A World That Could Govern Itself

(September, 2009)

Libertarians can hold to their faith only on the absurd assumption that my exercise of freedom never affects your ability to exercise yours. Quite the opposite: The freedoms and the fates of all six billion of us who occupy this globe are inextricably interwoven.
– Herbert Simon

While all other sciences have advanced, that of government is at a standstill - little better understood, little better practiced now than three or four thousand years ago.
– John Adams

Power cannot be delegated. Power has to be taken.
– Source Unknown

Political Disclosure: I was born and raised in New York City, and came to political consciousness in the 1950's, during the McCarthy era and the Cold War. My parents were distinctly left-wing in their politics, but not unreservedly so: parlour-pink as they used to say, but not completely Red. In the early 60's, while the Viet Nam war was heating up, I was active in the student resistance movement at Columbia University, and remember telling anyone who would listen that the United States would fight there for about 10 years, and accomplish nothing. This much was clear to any college sophomore who did a week's reading on the history of Viet Nam – but not, tragically, to "the best and the brightest" in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In 1966, I left the United States, spent 2 years in Israel (witnessing the 6-day war in June, 1967 and the first stages of the occupation that followed.). In 1969, I came to Canada, where I studied and taught aikido, became a Canadian citizen, and ended up in Ottawa doing contract work in informatics and program evaluation for the Canadian government. In 2003, I made the mistake of supporting George W. Bush's intervention in Iraq, – not as a grab for oil, or for the alleged 'weapons of mass destruction,' but as a clever move on the Middle Eastern chessboard. However, on seeing what a botch the Bush administration made in the aftermath of their invasion, I changed my mind: The tasks and responsibilities of global governance will have to be met in some other way than by American hegemony – though that seemed like the best bet at the time. Of course, the opinions expressed below were partly shaped by all these experiences.

Introduction: On the Bridge of Spaceship Earth

The image of planet Earth as large-but-finite spacecraft can be traced back to Henry George' book *Progress and Poverty*, published in 1879.[1] In 1965,

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1   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaceship_Earth

Adlai Stevenson used the phrase 'spaceship Earth' in a speech to the U.N. In 1966, Barbara Ward published a book with that title. In the same year, Kenneth Boulding also used the phrase in the title of his essay *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*,[2] which drew a contrast between the 'cowboy economy' of a world conceived as infinite, and the 'spaceman economy' of a spherical world confronting limits both to the resources it can supply and the waste products it can accept. Buckminster Fuller popularized the idea in 1969, in a briefly famous book called *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. The spectacular 'Earthrise' photo taken from lunar orbit on the Apollo 8 mission made this 'small planet' image iconic for everyone of my generation.[3] Our planet is now widely – and accurately – seen as a fairly large but definitely finite life-bearing system, hurtling through the void. To damage it is to diminish the prospects of our children and our species. Put in these terms, it seems clear that modernity has drastically reduced the margin for incompetence or open warfare on the spacecraft's 'bridge' – amongst its leaders and officers. Nor is open-ended economic growth a realistic possibility. As Boulding explained:

> . . . in the spaceman economy, throughput is . . . something to be minimized rather than maximized. The essential measure of the success of the economy is not production and consumption at all, but the nature, extent, quality, and complexity of the total capital stock, including in this the state of the human bodies and minds included in the system. In the spaceman economy, what we are primarily concerned with is stock maintenance, and any technological change which results in the maintenance of a given total stock with a lessened throughput (that is, less production and consumption) is clearly a gain. This idea that both production and consumption are bad things rather than good things is very strange to economists, who have been obsessed with the income-flow concepts to the exclusion, almost, of capital-stock concepts.

Boulding is writing about required economic rather than political changes, but the latter will be at least as great and as difficult. Obviously, a huge shift of paradigm is needed, and is already starting to happen. Though still the subject of deep and bitter political conflict, some governments are talking quite seriously now about their commitment to 'sustainable development' and the prevention of global warming. But there can be no such thing as indefintely sustainable development; and the transition to a Spaceship economy will require a Spaceship polity as well.

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2   Available on the Web at http://dieoff.org/page160.htm.

3   On December 24, 1968. See also *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaceship_Earth.*

The closed-Earth concept is a truism by now for all who don't wilfully reject the science behind it. But beyond the economics of the situation, the necessary shift of political perspective has scarcely entered public discourse: Through whatever specific institutions, at least three massive tasks will have to be performed tolerably well to keep the ship from blowing up or poisoning itself. 'Officers and crew' will have to manage the ship's economic 'life-support' systems to sustain tolerable living conditions on the lower decks; they'll have to negotiate, keep and enforce a relative peace, both amongst themselves and with the passengers in their keeping; and they'll have to manage the interface between their human society and the whole ship's eco-system to sustain a livable environment.

Goverments today are failing at all three tasks. The fact is that the overweening *success* of our species – to date, at least – has made the planet too small for its expanding human population and aspirations. Though some people may eventually migrate to colonies in space and even go on to populate the universe, that will not much help the remaining Earth-bound population any more than migrations to the New World relieved the stresses in Europe. As Boulding said, our ideas about economics will have to change. So will our ideas about government.

Change how? Most currently available answers to that question are in the realm of fantasy. Some have imagined a wise, benevolent global dictator of this or that stripe – a Mahdi, a second coming of Jesus, or even a well-meaning alien from some more-advanced planet, as in Arthur Clarke's novel, _Childhood's End_. Others, less fancifully, have imagined a global parliamentary system – a Parliament of Man as Tennyson put it.[4] The United Nations (like the League of Nations before it) was conceived along such lines; and has done useful work, though crippled by the ambitions, hatreds and corruptions of its constituent national governments.[5]

What's clear enough is that no national regime, and certainly no global one, will command much legitimacy or respect today until the tasks mentioned above are handled better than at present: peace-keeping on the global scale and global economic management subject to the constraints and requirements of the planet's ecology.

This won't be easy. In fact, all three tasks look impossible to government as we've known it, for reasons discussed below. The central point is that 'Spaceship Earth' is populated now by a high-tech global society, held together by complex systems of trade and communication requiring much more delicate and precise management than the ship's 'bridge,' as now configured, is able to provide. **We've evolved a society that we don't know how to govern.**

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4   From _Locksley Hall_, published in 1842.

5   See Kennedy's book on the UN ??

This essay, then, is just one individual's attempt to think seriously about (what I'll refer to as) 'the *Spaceship Earth* Problem,' which can be defined as follows: On a small planet with a tightly inter-connected, high-tech, global society, government has become a far more *technical* business than it used to be. Public choices today cannot just be tailored to reflect the balance of power amongst interests concerned in a given matter, but must be expertly designed to meet the technical requirements – ecological, economic *and* political – of a highly integrated global system. If this is not done adequately well, the 'spaceship's' life support facilities will collapse, taking our global society with them. Yet governments remain much what they have always been: not prudent managers of a small and tightly interconnected world, but cockpits of rival interest. As such, they are suited neither in structure nor in temperament to their new tasks of life support engineering. Neither are we, their citizens and subjects. Our problem, however, is to frame a political order – not necessarily a single world government, but at least a treaty organization of some kind – capable of providing acceptable and competent governance for the sort of global, high-tech society that we are trying to run.

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We can approach this 'Spaceship Earth Problem' by thinking through the ambivalent relationship between a society and its government. If we can understand what governments are, and why societies develop them, we might begin to see why governments today are losing their grip, and how the fracturing relationship between an increasingly global society and its government(s) might be updated and mended. Working along those lines, our program will be as follows:

- First, a discussion of formal government and its essential functions and features. What is a government anyhow? What does it have to be – today as in the past? Why do today's governments appear to be floundering, unable to cope with the issues on their plates?

- Next, a discussion of (what we mean by) '*society,*'and how it configures and manages its key institutions.

- Third, a generic discussion of 'good government' – what we hope for and expect from government beyond the factional wish-lists, priorities and issues that divide us.

- Fourth, a discussion of the global governance (and/or formal government) that's needed today, given the nature and issues of a global society.

- And fifth, a concluding section that reviews and summarizes.

Although my political preferences will be clear enough, I am not grinding an axe but trying to write a balanced essay – an *essay*, by no means a work

of political science – about the world as I came to understand it, from a lifetime of reading in publicly available sources. I have no special, 'inside' knowledge, and no pat answers to the problems. Indeed, I don't believe there are any. If there's a specific point I want to make, it's that our world badly needs much more political dialogue, experimentation and sheer human decency than it is accustomed to see. Not that I am holding my breath, waiting for this to happen. My point simply is that after thousands of years of experience and theorizing, political thought is anything but a finished subject. We're scarcely ready to think about, let alone agree on the kind of governance that a hi-tech, global society needs.

1.   Government

Let's begin with formal government (though the self-governance of society logically precedes it) because it is ubiquitous today, and because we have come to accept it as the norm, though it is actually a very late development. Think of it this way: Anthropoid creatures classified as Homo Sapiens, and thus already about as human as we are, had about 200 thousand years of unrecorded existence before real governments began to emerge in the Neolithic Age, with the rise of agreiculture about 10 thousand years ago. In that pre-history, the earth was explored and colonized, battles were fought, knowledge and know-how were accumulated, and thousands of generations begat and raised their children. Yet there was no such thing as government in our sense until men and women began to tend crops in marked-off fields, build walled cities, and bow down to sacred kings. There were chiefs and headmen before that time. There must have been status and power and authority. But there was no formal government until the roles of sovereignty and leadership became separate from the current human incumbent, or incarnation – until it made sense to say something like "The king is dead. Long live the king!"

   There was informal *governance*, of course: Customs were upheld; decisions were taken; wrongdoers were punished; public ventures and projects of various kinds were coordinated and led. But formal government, (by definition, an application of the techniques of formal organization to already familiar problems of governance), had to wait till such techniques were invented. This happened because the problems of governance finally overcame the already formidable capabilities of a tribal society.[6] When food had to be stored, guarded, and distributed from one harvest to the next, when city walls (and other huge construction projects) had to be undertaken and brought to completion, when trained fighting men had to be compelled to muster to the ramparts in times of emergency or to march far from their homes for real wars (beyond mere raids for

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6   Discussed below in Section 2.2.

cattle and women), then new methods were needed – a new technology of public decision and command: Men had to be led through training, discipline and fear of punishment rather than bursts of enthusiasm; positive law had to supplement established custom; the powers and prerogatives of leadership had to be detached, so far as possible, from accidents of talent and personality, and buttressed with custom and law. All this is just what we mean by '*formal organization*,' as will be discussed later on; and it will be convenient here to have a word for the informal kind. Thus, I'll always mean 'formal organization' when I speak of organization in these pages. I'll use the words 'leadership' or 'coordination' for the *informal organization* that we'll regard as oxymoron.

Accordinly, this section discusses formal government, leaving society's informal governance for later. In both, there are four crucial dimensions to consider, easier to recognize in government *per se* than in society at large. First, there is the dimension of *power* – what it is, who has it, and how it is wielded. Second is what political scientists call the coercion/extraction cycle,[7] through which means are collected to pay for ongoing public maintenance (including collection of the tax revenue) and whatever else, using an army (of soldiers, police and administrators to do so. Third are the functions of administration and enforcement, where the 'rubber' of government hits the 'road' of social happening, so that what has been decided and decreed actually gets done. And fourth, by no means least, though left last for this discussion, is the crucial function of *public choice* – the taking of decisions, whether by vote or consultation or fiat, binding for the society as a whole. In this section, we'll discuss each of these dimensions in turn, focusing on their perennial issues, and on the novel difficulties for each in today's globalizing society. My purpose is to understand why today's governments are visibly floundering – losing their grip – in what society has become.

1.1   Power

Power is something of a dirty word today. As with sex, everybody wants it, but few people want to admit in public to having very much of it, or of having and using it in interesting ways. That some persons deal, decide, authorize and command while others take orders and live as best they can within the margins of freedom allowed to them is a truth that liberal, democratic society is deeply reluctant to face candidly, and that it disguises as best it can. This is unfortunate, because power – like sex – is a fact of life that needs to be exercised and enjoyed productively, ethically and wisely–in a spirit of intelligent self-interest at least, and lovingly where possible. Prudery about power, as about sex, just tends to make it furtive and irresponsible – a negative part of life instead of a positive one.

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7   See Finer, *A History of Government*, pp ??.

Our problem is not to abolish power (a mere fantasy), but to come to terms with it: to render it domestic, creative and accountable.[8]

We'll have much more to say about the making and taking of power, as there can be no prospect of 'a world that could govern itself' without a fairly stable and generally accepted distribution of the stuff. But the concept of power is notoriously unclear, and it is scarcely possible to say anything useful without some acceptable definition. One difficulty, however, is that the concept of 'power' can be approached in several different ways: It is sometimes defined as a *capability* to get things done, or as *decisive influence* over what gets done. It is sometimes defined in a more hard-nosed way as the capability to get other people to act against their own intentions or wishes. All these approaches are possible, but I understand the concept, and will discuss it here from a somewhat cruder perspective, upstream of capability and influence and even coercion. I see power as grounded in what economists call '*rent*.'

Power is about holding and keeping 'a piece of the action.' It's about appropriating, excluding people from, and charging them for access to resources and goods that they need or desire. Obviously, such control is not surrendered without conflict; and one key purpose of government is to soften, ritualize and gentrify the conflicts of this kind that *necessarily* take place because 'the action' has to go somwhere, while everyone wants that it go to them. Thus, a great way to understand the basic nature of power and government is to look at the problems of conducting a criminal business like the trade in drugs, or any other illicit commodity. In operations of this kind, because appeals to law are not available, contracts can be enforced and property rights asserted only through violence: violence that one is oneself prepared to apply (and to endure, if it comes to that). In these criminal operations, each 'family' behaves much like a sovereign state, fighting for turf on which it alone collects the tribute, and on which its word is law. As in a state system, agreements can be reached and revenues can be shared, but such arrangements can be broken at any time. The key point for us, though, is that such an organization has no interest in fighting for its own sake. To the extent possible, it seeks to 'normalize' its operations – using its potential for violence mostly as a threat, collecting its tribute or 'tax' or 'rent' on a routine basis, and tending (to the extent convenient) to justify and thus 'legitimize' its exactions by giving some value (protection against rival gangs and whatever else) in return for what it collects. It will, however, resort to violence when its 'honor' is impugned, to make the point that it is ready and willing to fight if challenged in any way.

The central feature of 'organized crime,' then, is that recourse to law is not available. But, obviously, all society was once in this same condition. Before kings, and 'the king's justice,' there was no recourse to law for

8   *Second Thoughts* ??

anything; and tribal societies still operate this way, as we'll discuss later. In any case, the problem for any such extra-legal business is ensure that no one else can provide the substance or service in question – e.g. the drug, the gambling table, the commercial sex or whatever – without paying the tribute demanded. Whoever tries will first be warned off, and then will get his kneecaps broken or worse, unless he can summon counter-violence to neutralize the threat against him. The gang that can do so typically supplants the first 'family,' and replaces it with their own.

On this account, the essence of power is exclusion and conditional admission – admission on payment of the exacted price. Exclusion from life itself, in the last resort. It begins when some mean dude says – to his wife, his children or his neighbor – you cannot live unless you obey me. It gets organized as a communal venture when a whole tribe, led by a dude with bigger ideas, appropriates some resource of nature – anciently, a quarry for salt or obsidian, an oasis, or any valley where herds can graze or crops grow – and makes others pay for the privilege of using what nature has given. In due course, and with much greater justification, a similar bargain can be extended to man-made goods and services. Pay the rent and live in the apartment. Pay the toll and use the road. Pay the tithe and come to church. Pay the admission and enter the theatre or the museum. Pay the bribe or the fine and stay out of jail. '*Rent*' has become the economist's term for all such transactions. Technically, rent is what you pay to enjoy a benefit that someone else controls, beyond the cost of materials and labor in supplying it. In this technical usage, *rent* is the surcharge added onto production costs to pay for enjoyment of resources that are potentially free. All rents ultimately derive from the sun and rain and earth – from the sunlight and rain that falls on a plot of land, and from resources found upon or under it. From this perspective all property and rent originate as theft – as appropriation backed by violence – just as Proudhon and other anarchists have argued.

The classic justification for private 'property' and rent is that they enable and motivate an input of labor, and thus the creation of added value. About a fertile river valley, an obsidian quarry, an oil field, or any natural asset, it can be claimed that exclusion of others leaves their 'owner' with an incentive to work that land and sell its its improved produce to whoever will pay the price – for example, finished blades and other artifacts instead of blocks or chips of the precious volcanic rock. A further claim can be made that ownership also motivates a degree of rational responsibility, corresponding to the right of exploitation. An asset's owner has some incentive to ensure that it keeps its value. This may or may not afford long-term sustainability, but without such private ownership, you are apt to get what is called 'the tragedy of the commons' – the over-use of a free resource,[9] because each individual is in a race to grab the largest

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9   Stands of timber and unfenced grazing land are the classic examples. See ??

portion possible before the resource runs out.

A third rationale for the recognition and defense of private property through *law* is the desire to reduce the cost and disruptiveness of violent quarrels. As would happen if drugs were legalized, for example. But eventually, incrementally, this legitimate public interest in reducing violent conflicts over individual items of property becomes a more questionable desire of 'haves' to defend the extra privileges and opportunities that accrue to wealth against the public as a whole.[10] Gradually, a community of free property owners becomes an oligarchy of the rich.

Putting aside this question of justification, we note that some *legal* recognition of property rights has been a common feature of all complex and technologically advanced societies. The reason, probably, is that it is only on some such political and military basis, that an elaborate *economy* can be launched: A king and his followers lay claim to a certain area, dispossessing whoever lived there and claimed it before, granting themselves property rights to parcels of this newly taken land which they divide amongst themselves. Until another band disputes their self-conferrred 'rights,' they need not actually fight for them again, but only put up a convincing show of being able to do so. Meanwhile, they till the soil, dig and drill for precious minerals, build comfortable homes and generally do whatever is needed to add the value of their ingenuity and work to the appropriated natural wealth, selling its produce, and living in relative comfort and security on the proceeds.

The conclusion from all this is that whoever regards government and business – the public and private sectors of society – as natural enemies has not thought deeply, or is suppressing inconvenient facts, about their true relationship. To be sure, there are conflicts between their differing interests, as will be discussed further below.[11] But their interdependence runs much deeper: a king or any government needs private (taxable) businesses to maximize the value of its territorial holdings. Business needs government: to grab and defend its assets against rival polities, and to secure its property rights, markets and trade routes against outlaws of various kinds – in general, to anchor its prerogatives of rent-taking against whatever would disrupt them or take them away. As a consequence of this inter-dependence, some version of fascism, defined technicallly and non-pejoratively as the alliance of big business with big government, is just the inevitable consequence of bigness itself.[12]

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10   See 4.2 ??

11   In 2.4 ??

12   See Bertram Gross' book, *Friendly Fascism*, (1980) for further discussion of this basic fact.

the rentier state

To clarify some definitions: *Governance* of some kind is everywhere: There are no human societies without some capacity to defend themselves against aliens, uphold and enforce their customs, take and implement collective decisions. *Governments*, however, are organizations[13] specialized for these functions. 'The *state*' is a whole population and territory on which such structures of government are successfully maintained – a *failed* state being one on which those structures are breaking down. In political science, the term '*rentier state*' is usually reserved for states that derive all or a substantial portion of their national revenues from the sale or leasing of their indigenous resources to *external* clients. But the requirement that clients be external is somewhat artificial; and if we drop it, it can be seen that all states are *rentier* at their very core. Saudi Arabia, with little to sell except the oil beneath its sands is at one extreme. Japan with little more than the ingenuity and hard work of its inhabitants is at the other. But the Japanese state too arose and sustained itself by fighting for and defending those home islands, and then by parceling that turf among landlords and corporations who could farm, fish from, build cars and cameras upon, or otherwise exploit it – of course, taxing them for the privilege of doing so. So it has been from ancient times, and so it is today. Conquerors fight for and hold valuable properties from which rent (in its various forms – notably military service, labor, and monetary payment) can be derived. Their *power*, finally, is precisely the power to collect rent from their holdings. Sovereignty of the people, and the so-called 'democratic' state came about as competition for 'a piece of the action' amongst noble European families became too fierce and expensive for such dynasties, and came to need a broader political base. More on this later.[14]

Government evolved as basically agricultural peoples competed for the privilege of squatting on various regions of the Earth's surface. To hold onto such territories, foraging and grazing peoples needed leaders, and a kind of loose, informal organization that is not organization at all, in the strict sense. They didn't – and, in a few places, still don't – need formal government. (And don't want it when great powers try to give it to them – supposedly for their own good.) But the basically agricultural peoples had different political problems and different opportunities. Their opportunity was to increase the value and yield of their holdings by sinking intelligently directed labor. Their problem was to mobilize that labor as cheaply as possible, and to defend their holdings and harvests from raiders who would take them without paying the demanded price. They needed organization – starting with military organization – for all these reasons: to

13   See 2.3 below ??.

14   In Section 3.3 below.

gather and manage labor; to defend against actual and potential enemies; to collect tributes and taxes, and whatever other forms of rent.

