On explaining the rise of non-state actors

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Introduction
This paper is written in response to a request to provide a brief "thought piece" on how to measure trends in state power vis-a-vis non-state actor power. In an email exchange, I expressed doubts about the utility of such an exercise until there was a theoretical understanding of the apparent loss of state power to nongovernmental organizations. Interest was expressed in this, so what follows is my attempt to state such a theory briefly.

In essence, my argument is that human history from hunting and gathering societies to the present is in part a story of the movement of humanity from small group consciousness with little or no sense of individualism to the present situation where many humans (though still a small minority on the planet) are profoundly individualistic, chaffing at any form of social control and believing they can and should live alone and free, joining with others only temporarily, and as long as it is in their self-interest to do so. The creation of the nation-state system in the late 17th Century was a kind of way-station in this still-ongoing process. The nation-state system in part reflected the desire both to retain the virtues of small-group identities and loyalties (a function of "the nation") with the desire to be treated as a member of a voluntary association or even as an individual, and not as a member of a family or tribal group (a function of the representative and bureaucratic institutions of the modern "state").

This process was made possible by the historical development of technologies that have permitted increasingly private and individualistic activities. Because the spread of technologies around the planet (and even within nations) is far from uniform, and because different cultures mediate the influence of technology on behavior in differing ways, this is not a totalizing process. Most humans are still in, or longing for, tribal identities; fewer (but still many) are content with the balance offered by the modern, nation-state system; while far fewer still (but often influential elites) wish entirely or largely individualistic opportunities beyond the nation-state.

The emergence of non-state actors, the weakening of the state, and various forces of restoration (including fundamentalism) in reaction should therefore be understood within this broader framework, and not as though this were a novel or aberrant condition perniciously undermining the sacrosanct state. The theory also suggests that the process is *unstoppable as long as individualizing technologies continue to be invented, developed and diffused*, though it is certainly possible for the process to be stopped if technological innovation were stopped, or slowed and its logic distorted by political, economic, and/or cultural means.

The theory
The theory as a slogan is: "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us."

All current social institutions; all current social and personal values; each person's beliefs about who "I" am, about my "self", my "place", my sense of "time", what is "real"--and everything else--are shaped by the following things, in this order of priority:

Biology
Environment
Culture
Technology
Human actions

<u>Biology</u>
Humans are animals, closely related to certain primates, and a current way-station in the long and ongoing process of biological evolution. How we perceive the world around us, and what we perceive is both enabled and limited by our biology.

<u>Environment</u>
Humans also evolved for life on Earth and originally a part of Africa, though we have now come to live on every spot of Earth and to adapt to many different environments. Nonetheless our institutions and values are shaped differently by each of these differing environments.

<u>Culture</u>
We also live in cultures that, among other things, determine our native language(s), which strongly influence(s) both how we think and what we think. Until recently, culture was to humans what water is to fish: an unnoticed prerequisite to life. Only as we have come to encounter humans in many different cultures have we come to notice how much we are shaped by our own.

<u>Technology</u>
Humans also become "human" and change what being "human" means by interacting with their environment and with each other through technologies. As the Canadian philosopher of media perceptively said some years ago: "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Technology is never neutral, and to think so is a grave error. Technology is always transformative.

<u>Human actions</u>
And yet it is "we" who shape our tools. Human will and actions do count, but last and least in the list, and very heavily influenced in our repertoire of beliefs and actions defined by our biology, environment, culture and technology.

<u>Technology as an agent of social and environmental change</u>
It is now mainly to our technologies that our attention must turn since for the last several hundred years--and especially for the last several decades--more and more people are trained and funded to imagine, invent, develop or diffuse new technologies in all spheres of life. Indeed, even "biology"--once the unmoved mover of certain human action ("you can't change human nature!")--is increasingly just one more technology susceptible to human will and action (if not entirely to human control).

