

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

Andreas Wimmer

Sociology, Columbia University, New York City, New York, USA

Correspondence

Andreas Wimmer, Sociology, Columbia University, New York City, NY 10027, USA.
Email: andreas.wimmer@columbia.edu

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

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 century¹ 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 Minkinen, 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

patterns as much as the industrial and digital revolutions did (Makridakis, 2017). Since knowledge and information management are better done in environments of high trust (Powell, 1990), the organizational form of capitalism could change as well. Hierarchy and markets might be replaced or combined with a network of smaller scale companies within which products and knowledge are exchanged. Block-chain style technologies will allow contract enforcement in such decentralized networks—possibly with much less legal involvement of states than today. Assuming a continuing trend in global integration (certainly through ups and downs, as has been the case since the early 19th century), the new knowledge-intensive, decentralized forms of production will have the tendency to equalize life chances across the globe (as capitalism did in the recent past, see Milanovic, 2016), at least across those parts of the world where highly educated populations can be found.

Given massive thrusts in the development and application of robots and artificial intelligence, it is highly unlikely that humans will produce much of the goods or manage a large share of the information. They are simply not good enough at it. Since most of humanity will not have any meaningful form of permanent employment in the industries generating knowledge and managing information, self-employment, leisurely, emotion-intensive activities and exchange, small-scale trade and social work will fill up most people's days, perhaps supported by redistribution of profit and income in the form of a guaranteed base income. This does not mean that we will reach an utopia of artful leisure and philosophical contemplation—as in Erik Brynjolfsson and McAfee's (2014) "digital Athens." Rather, it remains an open question what meaningful activities the permanently unemployable part of the world population—anywhere between 30% and 70%—could undertake.

4 | POLITICS: FIVE SCENARIOS

With these five assumptions, the main technological and economic developments of the future should be covered. They concern how the human body is reproduced over generations, the relationship between humans and non-human machines, how humans are situated in time and space and through which organizations what kind of goods are produced. We are now ready to imagine different ways of organizing the political aspects of human life, keeping in mind the principles of modern society that I assume to continue into the future and that therefore will not differ between scenarios.

I generate the scenarios by varying three core elements of the political order: First, whether or not it continues to be organized by states, that is, by hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations with mutually exclusive claims to territory; second, whether or not cultural differences are considered salient when delimiting political units and legitimizing their existence (as is the case with nation-states today); and finally, how big in terms of population size these political units will be.

Table 1 shows the resulting five scenarios: A human society without state, going back, in other words, to the situation in which humans have lived during most of their history (but now based on very different principles of territorial organization, as we will see); a world of many small-scale states delineated from each other on the basis of common cultural identities other than the current nations; a world divided into empires that draw their boundaries based on civilizational similarity and difference; a handful of continental states that comprise culturally

TABLE 1 Scenario construction

	Anarchy	Identity-based mini-states	Empires	Continental states	World state
Politics organized by states	No	Yes			
Cultural boundaries salient	No	Yes		No	
Size of political units	Varying, overlapping	Small	Large		Very large

heterogenous populations; and finally, a world state for which cultural boundaries are obviously irrelevant. Note that I don't foresee the logical possibility of small states that disregard questions of cultural commonality, simply because economies of scale would favour larger units if cultural boundaries don't matter. Also note that there is no global state based on cultural commonality, at least as long as we remain the only intelligent species in our galaxy.

For each of these scenarios, we will discuss how the technological developments outlined above will “fit” into these various political orders, given the principle of institutional coherence. I will also discuss how each of the scenarios fulfils the three basic functions of political systems (i.e., public goods provision, security and defence and collective decision making). Finally, for each scenario, a brief note on how one could possibly go from today's world to the imagined future is in order (a kind of “backcasting” exercise in the words of futurologists, see Bishop, Hines, & Collins, 2007; Sardar, 2013, chapter 7).

4.1 | Anarchy

A world without states doesn't mean a Hobbesian fight of everybody against everybody. Individuals will associate with each other to form smaller or larger political groups, from hundreds of thousands to hundreds of millions of people, in a nonterritorialized, networked way. These associations provide public goods—insurance against illness, care for the elderly, the enforcement of contracts for example through block-chain technologies—to their members who live far away from each other. Protection from arbitrary violence is assured in a decentralized way as well through intelligent surveillance systems, smart drones and vigilante robots. Political co-ordination is assured through some kind of voting system in which all members participate.