These same needs exist today, but the problems of meeting them are more complex than formerly. And rent itself is more complicated than it used to be. Primordially, as we've seen, it was a payment demanded and obtained by virtue of one's control over Nature's resources and fruits. The obvious modern example is the revenue that accrues to countries with oil fields, and to the corporations with leased drilling rights. But the concept has more general application: Revenues extracted from control over social (non-natural) resources like distribution channels and jobs are also forms of rent. Access to shelves in chain supermarkets is certainly a benefit that the chains use to gain leverage on their suppliers. Likewise, the privileges of appointment and other forms of patronage that politicians use to purchase loyalty and reward supporters. These secondary rents are nothing new, but technology and corporate capitalism and democracy and expanding bureaucracies have greatly expanded their significance relative to the mere enclosure of land. This may be the central reason why post-modern states, even as they become vastly more intrusive and powerful, are losing power to non-state actors.

the rentier state today

So, where do these matters stand today? To begin with, the free resources that form the basis for rent are in finite supply – certainly, relative to the expanding market for the products that crucially depend upon them. For good reason, oil is on everyone's mind these days; but, in a crowded world, no resources are free for the taking. Everything in sight is 'owned' by someone of proven defensive capabilities. Hardly anything is left for easy grabbing from peoples too weak to put up serious resistance – a scandal in the world's media, if nothing else. Arable land is scarce, and the water to irrigate it has to be taken from where it collects and pumped to where it is needed. Drinking water is now bottled and sold to those who can afford it. Air pollution is now recognized as a hidden cost that (sooner or later) will have to be passed along to consumers and/or taxpayers.The basic stress on rent-seeking economies and their anchoring governments is that the Earth itself is limited, relative to its human population. In the best case, there must be conflict (that governments would have to negotiate) over access to resources and priorities for their use. But sharing and mutual problem solving do not come easily to government as we know it.

In fact, we are very far from the best conditions for negotiating the sharing that must take place. The long history of rent-seeking and oppression has left a legacy of bitterness, hatred, inequality and envy that bubbles up everywhere, with cruel, economically disruptive consequences that we read in the newspapers every morning, and watch on television at night. This poisonous climate of emotion and opinion is a second threat to

the rentier state as we've known it.

Third, the publics feeling these emotions are more articulate than formerly, with better means of communication, mobilization and coordination at their disposal. In the bad old days, the world's work could be done by slaves directed and driven along by a few overseers with whips. But that kind of work is performed by automated machinery these days. Work today needs highly trained and versatile personnel – full of initiative about their jobs but relatively ignorant and lethargic about their own situations vis-a-vis the rent-taking owners. Needless to say, this is a difficult combination. The media and advertising industries do their best to distract and tranquilize, but themselves become destabilizing when their net effect is to promote a vision of the good life that no one can afford.

A fourth novel problem for government is that modern technology, by perfecting the instruments of warfare, finally ruined that game itself for what government did really well: As recently as the 18th century, war was the sport of kings, and the handiest means for resolving the constant disputes over rental privileges. Today, all the fun and glory have gone out of the game, and even disputes between great nations cannot be worth the devastation. As the default mechanism for conflict resolution between sovereign states, war no longer avails.

The increasing influence and capability of non-state actors[15] relative to the national state is a fifth issue, already mentioned.

There's probably more, but these points will do for a start. The upshot is that states and governments everywhere are facing novel difficulties. We don't begin to know how to respond to these new political challenges. Indeed, we've scarcely begun to think about these challenges in the round. How governments, the powerful individuals behind them and the world as a whole will adapt to the new conditions is anybody's guess.

power, competence and discretion

It may be objected that rent is only one dimension of power but, to repeat, this just depends on how we choose our words: We can continue to think of power as a multi-dimensional attribute, and live with the occasional confusions that result. On the other hand, if we reserve the word 'power' for the prerogative of rent-taking (as I am doing here), then we need different words for the capability to get things done, and also for the prerogative of making decisions that will be binding on others. In these pages, I use '*competence*' or '*capability*' for that second dimension, and '*discretion*' for the third; dealing with them in separate sections below: *discretion* in Section 1.3 about 'Public Choice,' and *capability* in Section

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15   Such actors include Multinational Corporations, NGOs, the mass media and the Internet, religious groups, insurgent, terrorist and criminal organizations, and even some private individuals with significant international followings.

1.4 about 'Administration and Enforcement.'

But there is a key issue to discuss first – covered separately, though it is really inseparable from *rent* as such: Rent has to be collected somehow from people who would prefer to pay much less of it, or not to pay it at all. Part of the take must be allotted to those person who perform the actual labor of collection. Rent-payers must be kept docile somehow, and prevented from refusing or evading payment, or from organizing to eliminate the collecting 'landlord,' and share his functions amongst themselves on a cooperative basis. Accordingly, you can think of the section that follows on 'Coercion, Extraction and Civilization' just as a second part to this one.

1.2   Coercion, Extraction and Civilization

As we've seen, the rent-based economy depends on property 'rights,' which are first won and then defended by organized military force. But the troops and equipment to do this must be paid for with monies that first must be collected somehow – always from people who would prefer not to pay, but who will mostly do so, without too much fuss, if their alternatives are clearly worse. As Colbert, Louis XIV's finance minister, famously put it, "Taxation is the art of plucking a goose to obtain the most feathers for the least squawk." Like death, it has always been so, and always will be.

Competently managed, the upshot of Colbert's art is what political scientists call a coercion/extraction cycle[16] – somewhat like the combustion cycle of a candle which burns vaporized wax that gets melted and then vaporized by the candle's burning. The excess of tax revenue over extraction costs represents a kind of profit that can make the game worthwhile for those who undertake it.

However, the expenditures can be very great also; and when a government finds itself in the red, there are only three recourses: to squeeze harder for revenue, print more money, or borrow. Each expedient has its disadvantages, and none can be sustained indefinitely: Squeezing harder or inflating the currency cause resentment and make the government's situation more precarious almost immediately. Borrowing (to the extent that willing lenders can be found) avoids immediate resentment and has traditionally been the the most popular solution – despite its downside, which is to transfer the problem to future generations, creating an addiction to economic growth, or military adventuring, or both. This policy has been described as 'fiscal child abuse,' but usually beats the two alternatives because unborn kids have no political voice.

Now from one perspective, government need be no more than this: a well entrenched protection racket with coercion/extraction at its core.

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16   As Finer called it.

Indeed, some governments are little more. In practice, however, nearly all regimes, have found it in their own interests to put on a good show, and to give their peoples some value in return for what it takes. Thus, governments usually police the streets and marketplaces; hear grievances and dispense justice (or what can pass for it); build public works of all kinds – roads, harbors, aqueducts, sewer systems, and whatever other facilities; and subsidize religion and the arts. Much of what they do is obviously self-serving, but not all of it is directly so. Most modern governments do a million things, provide a million public goods and services, in response to public demands that they could also distract or reject if they wanted to.

Why do governments take on these extra functions? One obvious reason is to 'spread the discontent' and keep their subjects quiet. This is much cheaper, in the long run, than using naked violence and threats of violence to suppress resentments. The subtler reason is that by setting itself up as a manufacturer of public goods and encouraging a symbiotic relationship with the society it controls, a government makes itself 'legitimate' and indispensible – again reducing the costs of governing, and making its own position that much more secure. A more cynical reason is that by taking on these extra functions, a government increases both its cash flow and its penetration of society – its administrative capability. Finally, by providing all these 'public goods' – especially those that the private sector, left to its own devices, would not supply – government can actually assist the society to grow, thereby increasing its tax base – the extraction potential of the territories and peoples under its rule.

The central point here is that governments have usually found it expedient to temper their own coercion/extraction imperative with the multi-dimensional, often conflicted wishes of the peoples they govern. Sometimes eagerly, sometimes reluctantly, they find themselves in the business of keeping peace amongst opposing interest groups and factions, soothing the fears and passions of the general population, building a national community – a sense of national identity, to the extent possible – and (above all, perhaps) anchoring and gentrifying the internal rent game by restricting it to legal, non-violent means.

Governments thus seek to become, or at least be seen, as agents of peace, order, godliness and culture. At this new game, they are not always successful, and must often be deeply hypocritical because they can never get away from their rent-seeking roots. Their first imperative, always, is to hang on to rent and power: the name of the game. Yet the illiterate Mongol hordes who overran China from time to time, just like the Norman lords who crossed the Channel and took England, and just like the American forces in Iraq today, quickly discover that it is one thing to conquer a territory but quite another thing to govern it. Winning the war is the easy part. Setting up a stable, generally accepted coercion/extraction system

and government is much harder, because real acceptance (as opposed to sullen sufferance) can neither be forced nor bought. It can be earned, however; and, over time, it can become a habit to which is given a fancy name with positive connotations: *civilization*.

Even more than *power*, *civilization* is a multi-dimensional concept that can be approached from several angles. Yet, as with power, we can pin down a key aspect of it by following up Sir Kenneth Clark's distinction at the opening of his famous BBC television series on the history of art.[17] Standing on a bridge in the middle of Paris, over the River Seine, he contrasts the splendid architecture of the city with a hideous dragon's head from the the prow of a Viking ship that might have sailed up that river in the Dark Ages. He acknowledges that dragon head as great art, but excludes it as a topic of his discussion: "I can't define civilisation in abstract terms – yet," Clark says, contemplating the Parisian architecture. "But I think I can recognize it when I see it; and I am looking at it now."

From the perspective of coercion/extraction, we can perhaps supply his missing definition: The Viking raiders went everywhere and took what their long ships could carry. The French and Norman lords squatted on the land and organized a system of plunder to shame those seaborn marauders. By regularizing their demands, cloaking them in the forms of law, and giving some value for value extracted, they were able to take more, more often, and for much longer than the Vikings at their fiercest – through a system of taxation preferable to arbitrary, violent plunder for warriors and peasants alike.

Articulating this distinction, we can define civilization as the habit of submission to taxation (moderate, regularized extraction) on one side, linked with a habit on the other of using a good portion of the revenues thus collected for plausible public purposes. In one key aspect, a civilization consists precisely in this symbiotic relationship – which must be a matter of consistent government policy like the coercion/extraction cycle itself. Civilization is not *directly* the work of government, though the tax revenues pay for some of it. Rather, civilization is the work of an effectively governed society, in which plunder has been gentrified – i.e. purged of arbitrary violence, and rendered more or less steady and predictable – through stable systems of rent and tax and law. Its signature *pattern* is the spreading of discontent, so typical of effective governance: Everyone is slightly aggrieved, but few are desperately angry or miserable. There is freedom to experiment, and many thrive. Most have something to lose and hold some stake in the existing order. Few will risk their lives, or much of anything, to alter the status quo.

At the beginnings of the 21st century, as this is written, we clearly have the beginnings of a global society, but (on this definition) not even the glimmerings of a global civilization. That signature pattern is missing

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17   *Civilisation* (1969).

everywhere you look, for want of the governance that makes it possible. The global society has no effective global government, nor any functional equivalent – no really effective treaty organizations, for example.

If one asks why not, the obvious answer is the jealousy of sovereignty, jurisdiction and autonomy that all organizations (indeed, all individuals) naturally feel. There will not be anything like effective world government – therefore, no global civilization – until one of two things happen: Either a successful hegemonic and imperial power will impose a global order too strong and thorough to be effectively challenged. Or things must reach a point like that reached by the U.S, in 1787, by the principalities of Germany in 1871, by the nations of Europe in my own lifetime, where limits to sovereignty must be accepted because the alternatives, (for the sovereign powers themselves – not just their populations), are clearly worse. For the world today, I would bet on the second of these alternatives, eventually. But only after some catastrophe, on just the right scale, leaves orderly rent-taking no other options.

1.3   Administration and Enforcement

Administration is a comprehensive term for all those systems and procedures through which an organization tries to get things to happen according to its plans and intentions. Government bureaucracies tend to be unwieldy due to their nation-wide scope and the number of competing values and interests they are required to serve, but they are not different in principle from those of large private corporations. Administration is the process whereby any organization enforces its rules and implements its choices, against resistance if necessary.

But, what is it, precisely? What do administrators actually *do* for a living? People think of them contemptuously as 'time-servers' and 'paper-pushers,' but this is grossly unfair. In fact, many of the bureaucrats I used to work for on contract had entered the Canadian civil service from idealistic motives, wishing not just to make a living but to make a public contribution. Many were – or were working hard to become – knowledgeable and effective in their areas of responsibility. There were fools and slackers too, of course, but not conspicuously more than anywhere else. If many 'burned out' eventually, it was hard to blame them: The bureaucratic environment itself, reflecting the conditions and requirements of the administrator's role, conduces to cynicism, to a sense of unreality, to a counting of days until retirement. But, in the midst of this somewhat unreal, paper environment, there was real work to do; and most of the civil servants I knew were trying to do it, in the conditions as they found them.

That work can be described in terms of two key functions – both necessary in the private sector as well – regulation, and program delivery: To avoid chaos, decisions of the organization (however taken) must be put

in practice, and things must be done according to workable rules. That is the core of all administration everywhere.

Food safety, or rights of employees vis-a-vis employers might be offered as critical examples of the regulatory function, but there are hundreds of others. By act of Parliament (or Congress in the U.S.), civil servants are authorized to set conditions and standards in a given area, and to ensure that these are met. For reasons of public health and some political choices, animals must be raised, slaughtered, butchered, packed, shipped, stored and sold as meat under certain prescribed conditions. Legislation creates a power and responsibility to regulate, but the detailed requirements and methods of enforcement are largely left to the bureaucracy – in Canada, to the Department of Agriculture and Agri-food, for example, or to Fisheries and Oceans for the special case of fish and sea-food.

Civil Servants also design, implement and deliver programs to realize a government's objectives. Typically such programs are conceived and more or less designed in concept by legislators, by civil servants, and by the private parties affected – usually with some formal and informal collaboration amongst these groups, but with a good deal of conflict also.

The legislature then provides funding, authorization and a degree of supervision; the administration, working against and with influential private parties, designs the program details. The bureaucrats then purchase and organize appropriate human and technological machinery, and deliver the program with this machinery at hand. For example, in 1991, when the Parliament of Canada decreed a 15% Goods and Services Tax (GST) on almost everything sold by anyone to anyone, some people had to read through the legislation and then design and build a system to implement its terms. The computers needed to be programmed. The human clerks needed facilities and working instructions. As a business analyst (my job title), I was one of a small army, reading the legislation and expanding on its requirements, as input for the systems analysts who designed the computer programs, and programmers who wrote the code – which *became* the law in practice, whether or not it conformed to the law that Parliament had passed. This potential gap between intention and implementation is the crux of administration everywhere. It is a gap that can be narrowed when the conditions favor, but never completely closed.

What we call 'program delivery' includes the design and implementation of authorized systems and procedures, but in the strict sense it's what the organization and its computer systems *actually are doing*, once the whole thing is 'in production.' In the case of GST, program delivery was the work of collecting the legally prescribed revenues across the country, as one newly irritating aspect of the total business context.

I used to think of the whole process as a kind of avalanche, started by a pebble (a proposal, and then the Act of Parliament) tossed down from the

summit and gathering loose snow as it rolled, until it landed on the public's head.

Collection of revenue is something governments are fairly good at, and this unpopular tax, reduced to 5% in 2007, still brings the Canadian government some billions of dollars each year. But most other programs are far less successful in accomplishing their stated aims. Overall, and in general, whether in the public or the private sectors, administration has much in common with the proverbially futile enterprise of 'pushing on a string.' It is one thing to decide something; quite another to make it so. A boss man and his council decide and intend something at the top levels of their organization, but getting this to happen at the bottom, and then amongst the public at large, is another story. Too many layers lie in between, with each individual in each of these layers having perceptions and interests of his own, and staying only more-or-less obedient to the orders he is given. Even assuming no slippage at all between original intentions and the actual program delivery, a program may be overlooked, or ignored, or actively resisted by the very people it is supposed to help.

For our purpose, the crucial insight is this: Though the tools of administation are very powerful, they are clumsy and blunt – more like sledgehammers and chainsaws than pincers and scalpels. The result is: governments find it much easier to do harm than good, and often do harm even when sincerely trying to do good. Under pressure to *do something,'* both from the public and in their own bureaucratic self-interest, they often make a bad situation worse. The disastrous history of Soviet agriculture or of American campaigns against alcohol and other recreational drugs show how good intentions can lead to very bad results. Even of individuals we say that, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions"; and this is much more true of large organizations and governments – true to an extent that members of the public (subject as we all are to government's brute power) find difficult to believe.

The upshot is that governments can do some things with relative ease, but others not at all, or only with great difficulty and at enormous social and/or political cost. The US government could put a man on the moon once it had decided to do so, but has so far been unable to implement a nation-wide voting system of provable integrity. It built a terrific highway system, but its health care, education and financial systems are in deep trouble.

On the bottom line, threat, reward and persuasion are government's only recourses, and each of these has its limitations. Governments can threaten, intimidate and punish people to get them to do what is wanted. Yet threats are just bluffs if they are not convincingly followed through; while enforcement teaches counter-productive lessons of evasion and resistance. And worse: enforcement is self-limiting in its effectiveness. A man in prison or dead or just put out of business is not doing useful work

and paying his taxes. Effective enforcement tends to expel or erase people from organized society before it makes them docile and obedient.

As a second recourse, governments can extract and redistribute wealth, attaching conditions at both ends of this cycle to encourge desired behavior. The drawback here is that such inducements are costly to administer, and likely to very expensive in themselves if generous enough to affect anyone's behavior. In practice, the cost of qualifying and applying for a government grant or contribution, and then complying with its terms, is often more than the contribution is worth. Negative incentives (e.g. the high excise taxes on alcohol and tobacco) invite smuggling, or other forms of evasion, and incur costs of enforcement. A further limitation is that people have areas in their lives – ethnic and religious customs, for example – that are simply not for sale: where programs offering payment to encourage change are considered offensive in themselves.

And that brings us to persuasion, the third recourse of government. 'Communication' (as we call the propaganda we practice or approve of) is the easiest and cheapest but also the least effective of government's tools unless substantial openness to persuasion already exists. Even then, it is precarious, since people who are persuaded today may change their minds tomorrow. Or they may agree in theory, but go their own way in concrete situations, unless effectively threatened and punished. In any case, effective persuasion requires a reputation for credibility which is itself expensive and fragile. Still, governmental persuasion can accomplish much, when it is feasible at all. Its most effective method is to frame public discussion in the regime's preferred terms, so that people are not even aware how they are being manipulated. But even this technique goes only so far. When a rival 'spin' really catches on, a government pushing a different and preferred story just undermines its own credibility.