So, while biology and environment and culture remain important, as long as more and more time, attention, talent, and resources are devoted to inventing and diffusing new technologies, more and more people will live in societies that perpetually enable us to do things we could not do before; to believe things we could not believe before (since the technologies enables new actions which foster new beliefs); and thus to believe things we could not even imagine before. We live in a world where many of us are increasingly able to do new things and thus to challenge the values,

beliefs, and institutions that had been created in response to the behaviors enabled by earlier technologies.

This is not a naïve belief in "technological determinism". It is the result of a theory of social stability and change that understands "technology" to be broadly "how humans do things" and thus that understands that speech and families and nation-states are as much "technologies" as are knives and automobiles and genetic engineering. Each of these "technologies" also has its own hardware, software and orgware that should be analyzed. Indeed, much of the value conflict that occurs in the world today happens when behavior that a new "physical" technology (such as genetic engineering) permits clashes with the software and orgware of earlier "social" technologies (or "institutions") such as the family or religion. Since we live in a world that churns out new technologies that permit new behavior daily, we live in a world of daily clashes between old beliefs, privileges, and institutions, and new possibilities and limitations.

The rise and transformation of the nation-state

The nation-state concept and system is only several hundred years old, deriving from decisions made between the declining Holy Roman Empire and the rising dominant European powers in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Among other things, the resulting nation-state system was a response to the demands of emerging capitalist interests of the time, themselves made possible by the technologies, environmental changes, and resulting opportunities of early modern times. Because of the temporary dominance of Western cultures globally over the intervening years, the nation-state system has also become a global system, even though it violates the basic organizational preferences of many people (for example, of Islamic peoples for whom the basis for polity is the *ummah*--the collective of believers worldwide--and not a geographically-defined place).

Moreover, it is important to understand that the nation-state system was only one of several possible solutions that could have been reached at that time. The nation-state and international system was by no means an inevitable development in response to the demands of the rising bourgeois for a polity that would allow them greater political influence than did the feudal system of the time. It is quite possible to imagine that the Holy Roman Empire could have rallied and triumphed, providing a polity that would have enabled budding capitalists to "think globally and act locally" without being hamstrung within the narrow boundaries of linguistic, cultural, and geographic communities called "nation-states." Perhaps local capitalists needed protection to grow without being killed in their cradle by stronger predatory capitalists from other parts of the world, and clearly the pretenses of state "sovereignty" provided that protection. But, then and now, the market in goods and services yearns to be free and to be global. The protectionism of infant providers could well have been achieved without creating the cumbersome technology called "the nation-state" and all of the national and international lawyers and other functionaries who occupy its orgware and maintain its software and who now want to protect their privileges long after the state has lost its usefulness in the eyes of many.

The invention of "democracy"

Not only the nation-state but also representative government (now mistakenly called "democracy") developed out of the technologies, ideologies, dominant interests, choices, and accidents of their time. While the American Constitution of 1789 was indeed a fantastic social invention, it was the result of a great many compromises that could very well have been done differently. Moreover, the very idea of "constituting" a new system of governance by writing down basic principles, while not wholly unique (going back in some ways to Hammurabi, Moses, the Magna Carta, et al.) was in other ways something that the invention of the printing press made imaginable and possible.

But if one were to sit down now to create a new form of governance, without any awareness of the existing "constitutions" of the world today but with an acute awareness of the ideologies, interests, and especially communication technologies of today, the resulting systems of governance almost certainly would bear little or no resemblance to what resulted from the Constitution of 1789 as now mindlessly copied by nation-states worldwide.

Ideologies

Institutions like the nation-state, written constitutions, and representative governments were inspired by experiences with technologies that permitted more people be "free" and to desire "freedom" more than ever before. These technologically-augmented experiences also created ideologies that supported the desire for new institutions which, as they came into existence, fed back and strengthened the ideologies themselves.

