

Can superstates survive?

Alasdair Roberts
School of Public Policy
University of Massachusetts Amherst

15 January 2019

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Macro-level: Study of the governance strategies that are devised by leaders to advance critical national interests, and the ways in which these strategies influence the overall architecture of the state.

Meso-level: Study of the design, consolidation, administration and reform of specific institutions, networks of institutions, and programs within the public sector.

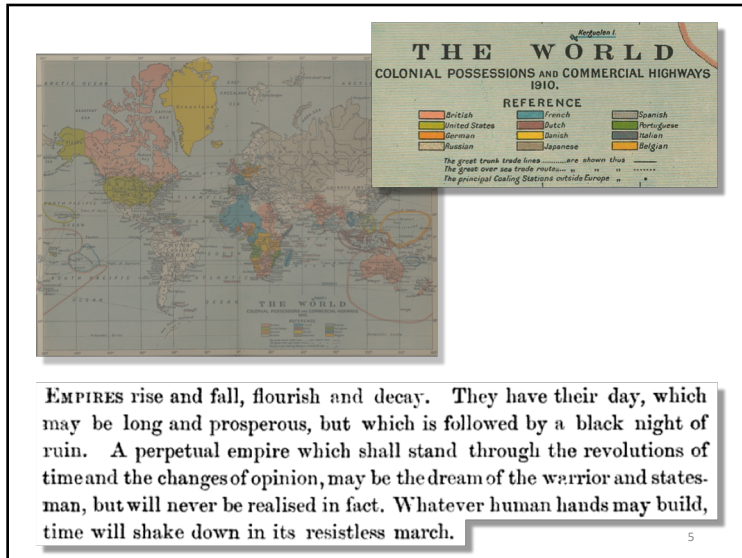
Micro-level: Study of the attitudes and behavior of citizens, employees and other people within the public sector.

An age of superstates

- Post-World War II "world of states"
 - 195 states; formal equality and sovereignty
- But varied in size, and size matters
 - Average about 40MM people, but wide variation
 - Literature on small and micro-states
- But what about superstates?
 - Population of 300MM and over
 - US, EU, India, China
 - Half of world's population, 60 percent of global GDP
- Comparable to empires
 - Dominant form of political order before WWII
 - "Age of European empires" 1870-1914

Without precedent

- Population of China or India equal to world population in 1875
- China has three times more urban dwellers than planet in 1918
- More literate people in India today than on planet in 1960
- Delhi & Mumbai have more people than "great nation" of France in 1850
- In 2017, Chinese airlines carried more passengers than all world's airlines in 1975
- Energy needs of China *today* are 15 times that of British Empire at its peak



Empires always die

- a “natural life span like individuals” (Ibn Khaldun)
- “like waves in the ocean, successively rising and disappearing again” (Horne, 1775)
- "No empire is permanent" (Doyle, 1986)
- Challenges:
 - Diversity of population
 - Political and economic inequality
 - Over-extension
 - Factionalism and dissipation within leadership group

Superstates vs empires

- Similarities:
 - Scale
 - Heterogeneity
- Differences:
 - ✓ Better knowledge, technologies of control
 - ✓ Restrictions on war
 - X Larger populations
 - X More restless populations
 - Literacy, urbanization, connectedness, mobility, marketization
 - X More complex and dynamic economies
 - X Higher expectations of states
 - Understanding and control of territory
 - Attention to human rights of population

Signs of mortality

- Relatively young political orders
- Three of four have suffered civil wars
 - India: Partition, 1971
- India and China at "elevated warning" in Fragile States Index
- Questions about survival of EU
- Concerns about polarization, dysfunctionality in the US

Four strategies for governing

- The era of convergence is over
- China: one-party authoritarianism
- European Union: diplomatism, technocratism
- United States: liberal democratic federalism, weak center
- India: liberal democratic federalism, strong center

9

Problems of cohesion

- Definition of purpose/mission
 - The unifying "idea of . . ."
 - Difficulties with appeals to nationality, culture, race
- Architecture of control
 - Extent of control over daily life
 - Direct or indirect control
- Integration of economy
 - "Single market" as device for unification, inclusion
 - Capacity to shape market activity, control "market forces": capitalist impulses vs. considerations of state

Problems of citizenship

- Rejecting the formal distinction of citizens and subjects
- Citizenship as a unifying idea; bolstering support for the center
- Defining the content of citizenship
 - Thick or thin?
 - Equal or differentiated?
- Implications:
 - For extent and mode of control
 - Capacity, stability

Problems of leadership

- Debate: is democracy possible at scale?
- Multiple considerations:
 - Representativeness
 - Of sections as well as people
 - Competence
 - Substantive and diplomatic aspects
 - Discipline/Focus
 - Constant attention to survival

Problems of external relations

- Self-absorption
 - Risk of distraction with internal challenges
 - Bias toward internal markets / protectionism
 - Sense of exceptionality
- Risk of over-extension
 - Impulse to "civilize" / extend the unifying idea
 - Demand for energy, other resources, markets

Problems of adaptation

- No "static, idealized Aristotelian model of empire" (Parsons, 2010)
- Delaying the day of reckoning
- Preserving creativity
 - Toynbee's concern
- Balancing institutionalization vs. flexibility at scale