



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## A New Trinity for an Asymmetric World: The Organic, Synthetic and Ethereal

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This is the second of two excerpts from Chapter 5: The Tribal Foundation of Order, Barry Scott Zellen, *The Art of War in an Asymmetric World: Strategy for the Post-Cold War Era* (Continuum Books, July 2012). You can find the first excerpt [here](#).

Our task at hand is to develop new analytical and theoretical tools to help map our new, asymmetric world, and to rethink some of the post-Westphalian assumptions that did not graft so well to the more distant corners of the world where we now find ourselves engaged militarily, where tribal governance remains the most enduring form of political order and sovereignty at the state level is largely an illusion fostered by mapmakers whose solid state boundaries ignore the underlying and often cross-cutting tribal realities. We must thus endeavor extend the levels of analysis further into the sub-systemic realm, beyond the state to the underlying sub-state realm – world politics’ equivalent to the quantum realm. We must also expand our application of the levels of analysis to the *pre-Westphalian* realm, which still defines much of the world beyond Europe where the nation-state was in many cases little more than an aspiration, and which on the ground remained ordered by these other “quantum” forces—such as tribal kinship, clan networks, or sectarian belief. In this more diverse world, we have many different kinds of states, not all of which are what Singer described as *national states*.

Some, of course, are *bona fide* nation-states but others which are multi-ethnic states. We also have tribes, sects, and clans, some that reside within states, some between and across state boundaries (thereby creating fault lines for future inter- and intra-state conflicts.) And with the increased digitality of communications and proliferation of networks, we have virtual and neo-tribal entities which could, in time, evolve into bona fide actors in world politics, much like clans, sects and tribes. The world communist movement could be viewed as the last century’s manifestation of a neo-tribal force that came to dominate much of world politics. Perhaps the spirited commitment to democracy by the Athenians two millennia ago, which in time evolved into America’s primary ideological export, could be viewed as a similar neo-tribal force. As can, one may argue, the Christian movement and Islamic movement, which evolved into world religions. Thus various social movements could, if they survive the test of time, form new and enduring non-state foundations of world order.

Our proposed new taxonomy for understanding these sub-, trans-, and non-state dimensions of world politics has its own inherently trinitarian structure; indeed, the core sub-components of world politics can be defined as being *organic*, *synthetic*, and *ethereal*. Among the organic components are of course the true nation-states which have evolved over centuries into stable, culturally and linguistically cohesive, militarily defensible, politically independent, sovereign units. But at the sub-state level, there are many more organic components, including the tribes that have survived the rise of the modern state and either live within, between or across state boundaries. Interestingly, not all states are organic, as much as they

might claim to be. Witness the stunning Soviet collapse, as this synthetic entity, a dominant feature of the short-lived bipolar world, fractured along its underlying organic fault lines. And, to be fair, today's organic states have not always been organic. Indeed, it took centuries of war, expansion, tribal conflict and annihilatory warfare, and political modernization for them to emerge.

Our differentiation between organic and synthetic echoes a hint of French sociologist Émile Durkheim's conception of mechanical versus organic solidarity, though to Durkheim it was organic solidarity that emerged in the more modern states where a division of labor introduced a more complex interdependence, while mechanical solidarity was evident in more traditional communities like tribal or clan-based societies—an inversion of his German rival, the famed sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' conception of premodern *Gemeinschaft* and modern *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies, incidentally, contributed to a renewal of interest in Thomas Hobbes among modern theorists through his republication of Hobbes' works, and his 1896 tome, *Hobbes, Leben und Lehre* in which he pays tribute to Hobbes for his theoretical inspiration. And even more interesting is the fact that Waltz, the “father of neorealism” and the great simplifier of world politics who placed parsimony before all else, looked to Durkheim, who distinguished between mechanical and organic solidarity, for theoretical inspiration and justification of his binary approach to world politics as in essence a two-party system (the system and its constituent units, which he boiled down from his original three images.) As noted in his 1995 article in the *American Political Science Review*, “Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal Form,” John Barkdull observed that “Waltz distinguishes domestic and international structures in terms of Durkheim's typology of mechanical and organic solidarity and the corresponding segmentary and organized orders,” and “places the international system in the mechanical, segmentary class and asserts that the international system, as a segmentary order, lacks a division of labor, or differences between the units.”<sup>[1]</sup> Barkdull notes that in contrast to Waltz's characterization of the international system by its mechanical solidarity, “the differentiation of units characterizes hierarchical, organic, domestic society. States are segments, Waltz argues, in that they are alike and are related to one another by juxtaposition, rather than displaying the organic ties of differentiation and mutual dependence found within a society. ‘The parts of a polity,’ writes Waltz, ‘bind themselves together by their differences’”—as he put it in his 1979 *Theory of International Politics*, citing Durkheim's classic *Division of Labor in Society*.<sup>[2]</sup> Furthermore, Waltz posits that “states, inasmuch as they are alike, are not members of the same polity and are merely loosely linked in the international system by their sameness. Thus Waltz equates mechanical solidary society with anarchy, organic society with hierarchy, and relies on Durkheim's authority for the reasonability of reducing all societies to these two polar types” in *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>[3]</sup>

