are concerned about the future financial viability of social insurance schemes (e.g. Busse, Wurzburg, & Zappacosta, 2003), make longer term predictions for about two generations, as do social scientists who wonder about the future fate of capitalism, given that human labour is increasingly substituted by machines or that capitalism in its current form may very well lead into an ecological collapse (see the essays in Wallerstein, Collins,

Mann, Derliugan, & Calhoun, 2013; Frase, 2016). Similarly, Young (2017 [1958]) (quite accurately) predicted during the 1950s how British society will look like 80 years down the road if elites would continue to be recruited on the basis of merit, rather than birthright.

Futures studies, an interdisciplinary field of professional forecasting and scenario planning, operate within a similar time frame of maximum half a century[1] but usually go beyond projecting existing trends forward (for an overview, see Sardar, 2013; for the history of futures studies, see Andersson, 2018). Forecasting and scenario techniques are used by corporations (famously by Shell) and governments to adjust their long-term planning to a range of possible futures that cannot be extrapolated from contemporary trends alone (for an overview of scenario techniques, see Börjeson, Höjer, Dreborg, Ekvall, & Finnveden, 2016; Sardar, 2013, chapter 6). A less technocratic tradition is critical future studies (with its own methods such as "causal layered analysis," see Inayatullah, 1998), which distance themselves from the dominant, power-infused modes of thinking informing mainstream foresight and prediction. They mobilize the perspectives and concerns of dominated or culturally distinct traditions in order to foresee, and thus make achievable, a range of alternative futures (Slaughter, 2004).

In contrast to both social science predictions and future studies, technology visionaries and political utopians prepare for, or try to bring about, a future that is largely unrelated to the principles of how the present world works. They imagine desirable futures, often without considering plausibility or probability. In line with Russell Jacoby's (2007) call to refresh left-wing utopias, for example, many progressive authors such as David Singer (1991) resuscitated the much-maligned utopian ideals of socialism … a vision that recently regained a surprising level of popularity among a younger generation without any memories of the *realexistierende* socialism of the Soviet period. In the green-libertarian corner of the ideological field, small-world advocates such as Bookchin (2005) dream of self-sufficient, egalitarian, low growth farming and crafts communities that barter goods with each other, as had generations of agrarianists since the dawn of the industrial revolution.[2] Similarly unbound are many of the future visions developed by scientists and engineers who think about the long-term consequences of automatization or artificial intelligence. Tech utopian Max Tegmark (2017), for example, imagines the world in 10,000 years (the very long-term indeed!) and contemplates how algorithms that vastly outsmart humans control the globe, either in a benevolent, multipolar form that benefits humans as well or in a totalitarian, centralized system, similar to William Gibson's (2015) science fiction novel *Neuromancer*.

In this article, I advocate for a different approach to envision long-term futures. Similar to enlightenment writings, I will try to go beyond utopian sketches of desirable futures by basing the argument, as much as possible, on established social science principles of how to understand human societies and their long-term evolution. In contrast to the predictions literature and to Futures Studies, I will extend the horizon to 300 years.

But why go that far into the future? A long time horizon will make imagining futures much more interesting precisely because we will have to assume radical change. A brief exercise in "change calibration" shows why. A classic scenario technique (introduced by Kahn & Wiener, 1967), change calibration means guessing how much transformation we need to imagine for the future by looking at what happened over the same time span in the past. As mentioned in the introduction, 300 years ago or in 1720, to be precise, dynastic kingdoms (such as absolutist France), tribal confederacies (as in Somalia) or empires (such as the Romanov empire or the Bamana empire in Western Africa) ruled most of the surface of the world. The model of the nation-state was born half a century later in the French and American revolutions. Today, 98% of the world is governed by modern nation-states (Wimmer, 2012). No trend extrapolation based on how empires or kingdoms work could have foreseen that. While it certainly looks like nationalism and the nation-state are as entrenched as ever before, both will have disappeared or greatly transformed in 300 years, if we assume that history continues at the pace of past centuries.

Quite obviously, however, the pace of change in the future may not resemble that of the past, in contrast to the basic assumption of "change calibration." Maybe history will slow down greatly over the next generations, driven by a reckoning with climate change, a turn towards zero-growth economies and a voluntary restraint in the development and use of new technologies? Nationalism and the nation-state would transform as a result of these

developments but perhaps remain the backbones of the global political order. If the Chinese empire survived for millennia, why can't the nation-state? As I will elaborate below, my basic assumption is that the future will still be modern and that human society will therefore continue to evolve and transform, driven by the same societal principles that have generated an accelerating future over the past two centuries. I therefore leave the stagnation and continuity scenario for others to develop.