One can imagine that these three functions are assumed by different associational networks with different membership and that some of them are based on geographic propinquity. Protection from arbitrary violence is best provided, for example, on the basis of neighbourhoods, which can be fortified through self-learning surveillance systems without walls. Other associations could be based on shared ethnicity, such as a school network that provides instruction in certain languages, or a series of such associations could cluster under an ethnic umbrella (see below the mixed scenario between anarchy and ethnic mini-states). Unlike modern citizenship, these associations would not be inherited from generation to generation but chosen depending on what kind of membership fees one can afford—further depoliticizing national identities by dissolving the idea of nations as groups of intergenerational continuity and mandatory solidarity.

How did this world come about? Sometime in the future, the better educated and wealthier citizens walked away from their states, letting them dissolve into a series of individualized, private, commercial networks, thus leading to a libertarian utopia of sorts. Through which exact historical events this happened is of course impossible to know. Some sort of citizen rebellion against the ever-increasing surveillance, control and taxing capacities of states could be imagined. Or in a more gradual, evolutionary process, private associations might crowd out state organizations in providing services to individuals—such that public school systems, for example, simply disappear because they lack children to educate.

From a global point of view, this anarchic world would be highly unequal. Some associations would be well protected, well provided with public goods and well-coordinated. They would afford the best robots for their members, offer smart genetic engineering to give their children a genetic advantage over others and enhance super-fast travel between the places where its members live. Others would be resource poor, conflict ridden and on the brink of dissolution. Their members might be serviced by poorly constructed robots or even will have to live without them; their children will resemble the contemporary *Homo sapiens* with all its deficiencies; to visit each other, they will have to enter some car-like, slowly moving device. Some individuals will not be able to afford any private association at all and will depend on the philanthropic generosity of the well-to-do associations.

Such inequality could well be legitimized—since I assume that the modern ideologies of universalism and egalitarianism will persist—with a radicalized meritocratic individualism: Everyone is responsible for her own destiny and makes her own choices, under constraints that are not anybody else's responsibility; everyone gets what he can afford and thus what he deserves. Collective identities dissolve, as do the associated ideals of solidarity: no ethnic groups, no nations, no social classes.

4.2 | Small states

The second possible scenario is that the basic institutions of the state will be maintained—bureaucratic, centralized governance over mutually exclusive territories—but at a much smaller scale than today. We can imagine an assortment of mini-states that are based on two distinct political identities: local patriotism or ethnic nationalism. The former will be dominant in larger, ethnically heterogeneous metropolises. London, New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Dubai will become independent city-states, maybe without even governing over a rural hinterland, similar to Singapore today. On the other hand, ethno-nationalist movements will create break-away states of ever-smaller proportions: Scotlandia, Catalonia, French Switzerland, Black Georgia/Mississippi, a White nationalist Appalachia, Black Choco (in Colombia), Mayan Central America, Indigenous Amazonia (in today Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia), Canton, Tibet, Wu-speaking Shanghai, Tamil Nadu, Zululand, Yorubaland and so on. Going beyond extrapolating this contemporary trend of ethnic separatism, one could also imagine the creation of mini-states based on other categories of identity: a city-state for LGTB people in San Francisco; a hyper-macho mini-state without women in Sonora—reproducing itself through in-vitro techniques; a feminist, men-free state on the Southern shores of Finland.

In other words, the countries of today, especially the larger ones such as Russia, India, China, the USA, Nigeria, South Africa, Mexico, and Pakistan, will split into many smaller ones, giving rise to over a thousand territorial states. These identity-based mini-states all assume the functions hitherto reserved to national states: defence, public goods provision, collective decision making. Durable alliances of small states for collective defence (an array of NATOS of some sorts) or for public goods provision are well possible, and many of these alliances will follow the contours of today's larger countries (an alliance of all Chinese mini-states, for example). A hybrid between the anarchic and the identity-based scenario is also thinkable: Rather than assuming the form of classical territorial states, identity-based political organizations could appear as deterritorialized networks, comprising all individuals of the same identity background wherever they live around the world, not unlike how the Austro-Marxists (Bauer, 1924) had envisioned to solve the ethnic tensions within the Habsburg empire.

