Politics, the State, and Government in the Western Liberal Democratic Tradition: Is State Authority and Legitimacy Fundamentally Undermined by Communications Technology?

What is The State? It is not something that is easily defined, and there are countless philosophers, political scientists and poets who have tried. At its core, perhaps, it is a group of people and resources bound by a common set of laws[1]. Beyond, it is a geographic area physically apart from the rest of the world. But it is more than that. The State is sometimes a nation, sometimes a religion, and often an army. It is a banner, a brand, an identity. It is often created by geography – rivers, mountains, oceans set borders. Yet even this has uncertainty, where sea cliffs retreat from coastal erosion, or borders move every day as dunes move across the desert. In The State we invest enormous power and authority. We cede our personal freedom, independence and sovereignty to its will. In return, we expect its protection, and no undue denial of our liberty. In this great contract[2], The State is empowered to wage war and make peace, to tax and to build, to judge, and even to kill. As citizens of the state, or subjects of the régime, we inject that State with authority and legitimacy.

Evolution of States
States have evolved over time – not that long a time – from a basis in communities, and geography. Nations are built from families, tribes, communities coming together and conquering each other over centuries and millennia of growth; and geography over a much longer geological process largely defines our borders. They have gotten bigger, grown into alliances and federations and empires, and some have retrenched (Britain), some have failed (Somalia), and some broken apart (Yugoslavia). Liberal Democracy, through alternate versions, has become the dominant form of government[3], and while it may not represent an End of History, Liberal Democracies have a tendency to knit themselves together in a process that we might call Globalization, which in turn makes them harder to supplant.

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[1] Weber called it "a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force" – Weber, Max, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), p. 154. Friedman said that Jack Kennedy was wrong when he said 'ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'; 'Neither half of the statement expresses a relation between the citizen and his government that is worthy of a free man in a free society,' Friedman said (Friedman, Milton, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago UP, 1962 (2002, 40th Anniversary Edition). The state is as much defined by its relationship with its citizens as it is defined as an abstract structure in law, or politics.

[2] See further Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *A Discourse on Political Economy* in *The Social Contract and The Discourses*, Everyman's Library 162, 1993, p 128 ff.

[3] While Fukuyama argued this point forcefully in the heady post-cold war days of the early 1990s, and his central thesis of that work has been broadly discredited in the intervening period, there remain strong arguments that liberal democratic structures – generally speaking – remain dominant in most parts of the world, and that individualistic, human rights based government is aspired to by people even in theocratic and quasi communist states like Iran and China. Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and The Last Man*, Free Press (Simon & Schuster), 2006 (orig. 1992)

Nature of Civic Society

The nature of civic society is also changing. The nuclear family is disintegrating. Families are becoming less dependent on other families within the extended family and the community, and more dependent on the state. Multiculturalism denudes national identity of its ethnic uniqueness. The *church* as a social structure in western society is fading as an irrelevance, while individualism further erodes the *accidental relationships of proximity* – family, community, locality. All of these changes are aided, facilitated and accelerated by technology. De Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy[4] recognized the importance of *The Church* as distinct from the Spirit of Religion – the infrastructure of civic society was as important to the effective administration of The State as any political or legal formal state structures. Bob Putnam's lament for a lost society Bowling Alone[5] wondered whether technologies like television and video games we causing a decline in what he called *social capital*, a kind of currency for the sociological economy, or a measure of how strong our societies really are.

Information and Communications Technology and Community

Technology is changing those key dimensions of community and geography. Communities and tribes are global. Families too. No longer do we fear the dragons at the end of the map, and communications and travel technology mean that distance has been conquered – at least on the planet itself, for now. Our associations, our societies, our socialization, are Global. Languages and language technologies are becoming more accessible, as more and more people speak fewer and fewer languages[6]. The Internet instantly connects everyone, and every machine. Our doctors, our lawyers, our teachers are on the other end of a phone, of a computer, even of an interactive television. This Smarter Planet[7] – as IBM call it – means that we don't have to rely on the *local* provider of services. To see and speak with our family in far flung corners of the world, Skype means we're rarely that distant, save for some perhaps atavistic yearning for material presence.