While this exercise will go beyond the temporal horizon of future studies, I will adopt, if in a somewhat a loose way, some of the scenario techniques developed by scholars working in that tradition. Scenarios make explicit assumptions about which elements of contemporary societies will likely persist into the future and which ones will change (for a detailed overview of techniques, see Bishop, Hines, & Collins, 2007). A range of theoretically possible futures can then be imagined, depending on the combination of persisting and changing elements.[3]

3 | BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

What do we think will remain constant over the long run and what will change? Everything, obviously, depends on these choices. I assume that modern civilization will not break down but continue to evolve. In other words, I will look at only a small subset of imaginable futures. Without this restriction, we would have to deal with an almost infinite number of possible societies—including a humanity enslaved by a giant artificial intelligence machine à la Tegmark, a social world without contact between individuals whatsoever (and therefore a world without society *stricto sensu*), a postfamilial society organized into hostile halves, composed of men and women, human life on a different planet with entirely different social conditions (Smith & Abney, 2019), the eradication of humanity by smart computers and their robot executioners and so on. In other words, my scenarios will be rather conservative and not to the taste of visionaries, critical futurologists or lovers of science fiction.

3.1 | Constants: Modernity persists

Assuming that the future will be modern and has four consequences (for other theoretical resources used to imagine the future, see Minkkinen, 2020). First, modern societies are characterized by the division of labour and correspondingly differentiated into the subsystems of the economy, politics, arts and culture, etc., each following its own distinct logic (Luhmann, 1995). Alternatively, one could of course envision a return to agricultural, preindustrial, small-scale communities, as some agro-utopians do. Or one could imagine that companies acquire functions hitherto reserved to states, such as public goods provision and citizenship rights (cf. Ohmae, 1995), leading to a de-differentiation of sort. In contrast, I assume that further functional differentiation is likely to happen, as formerly integrated functions will be delegated to specialized, newly autonomous subsystems. An example from the current age is the emergence of online dating as an autonomous field, while most individuals previously found their partners at the workplace.

Second, modern societies are individualistic, that is, individuals are in principle free to decide among the more or less limited choices that life offers them (Beck, 2012). No one is forced to marry someone chosen by others; no one is forced to become a baker if your mother was a baker. Individualism has expanded greatly over the past centuries, and there is no reason to think that this mega-trend will not continue. I thus assume that our descendants will not go back to a premodern, community bound way of life—again in contrast to some utopian visions of the future.

Third, modern societies are based on the ideals of equality and universalism (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Parsons, 1970). In other words, inequality and particularism need to be justified ideologically. Meritocracy has become the main vehicle to explain and legitimize the social hierarchies of modern societies, slowly replacing aristocracy, racism, patriarchy and other status-based ideologies. Nationalism was the main ideological tool

to justify why the principle of equality doesn't apply to every human being but only to the citizens of a state. Both meritocracy and nationalism might fade away, but the ideological principle of equality and universalism are more likely to persist than to give way to tribalism or legitimate slavery, which existed during much of the premodern area and in many places around the world. Without this assumption, obviously, a whole range of possible futures becomes imaginable, including the suppression and exploitation of the majority by a genetically engineered minority of super-humans, the loss of human rights of individuals who don't meet certain productivity standards and so on.

Fourth, all societies (not only modern ones) are institutionally integrated to a certain degree: The different parts of a society need to fit together (see for contemporary Western societies, Hall & Soskice, 2001). Egalitarian ideologies and democracies go together nicely, for example. Democracy and dynasticism—the right to rule because one's father has ruled before—contradict each other, however. Urban societies can't be self-sufficient, to give another example, but need an agricultural hinterland. As we know from a long discussion in the social sciences, functional integration does not explain much because there are many different parts that can be made to fit together: Hanging gardens within the city can substitute for a peasant hinterland. But for imagining (rather than explaining) future societies, the principle of institutional coherence remains important.

Another useful aspect of functionalist thinking is the idea of functional needs, that is, a subsystem of society "needs" to deliver certain things, in whatever institutional way. If we focus on the political system, an institution of some sort needs to provide humans who live in a complex society with public goods, e.g. the maintenance of public order, the provision with infrastructure that individuals cannot establish on their own and so forth. There should also be an institution that organizes collective defence and protection from arbitrary violence. And finally, complex modern societies need some sort of political decision-making mechanism to choose between alternative courses of action—some coordinating institution, in other words (for an old-school functionalist approach to political systems, see Almond & Coleman, 1960).

Again, functionalism is largely ineffective at explaining why political systems develop in this direction and not another and is therefore no longer popular in comparative politics (except in the study of the European integration process). But for the purpose of this essay, which does not try to explain something that has not yet happened, functionalism has a crucial advantage: It forces us to think in terms of alternatives and thus helps to imagine different futures. For example, public goods can be provided by religious organization such as mosques or by a unitary welfare state such as in Sweden. Thinking of functional needs also helps to further reduce the range of imaginable futures as we do not have to consider political systems that do not fulfil these three functional tasks.