It is easy to imagine how the small-state world will be born out of the present condition: Micro-nationalist discourses and other forms of radical identity politics may further gain in legitimacy while the contemporary macro-nationalist projects cease to capture the collective imaginations of the world's population. The current states therefore lose their power to restrain separatists of all sort. Like the Soviet Union dissolved into its component republics, the nation-states of our world might splinter without much fighting into a series of smaller successor states—while a more bellicose scenario à la Yugoslavia of course remains a possibility as well.

Similar to the anarchism scenario, there will be massive inequality between such mini-states, even if the globalized knowledge economy tends to equalize life chances around the world. Life in the country of the German Speaking Swiss and in the country Yorubaland will not look the same. The citizens of GSS will be genetically engineered, served by well-functioning robots, travel effortlessly and so on. The inhabitants of Yorubaland will continue to be *Homo sapiens*, have to deal with clunky and error-prone robots and travel slowly. The ideological underpinnings of such inequality are similar to today: developmentalism as well as communitarianism and cultural essentialism. Each state is seen as a collective actor whose task is to “catch-up” such that its

population can more fully enjoy the fruits of development and progress. Ethnic, racial or gender essentialisms provide the justification for the breach with universalist principles: Humanity is seen as divided into a series of distinct, internally homogenous “communities,” each unique and thus deserving a special place in the arena of human diversity.

4.3 | Empires

Another scenario is the rise of new forms of empire, characterized by large territorial extension, hierarchical, non-democratic forms of governance distinguishing between ruling and ruled populations, and mega-identities rooted in narratives of civilizational superiority. Imagine a reconstituted Chinese empire encompassing much of East Asia, including Japan; an extended US empire comprising all of the Americas plus the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand; a German or Russian dominated European empire stretching from the Ural to the Atlantic; a South-Africa dominated African empire; an Egypt–Turkey dominated Islamic empire including the Maghreb, Levant, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Here, the technological developments are shaped by imperial hierarchies: The ruling elites reserve genetic engineering, smart robot techniques and hyper-fast travelling for themselves, transmogrifying into a smarter, more beautiful, more emotionally disciplined and longer living, comfortably leisurely *Herrenrasse*, ruling over average *Homo sapiens* with bad memories, haunted by emotional impulses and ridden with diseases.

The difficulty, of course, is how to justify such inequalities if we assume that egalitarian universalism will continue to characterize the modern society of the future. The solution might be somewhat akin to how the classical Chinese empire of the Ming and Qing dynasties operated: through assimilationist meritocracy. An empire wide exam system could be used to recruit imperial administrators from the lower rungs of society. To stand a chance in these exams, the language, cultural codes and worldviews of the ruling elites need to be mastered, ensuring a slow cultural and linguistic uniformization over generations, not unlike in the empires of the past. Ambitious Columbians would train themselves in American style, optimistic can-do-ism and speak English; Japanese would learn Confucian classics and the intricacies of the ideology of harmony and so on. The ruling elite would therefore, as was the case in the classical Chinese empire, hail from diverse origins. Unlike in colonial empires, no clear-cut ethno-racial hierarchy would therefore emerge, but a cosmopolitan governing elite unified in the metropolitan cultural traditions and by the aesthetic and cognitive advantages genetic engineering brings them. Unlike the nation-states of the present, empires would emphasize the distinction between rulers and ruled and resist appeals to democratic participation.

The violation of the principle of universalism could be easily justified in religious or civilizational terms. The European empire would emphasize its Greco-Roman-Byzantine origins and enlightenment ideals, the rationality of its Weberian bureaucracy and so on. The Islamic empire finds its *raison d'être* in the preservation of the *ummah*, much as did the Umayyad or Ottoman empires. The Chinese empire rests on its thousands of years of tradition and its demonstrated superiority in arranging a harmonious society in which everyone finds her proper place. As Smith (1990) has hinted at a while ago, the mytho-symbolic repertoires that these empires will be able to draw upon may very well help to politically stabilize them. This represents a clear advantage over the Continental states discussed in the next section, whose technocratic cosmopolitanism will not emotionally resonate among the population and which therefore will have to excel in performance legitimacy.