Even more interesting, Barkdull describes how “Waltz's use of Durkheim's conceptual framework is in error in several respects,” and notes while “Waltz describes the basis for organic solidarity admirably” in his 1986 “Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, he nonetheless “ignores the significance of the fact that the main social types that Durkheim posits—mechanical and organic society differ in terms of their moral basis, preferring to emphasize the consequence that the units in each type are similar or differentiated. He mistakenly equates anarchy with the segmentary form and hierarchy with the organic form, when segmentary and organic society can be either hierarchical or anarchic”—and “compounds the error by conflating mutualism and mechanical society. Ultimately, the problem with Waltz's formulation is that his purpose is directly contrary to Durkheim's. While Waltz wishes to establish the invariance and continuity of the main features of international life, Durkheim attempts to explain and evaluate fundamental transformations in social relations.”<sup>[4]</sup> Barkdull further notes that “Durkheim's analysis points toward change and transformation in the international system, not to continuity and persistent structural limits on the development of international institutions. In short, contrary to Waltz's assertions, Durkheim does not provide any greater

support for his theory than to liberal internationalism—probably the reverse.”[5]

Our reconceptualization of world order embraces both the natural transformation of social relations inherent in Durkheim as well as the original, and dynamic, trinitarian structure contained in Waltz’s three images presented in his classic 1959 *Man, the State and War*—which has left students with a richer set of ingredients to comprehend the complexities of world politics, more so than his later theoretical and admittedly more elegant work as presented in his 1979 *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz’s original three levels of world politics continued a proud and enduring tradition dating back to Clausewitz, who stands as a principal (and perhaps the pre-eminent) gatekeeper to the contemporary world of total war; Machiavelli, who similarly stood as a principal (and perhaps the pre-eminent) gatekeeper to the modern world, and even further back to Plato, who emerged from Socrates’ shadow to become the principal (and perhaps, with the exception of Aristotle, pre-eminent) gatekeeper to the classical world, giving form to otherwise formless classical world and who initiated the rapid empowerment of the young field of philosophy as an art of social, political, and strategic construction with his sweeping vision of what Foucault might think of as classical *pouvoir-savoir* in the form of the Philosopher-King. In our reconceptualization of the subcomponents of world order, the states that are not organic are by default synthetic states: they are artifices that have yet to achieve full sovereignty over all of their territory and among all of their peoples, and their artificiality results in a fragility and brittleness that tends toward collapse during times of stress.

As we saw when the Soviet Union collapsed, it was a synthetic state albeit an unusually powerful one, but it failed to extinguish the aspirations of its organic captive nations—which after a series of singular uprisings stretching from Berlin in 1953 to Gdansk in 1980 finally rebelled all at once during the tectonic upheaval of 1989/1990, winning their freedom while dooming the experiment to re-engineer the very heart of mankind into a new Soviet man (*novy sovetsky chelovek*). But had Gorbachev not come along to meekly surrender to the democratic forces he unwittingly unleashed in his bid to restructure and reform the Soviet Union, and instead a ruthless tyrant had grabbed the reins of Soviet power and crushed these movements violently and without wavering, the Soviet experiment may well have continued. It boasted many gains, from its potent thermonuclear armory to its wide social umbrella offering universal health care, housing and education to hundreds of millions of its citizens to its tremendous advances in science and engineering; until the late 1980s, it appeared to be ascending much like (indeed, more so than) China today, and as described by Philip Bobbitt in his masterful *Shield of Achilles*, prior to the Soviet collapse the Soviet Union itself seemed to be quite viable as a state, indeed a superpower, and certainly not pre-ordained to fail. If the Soviet experiment had succeeded, perhaps a century or a millennium hence, the Soviet Union (and its coalition with other Communist States) might have evolved from synthetic to organic status and become an enduring feature of the international system, with the principles of socialism potentially eclipsing those of market-democracy which became enshrined, if little noticed, by the 1990 Peace of Paris. But it did collapse and with the Soviet collapse came the concomitant rise of the values embraced by the victor, a fusion of the ancient principle of democracy that infused Periclean Athens, and the modern economics of capitalism.

