

Final draft:

60 million Americans can't be wrong

by Christopher Kulendran Thomas

All over the world, citizenship - the right to belong somewhere - is tied to specific nation states.

If we don't belong to any particular national system, it's as if we don't exist.

However there was once a time, long ago, when there was nothing more natural for our ancestors than to move around throughout the land, discovering new horizons and sharing what they had. But alongside the development of agriculture, humans began to settle and claim their own space and possessions. Eventually they built factories and offices which were organised by political systems defined by national borders.

Increasingly the ownership of all that humans grew and built and possessed was distributed by markets. But the evolution of the species through connected technology is now making it increasingly possible to make the whole world home. And the markets that distribute everything that humans have have themselves evolved into financial systems that transcend geographic boundaries.

These systems are now becoming so sophisticated that they might even be beginning to dissolve the ownership of property itself.

So could technology now enable a more liquid form of citizenship beyond national borders?

This is the story of how an ancient civilization inspired the imagining of a new kind of global economy, based on the luxury of communalism rather than of individual property.

And it starts far far away in a land that no longer exists.

[Text:] "1. Eelam"

For three decades during the Sri Lankan civil war, 'Eelam' was self-governed as an autonomous state led by a neo-Marxist revolution. It was based on equality for all, irrespective of class, gender, race, faith or sexuality.

However in 2009 this idea was brutally crushed by an authoritarian Sri Lankan President who had come to power by appealing to neglected rural voters and inflaming racial hatred to get elected.

Leveraging this wave of popular hatred and fear of the island's Tamil minorities, he eventually dissolved parliament to rule with executive powers, culminating in the total annihilation of the Tamil homeland of Eelam.

This populist nationalist campaign that crushed the Tamils had been secretly backed by foreign intelligence and investment. And in the resulting economic boom that followed, along with expanded garment production for global fashion and sportswear brands, a new local market for contemporary art emerged.

Art became a symbol of economic prosperity and thereby served as retrospective justification for the very violence upon which that prosperity was founded. The flourishing regional art scene ended up corroborating the outward performance of a free society by which Sri Lanka's government evaded international accountability.

With the ethnic cleansing that had begun militarily now continuing economically, the people of Eelam left this corrupt pretence at democracy to look for a better life in the West.

[Text:] "2. America"

Late at night on November 8th 2016, Canada's Citizenship and Immigration website crashed as millions of Americans reacted in despair to the results of the U.S. Presidential Election. Some of them were so pessimistic for the future of America that they considered leaving the country.

Centuries earlier a similar decision to leave had been the founding imperative of America itself, when a minority that felt that they didn't belong in the Old World, left to build a new one.

Where they actually built it wasn't all that new to the native populations that they displaced. But for those that they'd left behind, it was a bold experiment in a different way of life.

And curiously, over time, the Old World ended up changing to be more like the new one that they built; because what they were building set an example of an alternative.

The economist Albert O. Hirschman argues that this is why the option of leaving is actually the ultimate means of ensuring political accountability.

In 1970 Hirschman wrote a treatise called "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" which has more recently become quietly influential amongst Silicon Valley's tech industry. It's a study of responses to decline in companies, organisations and states; and in it Hirschman describes the interaction of political and economic choices at play in failing organisations.

He observes how customers, members or citizens exercise their democratic voice - for example through complaints, suggestions, votes or protests - only when they believe an organisation is open to change; whereas if they realize that the system can't be changed from within, they leave. And it is this possibility of

exit that gives power to the democratic voice of those that remain through loyalty.

Throughout its history, the idea of America has been built by minorities emigrating from countries where they feared tyranny and lacked opportunity. And the promise of this New World pioneered by those that left, eventually amplified the democratic voice of those that remained.

[Text:] "But if you wanted to pioneer a New World today, where would you go?"

Influenced by Hirschman's writing, the Silicon Valley blockchain entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan proposes that today's exit might take a different form, in a completely different dimension.

His own parents had emigrated from India and the young Srinivasan ended up doing doctoral research at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California; where - out of a dorm room - he co-founded a genomics company called Counsyl.

But Srinivasan came to see America as [what he describes as] the "Microsoft of nations":

"Code-base is 230 years old, written in an obfuscated language, system was shut down for 2 weeks straight, systematic fud on security issues, fairly ruthless treatment of key suppliers, generally favours its rich enterprise customers, but we still have to buy it..."

However, Microsoft's near monopoly was eventually displaced - not though by a direct competitor in the software business, but by someone operating in a completely different dimension.

And, in a way, Microsoft's Bill Gates saw it coming, even when his company was at the height of its powers.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YypPVcyysHc>]

Sergey Brin too was the son of emigrants.

Both his parents were Jewish mathematicians who had left the adversities that they faced in the Soviet Union to come to the United States. And it was also at Stanford University, where Bryn met fellow PhD candidate Larry Page.

Page had a simple idea that would turn out to have profound consequences.

He wanted to download the whole of the World Wide Web - but only to look at the links between all the pages.

Together Bryn and Page found that this metadata could give them an incredibly powerful way of analysing the importance of the content that it linked. So they formed a company to organise all the information in the entire universe - which they thought could be achievable within 300 years.

Aware of the enormous scale of this challenge, they named their company after a number with a hundred zeros: a 'googol'.

