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Interview With Steve Fuller on State 2.0

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The [following interview](#) with Steve Fuller, conducted by Tikhon Sysoev, appeared in the 23 November 2020 edition of *Expert*, the Russian equivalent of *Economist* magazine. The interview appeared under the title: “Стив Фуллер: Государство 2.0 будет киборгом, но человек все равно останется неотъемлемой частью политического процесса” (“Steve Fuller Says, ‘State 2.0 will be a Cyborg, but Humans will Remain an Integral Part of the Political Process’”).



Tikhon Sysoev (TS): Could you please comment on these passages from [your interview](#) with *Logos* (a Russian humanities magazine) in which you observed that today people do not consider the state as an object of discussion because they do not think that political power, which they see as spread across society, focuses centrally on the state. What did you mean here? Why did people stop perceiving the state as a source of power? After all, we see that all the most essential issues are still resolved through the courts, officials, the army, through electoral procedures, and so on.

Steve Fuller (SF): In answering this question, it’s useful to begin with Max Weber’s definition of the state—taken from Hobbes: It holds the monopoly of force in society, and in that sense provides a basis for stable order within which people can act freely. This is why ‘law enforcement’ has always played a central role in the state. As states have become more democratic, those laws have increasingly required the consent of the people governed under them.

But starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, the state acquired an additional function, which was to make the social order more ‘cohesive’. Lots of different concepts come into play at this point, which are familiar from political discourse: ‘patriotism’ and ‘welfare’ come to mind immediately. The state starts placing its own demands on people in the name of ‘the people’, e.g. compulsory national service and redistributive taxation to fund education and health care. The state thus comes to be seen as ‘responsible’ for people in a deeper sense than simply protecting them from harm. It is here that ‘Right’ and ‘Left’ ideologies start to seriously define political discourse. Both are arguing over control of the state because the state is now seen as potentially involved in the conduct of people’s lives.

It is this sense of the state that is disappearing. The main reason, which especially applies to Western countries, is that the state has ‘over-promised’ with regard to what it can deliver in terms of levels of wealth, employment, social justice, etc. Clearest evidence is provided in the difficulties facing states when they try to justify increased taxation, as their populations become larger, more diverse and older. This is most obvious in the case of ‘tax revolts’, which are normally expressed by the ‘Right’. But the rise of both ‘identity politics’ on the ‘Left’ equally reflects scepticism about the state’s resolve to deliver on its promises. All of this weakens the state’s ability to perform its advertised functions.

TS: Also in that interview, you observed that the old-fashioned opposition between the Left and the Right are in the process of decline. Why do you think this has happened? And what impact can it have both on the state of the future and on the political system?

SF: The first thing to say about this is that the disappearance of Right and Left has been long in the making because both poles of the ideological spectrum have been always internally divided. The Right has included both Traditionalists and Libertarians, while the Left has included both Communitarians and Technocrats. But the fact that both poles, however divided, have contested each other in democratic elections for control over state power has kept them together. However, as voter turnout declines, especially among the youth, the legitimacy of these elections are increasingly called into question. A good recent example is the anger of the younger generation toward the Brexit outcome, even though they failed to vote.

Of course, the young aren't 'apolitical', but their sense of the 'political' is migrating to places which challenge the capacities of the state to act effectively. Consider these two contrary tendencies. On the one hand, there are 'Green' activists such as 'Extinction Rebellion' who insist on a politics of nature that requires global governance that extends beyond the welfare of *Homo sapiens*. No single state is really capable to deliver on this demand—and it's unlikely that all states will do it together. On the other hand, there are Silicon Valley enthusiasts who believe that 'high tech' can provide ways of circumventing and transcending the state's unnecessary burdens on their freedom. This is the world of crypto-currencies and other strategies that exploit the state's lagging comprehension and control of cyberspace. However, they may unwittingly be providing the infrastructure of a 'State 2.0', something like China's 'social credit system'.

TS: Do you think that the state is the highest form of social organization? That the loss of this institution could damage human civilization, perhaps even return it to barbarism? Or we must admit that public order has become so complicated that the state no longer occupies a dominant role in it—but perhaps only an auxiliary one?

