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Apotheosis of the State and the Decline of Civilization: A Systems Approach

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Abstract

Humanity is undergoing a second Axial Age. The first, as described by Karl Jaspers, brought transcendence into the vision and self-understanding of humans and the world. The rise of secularism and “Death of God” is dissolving and fragmenting that transcendence — a vital subsystem of the civilization system. Economy, knowledge and government comprise three additional subsystems and have coalesced to form the modern sovereign state, diminishing the traditional place of religion, art and philosophy in civilizations. An example of a state lacking common institutions of transcendence was the Mongol empire. Ruling Russia for a quarter millennium, its state form was a template for the Bolshevik regime. The relative success of the Communist state became a template for the Chinese Communists. While the U.S. was excluded from eastern Eurasian politics until the late nineteenth century, secularization and the growth of three material subsystems are signs of movement towards a dominant state system.

Keywords: state; systems; Axial Age; transcendence; Mongols; Russia; China; United States

Introduction

When did civilization begin? Barbarism begat civilization, and civilization begat the sovereign state which begat contemporary nihilism. Can this be an “Arc of History”? As a metaphor “arc” captures a recognizable image of linear human development. In more than a century of science and war, an arc of secularization has become the trajectory of civilizations. Albert Camus captures the essence of this change in The Rebel. Advanced humanity denies a divine presence in the historical arc and has replaced it with worship of the state — an effective usurpation that has occurred simultaneously with great wars and greater progress. The French Revolution put into practical shape a torrent of ideas that, finding fault with God’s management of the cosmos, demanded “a limitless metaphysical crusade.”

Modern revolutions have ended in reinforcement of state power.
In 1776 a collection of colonies transformed into a sovereign state; 1789 brought Napoleon; 1917, Stalin; the Italian disturbances of the twenties, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler. Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and Kim Il-sung followed the totalitarian arc with a fury familiar to Hitler and Stalin. These regimes were not outliers, and they represent a common theme — an omnipotent state to replace an omnipotent deity. Modernism’s mission was that God had to be replaced with unity based on self-worship and construction of human institutions, culminating in semi-deification of the state. Cancelling divinity in history has also degraded humanity’s higher possibilities as existence is reduced to discernible and measurable inputs and outputs.

Practically, this anti-crusade, sometimes disguised as deconstruction, hit high gear in the schemes and crimes of twentieth-century totalitarianism — a mutant form of impatient transformation to modernity. Modernization can be summed up as industrialization + urbanization + secularization + knowledge differentiation under the rational state — rational because it is a form of human engineering, expecting that policy actions have predictable consequences. Claimed effects have the Promethean outcome of placing man, not God or gods, as the fabricator of human existence.

The secular state abandons civilization’s past consensus on transcendence. Power then in all its human forms takes command of society and circumscribes the freedom inherent in natural right, proclaiming the necessity of voluntary or forced conformity.

This break with past elements of civilizations means that modern humanity no longer rails at God for his fate but replaces Him as creator and perpetrator. In place of a Supreme Being, there is nothingness as society is atomized into isolated individuals and these are dissected into mere neural dynamics. Individual actions are motivated by a combination of fantasy, unconscious primitive residues and rational practicality, made easier by debasing the past. Camus saw totalitarianism and apocalypse as a psychological consequence of our abandonment the divine element in civilization.

Much of traditional Western literature and philosophy addresses the trinity of God, man and nature. Is there a connection between the modern preferences for dualism over past inclusion of a godhead? By including God or gods, religion, philosophy and art into human expression of transcendence and noting its diminishment as core elements in the human condition, we can comprehend a wide-angle view of civilization’s present crisis.

As a four-subsystem system, civilization does not exist without transcendence. Moreover, human existence is devalued when transcendent morals are replaced with pragmatic ethics. Here is a vital difference — true morals originate in acceptance of a transcendent realm, while ethics is based on rational calculation of relationships among people and as a guide to proper behavior. Ethics is pragmatic; morality presumes a higher power.
By reducing the presence of transcendence in civilization, modern society has opened the door to nihilism, the belief that limits on behavior are constructs and thus artificial to be modified or eliminated. Nihilism negates civilization and removes the restraints painfully added over centuries. Machiavelli’s trope of “the end justifies the means” may have been the point of departure on the road to creeping nihilism as the "end" is never reached and justifies human destruction without limits.

