

post-ideological age some of the most exotic political visions are the ones that emerge from discussions about tech. You’ll find more radical libertarians and outright communists among computer scientists than among political scientists. Advances in computing have thrown up fresh ways to think about what it means to own something, what it means to share something and what it means to have a private life at all. These are among the basic questions of modern politics. However, the new answers rarely get expressed in political terms (with the exception of heated debates about civil rights for robots). More often they are expressions of frustration with politics and sometimes of outright contempt for it. Technology isn’t seen as a way of doing politics better. It’s seen as a way of bypassing politics altogether.

In some circumstances, technology can and should bypass politics. The advent of widespread mobile phone ownership has allowed some of the world’s poorest citizens to wriggle free from the trap of failed government. In countries that lack basic infrastructure – an accessible transport network, a reliable legal system, a usable banking sector – phones enable people to create their own networks of ownership and exchange. In Africa a grassroots, phone-based banking system has sprung up that for the first time permits money transfers without the physical exchange of cash. This makes it possible for the inhabitants of desperately poor and isolated rural areas to do business outside of their local communities. Technology caused this to happen; government didn’t. For many Africans phones are an escape route from the constrained existence that bad politics

has for so long mired them in.

But it would be a mistake to overstate what phones can do. They won’t rescue anyone from civil war. Africans can use their phones to tell the wider world of the horrors that are still taking place in some parts of the continent – in South Sudan, in Eritrea, in the Niger Delta, in the Central African Republic, in Somalia. Unfortunately the world does not often listen, and nor do the soldiers who are doing the killing. Phones have not changed the basic equation of political security: the people with the guns need a compelling reason not to use them. Technology by itself doesn’t give them that reason. Equally, technology by itself won’t provide the basic infrastructure whose lack it has provided a way around. If there are no functioning roads to get you to market, a phone is godsend when you have something to sell. But in the long run, you still need the roads. Everything will go better with them. Government is needed to build and maintain roads, especially to poor and isolated areas that lack the means to pay for them. Government upholds the rule of law. Government secures property rights. The consequences of state failure can sometimes be ameliorated by technological fixes, but they can’t be remedied by them. For that, you need well-functioning states. In the end, only politics can rescue you from bad politics.