SF: The state has been historically necessary to establish a widespread sense of 'normal' in society, as in the Latin phrase 'status quo', which can already be found in Thomas Aquinas. How this sense of 'normal' is established, interpreted and maintained has been, of course, the stuff of modern political theory. In principle, you could do away with the state, if you didn't think a sense of 'normal' was required for the human condition. And while the Silicon Valley enthusiasts would embrace that possibility, the Extinction Rebellion folks would not. In fact, the latter want to make global ecological equilibrium as the norm. In the balance is one's sense of 'justice'.

Here we should think of 'status quo' as connected to what we now call 'fairness' (aka the 'level playing field'). The idea of 'political revolution' provides insight into this topic. In the

Middle Ages, revolutions were justified as restoring the ‘status quo’, which was understood as a natural order in which Lords and serfs respect each other for what they are. Thus, most ‘revolutions’ were about Lords abusing serfs. In the modern era, revolutions—both liberal and socialist—have been justified in terms of restoring a different sense of ‘status quo’, namely, a society that enables everyone to contribute to society as best they can, regardless of their class origins. The difference between the medieval and modern eras lies mainly in a shift in the conception of human nature, which in turn informs the standard of ‘normal’ human behaviour that the state is entrusted to administer. In the medieval era, people were simply born into certain social roles; whereas in the modern era, they were born in a more open condition. This in turn justified the state’s role in actively establishing a sense of status quo that would otherwise not exist—especially by providing basic education and healthcare.

But the bottom line is that the state—be it at the national or global level—is required only if humans want some widespread sense of ‘normal’.

TS: But can we just imagine that over time the new deliverer or conductor of normality will change the old one? I mean here the state—regardless of whether we discuss, say, technological development or artificial intelligence. As we can see, all of these cases can follow the logic of ‘transhumanity’. Or, should we use the new term—your term in fact—‘State 2.0’—as a new landmark in the development of the State as an institution, which will be the destination of today’s state?

SF: This is an interesting question, both taken on its own terms and in terms of what the question reflects about the nature of the state. On its own terms, at least one transhumanist has proposed the idea that an Artificial Intelligence (perhaps with the appearance of an android?) could one day run—and succeed—to be elected into political office. Zoltan Istvan, who invented the ‘Transhumanist Party’ to run for US president in 2016, suggested that having an AI on the ballot would amount to a ‘Turing Test’ for whether humans are the best governors of humans! And Istvan is not alone; he is simply more dramatic. The technology critic Evgeny Morozov published a book a few years ago, entitled *To Save Everything, Click Here*, which ridiculed the many Silicon Valley-inspired attempts to ‘automate’ the state as a response to the inefficiency and corruption of human politicians. The book’s punchline is that all of those problems simply migrate to the algorithms running the proposed computer programmes. On Morozov’s telling, ‘State 2.0’ might even be worse than ‘State 1.0’.

At this point, it is worth stepping back and reflecting on what these ‘transhumanist’ ideas of a ‘State 2.0’ say about the nature of the state. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s youthful work, *The Limits of State Action* is an interesting point of reference. We normally think of Humboldt today as the inventor of the modern university as a place of ‘Enlightenment’. However, before he became Prussian Minister of Education, he was a leading Liberal thinker, who believed that a clear distinction needed to be drawn between legislators and administrators. Put in today’s terms, the people decide the general policy but the civil service decide how to

put the policy into practice to enable the people's will to be fully realized. (In this context, 'education' enables people to get clearer about what they really want; hence the centrality of philosophy.) Implied here are two distinct expertises—knowledge of the people's will and knowledge of how to make things happen—and a chain of command from the former expertise to the latter. Implied here is that 'the people' (represented either collectively or in a monarch) are not necessarily competent to say how exactly their ideas should be implemented. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Humboldt believed that the failures of the state were ultimately due to incompetence. I can easily imagine AI playing a role here, but it would be much more 'cybernetic', in the sense of requiring a more thorough integration of human and machine processes. In other words, 'State 2.0' would be a cyborg in which the human would be a significant part. It would *not* be humanity run by machines.

TS: By the way, it is interesting that neoliberalism intrinsically appeals to the fact that normality is produced by natural causes, i.e. spontaneously. For instance, there are natural laws of the market, which actually put things back the way they used to be. And this natural normality can appear only independently, by its own means, if I may say so. That's why the external participation of the state makes things just worse. In this case, can we conclude that neoliberalism is the reaction to state's powerlessness, which has already been referred to by you? That this is the main reason for the emergence of neoliberalism?