The fact is that many features of any society are beyond the reach of effective government. Or they can be improved a little, but not really changed. When a regime is really determined to do the impossible, it may well ruin the lives of a lot of people, and still fail to achieve its goals.

administration today

New ideology, technology, or methodology does not free administation from its inherent constraints. In fact, though the last century and a half have seen tremendous technical progress in administration as in everything else, administrative systems seem less on top of their workloads now than in Queen Victoria's time. There have been improvements in paper-handling – like the modern filing cabinet and file folder, the stapler and the humble paper clip. A series of inventions like the telegraph, telephone, radio and TV, the photo-copier and FAX, and then Internet (with all the facilities that it now offers) have made the transmission of information, propaganda and orders, dirt cheap, reliable,

and practically instantaneous. At the same there has been progress in various aspects of management: organization design, finance and budgeting, personnel, managment, operations research, program evaluation, and others.

With all these formidable improvements, the capabilities of government and its penetration of society expanded greatly. Yet the demands upon it increased even faster as cities and population grew, and as society as a whole became more complicated: more productive and wealthy in some regions, but at the same time more tightly integrated and subject to disruption. Human nature remained about the same. Grievances became more articulate, and tended to get much greater publicity; procedures manuals grew thicker, packed with innumerable rules and policy values, often in conflict with one another. Parkinson's law[18] – the tendency of organizations to grow as bureacrats make work for one another – continued to hold. For all these reasons, and quite apart from the intellectual and political problems of deciding what needs to be done, administrations have become outlandishly powerful and complicated, but decreasingly effective overall. Between the controls on its bridge (where public decisions are taken) and all the places in socety at large where things get done, the administrative workload is enormous; and it's no one's fault that Spaceship Earth needs better administration than it is ever likely to see.

1.4   Public Choice

When we speak of 'public choice' we mean one of two completely different things: Either we mean the choices made on society's behalf by some legitimate government. Or we mean the choices that *affect* society as a whole, regardless of who makes them or how. It's just here that the distinction between government and governance becomes critical: Casual choices made, sometimes by single individuals outside of formal government often have greater consequence than the formal choices made within;[19] but they lack the legal status and authority conferred by due political process. The difference between these two kinds of public choices can be important: When formal government and the informal governance of habit, sentiment or personal influence come into conflict, there is apt to be trouble – bloodshed if both sides are determined to have their way. Constitutional law tries to contain such conflicts; but there may be no law, or the conflict may go too deep – or have stakes too high – to be contained by legal process.

In this first section of my essay, we are discussing the role and power

18   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkinson's_Law.

19   e.g. Martin Luther's decision to pin his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg, or John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. There are endless other examples.

of formal government. The choices that concern us here are made by legislators, judges, functionaries – or by autocrats and dictators in some places. The paper as a whole, however, is concerned with the interaction between organized government and the other major institutions of society: with tribes, with religious groups, with corporate entities in the marketplace, with networked persons and interest groups of many kinds, now operating on a global scale. When public choices made by governments collide with public choices in the broader sense, government is apt to see the conflict as a problem of enforcement and administration, as we've just discussed. But, well before it comes to that point, there is a different kind of interaction: Before the state can enforce a law or implement a policy, it must decide what its law and policy *are*, through the process we refer to as *politics*: the means by which society evolves an institution that will govern it, articulate and select the goals it will collectively and officially pursue, and then formulate and enact the laws, programs and policies to administer. Because a society of any size or complexity is never homogeneous, there will always be different groups with different perceptions, values and interests. Typically, in any given area, there will be people who want the government to 'do something,' and others who wish it would keep its nose out of their business. The regime itself will be such a group, divided into various factions.

Accordingly, politics necessarily involves conflict – overtly violent, or disarmed and ritualized in some way – for influence or direct possession of the machinery of government. For a rough analogy, think of six people fighting for the controls of a car as it races along the highway. Sane passengers, sharing a common interest in living, would pull over and stop to have their argument about who will drive and in which direction, before getting back on the road. Unfortunately, in many situations, this conflict, or negotiation, must be conducted in real time, with the vehicle operating at full speed, because there is no way, or no time, to stop for a safe off-line dispute. Let's speak of *political management* – of Spaceship Earth or whatever system – for cases of this kind, comprised of various stakeholders with common and conflicting interests, forced nonetheless to make collective decisions.

public choice today

Most books on politics or political theory take up the question of how such conflicts are or should be resolved. That discussion is largely beyond this essay's scope, though we'll return to it briefly in Section 3.2. Our concern is with the broader point raised in the introduction – that on a small crowded planet with a high-tech economy and weapons systems, political management as we've known it is just not good enough to deliver the (global) public goods so desperately needed: world peace, and a just and stable world economy within a stabilized world eco-system.

Governments and political systems are not configured to make the necessary choices, nor to implement them once they are made. Having evolved to exploit and populate a relatively enormous world, they are now required to administer and make public choices for the relatively small one that Boulding described; and they are just not equipped to do that. That is the underlying reason why governments and political systems are floundering today, unable to cope effectively with the issues that confront them. But it is important to grasp the changes that have taken place, that have made public choice so much more difficult than it used to be.

To begin with, and as already noted, the technical correctness of such choices didn't use to matter much in the grand scheme of things. Whatever historical disasters occurred were only blips in an over-all story of advancing mastery and rising human population. Nature was fertile, and any loss of life, human or non-human, was easily made up in the next generation. Even a real collapse, a real Dark Age, would last no more than a thousand years or so, in just one corner of the globe. Today, partly because the tools available to government are so much more powerful, partly because the systems in need of regulation are so vast, powerful and tightly integrated, the consequences of bad policy can be far worse – perhaps lethal for the whole species.

Then too, our expectations are higher than before. Life itself seems more valuable to people who expect, with reasonable luck, to live comfortably to a ripe old age. Today when people are suffering, for whatever reason, we expect government to do something about it – because we know that technical means are usually available, the political weather permitting. The options available to government, both for good and harm, are much greater than they used to be.

Another reason problem for political management today must be our world's large, dense urban populations – better educated, with much better access to information, better means of communication, and an extensive literature of rights and grievances at their disposal. As well, in the developed world, at least, the rural population is no longer so very different from the urban one – perhaps more culturally homogeneous than the big cities, but not so isolated as it used to be. There is one major difference, however: Much more than the countryside, city people are dependent on a wide range of public services, but still within a political climate and mind-set that remains rural in many respects. As much as ever, there are some major issues and misunderstandings between town and country – which, however, are far less separate and radically different than they used to be.

Now add in the facts of globalization itself – that populations *here*, in this part of the world, are closely linked to populations *there* – by commerce, by family connection, and by indifference of the natural environment to our administrative boundaries. Consider too that news

spreads instantly around the world, with corresponding impacts on the various governments – as challenge, threat or opportunity. Finally, recall the basic point we started with – Boulding's point about a closed world – not nearly so open as formerly for economic exploitation and the externalizing of costs.

There are probably further reasons why public choice is now more difficult than it used to be, but these will do for our purposes. It is a constant of history, a truism, that it's much easier to know that 'something must be done' than to decide exactly what to do, let alone gain agreement on who should pay for doing it. In all their aspects, modernity and post-modernity have sharpened this basic fact.

1.5   Conclusion: The Once and Future Government

Human history is largely the history of various groups fighting for and defending prerogatives of rent on choice portions of the earth's surface. The contending forces must be well organized, and the entrepreneurial agency that builds and maintains a successful organization of this kind is called a *king* or (eventually) a whole *government*. When successful, that agency most easily and lucratively collects its rent by granting portions to lesser entrepreneurs who pay for these privileges with service, with leasing payments or with an outright purchase price, sub-dividing and delegating in their turn, and building what we call 'the private sector' in the process: farms, mines, factories, living places, and everything else.

In this way, the Romans organized the whole of the Mediterranean basin: Western Europe as far north as Hadrean's Wall, Africa as far south as the Sahara, and Asia as far east as the rival Persian Empire into a single system of rent-paying and recognized possession. The United States, after the global wars of the 20th century, has been attempting something similar (albeit with somewhat different means) in the whole world. That is what it means to run an empire. In between, the Mongols, the Muslim Caliphs and numerous other powers have had their innings at this game. After whatever successes, these empire-builders ended by driving their societies into bankruptcy,[20] leaving the field for some new conqueror to try his own and his people's luck. From Spaceship Earth's perspective, the results have not been happy – the wars becoming larger and more devastating, the ecological harm spreading farther and deeper as technology advanced.

The national state as it is today evolved mostly in Europe, beginning roughly in the 15th century as one aspect of the colonial scramble that followed. Or perhaps we should put it the other way: that the competition for empires abroad was driven by and made one phase of the consolidation of the nation-states in Western Europe and England. Either way, the two processes happened together and were clearly inter-related: The Europe of

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20   See ?? book, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (??).

1450 was distinctly backward in comparison with medieval China, India or the Islamic world. By 1650, just two hundred years later, the ships of several distinct European nations had sailed around the world, put down colonies everywhere, and brought home accurate maps and geographical descriptions. By 1687, Newton had launched a comprehensive science of Mechanics, with unified laws for both planetary and terrestrial motion.[21] The 'modern' age was well under way.

Two hundred years later still, by the end of the 19th century or so, in one field after another, that modern mind-set and order was visibly changing into something else – more complex, more disputatious, more confusing – and we date what we call the '*post-modern*' as beginning around that time. In particular, as became bloodily obvious in two 'world wars' – better seen, perhaps, as one European Civil War – the heyday of the nation state was passing. Though the sentiment of nationalism remained as strong, or even stronger than ever, the European system of national sovereignties achieved a zenith and then encountered the novel factors just reviewed, far from resolved as yet, which frame the 'Spaceship Earth Problem' as a whole. From that problem's perspective, today's nation-states are both too large and too small: too large to cope with the cultural stesses evident in the metropolitan cities and their surrounding countryside; too small to cope with the global footprints of those cities, or to civilize the global competition for rent.

We shift our focus now, from formal government – an institution riding upon society – to the global society itself. The latter, of course, is a much larger system: Government, however large and powerful, is only one of its institutions. When governments collapse, societies have means of evolving new ones, because political entrpreneurs will either sprout up internally or intrude from more successful regimes abroad. To some extent, a society can even direct itself, with no formal government at all – both its economy and its social *mores* functioning (more or less well) as entirely self-organizing systems.

Accordingly, in the discussion that follows, I use the word 'governance' as a generic term for the totality of influences, **not just government alone, but from whatever, source**, that guide us through our daily lives, and in our various relationships. That concept includes the regulations and policies of formal government, but is not limited to them. Governance is similar to 'culture,' but with this difference: Where *culture* is imagined as a repertoire of influential patterns (*memes*, as these are sometimes called), *governance* is conceived as a dynamic process or system – a flux of powerful suggestions guiding the social dance, though not necessarily in a self-sustaining way, as we imagine culture doing. The mechanisms of such governance are sometimes strong enough to resist the

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21   In his master work, entitled *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, but usually called *Principia Mathematica* for short.

edicts of formal government; sometimes, even, to overcome and nullify them. Regardless of what a government plans and commands, society's self-governance always gets the last word because, in the last reckoning, the formal government is itself just one of its products.

2. Society and Its Governance

We think about society in various ways, from various professional perspectives and the purpose at hand: Economists see it as a huge marketplace, with trading behavior in all walks of life – even when the bargaining is tacit, and no money changes hands. When the issue is sustainability, we think of it as an open system drawing energy and other resources from the funds and flows of Nature. Students of government sometimes talk about society as "a ship of state," or as a willful horse, precariously ridden and directed by the regime in power.

For our purpose here, we can think of society as a sort of cognitive ecology of competing suggestions,[22] that organizes governments for itself, among its other institutions. In contrast to the policy maker's view of society as organized by government and its laws and programs from the top down, we want to think of government from the bottom up, as a creature of society and its political process. Society is a self-organizing system; and one of the things that it self-organizes is its government: a central clearing house for the suggestions that flow around and through it.

Then the people in society we can think of as being formed and guided not so much by government directly, as by the social contexts of their own lives – *including* the laws and programs of government, but much else as well.

Accordingly, we'll be thinking of the policy maker's metaphorical 'horse' not from its rider's (or ruler's) perspective, but from its own. Society can throw off its government, and sometimes does so, but never just runs free afterwards, as anarchists urge it should. Instead, and usually rather quickly, it configures and then submits to a new ruler and government, often more demanding and crueler than the last. From this new regime's perspective, society is indeed like a willful beast; the ruler's problem is to get it to carry the burdens placed upon it, and to march where it is led. But from society's perspective, the problem is to get that ruler – be he king or dictator or president – to lead it where it wants to go, to the lush pastures or cozy stall that it believes must lie somewhere ahead. The beast bears its rider's weight partly because it fears to do otherwise, but partly because it hopes for benefits from doing so. And we should not forget that those citizens whose relations with government are shaped by hope of gain are mostly of a different social class from those driven mainly by fear.

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22   Reference ??

Our focus on the social context of individual motives and choices is not meant to deny or minimize personal autonomy, nor the divergence of human perceptions and interests. Rather, it seeks a handle on the *sources* of this divergence. And we shall find that the view from social context not only allows the question of why individuals hold the motives and desires they do, but opens space for a meaningful notion of *public* interest, apart from the personal interests of the individuals concerned. Context is all: It would not occur to anyone in a leaky lifeboat that there is no such thing as a common interest, or that the persons in it are not a meaningful group. In such situations you pump your heart out along with everyone else, and do your best to keep from tipping the boat – and to prevent anyone else from tipping it. Of course, that common interest can be overwhelmed by personal ones. Once the boat turns over, the time for cooperative activity and group consciousness is gone and it's every man for himself.

Somewhere between these extremes is the tension of ordinary social life: a constant straddling and fudging between personal and group interests – a tension that shapes us *both* as self-interested individuals and self-identifying group members, *at the same time*. What we call *society* is the context, emerging from the behaviors of the several individuals, that informs and gives meaning to their activities, even as it emerges from them. This reciprocal interdependence of whole on parts and parts on whole is no different from the *hermeneutic circle*[23] of literary theory. The crucial insight is that wholes and parts are interdependent. A part is such by virtue of its place and role within the whole system, just as that whole is just its parts and the relations between them. Wholes are no more and no less '*real*' than the parts of which they are comprised – which themselves are wholes comprised of smaller parts. When you look closely enough at anything, it disappears. But the table spread before you is 'real' enough to eat on; and what we call 'society' is real enough to make arrangements for the food, the table, the cutlery and the guests themselves.

We can see society as a system built from the the inter-personal relationships of individuals. *And* we must see those individuals as having been shaped as social persons, (not left as unshaped human animals), by their histories of participation in various relationships and groups – beginning, of course, with the family relationships that they encountered as newborns. We can see government, then, as an institution evolved on top of society (and, yes, riding and guiding it) to anchor and gentrify its rent games as already discussed. Accordingly, to imagine a properly governed world we must imagine a world that properly governs itself. We must imagine a global society functioning sustainably and more or less at peace – with governing institutions (of whatever form) anchoring its rent games in some generally accepted way. This may or may not be a sufficient condition, but it is surely necessary: An unsustainable global

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23   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutic_circle .

society racked by chronic violence around the rent-taking privilege is scarcely being *governed*.

More generally: The problem in this section is to conceptualize society in some manageable way, that still does justice to its unspeakable complexity. Most political theorizing fails grossly toward one extreme or the other: Either it seizes on one feature of human social interaction – role playing, say, or 'trucking and bartering,' or status seeking, or whatever – and treats that as the core of human social behavior. Or it gives up without a try, saying that there is no such coherent *entity* as society, or that society exists but is too complicated to understand. Neither attitude is helpful; and we can do better by considering the various 'modes of sociality' (as I will call them) through which societies configure themselves, and socialize their human inhabitants.

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After the basic one-on-one relationships and small groups from which society is formed, sociologists have identified four such modes, called *tribes*, formal *organizations*, *markets* and *networks* respectively. In combination, and often competing or jostling one another, these modes give rise to numerous institutions that govern the activities of its members – both through formal rules and commands, *and* through informal cues and suggestions. "A world that could govern itself" needs a degree of harmony – not too much serious conflict, at least – between these institutions of formal and informal governance. When the edicts of government collide with established attitudes and customs, violence and human tragedy result.

2.1 Relationships, Networks and Groups

Society begins with the relationships that people people enter into – even those as brief and casual as between strangers on the street. When people can pass each other on the sidewalk with reasonable confidence of not being robbed or assaulted or suicide-bombed, then a degree of civility is already present.

But this minimum is the very least that a complex society requires, if it to function smoothly and well. People need to buy and sell from each other in reasonable confidence that they will not be cheated. They need to trust that promises will be kept, that formal contracts will be honored. They need to trust that persons elected or appointed or hired for a job, will keep faith with roles they have accepted, and do more or less what is expected of them. Children need to trust their parents, and learn to be trustworthy themselves. Societies can scrape along as such basic trusts are eroded, but they grow weaker and more precarious as their transaction costs grow higher. The self-governance of societies, their ability to adapt

and endure, rests on this foundation of solidarity – not the Brotherhood of Man, necessarily, but confidence in a basic civility.

Several or many individuals linked through their relationships comprise a network, eventually a social group. The difference is a matter of perspective, really: The word 'group' marks off one set of individuals from the rest of the world while ignoring its internal structure. The concept of a social network connotes that internal structure of relationships while ignoring the rest of the world. But few groups are so amorphous that every member relates to every other in the same way; and networks must be considered and studied as open systems in some external world. In practice, networks can be arbitrarily large or small, while the boundaries of groups can be sharp or fuzzy. One of Sherlock Holmes' cases concerns a fictitious group called "The Red-Headed League," comprised of individuals with red hair. Such a group, if it existed, would need at least a spokesman and an organizing committee to do so much as arrange a picnic, and there would be disputes whether certain blonde or brown-haired individuals were reddish enough to join. The point is: all social groups are networks at the same time, and most are somewhat vague or open-ended in their criteria for membership. In particular, the concept of a society has both these properties. Troublesome as the term is for historians and sociologists, it remains an indispensable concept. But the term becomes more usable when we think of societies as networks of relationship, comprised of interesting sub-networks that motivate and guide their individual members.

To repeat a little: At least four major types of sub-structure have been identified: the tribe, the organization, the market, and the voluntary-participation network (simply called a network, though we must remember that the three other types are also networks, though of different kinds). We can use these four concepts, these four types of sub-structure, to think about the requirements and frictions of a global society.

2.2   Extended Families and Tribes

Clan, *tribe*, *sept*, *phratry*: These are some different names for a pattern that has been found everywhere as the default mode of society – much more so than Hobbes' hypothetical "war of all against all." Tribal society[24] is based on extended kinship relationships, but should be understood more generally as the logic of Us and Them. As a Bedouin proverb puts it "I against my brother. I and my brother against my cousin. I and my cousin against the world." *Brother* and *cousin* need not be literal blood-relations. They may be close and somewhat more distant affiliates of whatever kind. But however such consanguinities are grounded, their over-all effect is to subordinate the individual to more intimate and then progressively more

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24   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribe

distant groups to which he or she belongs. Each individual is free to contribute loyalty and support as he sees fit. He is, however, under heavy pressure to stand with close affiliates against more distant ones, and with even the distant ones against complete strangers. The pressure stems from a knowledge that he in turn will have to call on those affiliates for support at some future time. If he does not take up arms and join the *posse* when called on, he can expect scant aid in his own time of need.

In the pure tribal system, each individual stands as a representative of the group, can dishonor the whole group by his or her transgression, and is in turn dishonored by the transgression of any other member. If a transgression calls for revenge, this may be taken not just against the individual who committed the wrong, but against *any* group member – in effect, punishing the group for not policing its members properly. When a wrong is committed, there is an obligation to take revenge; and failure to do so is itself a source of dishonor. In this way, feuds get started, widen, and last for generations. A few of these have made it into folklore and literature. _Burnt Njal's Saga_ recounts the course and final settlement of one great feud that actually occurred in Iceland between 960 and 1020 AD, just in the epoch of its conversion to Christianity.[25] The Hatfield-McCoy feud, lasting from 1878 to 1891 in West Virginia and Kentucky, and making it all the way to the American Supreme Court,[26] would be a more recent example.