Yet somehow humans have been able to survive disastrous wars and resume a path of material progress, contrary to predictions of apocalypses of famines, global freezing and desperate shortages. Western civilization and its allies claim to have built an updated version of civilization based on expanding government, economic prosperity and rational scientific knowledge which has averted material collapse. These three subsystems comprise the state and have succeeded in building a material likeness of civilization without the element of transcendence.

The missing element is devalued yet tolerated as long as it does not seek to reclaim its former power. In reality, the major states no longer exist in civilization but in multiple states claiming to comprise rational unity superior to older forms.

**Jaspers and the Axial Age**

Ours is an age similar to what Karl Jaspers defined as the Axial age — when human self-consciousness first matured into higher understanding and awareness of our commonality. It marked the beginning of society with meaning beyond material survival, as religion, philosophy and art refined the human concept. With that consciousness embedded in civilization’s leading members and institutions, modernity revealed and advanced rational thought and action. Appeals to fate, divine forces or *fortuna* were less and less an accepted mode of thought, action or discourse.

The Axial Age III gave birth to new philosophies and religions that turned human attention from localized concerns to transcendence and humanity as a unity. Greek, Indian, Jewish and Chinese thinkers guided humans to consider man’s fate and morals above the sensible and substantial phenomena of direct experience or inherited superstition. It was an age roughly from 800 to 200 BCE illuminating a transformation from pre-history to world history, stressing the addition of metaphysics and self-consciousness to understanding life and human survival as it progressed. This transformation structured institutions and individuals through the present and may now be converging to become a global civilization.

Jaspers’ theory hinges on the introduction of transcendence into human consciousness—essentially a psychological and metaphysical revolution.

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1 See Ken Baskin “The Mything Link” for a discussion of Axial Ages, 103-104
He further saw mankind entering into a new age where science and technology would further complete human destiny and potential. While this vision resonates with observable developments, other scenarios are possible and less optimistic. I will examine an alternative possibility here.

**A Second Axial Age**

We are entering a Second Axial Age where modern states shatter past transcendence into fragments and harmless institutional niches. This turning point in history is negating the First Axial Age. The French Revolution’s “Cult of Reason” repressed traditional religion. Soviet ideology had little tolerance for any transcendence outside the state. The Maoist Cultural Revolution was a clear iteration of this drive to eliminate traditional transcendence. Each of these sought to establish human reason for past revelation and beliefs which defied verification. Reason replaced transcendence in modernity, with the spread of nihilism a collateral outcome.

To better understand the importance and direction of these developments, I propose a systemic and structural approach. World history, civilization and state form a triad of mega-concepts to describe the discernible structure of human origins, conditions and fates.

Civilization is a structure, constructed by humans to improve survivability in a hostile world.²

It is not a standing edifice that, once built, retains its dimensions and functionality. It draws energy and purpose from living persons who create, maintain and ultimately dissolve it, either from outside forces, or from exhaustion of material resources, or from dysfunctional choices.

A civilization is not an unchanging structure but a living system of interacting units and parts. The elemental units are individuals and groups. The parts are mutually connected subsystems, not dissimilar to the human body in which failure of one can negatively affect the other parts and the whole.

Figures 1 and 2 summarize how institutional evolution has structured the prehistoric population into discrete civilizations or pre-civilization tribes.

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² The concept of civilization has been discussed and described in numerous articles in the *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Barbara Tuchman has famously criticized the “big thinkers” who look for “a particular explanation of history,” and this author must confess that as a non-historian interested in the evolution of the modern state, the theories of Toynbee and others resonate with a quest for understanding. See Palencia-Roth, 32.
Figure 1: World History, Civilization, State

World history - the View of mankind evolving within an “Arc of History”

Civilization – Adaptation to environment to maximize life security

State – negates transcendence, places humanity at the center of creation

Figure 2: Co-existence of Pre-civilization and Civilization

- Formation of civilizations enhances human survival, establishes frontiers, hierarchies, and division of labor.
- Multiple civilizations, differentiated human populations:
- Each consists of four subsystems (Economy, Government, Knowledge, Transcendence)
- Tribal societies remain outside civilizations’ frontiers, though assimilation also occurs