How did the world of empires emerge? Not unlike the formation of empires in the past, the future metropolises might expand their influence and territory through a mixture of financial pressure, military conquest and voluntary submission by territories that seek protection by one empire to keep another one at arm's length. The military might of the centre—based on artificial intelligence and robot technologies not accessible to the weaker states—might be crucial in subduing resistance and bringing vast swaths of territories into the expanding imperial realms. Looking backwards from the point of view of the imperial world, the relative peace that early 21st-century observers noted

(Pinker, 2011) might very well represent an unusual phase in modern history, followed by a war-prone period of imperial expansion until, finally, we reached another stretch of pax Romana.

4.4 | Continental states

This scenario assumes that mega-states could also grow out of regional trade networks, as did the European Union, rather than a process of imperial expansion: think of a North-American Nafta-state, perhaps including the small Mesoamerican countries, a MERCOSUR state of Latin America, an ASEN state and so on. Compared to empires, these mega-states would be federal in their make-up, giving substantial political autonomy to what were formerly independent states. For this scenario to work, however, these mega-states have to assume some of the governmental functions now reserved to nation-states: They would have to raise taxes, provide public goods, offer collective defence, and some kind of political decision making at the level of the entire polity. None of this is currently achieved by the European Union which has no taxing capabilities, subsidizes but does not itself have the capacity to provide public goods, has no army and was erected largely against the will of the citizens of its constituent states. In other words, for Continental states to work properly and gain a minimum level of acceptance and identification by their citizens, they would have to complete the integration process that Eurocrats were always dreaming of, but so far unable to achieve.

Mega-states would be ruled by technocratic elites, recruited meritocratically from around their domains, that prove themselves to their voting publics through performance: providing public goods effectively, fostering economic growth, making well-behaved and efficient robots affordable for everybody, providing genetic engineering facilities for large swaths of the citizenry and so on. The new technologies of governance, made possible by intelligent, self-learning machines and new techniques of surveillance, and the economies of scale that governing large territories bring about make these states vastly more effective than anything seen in human history. They emphasize their commitment to equality but do not provide much of a collective identity (compare again Smith, 1990), which continues to be organized on the level of former nation-states, creating a constant field of tension between independence movements and pro-integration forces. A conflictual back and forth between independence and re-integration over the course of history is a likely possibility.

It is not too difficult to imagine the historical developments leading to this world. One simply needs to adopt a hyper-optimistic view on the future of the European Union and then imagine that this model of organizing statehood—through its problem solving capacity and economic competitiveness—is so successful that other regions follow suit in a sort of evolutionary adaptation process. Similarly, in the past, the nation-state model, pioneered by France, Britain and the United States, proved to be vastly superior to dynastic kingdoms and empires in securing the political loyalty of citizens, raising mass armies and extracting taxes. The political and military power of these early nation-states thus led to a process of competitive emulation at the end of which other states came to resemble the successful pioneers (Wimmer, 2012). A similar process could lead to the emergence of a series of Continental states.

4.5 | World state

The final scenario is a global state, ruled through a federal arrangement in which existing countries become provinces in the "United States of the World". Governing a population of a dozen or so billion should not represent a major obstacle, given the technological developments outlined above. If the Spanish crown was able to rule over all of Latin America and the Philippines for centuries, in the era of sailing boats and handwritten government reports, there is no reason to think why a global state should not be possible in a distant future characterized by hyper-fast travel and artificial intelligence.

A world state could grow out of currently existing global institutions such as the United Nations—the horribilum in the eyes of right-wing conspiracy theorists and the utopia of the global governance enthusiasts of the early

1990s. Or it could emerge from the extension of a globally hegemonic state, perhaps China. Both pathways to a global state are conflict prone as they run against the entrenched interests of today's political elites. In the contemporary anti-globalist world of populist nationalism, it is hard to imagine how elected politicians will ever transfer sovereignty and decision-making power to a global state. But history can take many different turns. Anti-nationalist social movements may gain power and successfully demand more robust global governance. They might join forces with an increasingly integrated global political, intellectual and economic elite and thus form a power bloc that can eventually overcome the resistance of nationally oriented elites and their constituencies.

