

Networks and Nation States

The 20th century was a century of institutions and of the centralization of power. That centralization was driven first by industrial capital and then by cultural and financial capital. We're now seeing the shift to a capitalism of sociality, which is both enabled by and requires new organizing structures for its exploitation. As always, the death struggles of the old are more visible than the tentative steps of the new; the crisis of financialized capital that we've come to depend on takes priority in the media which is itself dying.

In this hole, new structures are being born. Many of them look like traditional companies right now, like Facebook, trying to affect the capitalism of sociality entirely within the frame of a traditional corporate structure, trying to create network capital while retaining institutional control. That institutional control is endemic in the governance of the contemporary state, where we face a landscape of almost total regulatory capture. The State, of course, is trying to both adapt to this shift and use it to consolidate its control while coping with the disruption to the system of finance it has also depended on. The rich who have successfully captured the State are using this moment to attempt to ensure that those who are better placed in the old economy are better able to run the new economy, by the tactical devolution of responsibility for basic needs without the devolution of resources or authority.

This is all happening in an attempt to shape what will be a network structured future, to make a place for control in those networks, to ensure that not all peers are equal.

This, however, isn't the story of the 21st century. It will be a sizeable footnote, but still only a footnote, to what we can only describe as preventable genocide. All of these organizational structures, states, capital, networks, consumptions, etc., are built on a fundamentally unsustainable resource base. We understand the problems and the magnitude of the problems, and have done so, in increasingly refined terms, for going on 40 years now.

We have not acted, and it's clear that as long as the existing systems of control fail to act, we will not do so.

The remnants of the state exist only to ratify the desires of the body corporate and to exert social control; it will not act. We require a fundamental downshift in society, and while there will be many new technical opportunities, many new kinds of venture along the way, if something we would recognize as "civilization" is going to survive the century, it will require a dramatic wealth redistribution of wealth, a radical and global social equality. It will not be a profitable century.

Sooner or later, this truth will be inescapable even for the current structures of control, but by then it will be too late. With the shift from an institution-centric society to a network-centric society, we have a moment in which we may be able to make a different decision, take a different path, as the tools of control are momentarily caught on the wrong foot.

Two projects I'm involved in are working, at very different levels, to help affect this shift.

The Constitutional Analysis Support Team is an organization that came into being in Iceland in October of 2010, as the constitutional process there began to gather steam. Smari McCarthy and I, the core CAST team, work with states which are reinventing themselves, either after a moment of fundamental reform, or after a revolution. There are two broad branches of our work. First, we take Lessig's "code is law" one further, and treat law as code. A constitution, as a self-contained body of legal rules, can be analyzed for flaws in the exact same way that a computer system can be. While law, having complex human semiotics, is more than just code, many issues like decidability, Boolean complexity, undefined variables, and predicate prioritization can be treated in an identical manner to any piece of code. We go one step further and perform both formal threat modeling and informal situational analysis of the document, interacting (ideally) with the constitutional assembly throughout the entire process and filing bugs as we go.

The other branch of our work involves direct public interaction with the constitutional process. In Iceland, Facebook (along with an additional web forum) was used to allow every Icelander to comment on the constitutional draft. Thousands of comments were received, responded to, and in most cases addressed directly by the constitutional assembly.

We've been following and contributing to the discussion on Liquid Democracy for some time, and we're eager to bring more open solutions and deeper engagement to constitutional processes in the future, while also bridging the gap between the heavily connected and the less connected.

This process, what we might call in its fullest implementation the crowdsourcing of law (which, I hasten to add, is not what I'd properly call what happened in Iceland), has the potential to dramatically undermine the hierarchical structure of control that the State imposes on the governance of a nation as its end of the social transaction that is the creation of the rule of law. While I'm not recommending that we only attempt to make that transition at the constitutional level, it is a level which permits a much more fundamental level of engagement.

The other project I want to talk about speaks much more directly to every day social control. Sukey is a leveling tool for activists interacting with increasingly militarized global police forces. Sukey came from the student protests in London, after the Westminster bridge kettle. Its first implementation was a simple Google maps mashup, later replaced by an Ushahidi instance. Sukey lets individuals on the ground send in reports about where the police are, where kettles are being formed and where police brutality is happening. The reports are gone through by an analysis team that correlates and geolocates the information, sending both major announcements out on a general channel and placing more detailed tactical information on a map viewable by anyone.

Obviously, the police are able to view this information, but as they, in theory, already know what they're doing, this doesn't tell them much. Both that openness and the limitations of having a single analysis team, which can be infiltrated, and a single set of central servers, which can be seized, are obviously architectural and strategic problems with the system. Sukey version two will be built on top of Briar, and will exist as a completely decentralized system, with the possibility of strong pseudonymity, as many analysis teams as wish to do the work (which may be trusted without being fully known), and no server anywhere to seize.

While technology is useless in the absence of people using it, the control structures of the state are also as much technological as they are performative. Sukey aims to grow into the functional equivalent of the US DoD's Future Combat System Common Operating Picture, but one that works the way we do, one that's shaped like the network.

In the end, if we do keep civilization, the networks will win. Illegible network-shaped memetic entities like Anonymous will challenge the might of any nation on the planet, although we may have to fight a war against global network fascism to get there.

While this is, in some ways, hopeful, it should also be terrifying. None of us are as cruel as all of us.

Moreover, where does human mercy, discretion, and decency go in a future which is run by a protolethargiat? When we build social networks, smart cities, and the applications of everyday life, we build in rules that determine how we allow people to live. Computers are very bad at understanding anything other than a very rigid vision of "fairness", very bad at understanding a state of grace. Computers, despite our best efforts, are horrible at understanding the complexity of human relationships – most of the social networks which have succeeded use very simple definitions of connectedness, suitable to their community, and we adapt to those, because our machines are too dumb to actually know us.

If we build a network, our machines may not need to know us, but, if that future is to be humane, the business rules we build must be humane. How can we program in leniency without simply digitalizing nepotism? I call on those of you building systems like this to answer that call.

If the humanity of applications speaks to the means of life, how do we answer the other function of the currently-existing state, social control? If entities like Anonymous become the dominant actors of the next century, able to challenge the state (if it still exists) at will, whither jurisprudence? Fundamental rights? How does an entity like Anonymous decide how social sanctions can and should be applied?

I don't have any answers here, but I'm very interested in an ongoing conversation.

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