Technology, Community and the State

As the structures of society shift, as family, community and nationality are re-defined, and as geography becomes less and less relevant, the foundational determinants of the structure of The State are eroded. Those principles upon which states and nations were established no longer provide support to the legitimacy of administration, because people's loyalties are far broader and less concerned with ethnicity, location and contiguous community[8]. If The State was the logical evolution of society as it evolved

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[4] De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, Wordsworth's Classics of World Literature, 1998

[5] Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2001

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_death, retrieved May 15th 2012

[7] http://www.ibm.com/smarterplanet/ie/en/

[8] The United States is a clear exception in that it is more of a federalist administrative structure rather than a nation state, or even a community based state. The founding principles of the Constitution were white, Christian ideals that are under significant attack today. Its evolution has been interesting, based on the ethics of the French Revolution, yet without the baggage of monarchial legacy. It has created its own elites, of course, and has been the great catalyst for the explosion in communications technology in the latter part

and grew, accelerating through the Industrial Revolution where scale bore an increasingly direct correlation with wealth, where is its next leap forward? The Internet and associated technologies have placed the State at a disadvantage, as it is large, geographically fixed, and structured to delivery into a regulated market. Service consumption is small (i.e. customized, bespoke, tailored – a la Anderson's "Long Tail"[9]), geographically dispersed, and substantially unregulated. Philip Bobbit has argued[10] that the nation state is turning into what he calls the Market State, essentially a structure that facilitates economic development, and that is driven by the market.

Does such an evolution of society undermine the state? If the State is there exclusively to facilitate economic development and not to provide services or identity – maybe not even security, which is increasingly outsourced! – is its legitimacy compromised? Do people become less willing to accept the will of the state in imposing taxes, or in the deprivation of liberty? We may already be seeing some of this today, where the legitimacy of The State is undermined by its acquiescence in permitting massive, systemic fraud as the market – served by the state – would not benefit from such actions. Is The State becoming an anachronism? Is it actually becoming a hindrance in human development? Does technology ultimately replace the need for the structures of The State?

Media, Technology and the State
The development of media is another aspect of this subject that deserves consideration. The infrastructure of society and of the state is significantly influenced by media, and has been since the popularisation of news media after the development of the printing press. However, the twenty-four hour news cycle, the immediacy of communications channels on the internet, the rise of citizen journalists who are less controlled or influenced by the state, have created a new environment. People's sources of influence are now much more vaied, and the job of politics is increasingly about an aptitude to manage those sources, rather than substantive leadership and / or judgement (if that is indeed what politics *should* be about!). If the cumulative effect of digital media is to control elections and dictate who should win and who should lose – witness the closeness of the British establishment to the Murdoch dynasty in the UK, or "Tweetgate"[11] in Ireland, where the presidential election was effectively decided by a fake tweet broadcast on national television at a particularly sensitive time.

Technology, Revolution and Control
The rise of the Arab Spring was largely organized on Facebook[12]. Various protests in Iran in 2009 were been facilitated by Twitter[13]. The Great Firewall of China[14] is an

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of the twentieth century. Is there a link between the absence of deep rooted hereditary community structures in America, and its preeminent role in the development of communications technologies?

[9] Anderson, Chris, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion Books, 2006

[10] Bobbit, Philip, The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and The Course of History, Penguin, 2003

[11] http://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/colette-browne/tweetgate-leaves-rte-all-a-twitter-but-there-was-no-plot-against-gallagher-187080.html, retrieved May 14th 2012

[12] http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/facebook-and-twitter-key-to-arab-spring-uprisings-report, retrieved May 14th 2012

[13] http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html, retrieved May 14th 2012

astonishing cyber-defensive structure that allows the State to control access to digital information, yet even then there are countless examples of activists leveraging social media to circumvent the will of the state, most recently in the case of Chen Guangcheng[15], the blind Chinese activist whose escape from house arrest in China into the arms of the American embassy was carefully co-ordinated by activists on twitter and other social media. Blackberry Messenger was the dominant technology used to co-ordinate riots in the UK[16] in the Summer of 2011. The United Arab Emirates[17], India[18], Indonesia[19] and other countries have sought to ban Blackberry devices because its architecture meant it could not be hacked by state cyber forces. States recognize the power of technology for people to organize and assemble independent of its structures. States' attempts to control communications have so far proved to have limited effectiveness, but the technology appears to be evolving faster than they can keep up with. States have lost control.

Technology and Representation
A further question that arises is whether *representative* democracy remains valid as an acceptable paradigm. The original structures of democracy intended that all citizens (notwithstanding the franchise being limited to property owning men) would vote on all decisions. Representative democracy evolved to manage the massive growth in the size of states. However, technology now means that we no longer need representative voting. People can vote for the most insignificant piece of legislation, and it is perfectly achievable with technology. Millions of voters can be accommodated (notwithstanding the political incompetence that led to the failure of eVoting in National Elections in Ireland in 2002). Will this change the way in which decisions are made at local, or national level?