SF: What you say about neoliberalism is not really correct, though I understand that's how it has seemed in recent times. In fact, neoliberalism is divided on the matter you raise, but the state is involved significantly in either case. We normally associate the fixation on the market as a driver of social progress with Adam Smith. And he did seem to believe that if the state—understood as the monarch—withdrawed the monopoly privileges from certain businesses, anyone in society could compete to provide the same products and services 'openly'. This is the 'spontaneous' image of the market that, say, Hayek picks up from Smith. However, at the same time, a different way of thinking about the centrality of the market was brewing across the English Channel, in France. The Marquis de Condorcet, famous for his theory of human progress, argued that the state should be dedicated to creating markets where they do not yet exist, as well as breaking up monopolies that prevent markets from happening. It was Condorcet's vision that guided the people behind the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris in 1938 that officially founded 'neoliberalism' by name. One of the attending economists, Alexander Rüstow, defined 'neoliberalism' as 'liberal interventionism'. In other words, the state's primary task is to enable people to be free to develop their capacities.

This was a familiar idea from both the US Progressive and UK Fabian movements. Before the rise of the Soviet Union, both of these movements styled themselves as 'socialist'. But after the 1917 Russian Revolution, they gradually drifted toward this sense of 'neoliberalism'. The key point here is that these neoliberals never abandoned the idea of a powerful state. If anything, they became bolder in their sense of what one state can do to enable another state to be free! This explains, for example, the 1973 CIA-led overthrow of the elected Moscow-

sympathetic Allende government in Chile to install General Pinochet, who turned his country into an exemplar of ‘neoliberal reform’. Your readers may recall the Jeffrey Sachs-style economic ‘shock therapy’ of the early 1990s, not only in Russia but also across a range of nations previously influenced by the Soviet Union. That was neoliberalism in action in its original sense. Thus, from a geopolitical standpoint, Hayek’s talk of ‘spontaneity’ is a distraction.

TS: You have already mentioned and described the situation, where it appears that «the young aren’t ‘apolitical’, but their sense of the ‘political’ is migrating to places which challenge the capacities of the state to act effectively». What comes from such a situation for the society and the government? Who can satisfy the conditional requests if the government just can’t? We should agree that the discontent cannot last forever. It cannot disappear just like that. Or should we all just wait for global shocks without any hope of improvement?

SF: I appreciate the spirit of your question, but here are the basic facts. The legitimacy of nation-states in the modern era has largely rested on respecting geographical borders. The point of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which established modern nation-states, was to stop ‘trans-national’ religions from causing mayhem with local authorities. Indeed, the drive toward ‘secularism’ in Europe in this era amounted to a wholesale reinvention of social order without depending on the superordinate (‘alien’) power of the Church of Rome. In retrospect, it’s easy to see that such a solution would be doomed to failure as we became increasingly capable of transcending spatial distances. If nothing else, the last four centuries has been about enabling people to more easily communicate—and hence influence each other—over vast expanses of space. (Notice that I’m not presuming strictly military capabilities here.) That alone is destabilizing to any serious ‘status quo’ notion of the state. To be sure, China is still trying to hang on to that old idea through its sophisticated control of the internet—and doing so quite impressively for the time being. However, the easier that people can communicate with others who share their ideological concerns but not their immediate life circumstances, the easier it will be for states to be destabilized. For example, ecological activists are small minorities in all countries, but their ability to collaborate transnationally gives them a significant global voice. Not surprisingly, Pope Francis has linked the Church’s concern for social justice with environmental justice!

TS: I would like to get back to your central message, that «the state has been historically necessary to establish a widespread sense of ‘normal’ in society». As you also noticed, the content of what is considered to be normal changed over different eras. Perhaps even now, it is worth talking about the fact that, since the idea of what is normal has changed today, it is crucial to change the tools to achieve this ‘normal’ condition and thereby to reform the state? For example, we know that, today, the representative democracy is in a deep crisis, and the voice of some particular citizen is no longer represented in parliament, so the election are the instrument in the hands of the elites. So perhaps it’s time to upgrade this institute to represent, for example, the voice of this particular citizen?