America, too, was once a synthetic state. Borne of the British colonial experiment, shaped by the crucible of war, against Britain, Spain, Barbary pirates, the many Native American tribes, proto-nations and empires that governed what would ultimately become American territory, and later its own rebellious southern states – perhaps the decisive conflict which transformed “these united states” as a plural entity and amalgamation of sovereign components into “the United States,” a singular sovereign entity, otherwise known as the “Union,” and perceived to be “indivisible.” It is ironic that the Soviet Union perceived itself this way as well, but in the end failed to make the transition from synthetic to organic. Germany, in its long and painful history, started out as a collection of organic sub-state tribes, city-states

and other micro-states on the periphery of the Holy Roman Empire; but under Bismarck and Frederick, it carved out its own contiguous geographical space in Europe to assert state sovereignty, over-reaching in the twentieth century, but pushed back by the world community, divided and occupied for a generation, and finally settling in as an organic member of the world of nation-states, though in the mid-twentieth century, the militarily expanding empire envisioned by Hitler was clearly a synthetic state, one that quickly collapsed under tremendous external pressure as its eastern neighbor, the synthetic Soviet state, would later do.

The British Empire was also a synthetic state, and when it collapsed, it released from captivity many re-emergent organic states; indeed, it was the organic nature of a self-governing India that enabled his nonviolent revolution to succeed; Gandhi, by massing the populace in strategic but largely nonviolent resistance to British rule, merely persuaded the British to recognize reality for what it was, facilitating a relatively benign handover to independence. But not all of the constituents that comprised the British Empire became properly organic state-level components. What was once a united India, when forcibly divided into a sovereign India and Pakistan, became an imperfect, indeed distorted, reflection of the multi-ethnicity that had achieved some sense of organic equilibrium as a united whole, even with its complex multiethnicity. In division, it precipitated painful and dislocative forced mass-relocations of minority peoples on both sides of the new sovereign boundaries, and a series of traumatic upheavals including riots, and later wars, that caused a further fissioning of the body politic of Pakistan and the emergence of a separate, independent Bangladesh—the chaotic after-effects of partition has, for many years in our time, threatened to unleash the first bilateral nuclear war between two nuclear-armed opponents that still seethe with rage over the trauma of their conjoined birth, an ironic epitaph for two states who came to freedom through the elegant beauty of Gandhi's *satyagraha*; the still unresolved uncertainty over the status of Kashmir, claimed by both Pakistan and India and an apt metaphor for the failure of post-British India to achieve organic stability, illustrates how offspring states forged during the crucible of civil war and independence struggles can create new synthetic states like Pakistan, which struggle to evolve into stable organic entities and appear to always be at risk of further fragmentation into smaller, but more stable, polities. Might a united India and Pakistan have been more organic, as Gandhi himself believed but which the British, always thinking ahead (and tending to divide when conquering proved unviable), sought to forestall? Or must Pakistan and India instead continue to undergo a future series of fracturings into smaller sovereign entities for a truly organic equilibrium to emerge? And with both states armed with substantial nuclear assets, could such a fracturing unfold without nuclear war, just as the Soviet collapse managed to do?

China is widely perceived to be an organic state, and with five millennia of sovereign independence, its own distinct language (but with dialects that share a common orthography but which remain mutually unintelligible), its sophisticated and multi-tiered system of governance, and its recent economic might and increasing military prowess, there is no reason to doubt this. But, China's present borders do not necessarily reflect an organic wholeness. Indeed, its 1950-51 conquest of Tibet forcibly incorporated a captive nation into its body politic, one with its own distinct history, culture and language and its own rightful claim to organic status. Tibet lacked China's military and demographic power, and was less economically advanced, so did not stand a chance, but this conquest does not disqualify it from its unmistakable organic status, and its ongoing struggle, marked by occasional rebellions from Beijing's rule, reinforces the merit of its organic designation. For the moment, Tibet is thus an organic sub-state component of a synthetic China. But were China to recognize that its long-term stability could be enhanced by allowing a friendly and independent Tibet to emerge from its shadow—perhaps as a demilitarized buffer-state separating it from its true long-term strategic adversary, India—then Beijing would take a big step closer toward organic wholeness, and would in the process not only increase its own

prognosis for a durable stability, but would at the same time strengthen its relationship with the democratic West, and in so doing, help to further broaden the geographic expanse of what we have long called the “West” to include nearly all of Northeast Asia.