3.2 | Technological and economic change

These are the basic assumptions, and there is not much imagination needed to formulate them. But here comes the difficult part of the exercise: What do we assume to change over the next 300 years? First and foremost, we have to decide what the technological and economic basis of the society of the future will be. Given the rapid and unforeseeable pace of technological developments—after all, it is the domain of unforeseeable inventions—this is a very difficult task indeed. Again, if we assume multiple possible developments of technology and the economy, the number of scenarios will grow exponentially as soon as we also introduce different political developments, resulting in a rhizoid proliferation of imagined futures (as in the "cross-impact matrix" used in futures studies since Gordon & Hayward, 1968).

Let me therefore assume only one scenario of technological and economic development and hold this constant across all the political scenarios, making sure that these are all compatible with the envisioned techno-economic basis, in line with the principle of institutional coherence. First, there is little doubt, in my view, that genetic engineering will be used not only to eradicate diseases but also to create a more beautiful, smarter, longer living, psychologically more competent type of *Homo sapiens*. No ethical brake on these developments will be effective given how seductive the new techniques are (Baylis & Robert, 2004; Gardner, 1995), even though I assume, on the other hand,

that genetic engineering will not be used for some of the most evil possible ends (such as breeding soldiers or sex slaves) because this would contradict basic principles of modernity. Genetic engineering will therefore lead to further functional differentiation, giving rise to the subsystem of human design hitherto folded into, and subjected to the logic of partner choice. Beyond that, to what exact purpose genetic engineering will be used and by whom depends on the political developments to be discussed further below.

A second, equally likely technological development concerns the way humans reproduce. In-vitro conception is a reality now. The in-vitro maturation of the embryo from conception to birth will be technically achievable. In other words, reproduction will be entirely independent of sexual intercourse, of the female body and of stable partnerships—another example of functional differentiation. Since modernity will continue, I don't foresee that some institutions will manufacture humans without parents, as in Orwell's well-known dystopia. Rather, in-vitro conception and maturation will allow a further thrust in individualism: Every individual can choose, independent of each other, whether or not she or he wants to produce and raise a child, a development with considerable implications for gender relations—including the possibility of large-scale territorial segregation of men and women (as in one of the scenarios below). Again, as with genetic engineering, it will depend on the political scenarios in how far this technique will be universally accessible or restricted to the more privileged strata of humankind.

Third, intelligent and learning robots will no doubt perform many tasks now performed by humans: keeping company to lonely people, fighting wars, tending to gardens, providing security and basic policing and so on. I assume, against popular phantasies developed in Hollywood and elsewhere, that humans will remain in control of the machines. Some errors will certainly occur and lead robots and other intelligent machines to develop a will of their own and pursue their strategic self-interest—as brilliantly analysed by Tegmark (2017). But let us assume humans will be able to develop a new subsystem whose function it is to keep the algorithms in check—a third example of functional differentiation. Robots and intelligent machines will co-evolve with humans, similar to what cats, dogs and horses did over the past thousands of years (see also Harari, 2016). This also means that humans will remain bounded and restrained by their biological bodies and excludes the scenario of human-machine mixtures (such as the cyborgs imagined by Kurzweil, 2010) or the idea that an individual can gain eternal life by uploading her mind into a robot or onto internet (as imagined by economist Hanson, 2016).

Fourth, one of the main restraining elements of human development has been how we move through space. While the time needed to travel from New York to Hong Kong has been dramatically reduced compared to the era of sailing ships, it is still time-consuming and expensive to travel that far. This is most likely to change. I assume, however, that there will still be geographic friction: We will continue to have to use some device to move from New York to Hong Kong, such as a private super-fast airplane the size of a car (a nod to Elon Musk is perhaps in order here) or some sort of beamer à la Spaceship Enterprise. In other words, such movements will be much faster, but not everyone will instantly be able to be wherever they want to be—which would produce an entirely different, spaceless human society that is extraordinarily hard to imagine. To be sure, new techniques of visual representation will make it possible to be virtually present at any other place and interact with people there, but this presence will remain virtual, rather than physically real. Similarly, I assume that we will continue to be trapped in the present, rather than freely moving between yesterday and tomorrow—time travel will remain the domain of fiction.

Fifth, let us also assume that the problem of climate change will be solved through new technologies, as have been similar challenges in the past. Modes of transportation that are not based on fossil-burning engines are already in development (Abas, Kalair, & Khan, 2015), and it is easy to imagine ways of creating energy without polluting the air—giant solar panels somewhere in space, or tapping into the heat of the earth's interior. Once the climate issue is resolved, there is no need to think of future developments as necessarily zero growth, accompanied by a newly found ethos of modesty and contemplative stagnation.

How will the economy of the future look? Knowledge and information will be the key resources, replacing oil, steel or cotton of previous eras of capitalism. The economy will be about“moving bits, not atoms,” as tech visionary Nicholas Negroponte once put it. Artificial intelligence technologies will revolutionize production and consumption