As all the members of a tribe are collectively responsible and punishable for any member's misdeed, there is strong group-pressure for conformity. A woman who gets too 'liberated,' a girl who makes too free or marries without her father's permission may pay with her life. Such honor killings are still common in a number of Muslim countries, and have made headlines in Europe and North America when they occured in immigrant communities in the West.[27]

Barbaric as these tribal practices feel to modern sensibilities, in the absence of a reasonably honest state and legal system they serve a positive social purpose. Indeed, as in large parts of the Middle East today, where the state is perceived as oppressive or corrupt, the tribal code still retains much greater authority than the nominal government. It provides a kind of law where there is no law – a degree of stability that anthropologists have called '*balanced opposition*,' that curbs the "war of all against all" and preserves a kind of order, without the interventions of a Hobbesian sovereign. Lacking accepted law, collective responsibility, honor, and feuding shape every action and thought, often calling for quick shifts in

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25   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Njals_saga.

26   Mahon v. Justice, 127 U.S. 700 (1888). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatfield-McCoy_feud and http://supreme.justia.com/us/127/700/case.html.

27   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor_killing.

loyalty. Unite with your erstwhile enemy in opposition to a more distant foe; treat all members of an enemy group as potential targets; demand honorable behavior from members of your own group; and maintain your own and your group's honor by a clear willingness to sacrifice for the collective good. Warring Sunni and Shiite sects from Beirut to Baghdad follow principles of balanced opposition. They may be at each other's throats, yet they'll unite in opposition to an outside threat, as when Shiite Iran harbors members of Sunni al Qaeda on the run from America. In a sense, Islam's founding triumph was to raise the stakes of balanced opposition by uniting all the Arab tribes in an ultimate feud against infidel outsiders.[28]

Of course, this tribal system is vulnerable to feuding, xenophobia, nepotism, fanatic traditionalism, and so forth. But it at least sustains a group culture, defends group interests and answers the most basic of all social questions: Who belongs here and who doesn't? Who's in and who's out?

To repeat, then: tribal structure along these lines appears to be the default condition of social life. The hypothetical "war of all against all" disappears swiftly when it occurs, because distinctions of *Us* and *Them* are swiftly drawn – on whatever basis. It precedes every other form of social organization and reappears when other forms have broken down. It lingers in the forests and mountain regions where the king's men do not patrol. It is found on the streets of Inner City neighborhoods where the police don't go, and amongst criminals who have to manage their conflicts without recourse to law. It is the mode through which 'organized crime' gets (in that manner of speaking) organized. As the spontaneous defense of custom and culture against transgression and intrusion of outsiders, it is the primitive origin of society as such.

strengths and weaknesses

For today's political thinkers and government policy makers, the key question is this: Why are tribal patterns proving so durable, even today, and how could they be either supplanted or reconciled with more 'modern' forms of social coordination and governance: the government and the market? The question is difficult only because it's not easy for people and institutions to be candid about their own weaknesses. We'll shortly be considering some strengths and weaknesses of organization, and then of the market also; but what we must do now is look honestly at the question as it might present itself to a clansman – whether of 18th century Scotland or of present-day Afghanistan – forced to choose between supporting or resisting the encroachments of the central government and the global

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28   From *I and My Brother Against My Cousin*, a review by Stanley Kurtz of Phillip Carl Salzman's *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*.

market.

The clansman would see that his people were poor and weak by comparison with his more organized neighbors. But he would perceive too that the latter pay a steep price for their wealth and military might in the regimentation and drivenness of their lives, and in some other ways as well. He would be appalled by their greed and their immorality, and especially by the shamelessness of their women. He might perceive the men as hen-pecked and unmasculine, with no sense of honor at all. While a tribal woman might envy the luxuries and privileges of her 'civilized' sisters, she might be aware too of how those women were torn between their careers and their families. She might see the perpetual Western sex-tease as undignified and immoral, and the modern nuclear family (with its high divorce rate) as dysfunctional.

Tribal societies have tended to make a clear separation of sex roles, with the men as warriors and the women as breeding-stock. The simple reason for this is that, as a biological fact, their males are reproductively expendable while their females are not, because the population of fighting men twenty years hence is proportional to the number of nubile females today. Except as a desperate last resort, then, sending women into combat is a form of tribal suicide – a fact that tribal women can understand as well as men do, but that no longer seems relevant in the modern world.

A friend of mine who has taught ESL in Saudi Arabia and Iran and China used to say that, "From inside, all cultures make sense." To us 'civilized' types, the tribal pattern looks brutal and barbaric; on the other side, tribal peoples have their own vocabulary of contempt for us. In any case, we must remember that tribes revive and endure when the organizations, markets and voluntary networks have mostly collapsed. Tribal societies are under heavy pressure today, and there are hardly any pure ones left; but they may well outlast the encroaching global society. We should not be too sure that time is on civilization's side.

the tribe today

Tribal societies lingered longest in environments that were too harsh for civilized life – jungles, mountains, deserts, tundras where civilization could not easily penetrate. From ancient times there have been kingdoms and empires in the lands where agriculture was advantageous, and especially where extensive trade was profitable. Many tribal groups survived within such regions, resisting the state's authority wherever and whenever it could not be cost-effectively projected. By and large, that is still the pattern today. There are some caveats however:

First, there are no regions today that are so remote and/or forbidding that a modern state cannot penetrate when it really wants to. There are few so lacking in rent-potential or strategic value as to give no motive for obnoxious exactions and interventions by organized states. Afghanistan is

a case in point.

Second, most tribal peoples today are looking to have the best of both worlds – to retain what they value of the old ways while taking what they can from the new. How to do this – what to keep and what to toss, what to embrace and what to shun – is no trivial question. Globalization and modernity in themselves are threats and opportunities both, but not in equal ways to everyone. Thus, tribal societies find themselves deeply divided, sometimes violently so, over the issues raised.

Finally, the penetration runs both ways. Even as first world armies and corporations increase their presence in tribal areas, so there is an increasing presence of tribal peoples in many first world nations – w hich have had to adapt themselves somehow to all the slaves, immigrants and 'guest workers' who sought to retain elements, at least, of their tribal culture and mind-set in the world's most cosmpolitan cities. Much more than elements, sometimes. 'Honor killing' is a frequent occurrence not just in the Middle East, but now in London and Berlin as well. But this is only the extreme example of cultural disruption as a two-way street. Lesser clashes of 'modern' norms and values with 'traditional' ones are happening all the time.

Perhaps the most important social distinction in the world today is between those people who are basically comfortable with the pluralism and cosmopolitanism of post-modern global society and those who feel profoundly threatened by it. Conflicts arising from this distinction will be troubling the world's peace for decades and generations to come.

2.3   Organizations

Tribal society is primordial – harking back to human pre-history, and perhaps to anthropoid biology before that. At some point, formal organizations and rudimentary governments arose to challenge and largely supplant the tribal groupings that had formed the basis of human societies from ancient times. Hierarchical organization – stronger, more stable, more readily extensible – was the first great alternative to the tribal model of society. Enduringly symbolized by those great pyramids not just in Egypt, but all over the ancient world, it enabled powerful kingdoms and empires, standing armies and bureaucracies – in a word, *states*, huge business enterprises, and other social machines all with a similar basic design. This displacement of families and tribes by large organizations went much further and faster in some places than others, and has not gone to completion even today. Why did it happen, and what exactly was involved?

The basic pattern of true organization is that of any team or work group under a leader, who receives reports and suggestions from his people and takes decisions for them, giving orders that they will follow. Teams of this kind are efficient for hunting, for fighting – in fact, for

almost any purpose whatever. They allow the knowledge and experience of individual team members to be collected and utilized. They allow choices to be made swiftly, with as much counsel and discussion as the leader wants, or as time permits. They allow specific tasks to be assigned to whoever, in the leader's judgment, can best perform them. Most importantly, perhaps, they resolve much of the competition for status and influence within the group as expeditiously and stably as possible by reducing it to a one-shot competition for the position of leadership. The working assumption is that such competitions will usually be won by the strongest available contender (all things considered). This winner then gets to run a fairly stable social machine until a challenger supplants him.

As another great strength, this pattern can be extended almost indefinately:

- either downward, if team members are in turn leaders of lower-level groups; or
- upward, if group leaders meet or work together on some matter, and elect a leader over themselves.

Adding successive levels in these ways, the whole structure can grow arbitarily large, though no individual is required to supervise more subordinates than he can manage. The number of immediate co-workers for each individual is also limited by the requirement to "go through channels: to gain the cooperation of individuals in other branches of the organization, you get your leader to deal with their leaders. Cumbersome as this approach can be, it assures the necessary input and buy-in from all the work-groups concerned.

For relatively small, specific one-shot tasks, such formal organization is not needed: groups of humans can cooperate spontaneously to get them done. To put a dinner party together, put up a barn, go steal some cattle from a neighboring tribe – for tasks like these, no formal organization is needed. People spontanteously turn out to help, partly because such work-parties can be fun, and partly because social 'brownie points' are gained for showing up, and lost for not showing. People can even put themselves voluntarily under the direction of an *ad hoc* leader: the hostess of the dinner party, the best amateur carpenter, the fighting man with a reputation. They can do this easily because the subordination involved is not a permanent state of affairs, and because no recognition of general inferiority, no lowering of over-all status, is involved. Quite the contrary, in fact. People actually *gain* status by showing that they will subordinate their ego-needs to a task at hand and its 'natural' (i.e. consensually recognized) leader. Tribal groupings can be very good at work of this kind.

But with jobs that require on-going commitment, all these factors are reversed. It's one thing to ask people to come early to a party to help with the preparations – quite another to ask them to come and baby-sit for four hours every Thursday afternoon. It's one thing to rustle up a posse or a cattle raiding expedition – quite another to ask troops to march, stand

watch, and fight in line. Formal organization develops because the informal kind won't do for any task that can't get done with a burst of energy and enthusiasm. For any real *work*, that is to say – that irritating stuff that nobody wants to do, that must get done on a regular basis no matter what.

For work of this kind, there must be clearly established 'responsibilities': a euphemistic way of saying that it must be clear whom to blame if they are done poorly, or not at all. In other words, you need well-defined roles with known incumbents filling them. You need someone at the top to be responsible for everything, with subordinates underneath to whom specific responsibilities are delegated. In fact, *what you need is a kind of social machine, whose individual members behave as much as possible like interchangeable components* – holding their responsibilities and performing the tasks assigned to them, using personal judgment sometimes, but never in opposition to their orders or the rule-book – only to apply those abstract rules and policies to the concrete situation as they find it. In short, you need the structure that organization charts and job descriptions document, whether or not these are actually produced.

As a means for getting nasty or tedious work done, organization has matchless strengths. For all the things we use it for, it seems unbeatable and irreplaceable. There's probably no way that any complex society can avoid depending on it – for government, for military and political operations, for the production of goods and services – for everything that requires disciplined human effort toward predictable results. How natural, then, to fantasize that the whole cosmos runs this way – as a 'Great Chain of Being' with God at the top and and his subordinates below, at their assigned posts on the cosmic org chart. How natural to dream of a totally organized society, of whatever ideology, with everyone in his place, productive and content.

That dream is repugnant to some and attractive to others; but there are several reasons why it isn't going to happen, why the word 'bureaucratic' remains a pejorative. There are, in fact, several basic limitations to formal organization as a principle of sociality.

bureaucratic imperatives

Organizations function bureaucratically because they exist to get irksome chores done. In an ideal world, the decision-makers would first put their heads together, then rub their magic lantern to get all necessary work done, instantaneously and perfectly, by an obedient genie. In the real world, a bureaucratic pyramid of ordinary men and women must fall short of this ideal for many reasons, with two central ones paramount.

Their first perennial weakness is that the search for effectiveness and control is self-limiting by its very nature, creating clear incentives:

- to break the rules or write them with such ample loopholes so that no breaking is needed;
- to compile mountains of information which must then be held closely against potential opposition;
- to create resentment and resistance by suppressing dissent;
- to organize rival bureaucracies competing for the same scarce resources to pursue conflicting objectives.

In all these ways, organizations are always self-defeating to some extent, productive of the very chaos that they exist to limit or prevent.

The second fundamental weakness is just that organizations must be staffed, top to bottom, with finite, erratic, self-interested individuals. Office-holders are self-serving. Their knowledge is incomplete and often defective. Wisdom, public-spiritedness and courage are in short supply. The orders passed down from on high are not always wise or good. Having their own perceptions and interests in the way they do their jobs, subordinates' interpretation and obedience to their orders is imperfect, as well. Officials at all levels can be threatened, and some of them can be bought. The 'revolving door' between public and private organizations assures a certain coziness between them. In particular, there is a chronic discrepancy of viewpoint between the uppermost, 'political' levels of an organization, and the senior working level just below. The latter have first-hand knowledge which the former lack, and tend to be focused on the concrete requirements of their jobs, while the former are more concerned with the political environment. The tension between these levels often takes the form of 'whistleblowing' and unauthorized leaks to newspapers. But everyone seeks promotion, and no one wants to 'blot his copybook.' Organizations suffer from all these defects, and have always done so.

But there are at least two further imperatives driving these organizational hierarchies along lines that work against the needs of the peoples they attempt to manage, and often against their own long-term interests as well. Organizations are strongly motivated to *control* the environments in which they function, and strongly motivated as well to *grow* both in sheer size and in the rents they control. Both motives lead to conflict with other, similarly motivated organizations, to great waste of life, property and effort, and to destruction of the very environments they seek to master.[29] Tribal societies and even non-human populations of animals and plants can also grow to a tipping-point of collapse, but organization creates a more dangerous chaos, on a larger scale. Global society today suffers from a dynamic of this kind.

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29   See Jared Diamond's book, *Collaspse*.

organizations today

Organizations today can do pretty much anything they really want to, except insofar as they encounter opposition from other organizations. What they seem to lack are effective means of checking and reconciling their ambitions vis-a-vis each other. In consequence, they keeping getting themselves, to say nothing of society as a whole, into absurd political bun fights and into wars that our world can no longer tolerate. It's not so much that people get killed. War has always been cruel, but no more so than nature itself: The survivors reproduce, and life marches on. The problem, rather, is that a high-tech, tightly integrated global economy and a fragile, degrading global ecology cannot sustain incessant violence with modern organization and weapons. A high-tech, tightly integrated global society needs intelligent, inclusive decisions – collectively pondered, negotiated and carried through. The compulsively power-hungry organizations that we know cannot make or keep peace, or arrange a sustainable world in which to co-exist. Their innate belligerence will wreck our society, and perhaps nature itself, if we can't get it under control.

2.4 Markets

The propensity "to truck and barter" may well be as primordial as Adam Smith thought. Certainly, traces of local bartering and even long-distance trade go back to pre-historic times. Yet, as a principle of social organization, the market is relatively recent – dating approximately to the mid 18th century and to Adam Smith himself. For, what characterizes a market society is not the activity of trading *per se*, but the shaping of institutions and individual life-choices *by* the market. Until the volume of buying and selling becomes significant (relative to other economic activities), this does not happen much. So long as nine tenths or more of the population is engaged directly in growing grain or herding animals, you do not see a real market society though lots of trade may be happening. You don't have a market society, until the market itself becomes a major socializing force, which could not happen before the enclosure movement made farm land and farm labor into commodities that could be bought and sold, like any other.[30]

The men and women of a tribal society are guided chiefly by traditions and social pressures from the groups to which they belong. In a society based on formal organization, people are driven by commands from an immediate superior, and by information fed to them by subordinates. But in a market society, people are driven primarily by the flux of prices, and other news of variation in supply and demand. They go into this business or that one, develop one specialty or another, open this product line and

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30   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enclosure

curtail that one by following the trading and the changing terms of trade.

Adam Smith is remembered precisely for being the first to recognize and explain how the market itself could be a principle of governance from the bottom up – as opposed to central direction from the top down. This great discovery, in turn, was but a moment in a much bigger intellectual trend, from top-down to bottom-up styles of explanation, that has by no means run its course. As one aspect of this great paradigm shift, casual trade developed into a third principle of governance, capable of guiding people's choices and behaviors, and using people for its own purposes, pursuant to its own logic. The tribal dynamic uses shame and honor to socialize the tribesman and direct his conduct. The organization uses ambition and fear to teach obedience. The market uses everyone's need for income and the entrepreneur's hope of profit to guide people toward activities aimed at satisfying the needs and desires of others.

Characteristically, the market guides participating individuals to accumulate capital and capital equipment, and to divide and organize their labor. As a requirement and result, its people must be trained, both for their future careers and their specific tasks. At the same time, they must be conditioned to desire and purchase a whole range of its products that they could do very well without. The outcome, natural environment and market permitting, is affluent, consumer society as we know (or *knew*) it – what its enemies think of as a 'Great Satan' – a 'Great Adversary'[31] – inimical to all traditional virtues and values.

strengths and weaknesses

Simple, agrarian economies could be directed largely from the palace or castle or manor house; but it's just not feasible to run a competitive, modern economy by central planning – as most countries that attempted this feat eventually learned.[32] For all its irrational and sometimes perverse features, the market has two great strengths: First, its remarkable faculty for self-organization, its capability to adapt *spontaneously* to changes in supply and demand. And second, but closely related, it not only allows for but actively encourages a high degree of personal freedom in non-economic activities and choices. The market treats us all as self-interested entrepreneurs, pursuing personal dreams of happiness through contracts, freely negotiated and autonomously fulfilled. Both as a regulator of economic behavior and even as a socializing influence, it contrives to be more accurate and more efficient than the scribe's memo or the slavedriver's lash by turning private self-interest to the public's benefit.

Today the market penetrates every cranny of our existence, even the intimate ones like love, sexuality and religion that are supposed to

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31   As that name means in Hebrew and Arabic.

32   Though a few hold-outs remain as this is written: Cuba ??

transcend it. It has so many real strengths, we are so habituated to it and we hear so many paeans in its favor that it may be difficult for the reader to see its downside objectively – to appreciate why people who hate and fear it are not just irrational, or pathologically resistant to change. Conversely, it has been difficult for people who hate and fear the market to appreciate its real strenths.

Most obviously, the market defines the whole of life as a game that only a few will relish for its own sake, and that offers no consolation prize for losers. Everyone has to play; everyone strives for 'success,' but few have much idea what 'success' would mean beyond the triumph of getting above 'the rat race' and no longer having to strive. Tribe and Network offer identity and community. Organizations offer role and status – plausible bases for identity. But the market *per se* offers little to identity beyond the pleasure of contempt for those who have less of its goods than you do. Identity is precisely what it does *not* offer. Rather it demands of people that they form themselves according to the market's demand, and sell their marketable and marketed identities for the best price they can get.

As a principle of social organization, the market has some further drawbacks: Its motivation is to produce not what people need, but what potential customers (entities with money or credit) can be persuaded to pay for. Its characteristic framing of transactions as voluntary *exchanges* between buyer and seller is both a strength and a weakness. While this minimizes transaction costs, and makes for personal freedom, it does so by ignoring what economists call the transaction's 'externalities' – its implications for third-parties and for Nature. Yet another weakness of the market, due to its relatively low transaction costs, is its vulnerability to *mood* – to alternating waves of enthusiasm and panic. In a 'bull market,' prices are bid up and up and people go into debt – speculating that the value of their holdings will continue to rise. But sooner or later, a recognition grows that the assets are over-valued. Then the bids get smaller, the expanding spiral of boom becomes a vicious circle of bust – and expectation of bust – where credit is withdrawn, the money supply shrinks, and debts are repudiated (whether outright, or through banruptcy, or by printing money).[33] More and more people are thrown out of work, and unemployment results, as Calvin Coolidge famously explained.

Further, a great strength of the market is to make greed into a public virtue – up to a point. But because what is good for one person may not be good for another, there will be constant, ferocious argument about where that point lies – which features of society should be left to bottom-up market forces and which should be managed top-down by (formally organized) government, or mitigated by 'charity' – that is to say, by sentiments of tribal solidarity. This endless quarrel bears strongly on our Spaceship Earth problem as a constraint that will have to be accomodated.

