

Governing the Ungovernable: The Challenge of a Global Disaggregation of Authority¹

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The paper rests on a premise that is probably controversial. The premise is that the central tendency at work through the world is a pervasive and continuing disaggregation of authority. The controversy is likely to arise and persist because of an equally pervasive---and profoundly erroneous---assumption that world affairs are organized and run by its sole superpower, the United States. Clearly, the premise and the assumption are at odds. How can authority undergo disaggregation if one nation-state dominates and controls the course of events? Obviously, it can't; but the paper argues that the power of the superpower is greatly exaggerated even as spheres of authority (SOAs) proliferate at every level of community, in every realm of activity, and in every part of the world. An underlying question is thus posed and probed: what is the potential for regulating and governing the ever-greater numbers of SOAs that crowd the global stage.

SPHERES OF AUTHORITY

Elsewhere I have labeled the entities wherein authority is presently located and wherever it may undergo disaggregation as "spheres."² There are countless SOAs. Not only are the local, national, and global stages crowded with SOAs, but in every realm

¹A prepared for presentation at the annual conference of the International Society for New Institutional Economics, Tucson, Arizona (Sept. 30-Oct. 3, 2004).

²See James N. Rosenau, *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Chap. 8.

they are proliferating at an enormous but not easily calculable rate.³ Some of the SOAs consist of broad-gauged advocacy networks; others are narrow, special interest organizations; some are active within communities and initiate repercussions that span borders, while other are transnational in scope with units in several countries; some are informal networks of like-minded citizens, while others are formal and internationally recognized states; some are corporations and others are nongovernmental organizations. In effect, all SOAs are here conceived to be either governments or, in the literal sense of the term, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The proliferation of SOAs and the vast disaggregation of authority thereby created amounts to a new global order. Prior to the new order that has evolved since the end of the Cold War in 1991 the world was organized and dominated by sovereign states, a global structure that was fashioned initially by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and that subsequently became entrenched as the central feature of world affairs. Since none of the states answered to a higher authority, the state system came to be known as an anarchical system that varied in its structure to the extent that the number of major powers varied. Through much of its history the state system was regarded as a multipolar system comprised of between three and five major states. After World War II the system was transformed into a bipolar structure as the U.S.S.R. and the United States emerged as the only major powers. In the absence of any higher authority, during both the multipolar and bipolar periods of the anarchical state system conflicts were resolved through either diplomacy or war.

³The rate is not easily estimated because many---perhaps even most---new SOAs do not report their formation to centers that make such calculations.

Since 1991 global structures have undergone a transformation in which the state-centric system has been weakened by the advent of a new, multi-centric system that has expanded enormously as the number and variety of SOAs has proliferated. While some analysts have made a good case for regarding this new global order as one marked by “heterarchy,”⁴ I have called it a “bifurcated system” in which the state-centric and multi-centric worlds sometimes cooperate, often conflict, and endlessly interact.⁵ The emergence of the multi-centric world derives in good part from the new microelectronic technologies that have rendered individuals and communities more interdependent. Global television, the Internet, the fax machine, the cell phone, and a host of other technologies that have flowered since 1991 have, as *The Economist* once put it, led to “the death of time and distance.” These technologies, in combination with a huge movement of people around the world---everyone from the tourist to the terrorist---and a trend toward more and more education for people everywhere,⁶ have fostered the acceleration of globalization and an extensive proliferation of SOAs.

The distinguishing and prime characteristic of any SOA involves the issuance of directives by its leadership and the compliance of its adherents.⁷ Directives are usually

⁴ See, for example, Satoshi Miura, “Heterarchy in World Politics: Circularity, Distributed Authority, and Networks,” a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association (Montreal: March 17-20, 2004), and Anthony McGrew, “Power shift: from National Government to Global Governance?” in David Held (ed.), *A Globalizing World? Culture, Economics, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 127-67. McGrew defines (p. 163) heterarchy as a “system in which political authority is shared and divided between different layers of governance and in which many agencies share in the task of governance.”

⁵For a full discussion of the bifurcated system, see James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), Chap. 10.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp.