Pre-Civilization tribal societies

Civilizations
Ancient society and empires improved post-Neolithic survival by (1) organizing complex governments to manage defense and maintain order, (2) expanding the division of labor for production and distribution of goods, and (3) encouraging knowledge growth with written language and record-keeping. The Axial age inserted (4), an envisioned spirit of transcendence, into society which inspired men to work together for a common purpose beyond survival. These functional parts can be termed *subsystems* within the civilization *system*.

![Western Modernization: A Systems Approach](image1)

![Pre-Axial Subsystems](image2)
Civilization is a system of four interconnected subsystems: economy, government, knowledge and transcendence.

The first three were present in ancient societies as they mastered technology and expanded control over contiguous territory and peoples. Egypt and Assyria were such societies but lacked the universal consciousness that marked empires of the Axial Age.

A further characteristic of the three rational subsystems is their purposeful development to deal with the challenge of life survival. They improved observation, experimentation, communication of facts and modification — processes that have accelerated with modernization.

Transcendence, in contrast, originates in inspiration, speculation and revelation. It is more fragile and depends on voluntarism more than on proof. We can term the first three as rational subsystems and transcendence as an organic subsystem. Subjectivity distinguishes it from the rational subsystems that value objectivity.

The separation of the subsystems into rational and organic/metaphysical emerged in the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Religious wars gave way to the secular state as a way of making relations among diverse societies more rational.

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3 Mesoamerica illustrated that transcendence was manifested in the observed material world through astronomy, time and space. See Sugiyama.
Science, especially Darwinism, formalized religion as a profession of faith rather than loyalty to secular authority — a development that intensified since the mid-nineteenth century and led to increased hegemony of the modern state as a coalition of three subsystems.

The increased gap between the rational subsystems and the transcendent subsystem contributed to primacy of the state and is ushering in a second Axial Age — reversing the transcendence-affirming institutions of the past two millennia. The transformation is incomplete, but the direction is clear: Much of mankind is determined to build a completely rational world where transcendence is personal indulgence with minor institutional status.

The character of our present (second) Axial Age becomes clearer when we explore the sources of the modern state, which I suggest began with the Mongol empire, nourished the Russian empire and blossomed in the Soviet state. The Chinese Communists adapted the Soviet state, in both its Stalinist (national) form and Trotskyite (international) vision. Some features are becoming visible in the American state as well.

**Pax Mongolica: a State without Civilization**

The beginnings of the modern state can be found in *Pax Mongolica*. Not unique among nomadic tribes in Central Asia, the Mongols subsisted on herding and hunting, augmented by raids on other tribes and sedentary farmers. A powerful leader, Temujin, emerged, defeated rivals and unified the tribes under a single banner. Their skills with horses and powerful archery refined their approach to warfare against which agrarian societies were ill-prepared. They had no system of writing, no organized religion, and no cities. They fought each other for women, horses, and grazing lands.

China’s Great Wall had kept the Mongols on the steppe and some tribes were assimilated and even established minor dynasties over parts of the empire. The Mongols resisted assimilation and were subject to the traditional Chinese policy of “using barbarians to control the barbarians.” After subduing kingdoms and tribes of Central Asia, the Mongols invaded and occupied the lands that would become Russia, ruling for over 250 years.

Ivan IV lifted the Tatar yoke but could not erase effects of a multietnic state that began with little recognizable civilization⁴ to commend it.

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⁴ Like many tribal societies, the Mongols had a form of religious belief based on shamanism and all-embracing Heaven. Unlike Islam or Christianity, they had little motivation to convert conquered peoples and did not disturb existing faiths, a policy that facilitated their rule.
**Bolshevism: The Mongol State Template**

*Pax Mongolica* imposed a state without a foundational civilization and demonstrated that a unifying religion was not essential. Like Jews of ancient Israel, Russian clerics bemoaned that their sins were the cause of God’s wrath. Seven centuries later Lenin, Stalin and the Bolsheviks dissolved traditional Russian civilization, established a new state based on force and a form of rational materialism, creating a secular ideology that substituted for transcendent religion. Sheer force replaced piety-induced voluntarism. Stalin later demonstrated how a watered-down Orthodox religion could be summoned as a positive force in World War II, when national and sacred symbols were temporarily restored as national symbols. After the war, churches again were demoted to be museums of religion.