33   See http://blog.aol.ca/2008/09/25/leverage-and-deleveraging-101/

We can say this: It might be easier to negotiate sensible compromise between those who want more government intervention and those who want less if it were generally understood that what economists call market *failure*[34] is actually part and parcel of the market's real strengths.

the market today

The world market today is dominated by multi-national corporations that carry absentee landlordism to an extreme because their owners are everywhere and nowhere. It is rather more a mixed network of public and private organizations than a true self-organizing market in Adam Smith's sense. Still, it retains many properties of a market, despite the political maneuvering amongst a relatively small number of very large, very powerful players. As well, the character of rent has been changing, having increasingly more to do with the control of manufacturing, marketing and administrative facilities than with possession of desirable land. Another point is that today's governments are major actors in the world market – not only politically, as regulators and redistributors of wealth, but as huge customers as well. Some NGO's (like Greenpeace) and treaty organizations (like the International Monetary Fund) are significant players also. Withal, today's global society is most clearly understood as a system comprised not only of entrepreneurial market players, but of governments, and other organizations, constrained and often opposed by tribal and networked influences. Perhaps that system looks more like a market than anything else, especially when it is seen that political influence and offices of state are often bought and sold like other commodities, but the other social modes are by no means negligible. Tribes, organizations and networks all make their contributions to the fabric of the global society, but we can focus just on that society's economic aspects; and when we do so, we find a world economic system that seems dysfunctional in several familiar ways:

The first of these is an unfortunate tendency of property to accumulate further in the hands of those who already have lots of it. Sometimes called the Matthew principle (after the apostle of that name),[35] it is a consequence and special case of the so-called 'power law,' which also explains why frequently visited Web sites tend to attract even more visitors, and how it is possible for relative nonentities to become famous just for being famous. The basic point is that people with lots of money have more opportunities to make money than people with only a little – just as celebrities and Web sites who are already attracting lots of attention, tend to attract more attention than obscure ones that might be

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34   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Market_failure .??

35   After Matthew 25:29: 'For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.'

objectively more important or interesting or useful. This systemic trend to inequality is wasteful of talent and human energy, and a source of disruptive conflict.

Addiction to growth and resulting degradation of the natural environment is a second feature of the global economy. There's no need to say more about this here, as it was discussed at the beginning as a premise of this whole essay.

A third pattern is the boom-and-bust cycle which regularly causes the whole economy to function like a legal Ponzi scheme. Land, shares of corporate ownership, credit derivatives – their prices are bid up and up until they crash, often with disastrous consequences for ordinary working people who owned no such assets. The world is in the trough of such a cycle in 2009, as this is written. People are frightened and angry; and there is no knowing what the political effects will be, or when or how the crisis will end.

Today, the market is an over-arching paradigm, stamping itself on every type of social interaction and even on our sense of self, socializing people to think of themselves as self-interested agents who become linked to others through voluntary contracts. Needless to say, this is scarcely an adequate account of the human condition. We 'always already' find ourselves with a great deal of personal and cultural baggage before we have any awareness of private identity at all. Indeed, our concepts of value and self-interest are themselves formed by culture and family history. We are shaped by our membership in families and extended families, by our roles in various organizations and by participations in voluntary associations. These other modes socialize to precepts of loyalty, honor, obedience, or whatever; while the pure market paradigm, net of other influences, trains us to sell ourselves for the best price we can get, stay mindful of the opportunity costs of our commitments, and keep to our agreements except as it is safe and advantageous to break them. It scarcely shapes what we would consider a rounded human being.

The marketed personality is unattractive, yet the market society has unmatched productive potential. We want what the market can give, but have so far been able to check its destructive features – most relevantly here, its addiction to growth. Our crucial problem is to restrain the market without stifling it, and to channel its energies toward wisely chosen ends.

2.5   Networks Again

As I write this, the whole world is watching the aftermath of the Iranian election of 12 June, 2009, in which the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was prematurely declared the victor over the Reformist challenger, Mir-Hosein Mousavi, with a suspiciously high percentage of the vote. There are strong indications that the election was hijacked by a conservative regime that feared and wished to forestall even the mild

reforms that Mousavi and his supporters had called for. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of this theocratic state, has labeled Ahmadinejad's victory a "divine assessment," and urged the nation to unite behind him. At the same time, otherwise devout Muslims are defying this judgment with mass protests. The situation is fluid, and no one knows how it will turn out.

For this essay's purpose, the immediate outcome doesn't matter. Relevant here is the extraordinary role that hand-held video cameras, cell phones and the Internet are playing in mobilizing the Iranian public and getting information out of the country – despite the regime's frantic censorship. This is not the first time these new technologies have played a vital political role, but to-date it's the most dramatic. Though their long-term social and political implications are still uncertain, two points are quite clear: On one hand, these technologies have generated extraordinary public enthusiasm and hope that newly strengthened popular movements will bring democratic reforms. Correspondingly, this same potential brings fear to tyrants and reactionaries: Authoritarian regimes in Burma, Cuba, China, Iran, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere are taking steps to censor Web content, and limit the penetration of these new technologies which they consider damaging to "state security, national unity, culture, the national economy and law and order."[36] Shamefully, Google and other vendor companies are helping them to do so, but several networks of volunteers have developed freeware to evade the censorship efforts.[37] There is a virtual arms race in cyberspace. How it will play out, nobody knows.

But we can start with the technical possibilities, and speculate from there: Cheap, hand-held video cameras make it possible for anyone, with or without political or institutional affiliations, to vividly document newsworthy events, moment-by-moment, as they are happening. The World Wide Web makes news, unorthodox viewpoints and other information available to anyone with access to a personal computer, as soon as it is posted. Cell phones make it possible for crowds of people to coordinate their movements, on the spur of the moment, with no obvious leader that the authorities can target and punish. Collectively, these electronic technologies enable like-minded people of every stripe to inform themselves about current events and interpret them in their own way, against the official channels and official spin. They make it possible for spontaneous networks of like-minded people to plan and carry out group projects of remarkable complexity, regardless of nationality or location around the globe. Thus, repressive authorities have good reason to

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36   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship.

37   Notably, the Global Internet Freedom Consortium. See http://www.internetfreedom.org/ and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FreeGate.

be worried, and corporations in the information business – notably the publishers of books and newspapers and magazines – face stiff competition from amateurs.

Already clear is that the Web not only enables but strongly encourages the formation of world-wide interest groups of any type whatever. There is no idea or project or taste so weird or rare that those who share it cannot easily find each other and cultivate what they have in common through free, instantaneous exchange of information. This makes a radical social change, because the norms of a society lose much of their force when its deviants are no longer isolated. "One is a freak; but Two are an establishment," as one of my teachers used to say. When deviants can readily find each other and collaborate, they are no longer deviants, but nuclei of their own communities.

The World Wide Web also comes close to realizing the ancient dream of a Universal Library[38] – already with powerful search facilities that will probably become much more so.[39] Not the least significant aspect of what we call 'globalization' is that anyone anywhere with a laptop connected to the Internet can potentially read, download and re-distribute any information that has been posted by anyone, anywhere.

Cumulatively these new technologies are disrupting, possibly abolishing, the ancient subjugation of the individual to his immediate community and geographical location. On a global basis, they revise identity itself: Tribal Man defines himself (and is defined by) his affiliations and memberships. Organization Man defines himself by his location in a hierarchy: who he reports to, and who reports to him. Commercial Man defines himself by what he buys and sells, and by what the law recognizes as his property. But Networked Man seems to define himself through *ad hoc* patterns of participation, voluntary, mutable and temporary. It's much too soon to be sure how the fads will play out or how permanent their effects will be; but if we judge by all the blogs and chat groups, by applications like Facebook and Meetup, by communal projects like Wikipedia, Open Office and Linux, and by the situation in Iran as I am writing this, we might describe what is emerging as a culture of voluntary, global communities. If Tribal Man draws his identity from honor, Organization Man from scope and status, Commercial Man from income and wealth, then we might say that Networked Man draws it from contribution – often, anonymous contribution – to communities and projects of his own choosing.

Even truth acquires a different shape from the milieu in which it gets constructed and transmitted. In a tribe, truth is received from the ancestors who originally got it from their God or gods. In an organization, truth is

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38   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_library , http://www.ulib.org/

39   See http://www.learnwebskills.com/search/

partly the received corporate culture (for its employees also form a modern tribe, and are encouraged, as a matter of policy, to see themselves that way); but mostly, it's what the Boss is willing to hear. In the marketplace, truth is the bottom line, after all the transactions are recorded and the books are balanced. Ultimate Truth is the judgment of the stock market, and of the Revenue Agency auditors. But in a network, truth on any matter is the structure of argument around it – the totality of influences, flowing this way and that, to form what Germans call the *zeitgeist*: the spirit of the times, the climate of opinion. It is this structure of interests, concepts, perceptions and claims that determines what gets decided and done.

Networks are the most ancient form of social arrangement, but tightly coupled, voluntary, self-conscious networks are a new phenomenon, now able to configure themselves, on a global scale, for every imaginable interest and purpose. Notably, where governments allow, and/or people are sufficiently angry or desperate, networks are forming to influence or resist the power of the state, and of the mega-corporations. These movements are meeting ferocious attempts at suppression, but they are not easily crushed. Regimes cannot entirely get rid of them without weakening their own societies vis-a-vis more liberal societies elsewhere. Some regimes can strengthen *themselves* by doing so; but most powerful corporations are finding it easier and more profitable to appease, distract or compromise with such networks and movements than to ignore them completely. No one really knows what these spontaneous configurations are capable of, or what their future will be.

2.6   Society Today

The political divisions and failures of governance in our global society are daily chronicled on-line and in the media, so need not be detailed in this paper. Rather, our aim is to understand the dynamic basics of our global society as a task for global governance. What results have we obtained from the discussion so far?

Its central idea has been that much of the logic behind today's events can be found in the interplay of the four social modalities that we've been discussing:

- organizations and markets in contension over issues of planning and regulation vs. *laissez faire;*
- tribal groupings struggling to preserve autonomy, sensibilities and customs from (what they perceive as) their penetration and subversion by modernity – that is to say, by organizations and markets;
- networks mobilizing against the natural alliance of big government with big business in the name of democracy, environmental sustainability and various other public goods.

What we can see, indeed, is that these four modalities stand toward one another as complementary antagonists – pulling in antithetical directions, mutually hostile much of the time, yet making up for each other's weaknesses. They configure social relationships differently, hold different values, have different ideas of what people should be, and those differences will always cause tension amongst them. Yet, the more complex society becomes, the more it requires not only coexistence, but active collaboration between these modes. Nations, corporations and other entities that are incapable of such collaboration weaken themselves accordingly, and will predictably lose out to more flexible entities, though their ruling elites do very well for themselves in the short run.

The fact is that these modalities have come to rely on one another: Government relies on the market not only for goods and services but also for its revenues, since most of its taxes now are levies not on property itself, but on various property transactions. The market relies on the government to anchor its rent games and to protect property and trade under an effective legal system. Tribes take jobs, income from the market, along with the products (and niche products) that their peoples want. Often, they take subsidies from government as well. Governments expect the tribal groupings to raise and socialize children, and also to compensate for any weaknesses in 'safety net' services by helping the members who need help. The capacity to network, of course, is at the root of all other social arrangements. Today's sophisticated global networks try to keep those other institutions responsive to a public interest, while depending for their very existence on the globally organized and market-driven industries that provide its hi-tech tools.

To repeat, then: These basic social modalities are antithetical – in competition for influence over the lives and choices of human individuals. Yet they are also complementary, with each being good at some things that the other modes handle poorly, or not at all. And each has the defects of its virtues, exacting a social cost – sometimes a very steep one – for the things that it does well. It will be up to governments, if they can, as the most powerful and central of social institutions, to keep some kind of balance amongst and with the other institutions – to keep their complementary strivings fruitful, and their conflicts within bounds. It will be up to society as a whole, to social institutions of all kinds, to demand of its governments that they play this role, and allow themselves to be held democratically accountable for doing so.

<p style="text-align: center;">✳ ✳ ✳ ✳ ✳</p>

This concludes my overview of society today, brief and schematic as it has been. The remainder of this paper attempts a similar feat regarding the need for wise and competent government in today's world. Admittedly, no such thing seems likely now. No such thing may even be possible, with

government and society as they are and must be. The whole enterprise seems more than a little quixotic, even to me. Yet it still seems worthwhile to imagine what good government would look like, if only to help us muddle along with the conditions as they are.

3.   Good Government

The Declaration of Independence of what later became the United States begins with a 'self-evident truth' that all men are equally endowed with Rights to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.[40] By contrast, the British Parliament's Constitution Act of 1867 speaks about "Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada." It has been argued that the difference of temperament between the two countries is expressed right there, in these founding documents. The U.S. promises greater scope and liberty to its individual citizens. Canada promises 'good government' of a sovereign's loyal subjects. But what should we mean by 'good government' anyway? Especially, what should we mean by 'good government' on 'Spaceship Earth' today?

If governments simply refrained from doing evil to their own peoples, never mind each other's, it would be an excellent start. Everyone knows about the vast evils comitted by governments today in countries like Burma (Myanmar), Zimbabwe and Iran. Everyone knows about the still more spectacular evils just yesterday in Germany, Russia and China – and the tenacious defense of slavery, just 150 years ago, in the southern United States. A political scientist named R. J. Rummel has coined the term *democide*[41] for murder by act of government, *not* inclusive of battle deaths, actions taken against armed civilians and capital punishment. Rummel's studies show that the death toll from democide is greater than that from actual war: 262 million victims in the last century – about 6 times the number of war casualties. And, of course, murder is far from the only crime than governments are known to commit when the occasion suits. In fact, considering the role of government in anchoring its society's rent system, it may be felt that governments exist precisely and chiefly to put a legal face on crime – to organize or abet an assortment of acts that would otherwise be considered criminal: land grabs, forced migrations, enslavements, exterminations and extortionate tax schemes to rob poorer or weaker peoples and further enrich the rich.

It's harder to be clear what positive good we can hope for and expect from governments, given their very nature. But in this next section, I want to look at some *ideals* of good government, upstream conceptually of all political demands and maneuvers:

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40   Sic: the capital letters are in the orginal.

41   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democide, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politicide.

- the role of good government as a legal and administrative anchor of social context;
- our need for competent 'political management' (as I've called it), absent any broad consensus on social priorities or goals to be achieved;
- the ideal of democratic *accountability*, and of 'government with the consent of the governed'; and
- our fascination with the *spectacle* of government: government as a great *theatre* in which the dramas of social life are staged for public view.

It's conceivable that some clarity about these generic goods might help us negotiate our various factional demands on government more productively than at present.

3.1   Government as Context

The notion of *context* is one of the most interesting I know. On the Web, it's defined by Merriam-Webster as "the inter-related conditions in which something exists or occurs." In a literary context, it's defined as "the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning." But 'context' is more than that. We can think of it as an entity in its own right, in dialectical and homeostatic relationship with the individual elements that comprise it – the whole that is not only *more* than the sum of its parts, but partially *determinant* of those parts. A spark plug, for example, without the prior conception of an internal combustion engine is scarcely intelligible. One could see that it was an artifact of some kind, but why would anyone want one? The very idea of a spark plug, let alone the material artifact, exists only within the conceptual context of the whole IC engine. Similarly, the meanings of words are only pinned down in a reading of the whole sentence.

In managing our lives, the moment-by-moment choices and actions are guided by continuous parsing and interpretation of immediate situations. But that interpretation is always done in the light of remembered and comparable experiences. We are not robots, and it was an error of the so-called 'cybernetic psychology'[42] to think of the prompts and cues that guide us as literal control signals. These are better understood as *suggestions* of a sort – suggestions that we collate, evaluate, compare, and either accept or turn down, all within a context of innumerable other suggestions either received in the same moment, or called to mind from a remembered past. Many of these suggestions came from other people – from family and friends and business associates, and so forth; many others were received from the physical environment, both natural and artificial – from our appliances and tools, our homes and city streets, and from the climate, the landscape and all of Nature. We live in currents of suggestion that tug us every which way. The coherence of our lives, such as it is, is never a

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42   See, for example, http://www.livingcontrolsystems.com/index.html.

given, but a remarkable achievement.

Now, it is fruitful to think of the government of whole societies in these same terms: sometimes as a *source* of suggestions guiding our behavior but, still more, as a *receiver* and *processor* of suggestions from lobbyists and other political players. Thus, we might compare government to a relector telescope, with a parabolic mirror which gathers the light striking its surface and brings it to sharp image at the focal plane where it is captured and recorded on a photographic plate. Quite similarly, a torrent of suggestions from society at large is collected by an army of political aides and civil servants, and fed to the legislators and main policy makers whose choices summarize and preserve a resultant of all those promptings in fairly crisp and duarble form.

Other views of government are in circulation: Following Hobbes, we can think of government as keeping the civic peace by holding an effective monopoly on the use of coercive force. We can think of it as a vast protection racket, in the business of extorting and redistributing wealth. We can think of it as a kind of buffer or shock absorber whose essential function is to spread political discontent, preventing civil war by soothing or suppressing the conflicts in society – keeping them below a boiling point. All these views are partly correct, but they are only special cases. Most generallly, we can say that governments are in the business of influencing and anchoring the over-all context of social life, the *civic context*, as we'll call it, for better and for worse. They do this by checking domestic violence, but sometimes, wickedly, by invading other countries, or stuffing their own people into 're-education camps.' They do it by passing laws and regulations, and enforcing these by fining offenders, or tossing them in jail, or killing them. They build infrastructure of all kinds – e.g. roads bridges, dams and harbors. They set standards of all kinds. They put up monuments to their own past glories, to the gods, to the historical past.

Above all, and as we've seen, by conquering and defending regions on the Earth's surface, governments anchor the rent system, whereby nature's resources are appropriated, developed and sold as economic goods. From the obsidian quarries of ancient times to the oil fields of today, from the ancient city-state to the modern nation or empire, the actions of government support and organize the great economic game of rent-taking, production, marketing, and the pursuit of wealth. And, in the process, governments collect and re-distribute vast revenues, and they enlarge themselves as opportunity presents. Unlike reflector telescopes, they are not passive to the suggestions they receive, but have their own interests at stake. The key point is that governments do good and harm together, though some factions want to emphasize the harm they do while others emphasize the good. Over-all, however, we can best see government as a shaper of the civic context in which individuals live their lives – helping

some, hindering others, or doing both together. When we talk about 'good government' or 'bad government' it's that whole context that we should be judging – in a balanced way, with reference to the public interest as a whole. The reason governments are in trouble now is that our post-modern, globalizing society needs a different civic context than its governments evolved to provide.

context for Spaceship Earth

Anciently, as we've seen, the civic context provided by government centered on the control and gentrification of rent. After securing a territory, collecting taxes and paying the army, the key problem was to ensure an orderly marketplace in which trade could flourish – so that the economy, the population and the tax base could grow. These traditional concerns are still valid, but far less central than before. For a small planet, peace, economic justice and environmental sustainability are the new priorities, eluding government as we know it. They will be treated below, so need only be mentioned here (once again), to link the new concerns of government with its ancient and perennial ones.

We can put it this way: With all the changes that distinguish today's global society from the tribal and national ones of the past, some features are much the same. Adapting adequately to our new situation, we must draw sensible lessons from the past about some things that have not changed much: human biology and culture, the nature of human society, the chronic dilemmas and limitations of governance. It is important to see these clearly, and we have tried to do so. It seems fairly safe to assume that the four social modalities discussed above will remain as permanent constraints. People will continue to draw identity from tribal affiliations of various kinds; they will continue to form hierarchical organizations to assign responsibilities for work that needs to be done; they will trade with one another, and find themselves compelled by the market to specialize and organize so as to labor more efficiently and more profitably. Finally, they will continue to form voluntary networks for various purposes, both to supplement and to resist these other modes of association, but now with electronic technology and the Internet to help them do so on a global scale. These modes and the specific institutions deriving from them will continue to chafe against one another, pulling the individuals who comprise them in antithetical directions, sometimes to the point of large-scale violence and bloodshed. Little of of this is likely to change, no matter what governments do, though they can easily make things worse.