There are other captive nations and substantial sub- and trans-state tribes within China’s current boundaries including the populous Miao and Yi peoples, and dozens of smaller non-Han minorities. Some reside in ethnically homogenous swaths of territory which could, in the right time and place, become sovereign states, not unlike the smaller sovereign entities like the city-states of Europe and the newly independent remnants of Yugoslavia, especially the Bosniak enclave as well as the Kosovar enclave, both protected by western power and thus nurtured forth into sovereign or semi-sovereign existence. Such tribal and proto-national entities are to a large degree organic. The Bosniaks, for sure, since they have resided in the same homeland for half a millennium, have their own distinct culture, and to a large degree control a substantial swath of territory. The Kosovars are less obvious organic; tied to Albania by language and culture, but residing within Serbia by quirk of history, they may not stand as an organic sovereign state, and as a sub-state “statelet,” whose existence can only be assured by external military power, one could argue that Serbia’s claim to more properly and legitimately assert sovereignty over Kosovo is the better argument, but again by quirk of history, and owing to their poor treatment of their own ethnic minority, the Serbs have not been allowed to exercise what is in fact a reasonable and just claim. The exodus of Albanian Muslims that Serbia sought to encourage through ethnic cleansing may well have led to a more stable and organic outcome, with the Kosovars returning to Albania and the Serbs reclaiming their lost lands in Kosovo. Not a gentle solution but in the long-term, perhaps a more stable one.

The Middle East, especially with the half-century conflict between Israel and the Arab states (and various non-state entities), looks on the surface to be a clash between organic states. But during the long Diaspora of Jewish national existence, when the Jewish tribes found refuge and later faced annihilation in Europe, a millennium passed and during this long stretch of history, a largely Arab Middle East became organic. The restoration of Jewish sovereignty opened a gaping wound that has not fully healed, even after several generations. The Arab states have not made it easier, preventing most Palestinians the opportunity to integrate with their societies, resulting in decades of refugees living in camps and deprived of hope. The Israelis have not made it easy either, expanding their sovereign footprint to the territories captured during the Six Day War, relocating its capital to Jerusalem and declaring it to be indivisible, and engaging in fitful peace talks while building new settlements on land claimed rightfully by the nonetheless defeated Palestinians, developing its own nuclear deterrent so it could find solace behind its own “Samson Option,” and dominating its neighbors militarily. It has made peace, but along the way it has left the wound created by its very existence festering, a source of continuing tension. Israel is thus an ambiguous case. It has many dimensions that suggest it is an organic state. But to its neighbors and opponents, it can be said to be a synthetic state. An amalgamation of tribes united by their faith, they won their independence and have defended it ably, earning the respect and admiration if not the friendship of most of its neighbors. In the eyes of its neighbors, it remains in transition from synthetic to organic status; but once it achieves peace with Syria (which looked more likely under Alewite rule than it does now, given the passions and confidence unlocked by the current civil war), and facilitates a truly national rebirth of the stateless Palestinians, it may transition into the organic category, and achieve a more secure equilibrium with its neighbors. But the fact that Israel is by definition a Jewish state suggests another dimension to the conflict: between the region’s majority (albeit greatly divided) Islamic faith, and the minority Jewish faith. Within Israel, with its Israeli-Arab population growing faster than the Jewish population, there is a simmering conflict that could explode into civil war along both theological and cultural lines. When Iran’s leaders suggest “wiping Israel off the map,” they are more likely imagining erasing the sovereign

boundaries of the state they view to be a synthetic intrusion by the West into the Islamic world, but not necessarily the physical or even spiritual existence of the Jewish people, who share an overlapping heritage with all Muslims, who trace their lineage back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people born in the Babylonian city of Ur. They may in fact imagine a continued Jewish existence in the traditional (but not fully sovereign) Jewish homeland, and not the extinction of Jewish identity as so many Israelis rightly fear – as a minority religion within the broader Islamic world, much the way the old Persian empire was structured, and later the Ottomans. This complex clash of faiths overlapping national and subnational boundaries introduces us to the third dimension in our new taxonomy of world politics: the ethereal.

