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Perspectives

Will there be 1000 nations?



In its January issue, *Wired** magazine interviewed a few dozen high powered academics and corporate executives on their thoughts about the future. Some of their comments were worth repeating.

Consider this statement, by David Gelernter, Yale's renowned professor of computer sciences: "The future was and remains the quintessential American art form. Other nations sit back and let their futures happen; we construct ours. We can let the future happen, or take the trouble to imagine it. We can imagine it dark or bright--and in the long run, that's how it will be." Professor Gelernter is right-- America is the most successful nation on earth because it projects itself. Europe, Japan and much of the third world define themselves by what they don't want to be, which represents an enormous handicap.

Hoping for desovereignization

I thought two other comments eminently quotable. Robert Anton Wilson, futurist and author predicts that "The extension of the internet to everybody on the planet will inevitably lead to what Buckminster Fuller called "desovereignization"--the decentralization of power, with all humans participating." But Nicholas Negroponte, who heads MIT's Media Lab says that "Instead of the 200 (plus or minus) countries that we have today, we will have more than 1,000 by 2040."

Contradictory as they may seem at first sight, these two visions aren't mutually exclusive. The word that really matters is "desovereignization". If we really do manage to get government out of our lives, countries will become something quite different from what they're now. They'll be units based on practicality and cultural or ideological values and there is theoretically no limit to how many there will be.

**Wired*, at newsstands everywhere or by e-mail at subscriptions@wired.com

Larger trade blocks, more independence

Are we headed towards ever larger economic alliances, such as NAFTA or the EU? Or will there be ever more demands for national independence, such as those advanced by Quebeckers, East Timorese, Kosovars and Basques?

Probably both. Sovereign nations will find it increasingly advantageous to link up in trade alliances, but, at the same time, many of them will not survive the test of internal unity.

The most likely to become extinct are countries that are dictatorships--the concept of dictatorship is simply unsustainable in the age of information technology. Not far behind will be democracies which are overly centralized or extract excessive taxes. Heavy centralization causes regional rebellion and eventual secession, while an onerous tax regime drives productive citizens to other sovereign states or under-ground. Both trends will become progressive in the coming years: cross-border mobility is growing and technological evolution is making tax policing more difficult.

For obvious reasons, governments everywhere are likely to fight these trends. But thanks to the technological revolution, which has the effect of enhancing both entrepreneurship and independence, they'll lose this one. Three cheers for desovereignization! ☐

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