Government's nature too seems unlikely to change much from the features we've described. The pursuit of rents will continue, and will need to be stabilized and gentrified. Public revenues, backed by credible threats, will have to collected. Public choices will have to made – with the public's consent or submission obtained somehow. And this whole vast system will

have to be operated and administered by finite human beings hopelessly overmatched by their putative responsibilities because the information, the time and the detached wisdom are simply not available. "It's a big world and a short day," as my friend McKeefery likes to quote. In these respects, governments too are unlikely to change – and it would be well to leave off making impossible demands upon them, or being swayed by unrealistic promises.

Society and government will continue to evolve as they can and must – but we can at least be mindful of the human context we are seeking, beyond our narrow private or tribal ones. We can learn to value and seek arrangements in which all four modes of social association, and the specific institutions they form, can coexist, negotiate and collaborate more smoothly than they are doing now.

3.2   Political Management

Government has always been a problem of political management, as we've called it – a making of collective choices under disputatious conditions: The choices today may be more numerous, more urgent, more technical, and more irksome than in the past, but the problem itself has been around from ancient times, and various approaches to it have been developed. Perhaps the most common of these, conceptually the simplest, has been (what has been called) 'participatory dictatorship' – the practice of designating and accepting a single individual who hears all the reports, opinions and petitions, takes the decision and issues orders. Every project team and work group operates on this principle, more or less. Even on the scale of nations and empires, this system has worked very well when its incumbent is wise, conciencious and generous. The names of Asoka, Augustus Caesar, Charlemagne and Elizabeth Tudor, for example, are still bright as exemplars of good government, essentially in the hands of a single individual. But there are two decisive drawbacks to such systems of 'enlightened despotism' or monarchy: first, the problem of arranging for an orderly transition of power when it comes time to pick a new leader; and second, the notorious tendency of power to corrupt or, not seldom, drive insane, the persons who have too much of it. As well, there is a purely practical problem: when the decisions become too urgent and/or contentious relative to the time availble for consultation and consensus-building, participatory dictatorship turns into the arbitrary kind: government by the mere strong man whose word is law. Even this can work relatively well when the tyrant is sensible and the people are too docile or lazy for effective public participation. But now a third drawback is added to the two just mentioned: The lack of any broad political base for the decisisions taken limits the public's 'buy-in' when they are put in practice. At this point public conformance to the decisions taken requires increasing levels of coercion, and the whole system deteriorates in a a

vicious circle.

Another fairly common approach to political management has been to call a vote of the eligible constituents and let the majority decide. A third approach uses rules and precedents to pre-decide the questions that can arise, and sets a judge to hear individual cases and apply this existing body of law to their resolution. A fourth approach is to collect a panel of stakeholders, representatives or experts, and have them discuss a question amongst themselve and offer their recommendation as a consensus (or near-consensus) to an executive responsible for the actual deployment and coordination of available resources. The default solution is to let the conflict decide itself by allowing the contending interests to fight it out, possibly within ritualized limits.

In practice, governments have used all these approaches, and modern governments still use them – often in combination. Each has strengths and weakensses which are well known and mostly obvious; again, there is no need to review them here. What does demand our attention is that governments around the world today are haemorraging legitimacy because everyone can see that the 'Spaceship' conditions demand political management that is wiser, swifter, more acceptably authoritative and with greater public *buy-in* than we know how to arrange.

So, what are the possibilities? Given sufficient time, human nature itself might change toward further domestication for social living. Or, as Aldous Huxley warned in his dystopian science-fiction novel, <u>Brave New World</u>,[43] neuroscientists could devise chemical and electronic means to domesticate us artificially. Indeed, they are already doing so. How far such technologies will be taken, and how they will be used is anyone's guess.

But meanwhile, the brute fact about political management is that we live in each other's realities whether we like it or not. The temptation when we want something is to go after it directly – enlisting the help of others when we can do so, but pushing them aside when they stand in our way. Since their impulse is just the same as ours, they will predictably push back, and the usual result is that we find ourselves in a pushing contest – eventually a killing contest, when the stakes are high enough. If you are helpless today, I must expect you to bide your time, and await an opportunity to strike back – an opportunity that will arrive sooner or later.

It follows that suggestions from others cannot be ignored in safety. When people want something, they will usually make their desires known. If we stand in their way, they will try to nudge us aside – gently at first, but with increasing force. Unless we can eliminate them completely (which is seldom desirable, let alone feasible), they eventually find allies in resisting our power. Sooner or later we find ourselves over-extended, unable to resist their ambitions, and the worse off for having set ourselves in their way. Then it is their turn to over-reach, and eventually take the

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43   Already more than 70 years ago.

consequences. This pattern of over-reach and accumulating resistance, true even of individuals in their families, is true still more of nations.[44]

To be successful for the long term, political management must reach an outcome that all parties prefer to a continuation of their dispute. It must 'spread the discontent,' in the way political theorists describe. Typically, this distribution of benefit, cost and effective anger will require negotiation – but in a broader sense than usual:

- It will require the parties to have almost as much concern for the satisfaction of others as for their own;

- It will require them to anticipate and attempt to satisfy the concerns of other parties, not even present at the table, who may eventually resent and wreck their agreement.

In the old, religious language, ultimately succesful political management requires the parties to deal *lovingly* with each other – adding only that loving your opponents in this way also requires great skill at fighting with your friends. For the fact is that all relationships are *politicious*, rather than simply friendly or hostile, in the sense that they involve some mix of common and conflicting interests. The problem in every relationship, from the most intimate to the most complex and contentious, is to make the most of common interests, while resolving those of conflict as best one can.

political management on Spaceship Earth

On Spaceship Earth today, shrewd political management has become more urgent, but vastly more difficult than ever – due to the technical complexity of issues, the sheer number and diversity of stakeholders, and the silent clamor of all those disenfranchised who must be factored in somehow: the unborn children and living Nature as a whole. These requirements are brutally obvious to everyone now, except when our own interests are involved. What else is there to say?

3.3   The Ideal of Democracy

'Democracy' is a word that gets used a lot for an abstract good, like motherhood, that no one can argue with – waved at the most by regimes that respect it least, to justify oppression of their people in the people's name. What does it actually mean?

In its literal meaning – *rule of the people* – 'democracy' is either a disaster or a fraud. For 'the people' as such cannot govern. If government is actually entrusted to the people by holding plebiscites on all matters, the result, historically, has been disaster, as in California just now, as I am

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44   As Paul Kennedy documented in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*.

writing this.[45] As Madison famously argued in Federalist #10: "A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority . . . and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." Never mind the covert defence of property rights here, which are an issue unto themselves. It's true enough that domestic tranquility depends on the enjoyment of basic rights protected not only from the regime but from a popular majority. It's true as well that no regime can last long or thrive when its elites and its masses are pitted against each other.

On the other hand, what should we call it but fraud when the form of government makes a great show of giving the people a vote, while placing the real power securely elsewhere?

The case is a little better when we speak of '*representative democracy,*' meaning that 'the people' get to vote for nominees who promise to govern on their behalf. But even this method has serious shortcomings: Elected representatives tend to serve their own political prospects first, the interests of major supporters and contributors second, those of their direct constituents a long way third, and those of the nation as a whole last. In the end, representative democracy is not all that democratic. Worse, representative assemblies, down through history, have failed consistently as deliberative bodies entrusted with the current issues of legislation and policy. What they are good is *logrolling* (as it is called): the exchange of political favors amongst their members to achieve passage and funding for projects of interest to one another.

At least as an unrealized ideal, then, it makes sense to speak of *practical* democracy, meaning government that is effectively of, by and for 'the people' and the good of society as a whole, regardless of its formal structure. So understood, even a dictatorship might approximate (albeit precariously) to practical democracy, so long as the dictator is sincerely public-spirited, has his ear to the ground, and remains uncorrupted by his power. Actually, the historical record suggests that *any* formal structure of government can approximate to practical democracy, so long as the actual decision-makers want it to – and not much longer after that. Accordingly, the constitutional problem is to design a structure that gives those elite decision-makers a vital interest in governing responsibly in the whole society's interest, and with its meaningful consent – not just kleptocratically in their own.

The constitutional problem of realizing practical democracy even in a single country, never mind the world as a whole, is far beyond this essay's competence or scope. Reference to several interesting proposals in this

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direction can be found in the 'Suggested Reading' section, at the end. All I attempt here is to spell out what the 'Founding Fathers' of such a system would need to achieve. What would be true of a form of government – in its constitution and its day-to-day operations – before one could call it a 'practical democracy' as just defined?

First, it would arrange that the nation's ultimately rentable resources – its lands, oil, mineral deposits and whatever else are treated as collective patrimony – owned collectively by the whole society and only *leased* to private firms or individuals for exploitation, on explicit contractual terms. A concept of private property would remain: Firms and individuals could still own and control the use of moveable assets, from floor mops to heavy machinery. They could put factories and homes on public land, subject to legal and contractual restrictions and 'eminent domain.' But *ownership* of that land and its rentable resources would remain with the public, under management that was ultimately political – rather than purely private – in nature.

The formal government, then, no matter how configured, would be required to act in a stewardly role – effectively responsible and accountable to the public for its management of their patrimony. This, of course, is the core of the problem. As Madison put it in Federalist #51, arguing for a system of 'checks and balances': *"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."*

"Enable the government to control the governed; and oblige it to control itself." One should add only that the governed must have an effective say on the ends for which they are controlled, while the means of control must respect legal limits.

There you have it: Stewardship of the land its people; mandate on general policy; consent of the governed both to broad policy and to the means of implementation; ultimate accountability of incumbents doing the governing to law and to the public they are supposed to serve. These are the requirements. So you can think of a practical democracy as a kind of property management firm writ large – competently managing the public land and resources, with the public as its clients – and liable to replaced when its clients are seriously pissed off, for any reason at all. Of course, government of this kind may be for angels only. It may not be possible for actual men and women to come even close to 'practical democracy' in these terms. Still, the concept gives us something to think about and aim for. It is at least a standard that might be used to evaluate not only the system that Madison and his colleagues established, but every other political system as well.

democracy on Spaceship Earth

The governments we know today, including those we normally think of as fairly democratic are not practical democracies at all. Not even close. It's true that in many parts of the world, ultimate control of territory and its resources now resides with more or less democratically elected national governments. Yet the squabble amongst these entities continues – sometimes for the rental income itself, sometimes merely for a scrap of advantage in that squabble, or for some extra security in possession. Also, the requisite stewardship scarcely exists. At best, there may be some pretense that the national patrimony is invested toward some common, public interest; too often, even that pretense is missing. In the usual case, public resources are sold off and squandered to enrich a very few, while the public as a whole is bought off with hopes of rising living standards that are mostly illusory, maintained through ever intensifying exploitation of Nature's bounty: the addiction to growth already stressed. The needs and interests of future generations, having no political voice, are neglected almost entirely. Persons calling attention to this state of affairs are readily pilloried as radicals and extremists – less easily, however, than 20 years ago – by mass media subservient to government, to their advertisors, or both.

The people who go into government, whether as politicians or as civil servants, rarely have the motivation to function as effective Guardians for the body politic (as Plato thought they should), and certainly lack a constitutional framework or job requirements to do so. More than anything, they are functionaries for a a relative handful of great families and magnates who are the real proprietors.[46]

These proprietors themselves are not necessarily bad people – no more self-interested than the rest of us – though perhaps more frankly so. Caricaturing them as 'bloated capitalists' is beside the point. Of course, they enjoy their rental income, and hope to go on enjoying it. But they feel, not without reason, that the rent will always go to someone, who might as well be them. They are aware too that revolutionary movements in the past have not led to a rebirth of economic justice, but to political chaos. Thus, they can see themselves as guardians of a domestic tranquility that benefits everyone – though themselves, admittedly, more than most. But they can regard their wealth as just compensation for their extra effort, risk and shrewdness. Some even have a real sense of *noblesse oblige*, and feel a real impulse and/or social pressure to give back, in good works or charity, a portion of what they have taken. There is no evidence

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46   According to an article in the New York Times by David Cay Johnston dated June 26, 2003, "The 400 wealthiest taxpayers accounted for more than 1 percent of all the income in the United States in the year 2000, more than double their share just eight years earlier, according to new data from the Internal Revenue Service. But their tax burden plummeted over the period." See http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/26/business/26TAX.html?pagewanted=print&position=.

at all that troubled conscience keeps them sleeping less soundly than the rest of us.

As well, practical democracy depends on effective supervision by a reaonably knowledgeable public, comprised of persons alert to their own varied interests but ready to negotiate and compromise these toward a common, public interest. Unfortunately, in historical experience the public is better characterized as the 'great beast,' that Alexander Hamilton famously called it: impulsive, willfully ignorant, brim-full of envy and easily manipulated rage. One can debate how far the elites are to blame for keeping them so, but there is no prospect of this changing any time soon.

On the evidence, then, it's highly doubtful that practical democracy is feasible in the world as we know it, and doubtful too that anything less will avail to keep the 'spacecraft' from self-destruction.

3.4   The Theatre of Government

The Last Emperor [47] is a (somewhat fictionalized) cinematic biography of Pu Yi, the little boy who was born to be emperor of China, but lived to be deposed by the nationalist revolution, restored in Manchuria as a puppet by the Japanese, 're-educated' by the Chinese communists and finally, permitted to spend to spend the last years of his life working for them, in various capacities, most poignantly, as a gardener at the Beijing Botanical Gardens.

Near the beginning of that film, as background for the upheavals to follow, one palace official remarks to another that "The Imperial Court has become a theatre that no one is watching." A system that had endured through several thousand years, and a long succession of dynasties is coming finally to an end; but this one short sentence speaks volumes too about the business of government in general, which has always involved the staging of a good show that can hold the attention of its people.

A show of what, exactly? That depends on the situation. Sometimes, just of 'pomp and circumstance' – a show of showiness itself, to inspire awe at a mystery of vast power. Very often also, a show to reflect the nation's feelings, and send them back enlarged and amplified, with more or less spin toward what the leader and his speech-writers want the people to be thinking and feeling. The result is an elaborately staged performance by professional political players, with occasional walk-on parts by ordinary people – Monica Lewinsky, Joe the Plumber and whichever other 15-minute celebrities. Today's videocameras and microphones have changed the scale of the performance but not its basic character. Political showmanship was much the same in Queen Elizabeth's time, or in Julius Caesar's. Mostly these performances follow script; but sometimes there are fascinating slips and glitches, when a seam splits, or the make-up gets

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47   By the Italian director, Bernardo Bertolucci. See ??

smudged, or someone's extracurricular sex-life makes the headlines: The spell is broken for just a moment, and everyone scrambles to get it back in place.

Thus, the presidency – or any such office – is more than just a 'bully pulpit.' It's the acoustic hub of a stage-set on which numerous actors play – and ad-lib – their parts, going through the motions of public business and statesmanship. Of course, as with many plays, there may be a time for monologue, and then the pulpit aspect comes to the fore. But there are also times for stately minuets of grace and favour, for tense court-room dramas followed by dramatic executions, and for parliamentary debate. There are times for diplomacy, for patriotic parades and fireworks and air-shows, and for the heartbreak of war. And, of course, part of the show's excitment is its strip-tease: the guessing game about what's happening off-stage, with the occasional flashes of revelation.

This theatre of government can be seen as loosely analogous to the 'Cartesian theatre' of conscious feelings in a brain and body.[48] Both provide a kind of 'global workspace,' in which reports from specialized subsystems are brought together and digested for the making of system-wide choices. Both thus serve analogous functions of global representation, re-propagation and context-setting in their respective systems. And both become dysfunctional in analogous ways – vulnerable not just to structural disorders, but to purely cognitive or *neurotic* ones. Like human minds, governments can misread a situation in light of traumatic past experience. They can misjudge their own capabilities in relation to the situations they face. They can develop irrational anxieties, become compulsive, and show other such symptoms, loosely resembling the personality disorders of human individuals.

To whatever extent we are justified in speaking of society as having a *zeitgeist* – a 'spirit of the times' – or, at some given moment, as being pre-occupied with something or focussed on something, it is through government and the media that this consciousness is articulated and actualized. Other institutions will play their roles, sending, receiving and acting on stimulation, revenue and whatever else, from the currents flowing around them, but it is through government and the media that events enter public discourse and memory, and trigger some public response.

One could enlarge on this analogy, but this is not the place to do it. My present point is just that *sanity* of a sort is yet another aspect of good government – along with those already mentioned: We want government to maintain a benign context, at least not a completely lethal one, for the lives of those it governs; we want government to take collective decisions

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48   On the notion of a 'Cartesian theatre,' see http://home.comcast.net/~johnrgregg/self.htm ,
      http://www.philosophyetc.net/2004/11/cartesian-theatre.html and
      http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartesian_theater

and to function coherently and competently in the face of competing perceptions, values and priorities; we want government to be accountable to those it governs, and to function with their meaningful consent. But finally, we also want government to make for sane, attention-focusing theatre. We judge our governments in much the same way that we judge each other as individuals – by the way they bear up under the stresses that act on them, and by the shows they put up in doing so. At a minimum, we need our governments to stay in touch with reality, and do a competent job of tracking, responding and representing it to us. But we also want to have our passions expressed and gratified, our anxieties relieved, our dull lives validated. We ask that governments do all these things.

the global theatre

Half of politics is a manipulation of the scope and strength of first-person-plural pronouns: exhorting and goading people into states of excitement about '*our*' common interests, real or imagined. The other half is about persuading constituents that you are the true leader who will procure satisfaction of those interests on '*our*' behalf. Political theatre is the prime instrument for both these functions, and great politicians have always known it – holding center stage and upstaging rival players while attempting to direct the business of government.The key themes of this theatre – group solidarity and self-promotion – are just what they have always been. But some important features have changed:

    A first point is that the show has lost most of its religious flavor, at least in most of the world. Today as always, stability, morale and the consent of the governed require would-be rulers to stage a good show of power, wisdom, benevolence and responsibility. Regimes have always tried to do this, whether they meant to govern benevolently and responsibly or not. But in the past, their public show had a religious flavor: the ruler was a god, or he was a vicar or a servant of God, claiming and receiving almost divine honors. In most of the world today, an essentially secular state pays some amount of lip-service to religion – but little more than that. Under whatever form of government, a state consults secular experts, not priests, in taking its decisions; and it presents its edicts as outcomes of deliberation and good judgment, not of revelation. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is a matter of opinion, but the almost-global secularization of government is not.

    Second, the old-style monarchies, aristocratic and religious, went in for a theatre of ritual. Whatever intrigues went on behind the scenes, the public face of court life was choreographed and stately. By contrast, the modern republic is a squabble – almost as much on stage as *in camera*. Indeed, a great weakness of democracy is its way of polarizing political life into opposing parties, staging unseemly, self-serving disputes at the expense of common and public interests. The squabbling is affordable and

democracy works well when there is a basic consensus on values and goals that really matter. When the values at stake are non-negotiable, viable democracy is next to impossible – and starts to break down, or fails to take hold. I believe this is what we are seeing now, in many developing nations and some developed ones.

A third point is that political theatre is global today, though rarely mounted on a central stage – only at summit conferences, G8 meetings and the like. More commonly, the show is staged in numerous tents and 'rings' like a circus, but is no less global on that account. Electronic information technology has changed the game and is continuing to do so.[49] Fundamentally, everyone who takes the trouble will have the whole picture before him – can know what is happening around the globe, whether this suits the political authorities or not. A few countries are trying to censor their people's access to the Web, but undermining their own authority in doing so. Censorship has always worked against its own intention as inadvertent advertising for the forbidden material. This remains the case today. Regimes like China and Iran that hope to control the flow of information to their peoples find themselves relying on violence to do so. In the short run, bullets and batons trump tweets as some commentators have pointed out in connection with the Iran election. But in the long run, public opinion matters to some extent, and cannot be ignored indefinitely. At least, that has been the historical experience.