Soft Power and the Importance of Communications
Joe Nye's 2004 work on Soft Power[20] began to sketch out a new kind of international politics (which is just as important, perhaps, in domestic politics). He distinguished between Soft and Hard Power, the latter being the extent to which military and economic power enable States to achieve their objectives, while the former represents the extent to which States can use influence, persuasion, and encouragement to achieve their objectives. Soft Power is about projecting a desirable image, one which other states would seek to imitate. It is at its heart about marketing, public relations, and image. Nye wrote in the aftermath of the Second Iraq War, with the US clearly in mind, as the George W Bush White House fritted away the not insubstantial goodwill established by the international policies of the Clinton administration, and squandered an extraordinary

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[14] http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-17910953, retrieved May 14th 2012

[15] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/17/the_not_so_great_firewall_of_china, retrieved May 14th 2012

[16] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/07/bbm-rioters-communication-method-choice, retrieved May 14th 2012

[17] http://thegulfblog.com/tag/blackberry-ban/, retrieved May 14th 2012

[18] http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703814404576000991731835036.html, retrieved May 14th 2012

[19] http://techie-buzz.com/tech-news/indonesia-joins-the-fray-seeks-to-ban-blackberry.html, retrieved May 14th 2012

[20] Nye, Joseph S. Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, 2004.

opportunity to show genuine Global leadership in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. At the same time, States with less hard power – such as Canada and Sweden – enjoyed disproportionate influence on the world stage due to their more appealing image in world affairs.

In conjunction with the proxy wars of the Cold War, and the extent to which modern states see themselves projected on a world stage, this Globalised interdependence of people and States renders the modern State inseparable from others. After the tumultuous Spanish General Election of 2004[21], held only a few days after the 'al Qaeda inspired' Madrid Train Bombings[22], protestors shouted "Quien ha sido, quien ha sido?" (Who did it? Who did it?)[23], and while both the incoming and outgoing government continued to blame ETA[24], a group of supra-national terrorists acting in a Global cause were ultimately found to have committed the atrocity, and altered the balance of power in Spain.

Some other sources
The book "Netocracy"[25] is a poorly written, badly argued narrative on "the new power elite and life after capitalism", but makes some interesting points. Both writers are journalists, and admitted technophiles, and they discuss the concept of the *netocrat*, and the creation of personal identity through communications technology. These are people who understand the power of networks, and are *beyond capital*.

Francis Fukuyama's more recent work on political order examines the nature of political order, and legitimacy. In particular, his theory of political development – juxtaposed with the rapid evolution of communications technology – could provide a context within which to structure the argument. Acemoglu and Robinson's recent book "Why Nations Fail" examines similar issues. Recent papers on technological impacts on state legitimacy, including *The political economy of mass printing: Legitimacy and technological change in the Ottoman Empire* by Rubin, Miceli and Cosgel[26] can help provide some context for historical shifts in state power owing to technology advancements. There is an argument however that non communications technologies that had an impact on states and their power – such as gunpowder, or mass production – had more of an impact on hard power and therefore on the straightforward exercise of power and economic prosperity, and therefore on *relative* power, than on political philosophy. Even previous communications innovations such as the printing press, radio and television were less impactful because the *means of communications production* – to

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[21] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_general_election,_2004 retrieved May 14th 2012

[22] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/11_March_2004_Madrid_train_bombings, retrieved May 14th 2012

[23] http://news-spain.euroresidentes.com/2004/03/anti-terrorism-marches-in-madrid-news.htm, retrieved May 15th 2012

[24] http://www.peaceworkmagazine.org/pwork/0404/040405.htm, retrieved May 15th 2012

[25] Bard, Alexander and Soderqvist, Jan, *Netocracy: The New Power Elite and Life After Capitalism*, Reuters, 2002

[26] Coşgela, Metin M., Micelia,Thomas J. and Rubin, Jared, *The political economy of mass printing: Legitimacy and technological change in the Ottoman Empire*, Journal of Comparative Economics, Received 30 January 2011. Revised 13 January 2012. Available online 8 February 2012. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2012.01.002

extend Marx – was controllable by the state through regulation and other mechanisms, and expensive to start up. Personal communications technologies – starting with the telephone and evolved to current internet and social networking constructs have a fundamental, personal, and philosophical impact.

Summary
In this thesis, I will consider how people, though their newly developed civic society structures, influenced and guided by an integrated media, relate to one another and to the state, and organize themselves. I will examine the nature of the State, and how in the face of changes in civic society, media and technology, its legitimacy is impacted, and how legitimacy is redistributed in the new digital age. In order to achieve this, I will consider the nature of the modern State and its role in society; the evolution of the State and State power; the evolution of representative democracy, how it has coped with threats, and how other states have transitioned to liberal democracy from other systems. I will look at the development of western civic society, and how it organizes itself; major shifts such as the decline in church participation, multiculturalism, and globalisation, and how they has impacted on civic society. I will look at the development of communications technology, how it has become or is becoming ubiquitous, personalized and indispensable. At the intersection of civic society and technology, I will look at how media and journalism have changed or are changing, and their impact on the state and public opinion. I will examine how that changed media environment has changed or is changing the exercise of politics and government, and the administration of the State.