The ethereal dimension of the world order is one that exists in the mind and heart, such as the world's religions, and one might argue its cults and more messianic and millennial ideologies which in time might evolve into bona fide religions. As Europe modernized, many of the wars fought were sectarian in nature, and from the sectarian strife, an over-arching sovereignty was called for to suppress the fires of religious warfare. Thomas Hobbes famously called upon Leviathan to extinguish the fires of the English civil war, and to break the backbone of the combatants in the long sectarian war that shed so much blood on English soil. The rise of Leviathan, as metaphor for the rise of modern, secular state sovereignty, reflected the historical triumph of the state over the Church and its many sectarian factions. In what became the West, the struggle between Church and State was settled decisively, with the state asserting a unifying religious culture but over time becoming more and more tolerant to minority religions. In America, where many religious minorities fled Europe's religious wars and ubiquitous religious persecutions, a new and distinct ethereal society emerged long before America became independent, and even longer before it came to be sovereign across the continent. At the time of the first Indian wars, this was a clash between tribes and sects, the former indigenous to the Americas and the latter largely comprised of religious refugees from Europe. This was the environment in which King Philip's War was fought, a struggle not between church and state, but between church and tribe – the latter an organic entity indigenous to the Americas, and the former a newly arrived synthetic entity which, in triumph, would control first a colony and later a state that would itself come to dominate the continent. When the former achieved military victory, owing to its alliance with the Mohawks, defeating King Philip's army and thus breaking the will as well as the capacity of his coalition to resist an emergent *American* power, the victorious *synthetic* would in time evolve to become a veritable *organic* member of the world community, over time ascending to global economic and military predominance. Ethereal entities can thus plant a seed from which future states emerge, and enable the transition from synthetic to organic member of the world community.

In Europe, it was sect and faith that enabled fractious tribes to unite as one nation, thus providing the binding spirit that forged a nation out of warring tribes. Had ethereality survived in Europe past the Middle Ages it might have prevented the emergence of the nation-states as the organic units post-Westphalia. History may have been very different, with spiritual empires and not smaller nation-states dominating the European political landscape. And underlying the fault lines between nations, as seen during the Cold War, there was indeed an underlying ethereal fault line where a Christian West and an Orthodox East collided. And it was upon such ethereal fault lines that the former Yugoslavia fractured. Throughout the Islamic world, ethereal identity often supersedes that of national identity, and this explains the endurance and resilience of some of the Islamist and Jihadist movements.

When the anti-Soviet Jihad withstood the hard power of the Red Army, it did so in part because of the tremendous faith and spiritual dedication of the Jihadists. They were not fighting for their nation, and though organized largely into sub-state tribal groupings, it was an ethereal axis of conflict that largely defined their struggle. To them they were waging war against not just occupiers, but Godless Infidels, nonbelievers who rejected their faith and thus committed an act of apostasy, very similar to the blasphemy that drove the intra-Christian feuds of the Middle Ages. They could thus withdraw to Peshawar, regroup,

and then re-engage in Afghanistan, and when necessary, withdraw again. Their power came not from territorial possession but from the steadfastness of their spiritual vision and faith. The Red Army could occupy Afghanistan for a decade but never turn most Afghans into Communists. Their faith was too strong, and their identity perhaps more keenly ethereal than tribal. The Taliban movement, and its resilience, can be attributed at least in part to its ethereal nature. While its ability to govern Afghanistan quickly collapsed under American fire in 2001, its comeback should not come as a surprise given the deep spiritual roots that legitimize its rule, enhanced by the organic nature of its demographic base amongst the Pashtuns. That its ethnic roots are firmly planted in the trans-state Pashtun tribe, which straddles the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, affords an enduring base of popular support in both states, providing sanctuary to withstand a decline in fortunes on either side—much like that enjoyed by the anti-Soviet resistance during the 1980s. The Taliban's strength is thus a fusion of an ethereal bond with a durable organic trans-state base, tying its fate to both Afghanistan, where American power has been predominant, and Pakistan, which fostered the emergence of the Taliban movement a decade earlier. Similarly, the endurance of Bin Laden's Al Qaeda movement, even as its leadership maintains a stateless existence, and its ability to assert sovereign control anywhere in the world continues to wither, can be attributed to its unique ethereality, but in this case without the same unity of an organic ethnographic foundation. The idea that binds Al Qaeda as a global movement, and sustains its endurance across both space and time, reflects a rare global ethereal movement, not unique but exceedingly uncommon.