SF: I think a more ‘participatory’ form of democracy is definitely in our future—and of course, the internet will provide the infrastructure to make it happen. But it’s important to put this in the context of the history of democracy. Here I would return to my earlier discussion of Humboldt’s *The Limits of State Action*. One way to think about that work is as a critique of representative—especially parliamentary—democracy. In a sense, representative government is the last vestige of paternalism in politics, insofar as the ‘representatives’ are presumed to be more capable of expressing the public interest than the public itself. John Stuart Mill is one modern political philosopher who explicitly defended such paternalism. In contrast, Humboldt believed that as people became better educated, they could ‘self-legislate’, a phrase he got from his mentor Kant. In that case, there would be no need for a class of ‘professional politicians’ who ‘represent’ the people. However, there would be a greater than ever need for a class of dedicated civil servants willing and able to carry out the collective will of these empowered people. What Humboldt had in mind was a completely clear separation of ‘ends’ and ‘means’ in politics. The people collectively decide the ‘ends’ and the civil servants execute the corresponding ‘means’. Gone would be politicians who strategically distort the public interest for their own personal advantage. Needless to say, implementing Humboldt’s vision would require very careful consideration of both the voting system and the means by which the resulting decisions would be held accountable for their consequences. However, unlike Evgeny Morozov, I think that it should be possible to design computer-based solutions to deal with these matters at the appropriate level of sophistication.

TS: In an interview with our magazine (*Expert*), one political philosopher and historian noted that today the state has become a ‘deliverer of anxiety’. In a way, his idea can be understood as the other side of your thought—namely, that the state can no longer respond to the demands of its nation. But, perhaps, it is worth putting this question in the context of control practices, which have been intensified so much with the development of digital technologies. And in this sense, the state seems to be even more powerful. So such uncontrolled power causes anxiety to people. In your opinion, does it indicate that the state is intrinsically becoming only stronger?

SF: I have mixed views about this line of thought. Obviously, I understand where it is coming from. Everyone nowadays seems to be afraid that the entire world will adopt a version of China’s ‘social credit system’! However, it’s worth pointing out that the issue of privacy and, more generally, control over one’s self-presentation is not the same as it was in the seventeenth century, when the issue was one of religious and political authorities forcing people to declare their beliefs and allegiances. Privacy back then was a right to remain silent. But the advent of the internet, and especially social media, has turned the problem on its head. People can’t seem to stop expressing themselves! We routinely give away intimate details of our lives and thoughts with a click of the mouse. Thus, ‘privacy’ nowadays is about protecting people from revealing too much about themselves that can then be used against them. In short, the state does not actually need to be very coercive for people to render

themselves vulnerable to its power. All you need is for the major social media platforms to regularly exchange their data with the state, as already happens in China.

TS: Nevertheless, digitalization, which has covered almost of all countries today, in fact leaves no alternatives. The person can no longer choose whether she or he wants to leave some digital footprint or not: he leaves it in any case, because many functions are no longer available without the Internet. People seem to be more afraid of this particular situation — the absence of alternative that makes the digital state absolutely powerful. But the state acquires this very power without any forcing, as you’ve already mentioned, and this reveals its new cunning. Isn’t that so?

SF: There are two issues here, which can be easily conflated because people nowadays think of China, when they imagine a ‘digital state’. So yes, there is some sort of ‘digital control’ for people to worry about, but it’s not obvious that it will come from the state—at least not directly.

The distinctive feature of China is that the state has direct access to the digital data that people generate because the companies that collect and analyse the data are in direct partnership with the state. This helps to explain the reluctance of Western countries to deal with Chinese telecommunications firms, such as Huawei. However, the prospects for a truly digital state in the West are complicated by the independence of ‘big data’ platforms like Google, Amazon and Facebook from state control. Indeed, Western states have major difficulties collecting taxes from these firms! At the same time, it is certainly true that states require the cooperation of these big tech companies even for such basic state functions as national security. In the end, a ‘digital state’ will arise in the West only if somehow these big tech companies are incorporated into the state’s governance structure, perhaps through partial ownership, as in China. While that seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, it is equally clear that these firms need to remain sympathetic to aims of the states in which they operate in order for the West to function properly.

