

Superstates: What Empires Teach Us About Running Large Countries

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10 November 2022



1

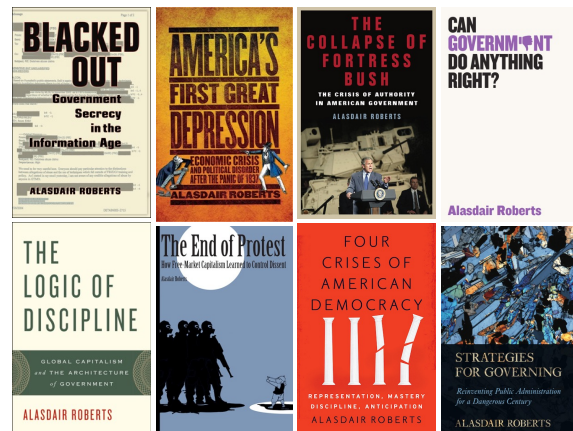
Levels of analysis in public administration

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.

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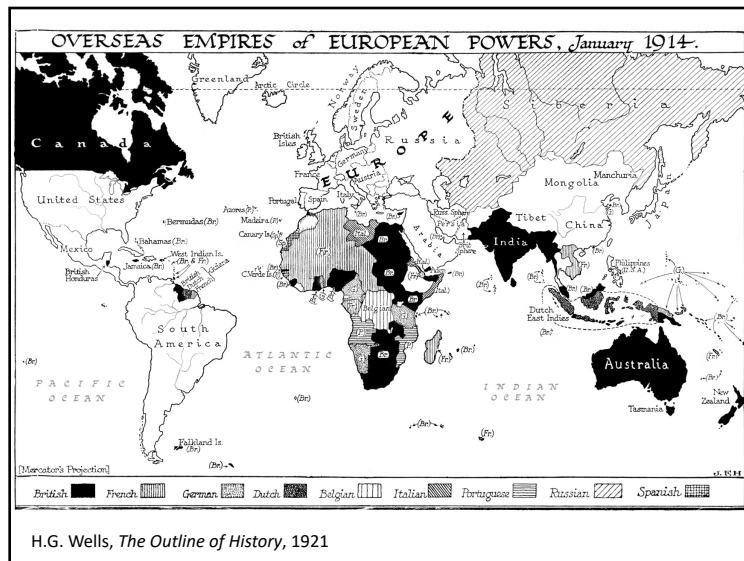


3

The great experiment

- By 2050, forty percent of the world's population will live in four polities:
 - India, 1.7 billion
 - China, 1.4 billion
 - European Union, 420 million
 - United States, 458 million
- By comparison: population of British empire at its peak was about 440 million
- Can polities this large be governed effectively?
- We have little experience at this scale
- Can they be held together while respecting democracy and human rights?

4



5

The evolving global order

- **The age of empires**
 - For most of history, empires were the "normal form" of political organization
 - Extensive, complex, changeable, "civilizing"
 - The last years of empire: 1945-1991
- **The world of [small] states**
 - More compact and homogenous
 - 19th century skepticism of "lesser states"
 - Post-war boom in small states
 - median population now 9 million
- **The age of superstates**
 - Predicted by HG Wells: US, Russia, China, India and Europe
 - Reprising old gap between greater and lesser states
 - Wells: "We want a new term for this new thing"
 - What about Russia?

6

Superstates ≠ ordinary states

What is the best way to get to "Denmark?"

Pritchett, Lant, and Michael Woolcock. "Solutions When the Solution Is the Problem." *World Development* 32, no. 2 (2004): 191-212.

Denmark

- Population: 5.8 million
- Area: 17 thousand square miles
- GDP: USD 355 billion
- *Very stable*

China

- Population: 1.4 billion
- Area: 3.7 million square miles
- GDP: USD 15 trillion
- *Fragile*

7

WHEN we peruse the instructive page of history, we behold empires in the world, like waves in the ocean, successively rising and disappearing again.

Rev. George Horne, 1775

8

Lessons from empires

- Empires always die
 - Ibn Khaldun, 1400: lifespan of 120 years
 - Rein Taagepera, 1970s: 130 years
- Two challenges for empire
 - Elemental hazards
 - War, provincial rebellions, mass unrest, economic change, pandemic, climate change
 - **Hazards that aggravated by scale**
 - **And are likely to cascade**
 - Dilemmas of regime design
 - Core leadership: Shared or concentrated power?
 - Control: Centralization or decentralization?
 - Creed: Dogmatism or tolerance?
- No stable solutions: Improvisation to put off the day of reckoning

9

Is authoritarian rule inevitable?