The conception of the West, in its early years, was perhaps as ethereal: Athens lost its own long and bloody Civil War with Sparta, and democracy in the end came nearly last to Greece in modern Europe, not first. But far away, in America, the ideals of the Athenians found new and fertile soil, but only after the indigenous peoples of the continent were genocidally annihilated or ethnically cleansed from their homelands. In the wake of their destruction a new organic form could arise, bound by its founding ethereal vision. Through by crude means, an ethereal conception of order took sovereign form as a state, and then underwent the transition from a synthetic to organic component of world politics over time and under the duress of war and conflict. As the "West," and perhaps one day, a united "Top," engages in its struggle with Al Qaeda and its many associated pan-Islamist forces, it should recall its own ethereal origins, and not dismiss its opponent for its current stateless status. The early Christians when they challenged the authority of the militarily and economically superior Rome were similarly outnumbered, but their ethereal conception of order planted the seed for not only a new world religion, but also the foundation for national identity in Europe millennia later that arose from its ashes. The ethereal movement imagined by Jesus and executed brilliantly by his followers upon his death, ultimately reclaimed Rome as its capital, where it still rules today in the micro-state of Vatican City.

These are just some preliminary thoughts, a starting point for a reconceptualization of world politics along constituent subcomponents that have proven their durability outside the framework of the Westphalian tradition. Europe has embraced nation-states, by and large, though its military history reflects a continuing aspiration for something more, a universal empire along the lines of what Napoleon briefly erected, or the more sweeping East/West synthesis achieved by Alexander in ancient times. Along the periphery of Europe, however, an enduring tribal reality has challenged the viability of the state as the foundation of order, as seen in the many fractious border regions from the Balkans to the Caucasus. In the post-colonial world, the alignment of state boundaries to the underlying ethnocultural topographical is even less snug, resulting in genocidal explosions of ethnic rage as seen in Rwanda in its 100 days of bloodletting in 1994, and near total war conditions as experienced in the Congo these past few years with as many victims as the whole of Europe experienced during World War I. The states system that so many modern realists have embraced may thus be viewed in hindsight as a naïve and idealistic fantasy rooted in a gross oversimplification of the very European history that undergirds their world view; and its fixation on the

state as the fundamental building block increasingly deviates from the inherent and underlying reality of world politics the further one looks beyond Europe. Realism must thus be weaned from its persistent dependence upon the Westphalian model, much as Benno Teschke does in his 2003 *The Myth of 1648*.

By setting realist theory free from its long state-centricity, it can better do what it initially sought to do: reflect reality, and in so doing, help mankind navigate its dangerous eddies, and achieve some measure of solace. By returning to its origins, a world of city-states trapped in a violent and anarchical world, and seeing how it evolved beyond the *polis* to world politics, we can rediscover its essence. Realism was not a rubber-stamp of the Treaty of Westphalia, it was a hard-fought, passionate struggle against chaos, a dream of enduring order, that responded to the complexities of history, and dealt with these complexities as best it could. It sought to mitigate through understanding the greatest dangers, and to restore equilibrium where it could. But the state as a fixed, and permanent solution to the problem of chaos, was never the sole end sought by realism. While Leviathan emerged in Hobbes' imagination to pacify the festering chaos of his era, this all-powerful sovereign was not the terminus of the realist journey; it marked the high water mark of state sovereignty, but on the global stage this only led to a new round of chaos and a new quest for order, as evident in the theoretical efforts of the total war theorists, as in the deconstructive realists who sought to dismantle this all-powerful, too-powerful construct.

It is obvious in our time that some components of world politics are organic, and from thus derive stability as well as legitimacy. It is also obvious that some components are synthetic, though synthetic need not mean a lack of legitimacy or even be a source of current instability. But a synthetic entity will have artificial boundaries which could under pressure become fault lines of conflict and even fracture into new sovereign entities. One can intuit that a state, as it evolves from tribal or sectarian origins into durable member of the world community, would likely aspire to migrate from synthetic to organic. With the Soviet Union, this came about during its collapse as its organic components were emancipated, regaining their lost sovereignty, rather than through its own evolution into an organic whole. America, itself once a synthetic entity, now can claim veritable organic status, its sovereignty unquestioned across its vast domain. China, largely organic, still holds by force captive nations that are unto themselves organic entities and would, in the absence of Chinese power, readily reclaim their own sovereign independence. This is so for the Tibetan nation, occupied by China and no longer recognized by the community of nations, but still recognized by millions of people around the world. Tiny Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were once similarly occupied by the Soviet state, though the West never fully turned its back on their just claims, rooted in their distinctly organic nature.