When the Soviet state collapsed, optimists hoped that democracy had conquered its greatest adversary, and that autocracy had no future. Yeltsin chaos gave way to growth of Putin’s soft dictatorship and restoration of Russian operations to secure and expand its borders. The post-Soviet oligarchy sealed the coffin of Soviet communism and nationalism has re-emerged.

**Evolution of the Chinese State**

Modern China illustrates another case of Axial reversal. When the Communists came to power in 1949, much of the Confucian legacy was denounced as feudal and an obstacle to modernization. Ancient family values were pronounced to be oppressive and the class structure that esteemed learning above production was attacked. Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, materialism and revolution replaced the transcendence expressed in Buddhism, Daoism or Christianity. Art and literature had to serve the revolution.

As Mao proclaimed at a Yenan meeting:

> The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.⁴

Denigrated during the Maoist period, Confucianism enjoyed a partial revival under the umbrella of Deng reforms, though more for its ethical content, cultural identity and attraction among Overseas Chinese and foreigners than as a supplement to socialism.
Contemporary China demonstrates how the four subsystems of civilization have divided and coalesced into a modern state where traditional transcendence has been reduced to a cultural source of identity from a source of morals and philosophical unity. In its place the communist regime has made “socialism with Chinese characteristics” a centerpiece of state legitimacy.

The process of state-building has demoted the preceding civilization to weakened culture as identity in modern China. Chinese communism has several times claimed to engage in building a new and improved civilization based on non-sacred transcendence and is today facing new challenges that may require reformulation of ideology — the vision of China and its place in the world.

On Chinese Civilization

China’s civilization system was of unparalleled durability since the days of ancient Egypt. Both were based on agriculture and maintained productivity by water management. China ascended into the Axial Age when political fragmentation gave birth to multiple schools of philosophy and the search for universal meaning. The statecraft of Legalism facilitated unification but addressed only one stratum of reality: construction of an effective government. Confucianism and Mohism addressed universal questions of ethics and morals, human conduct and governance, enlightenment and ignorance and equality v. inequality. Daoism, and later Buddhism, addressed cosmological and transcendent questions. Symbolic language gave continuity and accumulation to knowledge, though largely the possession of a specialized class of literati. China suffered periodic breakdown, and new dynasties restored order and civilization in a cyclical timeline.

The last high point of Chinese civilization was in the early nineteenth century, although most inventions had occurred by the Song dynasty (960 to 1279). Western intrusion in the late Qing and internal dysfunction began a decline which was not arrested until after World War II. Internal rebellions and centrifugal regionalism accelerated decline, during the period when Japan adapted to the new world order of sovereign nation-states and industrialization, becoming the chief predator in China. Beginnings of a revived China with democratic tendencies appeared with establishment of the Nanjing Republic in 1927 but were dashed by Japanese military invasion. A dispirited Nationalist government lost the Civil War and escaped to Taiwan, allowing the victorious communists to establish the People’s Republic of China in October 1949.

The new communist regime had the opportunity to restore a renewed civilization based on the example of the Soviet Union.

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5 The philosophy of Mozi (c. 470 BC – c. 391 BC) advocated universal love, in contrast to Confucianism’s love distinctions, with family claims of affection having greater priority than non-family.
With Soviet advisors, the Chinese economy changed from a war footing to state central planning, with a focus on heavy industry and financed by squeezing the agricultural sector. The new state, proclaimed as a “New Democracy,” was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union and the Communists accepted a degree of bourgeois development in order to transform the economy from a largely agricultural one to an industrial-based form, accepting that this was necessary to create a foundation for socialism.

By 1956 the Communist Party was confident that the state was sturdy enough to tolerate some criticism. The self-assured leadership encouraged intellectuals to speak out freely and even to criticize inadequacies of government. Surprised at the volume of criticism, the party attacked dissenters as reactionaries and "weeds" and nearly half a million critics were condemned as Rightists. Many were exercising the traditional Confucian right of criticizing the government when it erred.