Soon they had not only indexed the World Wide Web but were also translating the world's languages, fighting in the courts to digitise all the world's books and digitally mapping the surface of the entire planet.

But what about all the new information that was constantly being created?

Well Google found that the most direct way of accessing that information was by providing the very tools by which it was generated. Instead of selling software as Microsoft had done,

Google made its applications freely available in return for its users data and attention.

This business model was so successful that it forged a new kind of social contract that was no longer based on individual rights - such as to privacy or property - but rather on the benefits and conveniences that could be provided for free by targeting the messaging that would be most interesting to each individual user at the place and time that it would be most relevant to them.

The more that Google learned about its users, the more it could point them to what they wanted - and to what advertisers wanted them to see. In so doing they built the biggest advertising business the world had ever seen.

The whole universe was becoming a giant database for Google's machine intelligence to learn from. The more it saw, the more effective it became. [Insert ad.]

Very quickly, this model - of providing users with information and tools in return for their data and attention - wiped out Microsoft's business of selling software.

The software giant's supremacy was defeated not through direct competition but by companies like Google providing an alternative to the whole business of software itself - in an entirely new dimension that came to be known as The Cloud.

Applications and data no longer had to be owned by each user on-site but could be subscribed to from anywhere over the Internet. So customers left Bill Gates's legacy software behemoth in favor of the multiple cloud computing startups that had overtaken it.

But over time a transformation occurred within the company, in exactly the way Hirschman might have foreseen. Just as the failing monarchies of the Old World had been held to account by the example of America's liberal democracy, so too was Microsoft

eventually reinventing itself under new leadership - boldly into that new dimension as a cloud company.

[Text:] "But in what new dimension could an alternative to America itself be imagined?"

[Text:] "3. The Cloud"

The proximity of our bodies is understood in terms of the geographical distance between points in space; but the distance between our minds is increasingly characterized by a completely different metric: geodesic distance - or the number of degrees of separation between nodes in a network. So a set of closely related interconnections could form a dense cloud in geodesic space even though that network may be sparsely distributed in geographic space.

Geodesic cartography doesn't map nation states but states of mind. And now the geodesic clouds of the Internet are beginning to take physical shape in the geographic reorganization of bodies.

It's already common for people to connect online and move in together; but as more and more people do this, the cloud formations of the Internet could crystalize not just within homes but into whole towns or even cloud cities.

Srinivasan imagines that eventually entire cloud countries could materialise out of thin air. These would work as 'reverse diasporas' whereby groups that start out internationally distributed could be brought together. These cloud countries may be concentrated in geodesic space whilst continually reshaping across geographic space, based on a more liquid form of citizenship beyond borders; citizenship by choice rather than by hereditary privilege.

[Text:] "4. New Eelam"

The revolutionary vision of 'Eelam' was of a self-governed state based on equality for all its citizens.

Like other neo-Marxist revolutions around the world, it was inspired by Karl Marx's vision of a world without nations and beyond waged labour, where things would be shared rather than owned, based on economies of abundance underpinning societies so just that governments wouldn't even be necessary.

But throughout the Twentieth Century these ideas were distorted by authoritarian regimes that attempted to establish this utopian vision by force.

Marx himself though had understood technology rather than politics as the primary driver of history, continually making new forms of economic organisation possible. He thought that, when directed to unravel oppressive hierarchies, the emancipatory potential of technology could dissipate concentrations of power, melting, as Marx wrote, "all that is solid into air".

So what could a new Eelam be if that idea of a self-governed state was imagined as a distributed network rather than as a territorially bounded nation? A new 'Eelam' for all, with its idea liberated from its land?

Writing in the 19th Century, Marx had thought that solidarity between workers brought together in factories might catalyse a revolutionary transformation to a post-capitalist economy. But now, as more and more jobs are automated and the future of work looks increasingly like what artists do, it's perhaps the home - rather than the factory or office - that's becoming a primary site of production - beyond waged labour.

So could this means of production - the home - be reorganised through collective access rather than individual ownership?

Instead of either renting or owning a home, a flat-rate subscription to a 'housing cloud' could allow continual access to homes around the world, so that global citizens could move around freely between cities.

And if more and more apartments can be inhabited flexibly, those properties could also be traded optimally. This way, accelerated capital gains from appreciating assets could be repurposed to actually reduce the cost of housing, potentially building a much more valuable transnational infrastructure.

By reorganising housing function more like informational goods, the cost of each citizen's subscription could be progressively reduced over time until it could even become a trivial cost - like the cost of electricity in much of the world. This could form the basis of a democratised offshore economic system built on collective access rather than individual ownership - and optimised for mobility rather than accumulation.

This way, new forms of housing and citizenship could be developed for transient populations, ultimately extending these necessities to people excluded from either.

So just imagine if homes were streamable, the way that music or movies are. Diasporas emigrating from the old World Of Nations could be brought together in geodesic space.

These cloud formations could take physical shape at greater and greater scales and durations around the world.

Existing nations would then be held to account, as Hirschman described, by emigrants prepared to exit from their influence. And it would become ever more feasible for alternatives to

incumbent nations to emerge beyond geographical borders, formed by citizens of the cloud for whom the whole world could be home.

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