In the case of China, wars of unification and the stunning demographic dominance of the Han, once but a single tribe but now numbering over one billion, the world's largest single ethnic group, have brought their state toward organic status without fracturing like Moscow's empire did. In the brief life of the Soviet Union, its people did not fully evolve into a singular *Soviet man* as dreamed by Lenin and his disciples, but retained their linguistic and cultural uniqueness, and their traditional ethnic identities were never truly replaced by a new Soviet identity. In China, while the Han are clearly Chinese by identity, and exercise most levers of power, over a hundred million non-Han minorities endure, particularly along the southwestern periphery of China, most well known in the West being the Tibetans whose homeland was conquered by China during the last century—but there are also many other distinct minority peoples scattered across its vast southern and western territories, many who still struggle to preserve their distinctive cultural traditions and identity—whether tribal, sectarian, or even national.

This presents potential faultlines along which the Chinese state may yet fracture, and suggests that for so long as China lays claim to its current borders, it could yet meet the same humbling fate that Moscow's younger empire did. After all, the forced integration of Tibet into the Chinese body politic is a relatively

recent phenomenon and not an ancient one, even though China roots its claim to Tibet, in part, in its earlier historical domination of the Tibetan plateau. China may well be prudent to revisit its boundaries, and instead of asserting sovereignty over a such a vast synthetic realm, to restrain its assertion to a more defensible and properly organic realm. China's leadership is, no doubt, particularly sensitive to such a suggestion; as *Associated Press* reporter Gillian Wong has reported, China's President Hu Jintao told Communist party leaders in an October 2011 speech: "We must clearly see that international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of westernizing and dividing China, and ideological and cultural fields are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration."<sup>[6]</sup> China might counter that the United States is one, vast imperial domain, a continental synthetic that has no just claim to sovereignty, at least of an organic nature. But ask the over 310 million residents of the United States, even the descendants of its conquered indigenous tribes or the once proudly Mexican southwestern states, and most will tell you that they are first and foremost Americans now, and that America is by virtue of their enthusiastic consent an organic member of the international community. Even in the young states of Alaska and Hawaii, both of which experienced Japanese assaults during World War II, and which have not long been part of the American polity, have quickly become deeply embedded components of the American state, its people firmly committed to their Americanness. Perhaps the crucible of the Pacific War hastened this process, tightly binding the newest of America's states to their nation.

But if you ask the indigenous people of Tibet this same question, who have been part of China for about as many decades as Hawaii and Alaska have been members of the American union, and they will tell you something different, that they remain first and foremost Tibetans, and that their loyalty is not to Beijing but to the Dalai Lama, their spiritual, and formerly national political leader. As their March 2008 uprising demonstrated, they do not accept the legitimacy of Beijing's claim to govern them—and this strongly suggests that a China that includes Tibet is a synthetic entity, and a potentially fragile one at that, while a China without Tibet becomes more organic and thus more enduring as a sovereign entity. China instead aims to make Tibet Chinese by overrunning it with Han migrants by the bus, plane, and train load, and could in time transform Tibet, much as the Israelis have sought to do to their more populous West Bank settlements on occupied Palestinian lands, and which the Americans did state-by-state, territory-by-territory, in their relentless westward expansion—though in the way of both of these expanding states were numerous tribes and stateless peoples, not unlike the occupied Tibetan nation of today. Moscow's own efforts to Russify the Baltics and its many other constituent Soviet Republics left much of Eurasia with lingering fault lines and potential points of fracture, not just along which the USSR ultimately collapsed, but along which the surviving Russian Federation could continue to fracture. And who can forget the unsuccessful effort of the Serbs to transform the demographics of the former-Yugoslavia, which they long dominated, and thus carve out of its remains an organic, sovereign, greater-Serbian state? The risks to Beijing thus remain salient, and could imperil the endurance of its current territorial breadth.

The ethereal dimension is also of interest here, as Tibet is a Buddhist nation, its leader not just a leader of the faith, but until quite recently, the political leader of a nation. China, while with a long Buddhist tradition of its own, as a communist state has held an official view of religion that until recently did not accept the legitimacy of Tibet's Buddhist government-in-exile, while more recently seeking a more balanced way to reconcile China's increasing nostalgia for its spiritual traditions under the rubric of revitalizing its traditional culture—and thereby strengthening the unifying bond of Chinese nationalism. While China maintains its occupation of Tibet, it clearly has not won over the hearts and minds of most indigenous Tibetans, who view Beijing's legitimacy with the same critical perspective that Ukrainians and Latvians once viewed Moscow's. Once again, a largely godless government in the communist world may underestimate the enduring ethereal identity of those it has conquered, and because Beijing has not yet fully recognized the spiritual foundations of power and instead emphasizes the material dimensions, both

economic and military, it may underestimate the potential for resistance by those it occupies. Moscow certainly did, first in Afghanistan, then fatally in Central Europe, where its empire collapsed. China is encircled as much by democratic states as by Buddhist nations, and it may well be that the ethereal dimension could prove to be the most salient in a future marked by an unraveling of Chinese sovereignty and power.