Since a global state would be, for the first time in human history, truly universal, there would be little need to justify its boundaries other than by referring to the shared origins of humanity and the common interest in governing the planet and its resources wisely. Since such a state would not have to maintain an army, vast resources would be available for public goods projects. Without competition with other states, however, it is unlikely that the global state would be very efficient in providing such goods, however, certainly not compared to the Continental mega-states discussed above. Without borders, some other form of migration management would likely emerge, perhaps by periodically redistributing location rights (regulating who is allowed to live where) on the basis of merit or a lottery—the dream of today's political philosophers who abhor the exclusionary nature of nation-states.

To be compatible with modern principles of equality and to reduce migration pressures, the global state would have to promote the gradual equalization of life chances across its various provinces and thus support a trend already built into the information economy. Perhaps it would develop a gigantic social-democratic machinery similar to the one Germany deployed to lift the living standards of the former GDR provinces after unification. This would be politically feasible since the regulatory capacity of the world state *viz-a-viz* the economy would increase dramatically, given the lack of competition between states for capital. Taxation of corporations and citizens could reach levels not seen before. Tax evasion would become impossible, given the surveillance capacities of a global state and the lack of havens beyond its reach.

Ruling elites would be drawn from the various world regions. A system of rotating presidencies, proportional representation in positions of bureaucratic power, and meritocratic recruitment would hold the polity together—a kind of gigantic Swiss system of accommodating larger and smaller linguistic and religious communities. Similar to today's Switzerland (or the *millet* system of the Ottoman empire, for that matter), the principle of territoriality and subsidiarity would allow these communities to manage their own affairs at the provincial level: Some updated version of Sharia law in Saudi Arabia would regulate family affairs, a further evolved Code Napoleon would be applied on the European Continent and so on. High levels of legal pluralism, in other words, would characterize the world state.

It would obviously be culturally pluralistic as well, with varying creole cultures emerging here and there and a thin, but substantial layer of commonality sedimenting over generations: a shared language, a shared set of political principles that everyone needs to embrace to make legitimate claims on the state, a shared set of issues over which individuals and groups passionately disagree (what to do with the Antarctic colonization project? How much minority overrepresentation should there be in the elected global governing council?). Factions would likely form on the basis of larger civilizational commonalities: The former “West” against the Muslim world, the Latin American bloc against the East Asian alliance: a clash of civilizations à la Huntington (1993), but channelled into institutions that are capable of adjudicating and mediating between conflicting visions of and demands on the common state.

5 | WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

Which of these scenarios is more probable? All of them are compatible with my assumptions of continuity: that the future society will be modern, that technological developments will still be controlled by humans, that

profit-maximizing capitalism will persist and so on. Given these assumptions, all scenarios are equally possible—in line with evolutionary forms of futures studies, which refrain from attaching probabilities to different scenarios (Hideg, 2002). On the flip side, each of these scenarios also has specific challenges that make them more conflict prone and therefore less stable and less likely to survive across generations. In other words, none of the scenarios leads us back to a more stable, predictable form of social organization, as hoped for by those who see our present moment as an historical exception, as a particularly chaotic, contradictory and confusing period of world history (termed “post-normal” by Sardar, 2010).

The anarchic scenario faces the basic problem of how to regulate location rights: In a borderless world without centralized governing institutions, who will have the right to live where and how can this be enforced? Can it be achieved in a decentralized way for members of different networked associations—or will these associations necessarily become territorialized and build (invisible) walls around them? Does the contradiction between de-territorialized network structures and the need for a territorial regulation of location rights make this scenario unstable and conflict prone because it violates the principle of institutional coherence? Furthermore, how can these associational networks defend themselves against state or empire builders who may try to conquer them with superior military force or blackmail them by gaining control over crucial resources such as the technology that controls information flows or human reproduction?

The mini-state scenario also encounters specific challenges: In a world of one (or more) thousand states, aren't the transaction costs for regulating international trade and finance too high for this world to ever come into existence? Are these units functionally suited for a globally integrated, networked economy as described above or will their lack of regulatory capacity at the regional, let alone the global level make this world economically too disadvantageous to compete successfully against larger units?