⁷Given the variety of types of formal and informal SOAs, it seems preferable to refer to the persons they encompass by the generic label of “adherents” rather than as members, employees, or citizens.

framed and issued by policy-making bodies, some of which are formally constituted, but most of which are not bound by strict rules of procedure and are thus able to adjust their procedures to the circumstances they are confronting. Both types of decision mechanisms are vulnerable to controversy and factional in-fighting, but their success in overcoming difficult situations depends on the degree to which those targeted by the directives are ready to comply with them. *Compliance is the key to SOAs that manage to persist and move to toward their goals.* It involves people knowing when, where, and how to respond to requests for their compliance, an inclination that fluctuates with the depth of compliance habits, the issues involved, the degree of commitment to the SOAs goals, and the resources available to both the SOAs and the “compliancees.”

Compliance

To comply with a directive is to engage in an action that can stem from diverse sources. It can result from a careful reasoning, from a deep-seated habit, from a sense of coercion, from an unquestioned and long-standing commitment, from rigid ideological precepts, and from a host of other dynamics, all of which may interact and reinforce each other. In other words, compliance can be intentional or unintentional, conscious or subconscious, immediate or halting,

Importantly, however, compliance is not automatic. No matter how deep-seated compliance habits may be and irrespective of the degree to which the habits are subconscious, a number of diverse circumstances can lead individuals to resist directives and avoid compliance, a fundamental reality that is a prime source of the barriers to governability. SOAs are no more effective than the degree to which they can evoke the

compliance of their members/supporters. The less formal the basis of their organization, the greater will be their difficulties in generating compliance. And even then the most formally organized SOAs, nation-states, can fall on the low end of the compliance continuum. Indeed, recent events in Haiti and Venezuela indicate that public turmoil can paralyze the capacity of states to generate compliance.

It follows that compliance is profoundly relational. Whether or not it is effective depends entirely on the relations between those who preside over the SOA and the compliants. As implied, a huge number of variables can shape compliance, some that stem from the conduct of the authorities and other are embedded in the orientations and behavior of the compliants.

Superpower Authority

Viewed through the prisms of authority relations, the enormous proliferation of SOAs highlights the severe limits on the ability of a superpower to generate the compliance necessary for it to maintain order on a global scale or, at least, to realize its goals in myriad situations. The United States has the military capacity to subdue any other SOA, but a preponderance of the situations in the world with which it must cope are not amenable to the application of force. Bombs and armies cannot compel allies to join coalitions of the willing, produce desired outcomes in foreign elections, prevent adversaries from rearming or forming alliances, get leaders abroad to offer expressions of support, persuade central banks to lower or raise their exchange rates, promote democratic institutions where none have existed before, encourage governments to lower tariff barriers, generate favorable votes in international organizations, foment public

resistance to radical policies pursued by newly victorious foreign leaders, halt or reverse the spread of epidemics---to mention only a few of the situations in which the United States cannot presently employ its military resources and with respect to which it is no more powerful than any other country.

Does the absence of a superpower point to vacuums of authority, to political spaces in which no actor or cluster of actors can effectively resort to authoritative action? Not at all: the vast proliferation of SOAs portends less the influence of a former superpower and more a pervasive competition for the attention and loyalty of compliants. The doldrums are unlikely to dominate the global stage because diverse SOAs perceive diverse ways of getting onto the stage and persuading like-minded others to enlist in their cause. Authority vacuums occur when chaos is so prevalent that lines of authority are so obscure that no actor can issue directives with the hope of achieving compliance. Rather, in the absence of a superpower, the key question is whether the leadership of SOAs can exercise the authority accorded them by their followers and seize the opportunities to mobilize the support they need.

Authority in Deterritorialized Worlds

Nor are the limits within which authority can be generated and sustained confined to the superpower. All states have had their capacities to exercise control diminished at a rate comparable to the rapid acceleration of globalization. Globalizing dynamics are numerous and various,⁸ but in combination they weaken the ability of states to manage the flow of people, money, jobs, trade, pollution, ideas, crime, and drugs across their

borders. More than that, the proliferation of SOAs and the weakening of states reduces the relevance of territory and long-standing boundaries. To be sure, territory---the homeland---remains an important attachment for people everywhere, but that attachment is more flexible and less binding than was the case prior to the acceleration of globalization since the end of the Cold War in 1989-91. Now it is possible---and perhaps increasingly likely---for people to be attached to non-territorial and imagined or virtual worlds in which they feel close to people who, independent of where they reside, are conceived to share their basic perspectives toward the dynamics that are sustaining and expanding globalization.

