Exit Spaces: From Koreshan Cults to Wireless Mesh Networks

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This essay analyses ways in which the creation of new types of "exit spaces" - as defined by political economist Albert O. Hirschman -- outside the realms of the existing hegemony of the state and corporate power might provide us with imaginable alternatives with which to articulate our grievances with those structures allowing the creation of an agonist politics un-stymied by apathy and hopelessness.

Albert O. Hirschman's 1970 treatise *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* is a short taxonomy and analysis of possible actions an individual might take against an organisation they are unhappy with. Firstly to stop buying products and/or leave the organisation; exit. Secondly, to express dissatisfaction in some form of protest; voice. The third option is of course loyalty, to remain intractably faithful to the organization despite one's dissatisfaction.[i] The thrust of his argument rests on the relationship between customers and businesses but, writing at a point in history fractured by political dissent, he acknowledges the space for strong parallels with the political world and the relationship between citizen and state.

This essay will specifically look at the significance of contemporary, technologically-driven forms of exit space in seasteading, the Silk Road, and the Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network for their potential as new forms of public space in the technological realm.

The Failure of "Voice"

Hirschman sees exit from an organization as the progressive next-step following the failure of voice,– defined as the airing grievances and protesting. In order to understand the interest in exit spaces it's useful to consider arguments for why voice is failing as a form of inciting change in institutions.

In his essay "The Practical Utopian's Guide to the Coming Collapse," anthropologist David Graeber posits that far from being ineffective in their aim of changing the global status quo, the global protest movements of the late sixties had the significant effect of prioritizing domestic appeasement. He suggests that although they often failed in achieving their explicit objectives, they were strategically successful in creating a sense of political empowerment for the previously maligned as well as developing tactics and strategies for functional popular dissent in the framework of the United States' constitution. As a result of this success he explains that "…the

creation of that sense of failure, of the complete ineffectiveness of political action against the system…" became a leading objective of modern government from which resulted "…the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future."[ii] To this end, states and corporate organizations embarked on extensive strategies to prevent dissent on this scale in the future such as carefully curated media campaigns, public relations, intelligence operations, legal and property levies on space, and militarizing of the police.

Hirschman, writing from the midst of this dissent in the late sixties prefigures this internalizing, securitizing strategy as it is used in corporate organizations:

> …the short-run interest of management in organizations is to increase its own freedom of movement; management will therefore strain to strip the members-customers of the weapons which they can wield, be they exit or voice, and to convert, as it were, what should be feedback into a safety valve. Thus voice can become mere "blowing off steam" as it is emasculated by the institutionalization and domestication of dissent…[iii]

He goes on to describe other innovative tactics of organizations for suppressing dissent. For example how, during the Vietnam War protests, the Johnson administration dealt with government dissenters by giving them the role of "official dissenter," a position that makes the individual discountable and predictable. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe, in her book *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, refers to this as the way in which "…demands which challenge the hegemonic order are appropriated by the existing system so as to satisfy them in a way which neutralizes their subversive potential."[iv]

We could look to the failure of the Stop the War Coalition's 2003 march -- the UK's biggest ever demonstration -- to achieve its single explicit aim, to prevent the invasion of Iraq as evidence of this disempowerment of popular protest. I have previously identified the modern form of popular protest as "flatpacked protest;"[vi] the protestors organize online, carry identical banners and protest under the watchful eye of the police within carefully constructed legal and physical constraints. In this, they behave as a herd, not an active polity. As Hirschman describes they are easily predictable and discountable, occupying a necessary social niche but having any real agency stripped away through the institutionalization of protest.

The Space for "Exit"

Hirschman's term "exit", taken at its most literal, is the actual physical departure of a dissenter from the organization they take exception to. Exemplars of this literal form of exit might be the American communes, such as New Harmony, Indiana and Oneida, New York, that sprung up across the

territories of the US in the nineteenth century. Hirschman himself notes that “exit has been accorded an extraordinarily privileged position in the American tradition. […] The United States owes its very existence and growth to millions of decisions favoring exit over voice.”[vii] This is exemplified by the number of these communes setup by Europeans emigres looking to escape and challenge European cultural and religious hegemony.