Thus, like so many things, ideologies are strongly dependent on behavior, and behavior is dependent on technologies. Modern technologies provide experiences of independence and individuality in ways earlier technologies did not. Modern technologies permitted--if they did not actually require--the emergence of the ideologies of democracy, libertarianism and individualism. It is not possible to be an "individual" in a tribal society. It is impossible to have, and thus to imagine, "privacy" as a sustained concept in a sedentary agricultural village. But it is impossible not to come up with something like feelings of "freedom" "liberty" and "individualism" when you enter into the private worlds of silent reading and writing, and live alone among strangers in crowded cities.

The printing press facilitated the emergence of modern times by quietly spreading and authenticating ideas about democracy, freedom and individualism that more and more people were actually experiencing. To make the case even stronger, one reason these values are not as pronounced, or take a different form, in Islamic societies compared to Western societies may be because Islamic leaders initially forbade the importation of the printing press, insisting that learning be carried out by the traditional and conserving oral and handwritten methods. In the West, subversive religious as well as political ideas promulgated by the printing press enabled both the Protestant Reformation and subsequently the revolutions of democratic rights and institutions.

Now, post-modern communication technologies are even more individualizing as one chats online about forbidden ideas and practices with otherwise unknown buddies spread who knows where in cyberspace. Increasingly, any intervening institution, including the state, just gets in the way. It might be said that "we are all Baptists now", yearning speak directly with God without a mediating priest, pastor, king, or representative. Absolute individual freedom is the logical end of this progression, and some people--so close to experiencing it--yearn for it now.

Escape from freedom

But not everyone wants to be free. Most people still live in tribal, feudal, or modern environments, and do not want anything approaching absolute individual freedom--and responsibility. To the contrary, they want to be told what is absolutely right and wrong, to be assured, to be led. They want to know what the rules are, will try to play by them, and expect to be rewarded fairly for doing so. They seek definitive answers to their questions from authoritative experts. Otherwise, they freak out. A significant amount of the neurosis and psychosis found in the modern and especially postmodern world comes from people who are forced to be freer than they wish to be, or who feel that the rules of the game have been unfairly altered midway through

(some smaller amount might be from freedom-seeking people who feel frustrated by the continuing strictures of the state.)

Libertarianism as America's default ideology

Nonetheless, from the very beginning of the establishment of the United States, many Americans have insisted "that government is best which governs least." This belief was largely a consequence of the individualizing experiences and mythologies of the "frontier", themselves made possible by advanced organizational power resulting from writing; increased killing power made possible by precision-tooled guns; and extensive environment-modifying power enabled by the plow. Americans from the beginning have resented state power. They have rebelled against it, resisted it, subverted it, insisted they could do everything for themselves--even though they could not possibly have survived, much less have conquered and settled the continent as easily as they did without enormous assistance from the American state of the 19ᵗʰ Century--but this our libertarian myths obscure.

But there is more: especially during and after the administration of Ronald Reagan, but in many ways well before, the official view of the American political economy has been both political libertarianism and economic neoliberalism. The US led in the creation of a large number of local, national, and global nongovernmental organizations (NGO) based upon libertarian and neoliberal ideologies, as well as on the unstated assurance that American nationals would always control all important NGOs, guaranteeing their basic furtherance of America's national interests. Surely many other NGOs represented conflicting ideologies, but it is important to understand that much of the anti-state, as well as non-state, action has been undertaken by loyal Americans acting on the basis of neoliberal beliefs supported and furthered by official policies of the American state.

Something new

However, George W. Bush came into power with a team of advisors who do not want multilateral diplomatic globalism and economic neoliberalism. They do favor a novel kind of libertarianism, one that greatly relies on certain patriotic symbols of American nationalism and favors unilateral American military solutions within an otherwise withered state. Libertarianism previously was both anti-nation and anti-state. The current administration is trying something new--to keep the nation strong while the state vanishes away, and individuals take ownership over aspects of their lives once enabled--if not actually provided--by the state. It is a bold experiment. It is by no means clear that hypernationalism coupled with bitter anti-state sentiment (and within a state severely crippled by overwhelming debt and anti-state ideologies and policies) can survive.