I have sought to emphasize these non-territorial connections through a formulation that posits twelve hypothetical worlds---four local worlds, four global worlds, and four private worlds---and contends that most the time the orientations of people root them in one of the worlds. The four local words are the Insular Locals, the Resistant Locals, the Exclusionary Locals, and the Affirmative Locals, all of whom share an orientation toward situations, events, and trends that are close-at-hand, proximate, or domestic even as they differ in ways that their respective labels indicate.⁹ The four global worlds are the Affirmative Globals, the Resistant Globals, the Specialized Globals, and the Territorial Globals, all of whom are oriented toward remote, distant, or foreign situations, events, and trends even as they differ along the lines their labels suggest.¹⁰ The four private worlds are the Alienated cynics, the Alienated Illegals, the

⁸ See James N. Rosenau, *Distant Proximities: Dynamics Beyond Globalization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Chap. 3.

⁹See Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, Chap. 4.

¹⁰For an elaboration of the four global worlds, see Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, Chap. 5.

Circumstantial Passives, and the Tuned-out Passives, all of whom lack orientations toward any local or global world even as their lack of involvement stems from the different sources connoted by their labels.¹¹ Movement among the worlds is possible but infrequent and in several cases the premises of two or more of the worlds are so mutually exclusive that movement among them is highly unlikely.¹² The twelve worlds do not in themselves encompass SOAs. Being mental rather than empirical structures, they do not have formal or informal organizations or leaders that issue directives and seek the compliance of their adherents. Nonetheless, analytically they serve as bases for tracing SOAs, their formation, and their proliferation, by calling attention to the high degree to which the prevalence of non-territoriality poses a challenge to coordination on a global scale. For example, those who subscribe to the tenets that sustain, say, the world of Resistant Locals may be the focus of new SOAs that form around one or another environmental issue.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL EXPLOSION

The vast proliferation of organizations at every level of community, in every realm of activity, and in all part of the worlds is the product of a number of dynamics presently at work on the world scene. Perhaps the prime dynamic is what I call the “skill revolution”¹³ ---the expanding ability of people in all walks of life to know their own values and perceive where they are best articulated in the competition that marks an ever more crowded global stage. The result of these expanding skills is, among other things, a

¹¹The four private worlds are delineated at length in Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, Chap. 6.

¹²James N. Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, Chap. 7.

¹³My most recent formulation of the skill revolution can be found in Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, Chap. 10.

mushrooming of organizations, of people coming together to ensure movement toward their goals. Shared concerns about human rights are a major source of the organizational explosion, but so are the challenges posed by diverse dimensions of the natural environment. Indeed, political agendas grow at a rate comparable to the ever greater complexity of modern life, with the result that there are new organizations in literally every realm of human activity, with some that encompass large concerns and others that are limited to particularistic issues in particular locales. And by definition, of course, each new organization evolves a SOA charged with protecting and advancing the common interests of its adherents.

It goes without saying that the organizational explosion is the central source underlying the pervasive processes whereby authority is undergoing continued disaggregation. But these processes would not be so pervasive if people everywhere---young and old, rich and poor, executives and workers, educated and undereducated, conservative and liberal, black and white---lacked the skills necessary to identify and pursue their goals. The skill revolution is worldwide in scope and it rests on the growing capacity of individuals everywhere to know when, where, and how to engage in collective action and to comprehend that their pooled actions require a readiness to accede to their leaders who issue directives for them to follow. To be sure, as noted, such a readiness is not automatic. The directives may conflict with those of other SOAs to which a person is responsive; they may appear unwise or counterproductive; they may seem hasty and ill-conceived; but however they are experienced and however long it may take for an individual to conclude the collective action is warranted, eventually some directives undergo sufficient modification to generate widespread compliance on the part

of those who engage in the collective action. Indeed, it can easily be argued that the ability of SOAs to mobilize organizational support becomes increasingly difficult as the skill revolution becomes more engrained and widespread.

This is in no way to imply that the skill revolution involves people everywhere converging around the same values and interests. The global stage is crowded with SOAs precisely because issues and the values that sustain them vary. Rather, the skill revolution is a powerful source of the organizational explosion because people have become more aware of their own cultures, values, and/or their non-territorial orientations, an awareness that in turn serves to prod them into converging with others who are similarly inclined.

THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGIES

As previously implied, the Internet, the fax machine, and a number of other recent electronic technologies have had powerful consequences for the organizational explosion. Not only have the various technologies greatly reduced time and distance, thus rendering the distant very proximate (and vice versa),¹⁴ but for present purposes it has also led to horizontal networks, to a flattening of most organizations which, in turn, has resulted in an empowerment of their adherents. Some types of organizations still retain high degrees of hierarchy, but a preponderance of the pre-Internet organizations and virtually all new ones are founded on more horizontal lines of authority in which individuals can exercise greater influence over their organization's directives and direction. Their lessened hierarchy may or may not make organizations more open and democratic, but their

¹⁴ Rosenau, *Distant Proximities*, *passim*.

increased horizontality renders them both more flexible and more erratic, more susceptible to shifts in course or, in the worst case, more prone to decisional paralysis. The recent trend in the United States toward shareholders seeking to alter the policies and boards of corporations is a quintessential example of the consequences that can flow from a diminution of organizational hierarchy.

Put differently, organizations are increasingly able to inform and mobilize their adherents as well as recruit new adherents. Contrariwise, adherents are more able to mobilize opposition to their organization's policies, thus adding to the warp and woof of daily life on the global stage. Indeed, not infrequently intra-organizational squabbles can lead to their splitting into two separate entities, thereby extending the trend toward disaggregation and further crowding the global stage.

GOVERNING THE UNGOVERNABLE

Assuming the organizational explosion, the diminution of hierarchy, and the disaggregation of authority is worldwide in scope---not an unreasonable assumption despite some exceptions to these trends---the question immediately arises as to how the disarray of an ever-more crowded global stage can be externally regulated and governed. More accurately, along what dimensions can a modicum of external regulation be achieved? Or is the global stage so crowded with diverse SOAs that they cannot be subjected to effective government? Indeed, given the density of the global stage, is it possible to envision even a modicum of coordination, much less government, among them?

Depressing as the evolving global scene may be, it is premature to offer a negative response to these questions. The record of human ingenuity is too impressive to conclude that the coordination of a jam-packed global stage is bound to fail. At the very least one is inclined to explore alternative responses. Several grounds for a positive response are readily discernible. In the first place, it is erroneous to posit regulation on a global scale---global government---as a criterion for promoting order on the global stage. The world is too complex and diverse for global government that consists of a single global authority to evolve. But the criterion of global *governance* as a mechanism of coordination is plausible. As I have noted elsewhere,

. . . governance is not synonymous with government. Both refer to purposive behavior, to goal-oriented activities, to systems of rule; but government suggests activities that are backed by formal authority, by police powers to insure the implementation of duly constituted policies, whereas governance refers to activities backed by shared goals that may or may not derive from legal and formally prescribed responsibilities and that do not necessarily rely on police powers to overcome defiance and attain compliance. Governance, in other words, is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms whereby those persons and

organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy needs, and fulfill their wants.¹⁵

Put more succinctly, by definition all SOAs govern “within their respective and *often shared* domains. Thus ‘governance’ can and does exist within, across, and beyond the jurisdiction of sovereign states, and ‘global governance’ refers to the patterns of SOAs in the world and not to a form of world government.”¹⁶

Secondly, the regulatory mechanisms required for effective governance need not be centralized in order to maintain coordination among them. Effective governance can be as decentralized as the SOAs over which control is sought. Viewed in this way, it is hardly surprising that transnational regimes have evolved in a variety of realms of activity, from the protection of whales to the removal of land mines, from a monetary regime to one designed to exert control over the production and distribution of oil, from efforts to reduce corruption to attempts to minimize pollution, and so on across numerous aspects of the human condition.¹⁷ But such regimes tend to be fragile structures, composed as they are of governments, corporations, and interest groups that are active in their domain. Consequently, most regimes are marked by tensions and enduring conflicts between competing factions. In effect, they consist of one or more SOAs that seek compliance on the part of adherents that also adhere to SOAs of their own, a complex

¹⁵James N. Rosenau, “Governance, Order, and Change in World Politics,” in James N. Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel (eds.), *Governance Without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 4.

¹⁶Yale H. Ferguson, “Illusions of Superpower,” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 11 (December 2003), p. 32 (italics in the original).

¹⁷For an early and broad formulation of the regime concept, see Stephen D. Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

structure that more often than not renders compliance with regime directives variable and tenuous.

Whatever may be their links to regimes, some of the extant SOAs are local in scope; others are national; still others are international; but all of them are transnational in the sense that their adherents can and do move across national boundaries in order to pursue or sustain their SOA's goals. Likewise, some of the SOAs are coherent and effective, while others are riven by internal tensions and conflict,¹⁸ and still others lack the financial resources to circumnavigate the crowded global stage. In short, the innumerable SOAs are marked by extensive variability, but this reality need not hamper global governance if the match between the variability and the regulatory mechanisms is a good one.