The new empires confront different kinds of difficulties: Will meritocratic assimilationism be good enough to buy the minimal consent of the empire's population or will calls for “self-determination” both in the form of democracy or national autonomy overwhelm the imperial centre? Will a multipolar world with endemic competition between empires be too conflict prone, quickly giving rise to a single polity or a hegemonic empire with a series of subordinate client states? In turn, the technocratic competence of Continental mega-states might not be enough to secure a minimal level of consent by its citizens. Perhaps the current conundrum of the European Union will therefore repeat itself and be compounded in a world where individuals are much more mobile and no longer confined to national containers, as we are today.

The global state scenario solves some of the above problems but encounters others: Is the idea of humanity too thin and unspecific to generate enough willingness to redistribute resources through a socio-democratic mega-machine? Are social psychologists right that without competition with “out-groups,” there can be no “in-group” solidarity? Will humanity therefore have to wait for the landing of peoples from other galaxies to be able to band together into a single polity and overcome tens of thousands of years of political squabbling and feuding?

Some mixed scenarios are of course possible as well: A world state with some mini-states in the peripheries, let us say Appalachia or the mountainous Cantons of Switzerland, whose populations threaten collective suicide when asked to submit to a global Leviathan. A combination of Continental states and mini-states or areas of anarchy could also be sustainable, though it is unlikely that large areas populated by mini-states could survive the competitive (and perhaps coercive) pressure. For that reason, a scenario of equally sized Continental states and empires is more likely. As mentioned above, the anarchist scenario is unlikely to win out when competing with any form of stateness, unless we assume that its advantages for individuals are such that everywhere around the world they cease to pay taxes to states, resist recruitment into armies and disobey bureaucratic orders.

As in Chinese drinking games where one throws five dices at the same time, so much depends on the combination of unforeseeable developments. Are the technological predictions correct, or maybe only one or two of them? Will the economy indeed take on a decentralized networked form built around knowledge production and information management—or will giant corporations emerge that take over much of the political

functions provided by today's states (cf. again Ohmae, 1995)? Even if we could decide which of the five political scenarios are more feasible given the assumptions I have made, historical events and their contingent combination will push humanity towards one or the other of the five scenarios—or towards an entirely different, unimaginable future.*

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ENDNOTES

¹ An exception is the Millennium 3,000 Panel of futurist that was organized during the runup to the year 2000. It surveyed 100 experts to predict human life in 3000. Three scenarios were developed (Glenn, 2000): An optimistic scenario combining a genetically transformed, immortal, more intelligent and more compassionate humanity co-habiting with nanotechnologically produced artificial forms of life both on earth and other planets. In the second scenario, bioterrorism, nuclear wars and political dysfunction led to the eradication of humanity and its replacement by a network of new forms of life, robots and AI machines that conjointly plan their escape to other planets. The third scenario foresees a division into three forms of life: first, a traditionalist segment of humanity rejecting technological progress; second, a mixed cyber-biological form of the human species with genetically and nanotechnologically enhanced abilities that allow it to live on other planets; and third, completely a-biological, artificial forms of life that benevolently guard over the two branches of humanity.

² Many utopian visions appear in the form of science fiction: In Aldous Huxley's (1976) *Island*, a small-scale community finds ecological balance through meditation and the regular use of psychedelic drugs. Ernest Callenbach's (1975) *Ecotopia* describes a secessionist nation in the 21st-century north-western United States, whose members live an egalitarian life close to nature and smoke lots of marijuana.

³ More precisely, I will use “explorative scenarios” in which all of the relevant factors and trends are beyond the control of contemporary societies (the “external” type of explorative scenarios according to the typology of Börjeson, Höjer, Dreborg, Ekvall, & Finnveden, 2016). In the words of Hideg (2002), the scenarios developed below have an evolutionary character. No forecasting is possible because different solutions to the same evolutionary challenge are equally probable or improbable, such that we have to limit ourselves to “presenting evolutionary prospects” (*ibid.*: 286) rather than assigning probabilities to different futures. Hideg opposes evolutionary to critical futures studies. An example for the latter would be Sardar (2010), who seeks to transform our attitudes towards the future—away from the ideas of progress—in order to regain a more certain, less chaos-prone way of life (see also Inayatullah, 1998).

* *for* attempts to build “wild cards” into scenario thinking, see Mendonca, Cunha, Ruff, & Kaivo-oja, 2009.

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