

States, superstates, and strategies for governing

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States matter

"The state is here, the state is present" – Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, March 2020

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Restraint as a choice

- To the extent that the role of the state diminished in the 1980s and 1990s, this was a conscious and reversible choice by state actors.
- "The sovereignty issue is a red herring. If our rights are being trampled, we are going to be able to fix it." – Senator Bob Dole, 1994
- The misleading notion of "golden handcuffs" and "credible commitments"



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States should not be ignored

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.

From: *Strategies for Governing*, 2019

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No fixed formulas for governing

- Beware of claims about "single formulas" for governing effectively
- Strategies for governing vary from one country to another and vary across time
- The process of strategic or paradigmatic change is long and painful
- There are cycles of hubris and despair
- Though painful, this process is essential



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Although we cannot anticipate the new orthodoxy, it is possible to say something about the period of transition itself. We know from prior experience that is likely to be prolonged and marked by the intensification of political conflict. This will be true in conference rooms, as experts disagree more sharply about the content of policy; in voting booths; and on the streets, as protests become larger and more strident. The economic crisis will therefore mutate into a political and social crisis, distinguished by concerns about the dysfunctionality of political processes and the decay of public order.

Coen, David, and Alasdair Roberts. "A New Age of Uncertainty." *Governance* 25, no. 1 (2012): 5-9.

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Resist scholarly homogenization

- Emergence of a global knowledge-production system in public administration
 - Preoccupation with "top-ranked journals"
- Tendency of this system to:
 - Homogenize discourse
 - Perpetuate hegemony
- Not simply a matter of better representation
- We should also question the notion of a single agenda

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Scale matters

- 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
- Can polities this large be governed effectively?
- Can they be held together while respecting democracy and human rights?



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History matters

- Empires always die
- Two challenges for imperial leaders
 - Elemental hazards
 - War, provincial rebellions, mass unrest, economic change, pandemic, climate change
 - Hazards aggravated by scale
 - Likely to cascade: "polycrisis"
 - Dilemmas of regime design
 - Core leadership: Shared or concentrated power?
 - Control: Centralization or decentralization?
 - Creed: Dogmatism or tolerance?
- No stable solutions: Improvising to delay collapse

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Are
superstates
more
durable?

- Maybe yes:
 - Better control technologies
 - Better understanding of some hazards
 - Norms against interstate war
- Probably no:
 - Size of populations
 - Concern for human rights
 - Expectations of other states
 - Urbanized
 - Wired and mobile
 - Better educated
 - Ideas: constitutionalism, self-determination
 - Pace of economic and technological transformation
 - Climate change

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Centralization and its dangers

- Observed: tendency toward centralization
- Modes of centralization
 - Authoritarian centralization
 - Democratic centralization
- Dangers of centralization
 - Overload of the core executive
 - Bureaucratism
 - Intensified sectional conflict
 - Mass resistance against "distant rulers"

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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 human rights
- Avoid a narrow creed
 - “The nation” / “The public” / “the people”

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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

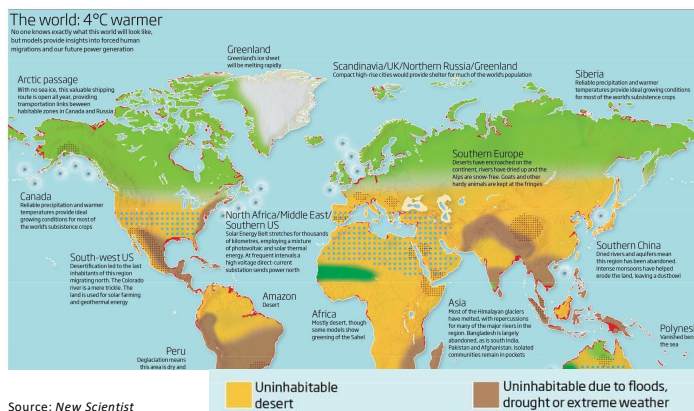
Weakening of Suri empire, sixteenth century CE

Collapse of Ming empire, seventeenth century CE

Weakening of British rule in India, late nineteenth century CE

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Will superstates survive the next century?



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Adaptability matters

- What an adaptable country must do
 - Recognize dangers
 - Reach agreement on priorities and main lines of policy
 - Reconstruct regime to conform with strategy
- What influences adaptability?
 - Institutions, deliberative practices, ways of thinking
- Two approaches:
 - The technocratic/authoritarian approach to adaptability
 - The federalized, liberal democratic (FLD) approach
 - Moral advantages
 - Problems: Short-sightedness, particularism, veto points, coordination costs
- How can FLD regimes be designed to promote adaptability?

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Realist approach to statecraft

- The world is complex and dangerous
- State fragility, rather than stability, is the norm
- Leaders must be vigilant about threats to critical interests
- Governing strategies depend on time and place
 - There is no “one best way” to govern
- States must be adaptable
 - Be wary of “permanent settlements”
 - The dilemma: commitment vs. flexibility
 - Do not expect continual “progress”
- We must take the long view, retrospectively and prospectively
- Realism can be principled