One feature of globalization that national leaders don't always grasp sufficiently is that public opinion is also global today, and that they must play to a global, not just a national audience. The foreigners don't get to vote, but collectively they have other kinds of influence. Flouting 'world opinion' erodes legitimacy, and tips you into the dangerous, expensive risky game of government by brute force. People watch, take in and understand the theatre of government as they wish, but it's one world-wide show for everyone now.

Fourth, closely related to the above, is a shift in the direction and production of political theatre from the performances of main characters to the uptake of these performances by their audiences – the public and its critical segments. The concept of impact on the listeners is nothing new, of course. It goes back at least to the schools of rhetoric and advocacy in ancient Greece. But the global dissemination of significant performances, and the *spin* wars that occur as these are reviewed and debated by professional and amateur critics on television and newspapers and blogs, has made it more important to influence how some event or speech is *interpreted*, than to control what actually occurs. As Chomsky and others have shown,[50] the orchestration of political discourse is now a major art

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49   As reviewed above (Section 2.??) about voluntary association networks.

50   See ??

form – so much so, that the concept of 'reality' is widely doubted. It can be defined, however, as that which remains after all commentary has been forgotten; and for our little Spaceship's prospects, it is the only thing that counts.

A final point here is that current political theatre is largely a spectacle of ethnic, religious and economic rivalries, improvident and harmful to the global system as a whole – anything but an edifying spectacle of power, wisdom, benevolence and responsibility. In this respect, most governments today are downright self-destructive – eroding their own legitimacy, and their moral authority. As this is written, President Obama is trying, sincerely as I think, to project an impression of global consciousness and responsibility. A global audience appreciates his rhetoric and his efforts, but there are limits: Even a well-meaning president is constrained by domestic politics, and by his obligation to put American interests first. It is simply not the case that what's good for the United States is good for the whole world, though many Americans seem to think so or pretend to. At present there is no effective global institution – neither the hegemony of the United States and the G8, nor the United Nations, nor anything else – to mount a credible show of human solidarity.

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The phrase '*good government*,' has a flavor of oxymoron to it: From ancient times, to our own, the consensus has been that government at its best is a necessay evil, to be conducted as lightly and forbearingly as possible. One thinks of Aesop's nasty fable about *King Log and King Stork*, and of Lao Tzu's advice in the *Tao Te Ching* that one "should rule a great country as you would fry small fish" – that is to say, gently and carefully, to avoid making a hash of it. This skeptical view is surely correct: Nobody wants to be governed; everyone wants *other* people's liberties restricted to make their own positions more comfortable. What everyone wants most from government is to be left alone.

Thus, the people who fear government *per se* have more than a leg to stand on, and are making a serious point: Government in the last century did a great deal of harm, is still doing much harm, and will continue to do at least some harm, no matter what reforms come about, as the price of doing anything at all. That is a given. Yet to say that "government is always the problem" is misguided. To willfully sabotage government to prevent it from usefully contributing to any solution is downright perverse. The sober fact is that a hi-tech global society needs quite a number of things from government, that government as we've known it is ill-equipped to provide.

4.   The Political Agenda

Let's return now to those novel tasks for governance, raised and high-lighted at the beginning:

- to manage the economic life-support systems of 'Spaceship Earth';
- to negotiate, keep and enforce a relative global peace; and
- to manage the interface between human society and its natural environment.

Our globalizing society is quite likely to destroy itself if these requirements cannot be met. Now it's time to explore some of the problems involved in doing so.

Life Support

A man I used to work for liked to say: "Everyone has to eat at the table." He was the financial officer of a consulting firm, talking about the division of project revenue; and his point was that there had to be a certain minimum for everyone. Everyone on a project team had to feel that he was valued, and everyone had to make a decent living. Above that margin some could fare better than others; but you could not let anyone wallow in luxury while others were pinching pennies – let alone starving. He made this point not as a question of ethics, but as a shrewd businessman asserting the interests of his company: Its projects would not get done to the clients' satisfaction he knew, if the team members were resentful and distracted. Projects would only get done properly if everyone felt some pride and stake in doing their job.

I don't think the premise of a high-tech society can be better put: "Everyone has to eat at the table." When the world's work can no longer be done by a gang of slaves driven by the lash, when its systems need the intelligent, civic-minded particpation of all concerned, then everyone must have a place to sleep and a few nourishing meals a day. There must be recognition of a common humanity, even in the people we like least. Otherwise we will get no peace and deserve none. Neocon arguments about 'moral hazard' and 'the nanny state' avoid this crucial point: In the last analysis, as with those project teams, basic social charity is not an ethical question at all, but a brutally practical one – because there's no reason why anyone with nothing to sell (not even his intelligence or his brute labor) should accept the property rights of a man with assets in the billions who's putting him out of a job to make a little extra profit. There's every reason to disrupt the system taking a suicidal revenge, when society offers few other satisfactions. When so many people are in desperation, with visions of prosperity constantly held up before them by movies and advertising, what else should we expect?

But . . .   This vision of a world in which food and other necessities of life are available to everyone by right presupposes that subsistence goods,

or the wages to buy them, are at least partly removed from the jurisdiction of the marketplace. They would have to be recognized as basic entitlements, in a social contract that all humanity was pledged to honor for every child born. The deal would have to be that minimal but adequate food, clothing and shelter were freely available to all, while everything beyond that one would have to work for. Correspondingly, it would be understood that no one was driven to work by the lash of necessity, but only for the luxuries and amenities of life that he or she wanted. Some would elect to work a certain number of hours each week at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, offered by the market or by the government, to supplement their subsistence income. Others would pursue chosen careers as people mostly do at present – for the honor, stimulation and potential rewards of doing so. The subsistence level could be adjusted to ensure an ample incentive to work, without the hopelessness of absolute poverty. It would be possible to look for – and train for – more remunerative work at any time.

I think a high-tech society like ours could make a go of such a system – if the political will existed to do so. In many respects, the Scandinavian countries are already doing so. I even think this system might be cheaper and much more stable than what most countries are doing present. But it would require drastic changes, not only in the realm of politics and economics but in people's attitudes.

These changes are pretty obvious, and some are already starting to happen: a greater willingness to share; a preference for simplicity over extravagance and status consumption; widespread acceptance of family planning, and a preference for small families. But one necessary change contradicts a structural feature of our economic system – the addiction to growth. The necessary ethos of simplicity and sharing is radically at odds with the drive for higher sales volumes and share prices, and for full employment.

Peace

The basic precondition for world peace is some generally acceptable sharing of the globe's economic rent. Governments evolved for the pursuit of rent, and, to this day, exist mainly to anchor, gentrify and *civilize* this pursuit as the basis of economic activity. Rich countries today have learned to civilize the pursuit of rent and other forms of wealth amongst their domestic elites, whilst exporting poverty and chaos abroad. On a small planet, armed to the teeth with industrially-produced, high-tech weapons, we will have no peace until the international rent-grab game is brought under control.

As it stands, the concentration of wealth (and, correspondingly, the propagation of poverty) now threaten the stability of the social system and even its survival. Too many people can bilk the system richly, contributing

little or nothing to it. Too few feel much stake in its ruthless, trickle-down order. There is no way to feed all the mouths at the table with an economic system founded on *sauve qui peut* and the perpetual clawing for rent, and there can be no stable peace or planning under such conditions. Sustainable management of the global environment – the very source of rent – will be impossible until the rent wars are somehow ended. How, and with what prerequistes, can we imagine this happening?

There are only two ways: Either some political entity – be it a war lord or a democratic nation – must first win, and then organize the rent game for its own benefit (as the United States has been trying to do); or else the various contenders must agree amongst themselves on civilized rules to share and exploit the resources from which rent derives. As the latter has so far been impossible, the familiar outcome has been oligopoly and oligarchy: A few players become sufficiently powerful to share 'the action' amongst themselves while excluding everyone else.

The lesson of history has been that division of rental income amongst competing jurisdictions and 'profit centres' remains tolerably peaceful only under a sovereignty that keeps the peace. Whether that sovereignty is constructed by a king, a committee of oligarchs, a dictator or a republic of some kind, Hobbes was right that there must be one. By preference it would represent and be accountable to the whole global population – as democratic governments today hold sovereignty over their own territories with some accountability to their constituent populations. But a global sovereignty of whatever kind is not in sight.

Ecological Stewardship

Ecological issues today are discussed under the rubric of 'sustainable development,' a politic evasion of the Spaceship Earth problem, implying that we can continue to have it both ways – economic growth within only mild ecological constraints.[51] Almost certainly, the reality is different. Technological progress may postpone the crisis for some time, through still more complex and intensive exploitation of the Earth's resources, and further expropriation of hitherto free resources as rent. Actually, technology has been doing just this for quite some time: ever since edible veggies and game became too scarce to support the foraging lifestyle. Sooner or later there will have to be serious limits – to population, to extravagant consumption, and to pollution. If we cannot impose these limits on ourselves, Nature can be counted on to do it cruelly for us. It does the same for any species that expands beyond its environment's carrying capacity; the pattern of exponential boom-and-crash is a commonplace of population biology. Does human intelligence count for

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51   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability and
     http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_development.

anything here?

Very likely, it does not. If there is a single, central reason why this global society will prove unable to govern itself, it's that the imperative of limitless growth will prove too strong for rational policy. It's not just a question of attraction between the sexes, as Malthus thought, back at the end of the 18th century. It's that society itself is addicted to growth, for at least four other reasons:

- Need for offspring as 'social security,' to care for parents in their old age;
- Economic pressures toward the cheaper and more convenient;
- Political pressures toward full employment – today requiring an economy expanding faster than is possible.
- Demographic competition.

In principle, all four of these 'forces' should be containable through rational policy. The fruits of sexual chemistry can be kept within desired limits by readily available contraception, by persuasion toward small families and, push comes to shove, by a tax and/or licensing of babies. The desire for numerous offspring as a form of old-age security is already taking care of itself – at least in prosperous countries that can provide pensions to the elderly. Economic trends toward cost reduction can be countered by the familiar devices of surtax or cap-and-trade on products and technologies considered dangerous – whether to the environment or society. The political need for full employment can be reduced or even reversed by a guaranteed subsistence income, by tax incentives toward part-time employment, and by encouragement and funding of leisure pursuits. Finally, the demographic competition between religious and ethnic groups would fade automatically in a successfully secular and cosmopolitan society, with rising levels of tolerance and civic trust, and is already doing so in many places. It is reduced by all policies favoring tolerance and cultural diversity – a general climate of live-and-let-live.

Not one of these policies is novel. Most are already in place somewhere, and all have been proposed. But we are caught in a vicious circle of historical memories, mutual suspicions and vested interests that will be difficult to break.

The Situation Today

International associations of various kinds have existed since ancient times, and the idea of truly global government[52] goes back at least to Dante who discussed it in a book called _Monarchia_ written in 1329. At various points in European history, diplomatic conferences were held to end wars and restore some international order. Thus, in 1648 no fewer than 109 delegations from all over Europe signed the Peace of Westphalia to

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52   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_government and http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/world-government/.

end the Thirty Years War. After Napoleon's defeat, statesmen gathered in Vienna to redraw the map of Europe. After World War I, the League of Nations was formed, with 43 founding members – but not the United States, which refused to join. After World War II, the United Nations was founded. All these assocations had some conspicuous successes, and the UN today continues to do some useful work. To dismiss them as completely futile would be a mistake. But the League of Nations proved unable to prevent the Second World War, as the UN today has been powerless to prevent or resolve the numerous conflicts of our own time. For that matter, the union of states established by the convention at Plhiladelphia in 1787 failed to resolve the slavery issue and prevent the American Civil War.

It is the classic problem of political management: Such associations and organizations can be effective only when the perception of common interest is strong enough to overcome the chronic rivalries and diverging interests of its several members. Absent a sovereign power able to forbid the withdrawal of disgruntled members, the association's successes will be modest and its final breakup inevitable. Even a sovereign regime, where one exists, will find it difficult and dangerous to override any major interest group, though it will have to do so from time to time. All government is limited in this way.

It is from this perspective that we must judge the performance of the various institutions supplying what there is of global government in the world today. The United Nations, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the International Court of Justice (aka World Court) and the International Criminal Court.can do only a fraction of what is needed, and inevitably reflect the predominant interests that sponsor them and/or on which they are required to act. Still, they are probably better than nothing: Without them, the world would be still more chaotic and dangerous than it is.

In their actions and inactions, their successes and their failures, these institutions show the difficulties that any sovereign global government would face. Such a government would have more effective power than these collectively do, but would attract more lobbying and more blame as well, and would face an impossibly divergent constituency – divided just as badly and in the same ways that we see today.

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Whatever form it takes, global governance must face the central fact that the competition for strategic rents is becoming still more intense, as rising powers (like China and India) compete for access to depleting resources, and as advanced weapons diffuse into the hands of non-state actors – criminals and political extemists of (various stripes) – operating in symbiotic relationship, outside of and against the law. We call such actors

'freedom-fighters' if they're on our side, and 'terrorists' or 'gangsters' if they are not; but that distinction is helpful only for the propaganda – for governments and the mass media. To be sure, there is a valid distinction between the players solely interested in money, and those with some political agenda. But exactly that same distinction can be applied to multi-national corporations and, indeed, to legal businesses of every type and size. At every level, there is some mix of economic and political motives, as is the case for states themselves. Wealth and power go together, and they always have.

Lenin remarked on one occasion that "Capitalists are so greedy that they will sell you the rope to hang them with." He was not quite correct, but only because the central motive is not simple greed, but a logic of rent and power which applied equally to Lenin's colleagues, and to Lenin himself. A central theme of this essay has been the continuity of law with crime, and the spectrum of violence and patronage that links them.

What is clear today, as I am writing, is that the power of national states relative to non-state actors is on the wane. This has happened many times before, usually as the prelude to a 'dark age,': a collapse of 'civilization' – defined as secure, self-confident, systematic rent-taking from a shrewdly governed population by a responsible elite. When that elite becomes over-condident and irresponsible, it increasingly alienates the middle classes, artists and intellectuals who then side more and more with civilization's victims, both within its borders, and without. The elites then become still more exploitative, oppressive and irresponsible, in a vicious circle that leads to breakdown. The barbarians take over, with dismal results, before an ascent toward 'civilization' can begin again. From that perspective, the failure of the world's elites to organize effective global governance is an act of collective suicide. The point for us is that none of those three survival tasks – life-support, peace-keeping and ecological management – is possible without secure, competent and public-spirited governance on the global scale.

All the above notwithstanding, even after two world wars and the unchecked proliferation of weaponry from atom bombs to Kalashnikovs, there is bitter resistance to the bare idea of global governance:

- from tribal chieftains and leaders whose leadership depends on fanning existing rivalries and hatreds, and mobilizing their peoples to pursue them;
- from nationalists and traditionalists of various stripes who still hope that their own faith or ethnicity will conquer and rule the world;
- from the world's poor who know little beyond a familiar way of life, which they fear to lose in a global society;
- from many other people, not necessarily poor, whose hopes and priorities are local, and who fear the bureaucracy, political entanglement and corruption that a still higher level of governance would foist upon them;
- from those who fear that any global governance would be authoritarian and

paternalistic, rather than democratic, inevitably dominated by alien factions and interests.

That is to say, from almost everyone, and with mostly valid reasons.With so much opposition, effective global governance is a long way off. Yet there is really no alternative, if those three survival tasks are to be competently handled. Everyone knows this, and there is a crisis of political leadership brewing – this time, on a global scale – as elites and authorities, forfeiting the public's trust, resort to ever more repressive measures.

What can we hope for? Probably, it will take space invaders, or some homegrown political disaster to shock the nations into real cooperation – with the corresponding surrender of their autonomies and interests. For all its horrors, World War II wasn't quite enough, and World War III could make the whole question moot. As matters stand, some real catastrophe – sooner rather than later – is only to be expected, but it will have to be of just the right magnitude: Too severe and it will push us back to primitive conditions, if it does not wipe us out completely. Too mild and it will change nothing. It seems insane to find oneself hoping for war or plague or ecological collapse on a sufficient but not excessive scale. But that is where things stand. That is the mind-set from which this essay was written.

5.   Conclusion: A Few Political Ideas

While working on this piece, I talked about my project with a number of people – both in Ottawa where I live, and in Mexico City where I spent the winter of 2009 – at a hostel in the district of Coyoacán, a few blocks from the house where Trotsky was living in exile when Stalin had him murdered. There I got to speak both with Mexicans and with visitors from all over the world; and everyone I spoke with agreed with my central premise – that governments are out of their depth with the key issues of today's world, and that our global society is spinning out of control. Many also thought (though most were too polite to say so) that the problem was too large and complex to understand, and that the attempt to write about it was foolish or arrogant. Several accused me of writing a pamphlet on how to run the world. This, indeed, would have been every bit as silly as they said. I fully agree with Edmund Burke that grand programs to improve the world inevitably do more harm than good, and that change should be tentative and evolutionary to the extent possible. I will insist, however, that far from telling anyone how to run the world, my effort has simply been to understand how governments and societies relate to one another, why politics and economics are not two separate disciplines, and why their relationship becomes so strained when the issues between them are seriously broached. Nonetheless, I will conclude with a few suggestions –

no more than suggestions, as I wish to emphasize – that might be worth trying, or might be a basis for what is worth trying, when we reach a point of readiness for cautious political experimentation.

Indeed, the first and main suggestion I would make is that we learn to think about politics and government in a more technical and experimental spirit. As a key implication of the 'Spaceship Earth' paradigm, we can see that government has become a more technical and managerial enterprise than formerly, allowing far less scope for ideological, jurisdictional or merely personal power games. In the same way that driving, or flying a plane, requires a steady hand at the controls, with skills that are much the same regardless of where one wants to go, so the requirements for keeping a government and society in steady 'transfer orbit' to wherever now pose increasingly stringent technical constraints, apart from anyone's religious or political preferences. The officers and crew on the bridge of Spaceship Earth must have, collectively, at least the skill of a licensed driver or pilot to keep that vessel from blowing up or poisoning itself. A society of 7 billion souls on a small planet has intrinsic technical requirements that governments have yet to fully grasp – let alone satisfy.

The first of these requirements is *determination*; the second is *mandate*; the third is *steadiness*. As much as any driver or pilot, government must understand the context it is maintaining and have a clear and steady sense of its own intentions. As much as driver or pilot, it needs a mandate from its passenger to keep the 'cabin temperature' at a comfortable level, and (except in emergencies) not take the craft to Boston when San Francisco was the agreed destination. Or vice versa, of course. Third, like any driver or pilot, it must 'steer' the vehicle (adjust to the social context) as smoothly as possible, avoiding harsh or abrupt changes that could throw the vehicle out of control.

It is just here that the great conservative Edmund Burke[53] still has much to teach about the art of government. For Burke well knew that "A State without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation"; and we may affirm that much has been learned both about society and human nature in the 200 years since Burke's death, without rejecting his counsel that abstract ideas, rights and principles are distractions and even hindrances to prudent statecraft. As Burke clearly saw, society seems constantly to be dividing itself between persons who desire and demand some change, against others who resist and deprecate that change. But the true statesman, like any competent driver, accomodates the inertial tendencies of society to its objective conditions (the twists and turns of a road) and to the safety and comfort of his passengers. It was conservative Burke who said, "We must all obey the

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53   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke and ?? I am endebted to my friend John McKeefery for repeatedly countering my own impulses toward 'social engineering' with Burke's skepticism about the feasibility or value of such attempts.

great law of change. It is the most powerful law of nature."

The fourth of our society's technical requirements, over-arching the three already mentioned, is an obedience to those brute facts that cannot be willed or interpreted away. This is the point Canute was trying to make when he set his throne by the sea and ordered the tide not to come in. The power of a king, or of a whole modern government, has its limits. Nature, in particular, works on forces, rules and schedules of its own.