Maoism took a radical direction in the anti-Rightist campaign following the Hundred Flowers Movement and viewed the post-Stalin Soviet Union as revisionist and bureaucratic. The Maoists abandoned the Soviet model of development and launched the Great Leap Forward to overtake the industrial countries by mobilizing the countryside and restructuring the economy into People’s Communes — an utter failure that saw tens of millions perishing from starvation and associated causes.

Backlash against radical excesses pushed Mao into the background until his comeback in launching the ruinous Cultural Revolution. Totalitarian in scope and method, it forced the population to study and live by the Maoist ideology loosely based on Marxism-Leninism. Human Will would overcome material obstacles. In retrospect, it was the culmination of promises to create full communism by elimination of private property and submergence of individual will into the work unit and People’s Communes.

The Maoists created an artificial and unsustainable version of transcendence, a Rousseauian concentration of human voluntarism into a powerful General Will that could overcome all obstacles.

The Maoist iteration of the state sought to decentralize the economy, make ideology the criterion of knowledge and create new institutions of government with reduction of party power. The attempt to restructure the national economy failed, as the country approached bankruptcy. Most farmers remained aloof from the largely urban political turmoil, and food production remained adequate. What followed was anathema to the Maoists.

Deng Xiaoping took control of the party and introduced a pragmatic approach to state-building, with the Communist Party once again in command. Foreign investment was permitted and accelerated modernization.

The Deng reforms forged an alliance of the party with business, science and technology to strengthen the state. From the communist standpoint, there could be no dissent that might call their legitimacy into question.⁶

Political persecution, economic failure and outright lies had soured many Chinese away from communism, especially as knowledge of economic growth in the market economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan trickled into the relatively closed society. Deng announced that without legal and economic reforms, the Communist Party and the country faced new crises. People had lost faith in socialism, and radical change was necessary. Reforms which were considered capitalist found their way into the new economy — including private plots and a greater market-orientation. Foreign participation was included with joint enterprises and joining the World Trade Organization. The reforms may have changed too fast and brought inflation that was blamed for the 1989 uprising at Tiananmen.

A nation cannot cohere without a shared ideology — a common set of values and goals expressed as material and transcendent vision.

At the culmination of the revolution’s military phase, the communists faced the problem of governance and adapted Soviet-style institutions with adjustments for Chinese conditions. That path of modernization led to bureaucratic statism and promised to suffocate the energy generated by revolution.

A period of class struggle saw the apotheosis of radical mobilization and dominance of conflict as an agent of change. It not only negated the goals of economic modernization but generated social conflict making common purpose difficult. Under Deng Xiaoping, economic reform created inequalities, corruption and conflict threatening progress. The party introduced the concept of the "harmonious society" (hexie shehui) as the necessary environment for economic development and peaceful governance. The concept conformed to the Confucian utopia of Datong, or “Great Unity,” and embraced not only China but all of humanity. China still finds her particular civilization to be a source of ideological inspiration as long as it does not threaten socialist hegemony.

⁶ Even the massive floods of August 2023 were camouflaged to avoid any hint that “Heaven is displeased with the rulers” – an echo with imperial times.
The American State

...the idea of soft despotism was first expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville in his book Democracy in America. In simple terms, it amounts to people freely giving more and more power to the government in return for which legislators promise them a world of perpetual security. VI

The United States has been relatively immune to the growth of the secular and authoritarian state experienced in eastern Eurasia. Hemispheric separation by two oceans kept the Mongols, Russians and Chinese in their own spheres of interaction. Until the closing of the continental frontier, America remained separate from Eurasian history.

The Spanish-American War ended the splendid isolation enjoyed since independence when the U.S. replaced Spain in her former territories — more as a political and economic force rather than as a colonial overlord. An important exception was the Philippines, which were envisioned as an entrepot for trade with the Far East. But it brought about friction with Japan’s mounting ambitions in China after annexation of Taiwan (1895). T.R. Roosevelt further involved the United States with his brokering peace between Russia and Japan in 1905.