The American communes of the19th century are endemic of how, given the desire to form a society under an alternative set of beliefs, the US at the time was an accommodating place to do it. The Koreshan Unity movement provides a case study of the process and reasoning of these communal exits. Following altercations with the Chicago authorities, the Koreshans, led by Cyrus Teed, decided to settle in rural southern Florida in 1894. They believed that the universe existed inside a giant sphere (and tried to prove it [viii]), and had a host of unhelpful social policies for a growing community, such as mandatory celibacy. Despite this, they were incredibly successful as historian Robert S. Fogarty remarks, counting almost 200 followers at their height:

> Remarkably enough the colonists succeeded in constructing and sustaining a community until Teed's death in 1908. After his death the colonists waited for him to rise from the dead and when that failed to occur the two hundred members split into warring factions.[ix]

Fogarty goes on, referencing Arthur Beston to speculate as to why the Koreshans were perhaps one of the last successful and notionally accepted communes because the possibility of challenging the hegemony of the state by the early 20th century was unimaginable:

> …social patterns became so well defined over the whole area of the United States that the possibility no longer existed of affecting the character of the social order merely by planting the seeds of new institutions in the wilderness. [Fogarty 1975]

Hirschman terms this hopeless situation a “lazy monopoly” and explains why, in 1970, exit had become a completely unfathomable tactic for the citizens of the US and other world-leading states: “…no standard of comparison is available for the superpower which can claim, with some plausibility, that in view of its special burdens and responsibilities ordinary standards do not apply.”[x] In other words, by the time Hirschman was writing in the late 1960s, there was no way for a disgruntled citizen to imagine or make an example of a better alternative to their current situation and so they sank into loyalty. Here we find Graeber’s more poetically named “apparatus of hopelessness.” Exit becomes unimaginable and, importantly physically challenging when almost all hospitable land and the imagination of alternatives falls under the hegemony of the state.

Seasteading

If a line were drawn a hundred years from the Koreshans to today, the seasteading movement would be a parallel. Seasteading evolved as a practice in the late 1980s and has recently come back into vogue with Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and neo-libertarians pursuing the dream of offshore settlements in international waters, the last wholly politically neutral territory. Seasteading is usually presented from a corporate standpoint with arguments for the ability to employ immigrant workers without the complexities of immigration law, the storage of data that may be illegal on-shore or for tax-evasion and low trade levies.[xi] As China Mieville, in his essay "Floating Utopias," writes:

> Their intent is to slip the surly bonds of earth not up but sideways, beyond littoral borders. It is a lunatic syllogism: "I dislike the state: The state is made of land: Therefore I dislike the land." Water is a solvent, dissolving "political" (state) power, leaving only "economics" behind.[xii]

However, as Mieville alludes to, seasteading is more plausibly seen as political posturing. It's questionable as to whether any of the myriad proposed projects, backed purely by the cult of personality built around the personal successes of its most vocal proponents, are even technically viable. The engineering complexities still to be overcome versus the actual investment in projects implies that seasteading is the "…forward wedge of a political project…" to gain greater leverage over the existing economic and political hegemony.[xiii]

Seasteading also invalidates itself by openly posing as a project for an elite subset of the neo-liberal idealists, marketing itself to Burning Man hedonists and Silicon Valley billionaires, pleading wonton ignorance to the reliance that this superculture has on the people who would construct and service their floating utopias let alone buy their products or engage with their economics.

Silk Road

The Silk Road represents a similar if significantly more functioning attempt at exit space as extra-statecraft, but instead of slipping the surly bonds of earth, it subsumes itself in existing infrastructure by leveraging technological exploits.

The Silk Road, often cited as the "Ebay of drugs," is a narcotics marketplace that operates using Tor -- a service that allows online users to anonymize their activity and location to prevent traffic monitoring. At its height in 2012 it was trading approximately $1.2 million a month of illegal drugs around the world by shipping products between sellers and consumers simply through domestic and international mail services.

Silk Road provides an interesting example of what might be considered an internalized exit. Unlike the Koreshans or seasteading, Silk Road suggests no physical migration or movement in order to remove itself from the auspices of the state to pursue activities opposed to national laws or principles. The operation was largely run from San Francisco public libraries' free WiFi, and Tor still relies on backbone Internet connections. It also utilized standard postal services for delivery as opposed to the nefarious courier services of the organized narcotics business.[xiv]

Although one would no more trust Silk Road as a political platform than one might trust Ebay as a healthcare provider, it furnishes an interesting argument for the idea of technology as a territory. Network and technological platforms have the same potential to be political spaces as town squares or floating cities. They are spaces with gatekeepers, levies, security, methods of communication, exchange protocols and travel embedded in their construction. The Silk Road is a space under a political jurisdiction (though not a particularly desirable one) that exists subsumed in the physicality of the state.