Returning to our discussion of tribalism in the modern world, we have considered the sub-state dimensions of the many conflicts that have defined the GWOT. The tribe, like the clan or sect, remains a foundational, organic component of the world community, an essential sub-state and even pre-state building block. To successfully restore and maintain order in today's complex world will require a sustained recognition of the endurance of tribalism in the modern world, and its tendency, in times of upheaval and collapse of centralized orders, to reassert itself as a key pillar of political order. This will require becoming what Bing West eloquently described as the "strongest tribe," as we did successfully in Iraq. Becoming, and remaining, the strongest tribe is thus essential for achieving victory in our continuing war on terror, by whatever name it goes by. But strength must be defined by more than the material; it is also moral, as long recognized by theorists of war.

Thus the ethereal dimension is every bit as important, forming the spiritual seed around which tribal, sectarian, and later national identity coalesces, and if overlooked could enable synthetic states to fail; but if embraced, it can enable organic states to endure. Recognizing these important interconnections of organic, synthetic, and ethereal dimensions of world politics helps move us toward a reconceptualization of international relations, and a more nuanced appreciation of the quantum dimensions of world politics, which is the ultimate foundation of world order. Thus thinking about organic versus synthetic, and the underlying ethereal dimensions of international relations, can help provide new insights into world politics, especially along the ethnoculturally complex border regions between states. Understanding which parts of the world possess an organic, and inherently durable, foundation, and which are more aptly synthetic and potentially vulnerable to a fracturing, could help guide the evolution of American military and diplomatic policy, and help foster important instincts for where our military power could be applied effectively.

After all, a synthetic state can be broken into smaller components, while an organic one cannot—though with enough force, even an organic entity can ultimately be annihilated, through total war or genocide. As the collapse of the Soviet Union and before that the breakup of Yugoslavia demonstrated at the Cold War's conclusion, modern states are neither eternal nor unchanging. They are dynamic and evolving. And it may well be the internal, sub-systemic dynamics described above that drive these changes and not just balances or imbalances of state power in the international system. Indeed, across much of the world, there may truly be no state system at all, despite its prominence in the minds of so many theorists—but instead, in its lofty place, is an ethereal but nonetheless lasting interconnection that varies greatly by region, shadows cast upon the wall of mind deep down inside Plato's cave—mere glimpses of an overarching order, amidst a kaleidoscopic amalgam of organic and synthetic parts, each doing what they do best: surviving in a maddeningly complex world, for as long as they can.

## Notes

[1] John Barkdull, "Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal Form," *American Political Science Review* 89, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), 672.

[2] Barkdull, "Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal Form," *American Political Science Review* 89, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), 672.

[3] Barkdull, "Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal

Form,” *American Political Science Review* 89, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), 672.

[4] Barkdull, “Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal Form,” *American Political Science Review* 89, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), 676.

[5] Barkdull, “Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: The International System as an Abnormal Form,” *American Political Science Review* 89, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), 678. Noting that “Durkheim posits mechanical and organic forms of social solidarity,” Barkdull explains on the same page that he must “question the relevance of these normal forms to the conflict-ridden world in which we live, where social solidarity is woefully lacking,” and thus puts forth his own thesis that “to categorize the contemporary international system, we need to turn to another aspect of Durkheim’s work, his analysis of abnormal forms of society,” which include the *anomic*, *forced* and *uncoordinated* division of labor.

[6] Gillian Wong, “Hu: Hostile Forces Seek to Westernize, Split China,” *Associated Press*, January 2, 2012; Associated Press, “China’s Leader Slams ‘Plot’ to Split Nation,” *MoneyNews.com*, January 3, 2012, <http://www.moneynews.com/Economy/Hu-West-Split-China/2012/01/03/id/422838>.

## About the Author



### Barry Zellen

Barry Scott Zellen is an author, journalist, and political theorist specializing in the philosophy of war, the evolution of strategic theory, state-tribe conflict, and the tribal foundations of world order. Much of his early field work was rooted in the Arctic and Subarctic regions of North America, where he developed his ideas on the state-tribe interface, the tribal foundations of world order, and the persistence of tribal governance in remote regions well into the post-Westphalian era. He is a senior visiting fellow of the Anchorage-based Institute of the North and on the board of the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States (ARCUS).

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