- "Politics requires that only one person exercise control. . . . [Otherwise] destruction of the whole could result."
 - Ibn Khaldun, 1377
- "Only undivided authority can function conveniently over the expanse of a vast empire."
 - Catherine II of Russia, 1767
- "The most essential condition of good government is that authority should be strong, and authority cannot be strong unless it is concentrated."
 - Sir John Strachey, 1903
- "The Party leads everything. If authority is divided, there will be catastrophic consequences."
 - Xi Jinping, July 2020

10

Are superstates more durable?

- Maybe yes:
 - Better control technologies
 - Better understanding of some hazards (such as economy, pandemics)
 - Norms against interstate war
- Maybe no:
 - **Concern for human rights**
 - **Expectations of other states**
 - **Size of populations**
 - **Urbanized**
 - **Better educated**
 - **Wired and mobile**
 - **Constitutionalism**
 - **Nationalism and self-determination**
 - **Pace of economic and technological transformation**
 - **Climate change**

11

- 4 The United States: An Old Hazard Returns
- 5 India: The Centralizing Reflex
- 6 China: Authoritarian Dilemmas
- 7 The European Union: Cohesion without Coercion

12

Four approaches to governing at scale

- Shared awareness of fragility
- Different choices on leadership, control, & creed
- Choices that are shaped by history
- But also judgments about how to maintain cohesion



13

Centralization and its dangers

- Observed: tendency toward centralization
- Modes of centralization
 - Authoritarian centralization
 - National leaders hold the reins tightly to control “centrifugal forces”
 - Democratic centralization
 - Competition for national office expands expectations of central government
- Dangers of centralization
 - Overload of the core executive
 - Bureaucratism
 - Intensified sectional conflict
 - Mass resistance against “distant rulers”

14

The Covid test

- Four polities experience a simultaneous shock
- With different results in 2020-21
 - Caveat: Indian deaths likely an order of magnitude higher
- Test of Sen’s hypothesis: Does democracy prevent disasters?
- A more complicated story about
 - historical contingencies (China)
 - allocation of responsibilities by level (EU versus US, India)

Table 1. Results from the Covid Test, 2020–2021

	Deaths	Deaths per million people	Persons fully vaccinated per 100 people	% Real GDP growth 2020/2021
China	6,000	4	74	2.3/8.1
India	476,000	340	35	-7.3/9.0
EU	876,000	1,990	67	-6.4/5.2
US	793,000	2,403	59	-3.4/5.6

Source: COVID-19 data for China, India, and the United States from COVID-19.who.int. EU data from www.ecdc.europa.eu. GDP data from International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook* (January 2022). GDP data is for the Eurozone only.

15

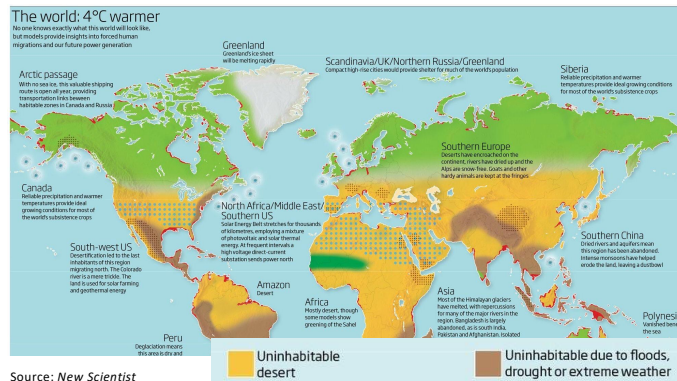
How to rule a superstate*

- Limit central functions
- Emphasize democracy at sub-central level
- Avoid winner-take-all institutions at the center
- Acknowledge fragility
 - Endemic to large polities
 - Especially those that respect democracy and human rights
- Avoid a narrow political creed
 - “The nation” / national culture
 - “The public” / “the people” / “popular mandate”

* While respecting human rights

16

Will superstates survive the next century?



17

Empires upended by climate change

- Collapse of Akkadian empire, Mesopotamia, ca. 2150 BC
- Roman empire, "The anarchy" of third century CE
- Roman empire, climate-induced migration, fourth century CE
- Weakening of Abbasid and Tang empires, tenth century CE
- Rebellion in Delhi sultanate, fourteenth century CE
- Weakening of Suri empire, sixteenth century CE
- Collapse of Ming empire, seventeenth century CE
- Weakening of British rule in India, late nineteenth century CE

18

Southwest drought is the most extreme in 1,200 years, study finds

India and Pakistan heatwave is 'testing the limits of human survivability,' expert says

China's Drought Threatens Nation's Energy, Food and Economic Security

Climate migration will worsen the brutality in the Mediterranean

19