Between those who want reform and those who want things to stay as they are, there are these few points of wisdom that every driver learns: that the laws of physics do not change for your convenience when you get behind the wheel; that it is possible, nonetheless, to get somewhere if you can pay for the gas and are clear where you want to go; that the process of driving is a succession of smoothly made compromises between willed outcomes, laws of physics, and sheer happenstance – the rock that hits the windshield, the child chasing her ball, the driver of that other car who gets distracted by his cell phone. Government today can be no less so.

The moral is that serious political discourse begins only *after* the diverging ideologies have been heard and put aside. For what the ideologies (collectively) can offer – articulation of the diverging viewpoints, and a structure of rhetorical tension amongst them – will seldom collapse to practical consensus that can provide a basis for policy. Given an argument conducted not with bullets, or with soundbites and slogans, but with integrity and respect, what such structures can afford is a kind of 'polyphonic truth' – a public truth not of consensus but of mutual recognition and dialogue, that gives some basis for negotiation when people would rather compromise than fight.[54]

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I would have liked to conclude this essay is some positive, upbeat way, with clear recommendations for re-inventing government to meet the urgent requirements of our high-tech global society. When I began my readings on the history and nature of government, that is certainly where I hoped to arrive. But I'm not there yet, and have taken this project as far as I feel able. I see no coherent solution to the problem I began with: the technical requirements for governance on 'Spaceship Earth,' and feel less hope than when I started that such coherence can be found. Evolution (including cultural evolution) mostly fumbles its way along; and, in no field more than politics is it the brutal fact of life that we must abandon hopes of elegance and learn to be content with kludged outcomes. To that extent, the people who laughed at this project were correct. As Kant famously said, "From the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." This applies preeminently to government, and to all

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54   See my book, <u>*Sharing Realities*</u> for a full-scale study of 'polyphonic truth' and its uses.

political institutions.

Accordingly, reading over and revising this piece, I feel like the little boy in Anderson's fable[55] who sees – as everyone does – that the Emperor is naked, but is too innocent to keep his mouth shut. Most of it is a review of the obvious – no more than a re-articulation and putting together of things that everyone knows – and knows not to discuss in public. Still, I don't feel this effort was a waste of time, if only because the essentials of our political predicament are rarely reviewed in compact format. While I have no neat, specific recommendations to offer, I can wind this up with a few paragraphs summarizing the salient results:

1) Let's begin with the notion of context as the key to what society needs from its government. We've seen that the Hobbesian monopoly of violence, the protection of life and property, and whatever other public goods, are only special cases, because governments do much more than that – much of it inadvertently, as a mere by-product of their activities and even their existence. They produce public bads as well as goods; and much that they do, while good for some, is bad for others. Nothing they do, or could do, will benfit everyone equally. There is hardly any such thing as an unequival public good. A better way to think about laws and public programs and policies would frame them not as actions of government but as part (and only part) of the social context for everyone – including government itself. What governments do, in general, is to anchor the context of people's lives in law and public programs and policies – for better and for worse. Context is the water that the fish swim in: the things we seldom think about because they appear to us as permanent features of our social landscape, beyond our ability to escape or change. Government does not create most of that context, but it does play a central role in stabilizing, legalizing, bureaucratizing the context that it finds, and in settling some of its details. When governments set themselves squarely against a prevailing social context, they usually make a mess.

2) A key aspect of any society's context is what I've called its 'rent system' – those arrangements whereby Nature's bounty is appropriated and modified, through whatever processing, into a marketable product. Government's role in these arrangements is: first to organize some group in gaining and keeping control of land (and whatever rentables come with it) against whatever rival claimants; second to allocate portions of its 'domain' – its rental privilege – to developers, in return for services rendered: for payment , or just for free, or nearly so, in order to stimulate that domain's development;[56] third to stabilize and gentrify the scramble for rent through its legal system; and fourth, to pay for this whole

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55   *The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Hans Christian Anderson

56   As in the U.S. in a series of land grant programs. ??

operation by levying taxes. An understanding of rent gives us a handle on the slippery concept of *power*. Rent – 'a piece of the action' – is what powerful people already have, and what they are competing for more of. Government is needed to keep some kind of order in this scramble. Whatever else it does or could do, that is its crucial function. That order is the central aspect of context that governments evolved to provide.

3)   The rent system begins with a high-handed appropriation of resources by force of arms, but it can have two positive, ethically defensible consequences: One is to provide a context in which '*entrepreneurship*' – profit-seeking not just through extortion but through some form of 'value added' – becomes possible and worthwhile. The other is to prevent a tragedy of the commons by the simple act of taking what was potentially available to everyone and claiming it as one's own. The latter justification is problematic, however. You may be motivated to take care of what you own because you hope to use and enjoy it indefinately and pass it on to your heirs. Or you may prefer to exploit it ruthlessly to recoup your investment, and then pass it on to a handy sucker after most of it wealth has been extracted.

4)   A fourth point of interest is the problem of political management. Given the increasingly complex systems we are running, the varied expertise required to build and run them, and the diverse interests of their stakeholders, that problem becomes increasingly urgent. I don't think it's an exageration to suggest that the future of our hi-tech, global society depends on learning to operate what looks increasingly like a relatively small but very complicated spacecraft with nervous passengers struggling for the controls. This might be possible through subtle institutional arrangements that would elicit all these people's perceptions and concerns, and synthesize these into a course that all could live with. But it surely cannot happen until the problem is recognized and faced squarely not just as a common concern but as the paramount one. A corollary is that there can be no peace for anyone until everyone has a secure place at the table – secure enough to feel a real stake in not overturning the global banquet table and ruining the feast for everyone.

5)   Closely bound up with this issue of room at the table is the concept of 'democracy,' and the political role of the ordinary (mostly non-political) citizen. One solution to the problem of political management, is to discuss and take a vote on each matter, and let the majority decide. Democracy has its own problems, however; and with large groups, direct democracy mostly gives way to the representative kind. As the issues for public decision become more technical (though in no way less political) than formerly, representative democracy in its turn may need to be replaced.

  For that reason, the concept of 'practical democracy' becomes worthwhile, to free ourselves from the superstition that the liberal,

representative system is a *nec plus ultra*, and an absolute good in itself. Nothing of the sort: Representative democracy was and remains a makeshift solution to the perennial and very difficult problem of political management; and, though we may finally decide that it is the best solution possible, that should not prevent us from considering alternatives. Both the problems and the technical means of politics and government have changed, and the forms of legitimate government may need to change as well. What we want is stewardship, democratic accountability, and ultimate sovereignty of the public at large. Electoral institutions are one way to achieve these goods – and not necesssarily the best. The essence of our predicament is that not even an ocean-going ship, let alone Spaceship Earth, can be run by opinion poles and popularity contests. Nor would the rule of a dictator or a committee of experts work better. Where does that leave us? My only conclusion here is that political philosophy must not be regarded as a finished subject. Quite the contrary: We have no idea at present how to govern our post-modern, global society, and have scarcely begun to think seriously about the problem of doing so.

6)   One aspect of this problem holds special interest for me, and I have written about it elsewhere.[57] Government today is both a leading producer and consumer of public knowledge. The management of modern society, increasingly requires that politicians and civil servants base their judgments not just on what they or their constituents would like, but on what the system they are managing can tolerate before spinning out of control and crashing. These judgments have become highly technical, and year by year are becoming more so. As this happens, the propagation of untruths becomes a form of pollution, as dangerous as dumping toxic chemicals into rivers or greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Deliberate and persistent propagation of falsehoods becomes a criminal act – as religious heresy was considered, once upon a time. The *political* problem, of course, is that my truth may be your falsehood – and vice versa. In this way, the value of freedom of conscience, belief and utterance, extended (as in practice it must be) to a right of self-deception and prevarication, collides with a very real public interest in intellectual honesty and truthfulness. Again, I see no solution to this dilemma beyond the vigilance of journalists and of the public itself. Government and the public will have to keep each other honest, because public safety now depends on this, and neither can do the job alone.

7)   Yet another result from our discussion has been that institutions of regional and eventually global government, having their hands full with things that only they can do, will have to share their power by devolving as many functions as possible to more local institutions. We are used to administrative delegation. We are also used to federalist devolution by

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57   In *Sharing Realities*, already mentioned. ??

now: the sharing of power between different levels of formal government, coordinated through a framework of constitutional law. But federalist systems as we now think of them are organized on a territorial basis: The national territory is comprised of (or broken out into) semi-autonomous states or provinces, and then into townships and municipalities each with formal government of its own. We are used to the idea that various professions – notably medicine, law and engineering – regulate their affairs and license their practitioners through professional assocations with quasi-governmental functions and structure. We are used to industry associations collaborating with national governments, and even with international treaty organizations in setting their own standards. What is still highly controversial, (and rightly so, for there are strong passions and arguments on both sides) is the concept that individuals should have the liberty to live, manage their families and raise their children, under the *social* law of their choice – and that states could learn to live with such an arrangement. Already, in most jurisdictions, people can choose to get married either by a clergyman, or a ship's captain, or a justice-of-the-peace. Some jurisdictions permit abortion, or recognize gay marriage, while many others do not. In a global, diasporan society, why not take this diversity a step further, and let people choose to conduct their family lives under their preferred social jurisdictions? Would it work? Would it soothe rather than exacerbate our present-day social conflicts? Could the necessary limitations on such liberty be negotiated and imposed? I have no idea, but it seems worth a try. What seems clear is that in today's post-modern states, national policies of ethnic and cultural homogeneity come at a high political price.

8) We also mentioned the theatrical aspect of government, and its rough analogy with the Cartesian theatre of consciousness – suggesting that policy choices can be seen as outcomes of a society's collective 'mind.' Drawing on this metaphor, we can see that what happens on the public stage reflects the public's perceptions and emotions at any moment – while, at the same time, focussing and partly shaping them. As with any theatre, this magic depends partly on the skill of the performers, but partly too on the audience's 'willing suspension of disbelief' – *willing*, because the public needs those political performances to know its own mind: How can we know what we think until we've watched what our leaders are saying? But just because society's mind is strongly shaped by the performances of its government and by the context it creates, the fundamental *sanity* of politics and government becomes critical with the powers now at society's disposal. As recent history has clearly shown, a single crazy individual, backed by the resources of a modern state, can destroy a whole society, a whole world. In a brilliant critical essay, C.L.R. James has argued that in _Moby Dick_, Melville used the metaphor of a whaling ship's disastrous voyage, transformed by its one-legged Captain

into a quest for personal revenge, to explore this deadly vulnerability.[58]

9)   We have also challenged the conventional wisdom about government and the market – politics and economics, the public and private sectors of society – as standing in opposition toward one another. Though their relationship is indeed politicious, involving many points of conflict, it has more important points of mutual interest. This mutuality is not just a feature of our present-day, neo-liberal synthesis of democracy and capitalism, but is true (admittedly in varying degrees) for other social systems as well. In every society, wealth and power go hand-in-hand, with about the same perennial tussles for dominance and for autonomy that one observes in a long-married couple. In some societies, one uses military power to coerce labor and extort wealth. In others one uses wealth to buy labor, votes and troops. Priorities differ, naturally, but the underlying symbiosis remains about the same. Wealth and power both derive from rent – the bounty of Nature, expropriated for human advantage by some particular human group, and usually in despite of some other persons or groups who would claim that bounty for themselves.

10) Following through this long train of thought gives a sense of how difficult government is – how difficult it is to do what is really needed, rather than what is expedient, or what the most powerful interests want. I have heard senior civil servants[59] say that this was the main lesson they'd drawn from all their years of experience: How hard some things that looked easy turned out to be! The fact is that cooperation and obedience, either to law or to necessity itself, do not come spontaneously to human beings. Call this "Original Sin" if you like, but I prefer to see it as the inherent cost of a human penchant for exploration and limit-testing, that evolved for good reasons, and that has served us well, on the whole. Until now, at least.

11) This essay on government points beyond itself, toward a meditation on man's place in nature, which is no longer just a matter of ideological and religious contention, but is now in very practical and ecological doubt. Within my own generation too, all the great religious questions – about the origin of the universe, and the nature of life and mind, and morals – came within the scope of science – which already offers more soundly based answers than religions ever could. That 'disenchantment of Nature' had already started with Galileo and Newton, and became deeper and more radical with Darwin. It is now cutting deeper still, as neuropsychology and the so-called GNR technologies – genetics, nanotechnology and robotics – are converging in ways that will ultimately shift our concepts of what it means to have a mind, and what it means to be human. Artificial brains

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58   *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, CLR James, 1953

59   Notably, my former partner Caol Motuz.

(now called *neurobots*) – for a host of medical, military and industrial applications, the prevention or reversal of natural aging, bio-engineering and 'designer-babies' are just a few of the possibilities. See, for example, http://www.aleph.se/Trans/ for advocacy and resources on the whole trans-human agenda. Of course, all these technological possibilities are political issues as well.

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"History is a nightmare . . . ," James Joyce makes his hero say; but, teasingly, that nightmare has been relieved from time to time by interludes of good government. On the whole though, our experience has been that rulers who wanted to govern gently, and for their people's benefit have first had to prove that they could defeat their enemies, collect the revenues and dispense patronage, with the best of them. Only then did they find it possible to promote agriculture, manufacturing and trade, and encourage learning and the arts. With an adequate concentration of secure power, good government has sometimes been possible. The great Mauryan Emperor Ashoka stands as an example, but for every enlightened Ashoka, we've seen a murderous Shih Huang Ti, or Hitler, or Stalin, or Chairman Mao, or Suharto, or Pol Pot, or Robert Mugabe . . . The list of political infamy is endless; and the list of sheer mutton-headed folly is even longer. With Man as she and he are today, our Spaceship's prospects for competent, benign governance are not bright.

Postscript: The Great Change

Boulding's argument about the transition from a Cowboy to a Spaceman Economy can be read in the broader context of human evolution. For the last million years or more, humankind has been crossing a threshold from a world of pure Nature to a world primarily of Culture – or of Culture-in-Nature. You can date this 'Great Change' from the mastery of fire, or from the emergence of symbolic language,' ceremonial burial of the dead, the building of walled cities, the invention of writing or in any way you like. It doesn't really matter, because no one is quite sure exactly when or in what order these milestones occurred. What is quite clear is that over the millenia, gradually at first but with increasing speed, the humanity of the human animal accumulated to produce a creature that exists outside of and against the rest of Nature – a creature that lives not by its claws and fangs, nor yet by its ability to run away from danger, but by its wits, its tools and its social skills.

   While our ancestors must have been physiologically 'modern' by about 40,000 B.C. at the latest, the shift to a sedentary and civilized lifestyle only got started around 10,000 years ago, and really took off about 5,000 years ago. Evolution is taking a new direction – or trying a weird

experiment if you like – and it's going faster and faster, through a crisis of history ('the Singularity' as Ray Kurzweil has called it[60]) toward an outcome that no one can foresee. What is obvious is that we are not just another species in the natural world, and have not been that for some time already. Up to some point in time, we were just another species of primate – not all that different from orangoutans, gorillas and chimpanzees, our closest living relatives. Like them, we just did our best to keep eating while avoiding being eaten, and reproduced our kind in the typical mammalian way. But then something happened that the Eden myth captures not too badly: We became self-conscious, fell away from Nature, found ourselves forced to labor (not just forage) for a living, and became oppressed by painful thoughts and emotions like shame and guilt, and a foreknowledge of death.

   A solitary human animal, given only the equipment of its own body, would need luck to stay alive in the wilderness for one full cycle of seasons. Not all that long ago (as evolutionary time is reckoned), leopards hunted us on the African savannah for an easy lunch. Today, we routinely drive faster and longer than any animal can run, and have weapons no other animal can match. We've hunted those leopards, and many other species, almost to extinction for their lovely pelts, or just for sport. People with even a little money live in homes that are kept at a comfortable temperature all year round, and buy their food at the supermarket. The only species that seriously threatens us is our own. But that threat is a very serious one. The Great Change is now an imminent crisis because today, with all our modern technology and weaponry, we still have many of the instincts and emotional responses of our anthropoid ancestors.

   In this respect, the Biblical and most other religious accounts are completely misleading: We must learn to see our species not as a finished work of God, but as a work-in-progress. We ourselves are 'the missing link' between the apes and the true humans. We still have the instincts of the wild creatures we recently were; and the elaborate institutions we've invented to live with these instincts are quite inadequate to keep us safe from them. Thus, humankind may or may not survive long enough for the potentially lethal discrepancy between primate temperament and high-tech culture to sort itself out. The global society may or may not learn to manage its powers so as to live in peace with itself and with the rest of Nature. There is an excellent chance that our civilization will collapse before we learn to do so; and the consequences of that collapse for the species as a whole and for life on this planet cannot be known until it happens. At best, there would be another Dark Age, comparable to the one in Europe after the Roman Empire's collapse but on a global scale. At worst . . . We can only guess which life forms would thrive after a world

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60   See Ray Kurzweil's book, *The Singularity is Near* for a detailed account of these accelerating changes. Discussed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Singularity_is_Near .

war (or more leisurely disaster) that wiped our kind off the planet. There would be new opportunities for beetles, probably.

We'll either get through this period of 'Singularity' or we won't; and I want to end this paper with the suggestion that any species anywhere in the universe that undergoes a similar Great Change – emerging from Nature into technologically sophisticated Culture as we have – probably must face a similar crisis at this point in its career. Our own crisis is probaby not from any special flaw of human nature, probably not a sad accident of our evolutionary fate. More likely, it is a normal consequence of a wild animal's commitment to 'culture,' and to some features of the evolutionary process – with an outcome that would vary according to the local circumstances.

In general, Darwinian evolution generates branching lineages of creatures that live moment-by-moment for the survival of their own gene-line, with no foresight at all. They struggle to survive, and they just do until they don't. Their brains, as a great physiologist once put it,[61] are not organs of thinking but of survival, like claws and fangs. Life may be cruel, but it is not a moral problem. Also, no single species can rock the ecological boat for a whole planet. The tragedy of the commons is just in the nature of things. When a species over-exploits its habitat, its numbers crash and stay depressed until the habitat restores itself. Such boom-and-bust cycles happen all the time but no creature worries about them.

Life (as such) is not planned or designed by anyone, nor can it design itself. It's more like an infection that some planets catch – beginning as a self-catalyzing chemical reaction and ramifying from there, creating "endless forms most beautiful," as Darwin said. At some point, one or more of these life forms may evolve glimmerings of sentience or consciousness – a brain that partially *represents* and cognitively *captures* its world – more than just triggering appropriate responses to its local conditions.

But from that point on, the creature's use of this trick (as with any other) generates a selective advantage in doing the trick more easily and better, through (what is called) the Baldwin effect.[62] By the life it leads and the equipment it already has, the creature in a sense selects the selection criteria that act upon it and its progeny. The repeated stretchings of a giraffe's neck are not passed to its offspring as Lamarck thought; but what does happen is that the advantage to a leaf-eater of being able to reach higher gets passed to future generations, because a family of leaf-eaters with longer necks leave more offspring on average than those with shorter ones. For a ground feeder, there is no such advantage.

As a feature of natural selection, this Baldwin effect must act to some

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61   Albert Szent-Györgyi

62   Named for the psychologist James Mark Baldwin who first called attention to it. See ??

extent on any consistently advantageous trait of any species anywhere. It does not relieve the blind randomness of natural selection, but it does weight the random selections according to the creature's life-style and organic adaptability. Working on a creature with the vague beginnings of consciousness, it will tend to drive that creature's progeny toward deeper, readier and more collaborative consciousness – and toward what I am calling the Great Change: a partial replacing of blind natural selection with foresight and purpose: a partial drop *out* of Nature, *into* society and its cultures, with all their advantages and unsolved problems.

One might compare the resulting crisis to that of adolescence. Kids at this age have lots of new capabilities, with little experience as yet of how to enjoy them safely. It is a dangerous time of life, with much higher mortality rates than just a few years earlier or later. On this analogy, one can see the acquisition of consciousness by any species as leading (if the creature survives that long) to a period of adolescent reckessness, full of dangerous new ideas and new technologies. A species that gets past the upheavals of this time may have a long maturity. Those that don't will be cut off short, their potentials unfulfilled.