A World Wide Web of Citizenship

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Liav Orgad offers a characteristically insightful and provocative speculation on how novel technologies will facilitate global citizenship. Global interconnectedness is transforming individual identity composites to include transnational elements, and the migration of identity is, as Orgad argues, establishing more pervasive understandings of global responsibility. Along these three dimensions of interconnectedness, identity, and responsibility, we are assimilating an understanding of global citizenship. A recent world-wide poll¹ found that a majority of respondents consider themselves more global citizens than citizens of their own countries.

Orgad is also to be congratulated for identifying the citizenship-related possibilities of blockchain technologies, which might further enable that sense of global identity. Blockchain could deliver a formal identity detached from national citizenship and sovereign control. Indeed, a blockchain identity could plausibly displace the passport as the standard form of identification in the same way that Bitcoin might plausibly displace national currencies. So long as it were insulated from the surveillance capacities of states and powerful non-state actors, a blockchain ID might enhance individual autonomies on a global landscape.

I am less taken by the concept of cloud communities as such. The internet facilitates the making of transnational and non-state communities, but for the most part these are communities that exist on the ground. Eliminating friction in long-distance global communication, the web enables connectedness among individuals who might otherwise maintain only thin or even non-existent ties. This is the case with almost all real-space identities that are not based on territorial location. The Web collapses location, allowing territorially dispersed communities to establish dense networks.

True, some communities exist only or primarily on the web. The community of video gamers, for example, is mostly an online identity, constituting

¹ 'Identity 2016: "Global citizenship" rising, poll suggests', *BBC News*, 28 April 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-36139904>

(perhaps) a genuine cloud community. But even as our online selves become more prominent in our everyday lives, they are now and will be for the foreseeable future only a slice of our identity composites. (Remember [Second Life](#)?) There is also the interesting phenomenon of e-residence as innovated by Estonia. But that ‘residence’ doesn’t represent community, even in its virtual sense; really, the label is misplaced. No sense of solidarity is likely to flow from e-citizenship in that form any more than individuals with bank accounts in the Cayman Islands compose a community on that basis. It’s a market convenience and little more.

The false dichotomies of political community

Of course, one way in which the web facilitates communities is as a vehicle for community self-governance and in turn, global self-governance. Almost all communities are political. In this respect, I would part ways with the dichotomization of political, state-based communities and civil society that appears in other contributions to this Forum (Rainer Bauböck’s and Robert Post’s in particular). At the very least, it is a continuum rather than a binary. The web will as a general matter enhance transparency. The web allows voices to be heard. No organisation, community, identity group, or movement can be governed in an insulated, top-down fashion.

So the web (more so than cloud communities as such) is already enhancing self-governance. It will not solve the problem of unequal representation. As Orgad notes, the international system continues formally to work from the principle of sovereign, not individual, equality, so that the citizen of San Marino has much greater clout than the citizen of China, both countries having one vote in international institutions but San Marino having many fewer citizens deciding how that vote will be cast. It’s an extreme departure from the one person, one vote benchmark of democratic governance. But sovereign equality masks vast power disparities that in many pairings will more than compensate for inequality at the level of the individual. The citizen of China may be one of almost one and a half billion, the citizen of San Marino, one of thirty thousand, but China’s global heft surely gives its citizens a more powerful voice (however measured) than those of its pipsqueak counterpart.

The web does help level the playing field against state power generally. In that sense the web may mitigate political inequality. Global governance is not the sole preserve of state representatives, as Orgad appears to have it; non-state communities are exercising increasing powers, formal or not, at the international level. The web supplies an important channel of global influence that does not institutionally favour state-based communities (it

may even disadvantage them, insofar as bureaucracy inhibits technological adaptation). That translates into greater global self-governance capacities, and a redistribution of power away from states. The citizen of San Marino who is an environmentalist, who has an LGBTQ identification, or for that matter is a Catholic has alternate vehicles of representation at the global level, and those vehicles are empowered by the revolution in global communications.

But inequalities will persist, even if they are redistributed. I agree with Bauböck that Orgad's implication of a world federalism based on blockchain equality present an improbable prospect. In this respect, the technology does not answer standing objections to one-person, one-vote at the global level. Cloud communities, such as they exist, will themselves operate on the basis of internal formal equality in limited contexts only.

Corroded Leviathan

The corrosion of state power, meanwhile, will accelerate. Francesca Strumia articulates a new question, 'why am I a citizen of this nation-state?' That question has new salience, most dramatically with the rise of investor and other forms of instrumental citizenship. But it also begs the question, 'why should I care that I am a citizen of this (or that) nation-state?' It is no doubt true that possessing a premium passport expands life opportunities.² But within the universe of developed states, the question is not so obviously answered. There are inevitable spatial elements to our physical existence that are best governed through territorially delimited community, but those necessities need not be addressed at the level of the state. Many are better addressed at the subnational level, with respect to which 'voting with your feet' is practicable as a preference-sorting mechanism into 'like-minded sets', in Bauböck's formulation.

This gives the lie to the other misplaced critique of cloud communities, that they are voluntary and monolithic where states are involuntary and diverse. Here again, a descriptive spectrum is more appropriate than an artificial binary. It is true of course that most individuals are born into the states of which they will remain members (at the same time that a growing number change nationality after birth). But many are effectively born into non-state communities as well. Religion supplies an obvious example. In some contexts, the exit costs – perhaps a better metric than voluntariness – of leaving

² The Henley & Partners – Koehenov Quality of Nationality Index, available at <https://www.henleyglobal.com/quality-of-nationality/>

a religious community³ are higher than leaving a state-based one. Communities based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are more or less involuntary. They can also be remarkably diverse, sometimes more so than state-based communities. The Catholic Church represents a more diverse constituency than does Austria, for example, and its internal dynamics surely implicate politics in any but the most formalistic definition of the term.

I understand the liberal nationalist tendency to lament the corrosion of state-based communities. There was a time (the latter half of the twentieth century) when the state impressively if imperfectly delivered on redistributionist solidarities. But wishing a return to that era is starting to look somewhat sentimental. States are powerful beasts, as Bauböck observes. They will linger in the way of other once-dominant legacy institutions (think the Holy Roman Empire). But they are clearly in crisis, and it seems unlikely that we will be able to re-right the ship to its formerly commendable course.

In the meantime, we should be setting our sights on making the new world a better one than it might otherwise be. There are many dystopian possibilities (some of them almost [apocalyptic](#)) if the state collapses and other locations of power replace it. Wishing the resurrection of the state will do us no good to the extent that the state can't withstand material developments on the ground. A necessary first step will be to map the new institutional landscape, of which cloud communities will clearly be a part.

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³ 'Off the path of Orthodoxy', *The New Yorker*, 31 July 2015, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/off-the-path-of-orthodoxy>