Such a match does not presently prevail. All too many SOAs are either committed to goals that render them unresponsive to external regulatory mechanisms or they are too weak to effectively generate forms of cooperative compliance on the part of their adherents that enable them to act constructively on the global stage. The trend line, however, is in the right direction. Not only has the Internet greatly facilitated and hastened the capacity of SOAs to coordinate with other groups whose goals or interests overlap with their own, but increasingly demands for transparency and accountability are being made across a wide swathe of the global stage, a trend line that seems bound to lead eventually to ever greater degrees of coordination. Some maverick SOAs will doubtless always remain outside the matrix of coordination---such as crime syndicates or

¹⁸See, for example, Felicity Barringer, "Bitter Division for Sierra Club on Immigration," *New York Times*, March 16, 2004, p. A1.

terrorist groups---but the mavericks are less a measure of global governance than the widening breadth of the coordination matrix.

COMPLEXITY THEORY

In recent years, moreover, a theory and a methodology to explore it have evolved that facilitate tracing movement along the upward slope of the trend line, whether it be the gentle upward slope suggested above or one that is nearing a crest before a sharp downward collapse. As I understand it, at the core of complexity theory is the complex adaptive system---not a cluster of unrelated activities, but a system; not a simple system, but a complex one; and not a static, unchanging set of arrangements, but a complex adaptive system. Such a system is distinguished by a set of interrelated parts, each one of which is potentially capable of being an autonomous agent that, through acting autonomously, can impact on the others, and all of which either engage in patterned behavior as they sustain day-to-day routines or break with the routines when new challenges require new responses and new patterns. The interrelationships of the agents are what makes them a system. The capacity of the agents to break with routines and thus initiate unfamiliar feedback processes is what makes the system complex (since in a simple system all the agents consistently act in prescribed ways.) The capacity of the agents to cope collectively with the new challenges is what makes them adaptive systems. Such, then, is the modern urban community, the nation state, and the international system. Like any complex adaptive system in the natural world, the agents that comprise world affairs are brought together into systemic wholes that consist of patterned structures ever subject to transformation as a result of feedback processes from their external

environments or from internal stimuli that provoke the agents to break with their established routines.

The disaggregation of authority on a global scale is a quintessential instance of a complex adaptive system. The crowding of the global stage with an ever greater number and variety of SOAs bespeaks complexity on a grand scale. But complexity theory postulates that despite their number and variety, they co-evolve through time, thereby becoming increasingly adaptive to each other and, in so doing, achieving a measure of coordination that may be increasingly subject to regulation.

How does one know if the global system is moving in this direction? There is a methodology for assessing its movement. Agent-based modeling using simulations enables those tooled up in the method (which I am not) to observe the interaction and feedback processes through which the numerous and diverse SOAs react to each other as they cope with challenges and seize opportunities. It is not mere coincidence, for example, that business leaders have found that their organizations are better able to confront change and function efficiently in the globalized economic environment by decentralizing their operations.

There is, of course, no magic inherent in complexity theory or its methodology. The processes of co-evolution and adaptation are slow and cumbersome, so that conceivably, even probably, they will not yield to the degree of regulation one might wish for. Still, the architecture for a modicum of global governance can be discerned in a variety of forms, from SOAs concerned with human rights to corporations that have committed to the Global Compact, from the formation of a global network of

governments that contests terrorism to international courts of justice, from efforts to preserve a nuclear proliferation regime to sporadic efforts to address transnational environmental problems, from accelerating proposals to reform the United Nations to a growing tendency for countries in particular regions to come together to work on mutual problems.¹⁹

SUMMING UP

In short, disaggregated global authority is not the same as global chaos. Rather, it is patterned and parts of it are susceptible to regulation. The probability of pervasive regulatory mechanisms evolving may not be very great, but there is a potential for more and more of them coming into being even as it sometimes seems that the world is on the brink of sheer disarray. It is natural, even easy, to focus on situations marked by crises and disarray. Yet, the continued disaggregation and proliferation of SOAs ought not be discounted in assessing the prospects of a world without a superpower. The absence of a superpower does not necessarily inhibit trends toward governance on a global scale.

¹⁹For the contention that an intergovernmental global architecture is slowly emerging, see Amitai Etzioni, *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).