To summarize and conclude

The basic theory
--New technologies enable new behavior.
--New behavior provokes new ideas and values.
--New ideas and values clash with old ideas and values based on old behavior enabled by old technologies.
--Leading to the creation of new beliefs, values, and institutions on the basis of the new technologies.

This process is facilitated by the fact that old people, accustomed to old technologies and socialized into old beliefs, die, while new people for whom the new technologies and beliefs are "natural" are born. Nonetheless, institutions based on old technologies may try to resist the changes enabled by the new technologies. Especially, they may try to

preserve old beliefs and values. Some institutions are better at perpetuating prior beliefs and values than others. The Catholic Church is an excellent example. But even it is a significantly different institution, with importantly different beliefs and practices, from what it was 100, 500, 1000 or 2000 years ago because of the technological, cultural and environmental changes in the world around, and within, it.

The theory applied to the emergence the nation-state system

--The technologies and cultures of tribal societies encourage group loyalty and thinking. Deviance is rare, and sustained individualism almost impossible.

--New technologies subsequently enabled increasingly individualistic experiences and ideas.

--The nation-state system was created in part to accommodate persons who were experiencing and thus who wanted more autonomy, but who also wanted identity within a larger community. The "nation" defined and embraced the wider community. The "state" created institutions (such as "representative government" and "bureaucracy") that addressed the desire for somewhat greater autonomy and personal empowerment.

The theory applied to the decline of the nation-state system

--Current technologies encourage substantially greater experiences of individuality.

--Resulting ideas of individuality have led people to create anti-state or post-state ideologies, such as anarchism, globalism, libertarianism, and neoliberalism.

--The latter two ideologies have become increasingly dominant in the United States, being advocated by ruling economic, political, media, and academic elites, and then adopted widely by many citizens.

--Many nongovernmental organizations have been purposely created on the basis of these ideologies and facilitating policies.

--For a while, it appeared that the nation-state system was in the process of transforming into something both more global and more local. This process is still happening, as the creation of the European Union illustrates.

--However, the current American administration is attempting something new: on the one hand it continues to encourage anti-state and individualistic sentiment and policies while purposely preventing state action through crippling levels of indebtedness, and on the other hand it is greatly and so far successfully strengthening nationalism through appeals to patriotic unity and unquestioning loyalty.

--As long as new technologies (especially new *levels* of technology, eg., the difference between the technologies of an agricultural society and those of an industrial society) continue to be invented, developed, and diffused, the cycle will continue. If the introduction of new technologies continues at its present pace, or increases, the fragmentation of society and the obsolescence of all institutions will increase without new institutions and supporting value systems and persons being created. "Post-modern" persons might thrive in such a turbulent environment, but it is not clear that persons living in or retaining the consciousness of modern, feudal, and tribal cultures can. The likelihood of unsustainable social and psychological chaos is great, though the possibility of human/social transformation into a higher plane of consciousness and capability is exhilaratingly appealing.

--The only way to stop the technology change cycle is to stop technological innovation and diffusion. This might happen either by accident or catastrophe, or by relevant people deciding to stop funding or doing basic research and subsequent development and diffusion. Both require a major revolution in the world of the present. But neither is unimaginable. A coinciding economic and environmental collapse could break the cycle whether we want it to or not. On the other hand, the swift rise of anti-science and anti-technology sentiments among religious fundamentalists today, and such resulting policies as the increased funding of creationist, intelligent design, and other faith-based beliefs and initiatives in the US--along with severely limited budgetary funding constraints--could certainly do the trick. This development in the US mirrors and mutually-reinforces the continued triumph of anti-science and anti-western technology sentiments within the Islamic world.