At the outset of the twentieth century, American involvement in the economic, political and military complexities of Europe and Asia grew apace. After World War I, Washington set out on a path to impose a Wilsonian vision of international justice and later to stop German and Japanese aggression in World War II, when government mobilization of economy, diplomacy and knowledge stimulated massive expansion of the administrative state. The Soviet threat became dogma in the Korean War, and this continued until its collapse in late 1991.

The anticipated peace dividend was short-lived as new threats and emergencies claimed continuation and expansion of the now-embedded bureaucratic state. Covid, global warming and revived Russian expansion have moved the American state into a pale imitation of the centralized states of Eurasia, with greater penetration of government into society than in the past. Visual surveillance and a plethora of electronic monitoring have made individual movement and thought open to private and government entities, making past accumulation of typewritten records and handwritten dossiers seem primitive by comparison.

America’s founders purposely avoided the religious issues that had characterized Europe for centuries by distinguishing between church and state. As a society founded in large part by religious dissidents, Americans preferred toleration and no favorites in the matter of faith.
In place of a common transcendent religion, the emerging American vision was secular and based on a paradoxical spiritual materialism — a belief that the pursuit of happiness in this world was more attainable than an imposed religion promising glory in the next world. Application of rationality, science and technology to problems of this life and personal choice of faith or non-faith was best left to individuals, not government.

The Soviet collapse reinforced the belief that the American Dream was universal and the desire for democracy was liberated in former autocratic regimes. Global markets, electronic communications and cheap energy combined to realize a vision of freedom and prosperity. Signs of democracy appeared in Russia and China. The groundswell of reform and revolution surged in the 1990s.

The secular democratic state seemed to be the one size that fits all, with rationality infusing governments, market economies and emanating from the sci-tech knowledge elite. Islamic societies like Iran and Saudi Arabia declined to join the apparent mainstream and North Korea dug in its heels against any change. China’s repression of democracy in 1989 and Russian expansion in Crimea and Ukraine announced that the honeymoon was over. Election of Donald Trump (2016) on a wave of populism portended curtailment of the momentum of state expansion. His defeat in 2020 signaled a return to statism with special attention to climate change and continued Covid emergencies.

Conclusions

The modern autocratic state, with China as a leading example, has demonstrated an ability to adapt to change and opportunity. It can adopt a democratic façade without compromising central control or tolerating opposition to its monopoly of power. Law, order, technological advance and limits on alternative approaches have proven successful in such states, at the expense of the American democratic model’s ideals.

A large part of the appeal of autocracy is that, under enlightened leadership, it can be rational and effective, with few detours pressured by interest groups or occasional visionaries. Freedom of speech is considered perilous to political order and severely limited. Transcendence is replaced with secular materialism that aims to satisfy the general population. In China, those who embrace transcendent Christianity or Falun Gong are often persecuted. Islam and Buddhism are tolerated as long as they do not encourage non-compliance with state direction.

The triad of government, economy, and knowledge work in tandem to dominate society where religion, art, culture and philosophy once occupied autonomous partnership. At one end of the state spectrum is Iran and Saudi Arabia, where Islam establishes transcendence as a meaningful component nourishing a continuous though highly modified civilization.
At the other end we find North Korea, with total state control emanating from party government, planned economy and a highly restricted knowledge subsystem. The constructed ideology of *Juche* has characteristics of a religious framework with a pseudo-morality based on the Kim dynasty’s personality cult, in contrast to South Korea where nearly a quarter of the population is Christian.

The modern autocratic state emerged with *Pax Mongolica*, enveloped Russia until Ivan the Terrible, was revived by Lenin and adapted by China. It is now showing symptoms in modern America. It bodes a trade-off of human freedom for greater life security and is a fundamentally rational construction. As such, its embrace will not be reversed, although its over-promise to deliver life security to billions of humans will likely engender crisis and necessary modification.

Coming crises will no longer be national but regional and global. Sovereign states will expand their reach to confront crises, deploying laws, material resources and sci-tech knowledge in their search for solutions. The juggernaut of state power may overwhelm societies where transcendence has desiccated, where freedom is trivialized as consumer choice, and where individual agency is replaced with victimhood and the heritability of repressive tendencies.
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