Looking at these matters from a Western standpoint, what people should really worry about in the short term is not state control but market control. Western states have been so far relatively clumsy in their use of big data for purposes of governance, which is partly due to a lack of competence but also due to lack of direct access to the relevant data. Moreover, given civil rights protections in Western countries, it is legally difficult for the state to access privately (i.e. commercially) obtained data. So even though a Western state can’t put you on a blacklist, as it can in China, the Western market is free to shape your attitudes and desires. The path of least resistance for any would-be Western ‘digital state’ would be to adopt a high-tech version of the ‘nudge’ strategy of ‘libertarian paternalism’ associated with US lawyer Cass Sunstein and economist Richard Thaler, whereby the state surveys the emerging data patterns and then design policies that focus those trends in directions that the state considers desirable—all without issuing threats of coercion.

TS: Today, many of those who talk about the crisis of the state argue that in the future, the state as a form can be replaced by the agglomerations of large cities. Thus, the world will be divided into plenty of local and independent megalopolises. These experts predict that this new system will become some kind of returning to the Middle Ages. In your opinion, is this scenario possible?

SF: I would put the matter a bit differently. States will increasingly need to manage ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces within their own jurisdictions. In the 1950s US sociologist Alvin Gouldner encapsulated these forces as social roles: ‘locals’ and ‘cosmopolitans’, respectively. Interestingly, he was studying universities—which of course were among the original medieval city-states. In short, some academics display lifelong loyalty to their own universities (‘locals’), whereas others are more oriented to academics with similar interests at other universities (‘cosmopolitans’). The original city-states also struggled with these dual identities, which evolved over the centuries as the state expanded in scale and scope. It resulted in the strong distinction between ‘politics’ (‘locals’) and ‘business’ (‘cosmopolitans’) as careers that we see today—at least in Western societies.

In this history, issues of ‘patriotism’ and ‘citizenship’ have been flashpoints where locals and cosmopolitans clash. After all, the cosmopolitan’s idea of ‘openness’ may be the local’s idea of ‘treason’. UK political commentator David Goodhart nowadays talks about this distinction in terms of people from ‘somewhere’ (‘locals’) and people from ‘anywhere’ (‘cosmopolitans’). He notes that the distinction increasingly corresponds to the difference between people whose lives depend primarily on what they do ‘offline’ and ‘online’, respectively. All of this reminds me of debates in the Cold War about the role that ‘metropolitan elites’ play in global ‘underdevelopment’ by not being sufficiently oriented toward their own nation-states. And perhaps the internet will increase this tendency, resulting in attempts by other states to create the sorts of ‘firewalls’ in cyberspace that China has so far managed to succeed in doing.

TS: If we look at the 20th century, we will notice that, despite two unprecedented world wars, the consensus was reached on some of the most important issues. For example, the person should not exploit another person, and the nation should not exploit another nation. Racism is bad, or every nation has a right to self-determination. And, at least in words, this consensus between states was maintained. It made possible to stabilize somehow relations between countries. In your opinion, what is the current subject of the search for such consensus between states? And by which means this consensus can be achieved?

SF: If I had to single out just one issue where consensus is lacking—and I hope that it does not sound too metaphysical—it would be a universal right to self-transformation. We have already achieved some elements of this ideal, both within states and between states: in particular, the ability to change the social class of one’s birth through education and the ability to change national identity through immigration. To be sure, there is no guarantee of

success in either case, but they are generally allowed. At least, the burden of proof internationally has shifted to those countries that would prohibit such acts of radical self-transformation. We have yet to establish a similar level of tolerance for trans-gender, trans-race, trans-species and cyborg existences. That's the next frontier, if we truly respect the freedom of people to explore their full potential. And hasn't that been the ultimate aim of all the international consensus you mentioned? It has not been simply about keeping the peace.

If your readers find what I'm saying fanciful, they should consider the battles waged over the original claim to a right of self-transformation. They were about religion. Modern ideas about the international order were forged in this context, from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The historic problem with religion from the standpoint of the state was that its doctrines encouraged adherents to think of themselves in terms that went against the aims of the state. This charge has historically applied to Buddhism just as much to Islam and dissident forms of Christianity. The rapprochement generally reached on this matter in the modern period is often discussed in terms of 'freedom of conscience' and 'freedom of expression'. However, it was really about a right to think of yourself in terms independent of what the state or society expects, which may in turn result in a change in how the state and society operates. This is still an ideal worth pursuing.