Seasteading and the Silk Road give us with two key examples of exit spaces; one which seeks to physically remove itself and another to subsume itself. Neither are particularly desirable or sustainable, but they represent imaginable alternatives to our standard platforms and institutions of politics.

The Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network

The Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network (AWMN) is a community-run mesh network based in and around Athens. Unlike the dominant root and branch network structure in which there are gate-keepers to access and distribution, a mesh network is a distributed peer-to-peer system where no individual node has the capabilities to control any others. As one of the architects, Vaggelis Koutroumpas described it:

> We could be considered as an alternative telco [telecommunications company] in a sense - with the important difference that this network is owned by the people and is for the people. There are no companies involved. There are no financial motivations or gains in AWMN (though many would love to capitalize on it - we constantly give a fight to keep it open and free!) It's a non-profit network. And there is no government censorship. Even if they wanted to it could be quite difficult to censor something on AWMN since we own the backbone routers and can play with routing pretty much like the internet works.[xv]

The AWMN was constructed as a community-led project in 2002 in response to poor internet investment on the part of the Greek state. The network provides high-speed symmetrical broadband;

symmetrical in the sense that it is an alternative to the Internet replete with its own social networks, gaming servers, media, and communications structure. In addition to providing this public infrastructure service, it also provided a backup to Internet connectivity when cell towers and Athens' tenuous broadband struggled during the austerity protests in 2010-2012 and at times when the government initiated communications shutdowns.

Not only is the AWMN a functioning exit space but it is also a largely desirable one and a format that is gaining traction as a plausible alternative to the increasingly besieged current Internet structure.

Of course the success of the AWMN as opposed to other similar projects is in its locality and its situation. Hirschman himself describes how specific instances of cognitive dissonance -- a disagreeable situation -- might lead past voice and exit and "…could lead to actions designed to change the real world when that is an alternative way (and particularly when it is the only way) of overcoming or reducing dissonance."[xvi]

The activists and developers working on the AWMN had no desire to leave Athens to its fate and felt that their protest was unheard. Instead they took the option to construct their own exit space embedded in the infrastructure of the community they already belonged to.

In this sense, the AWMN is not an exit space, but an action space, providing the construction of a real functioning imaginable alternative. How this imaginable alternative is used and how it engages with the institutions whose failures it was born from is a different matter.

Agonistic Spaces

Chantal Mouffe is one of the leading proponents of agonistic politics; a confrontation between opposing political ideals as opposed to concession or harmful antagonism. In order to do this however the positions of adversaries need to be established. She contends, and in agreement with Graeber and Hirschman, that with suppression of imaginable alternatives it has become impossible to exercise true dissent:

> The absence of recognized alternative to the dominant hegemonic order has prevented those who have tried to resist this order from finding legitimate forms of expression.[xvii]

She argues that in order to re-politicize people and to combat apathy there must be the construction of a "constitutive outside" -- spaces or ideas occupied by a them and an us. She describes this as political articulation, a clear placement of ideals and beliefs in an almost spatial sense so as to construct polities with demonstrable imaginable alternatives.[xviii]

What the Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network provides is a political space in which to assemble and articulate an "us." It functions as a town square for people with government grievances to assemble and organize, not just to take part in a street protest but to demonstrate the plausibility of a community-led technologically-mediated space that dually functions as a political body. The AWMN has to make decisions about its future direction, content and principles as a horizontally distributed network and for the last 12 years has provided a growing and exemplary instance of that kind of system. Where the Occupy movement suffered from rapid scaling and inarticulate definitions of us and them, the AWMN has built its identity as a platform and a community slowly and stably.

The town square in advance of the frontier

In spatial political terms, we could consider the Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network a town square in advance of the frontier: A new type of politically active public space that has so far avoided being dragged under the yoke of more hierarchical control and thrust into Graeber's "apparatus of hopelessness."

While the AWMN is significantly dissimilar to the much more ostentatious and elitist seasteading movement or the guiltily thrilling Silk Road, the format of a sustainable, distributed community-led technological territory provides an enticing model of a future for new active public spaces. With growing cognitive dissonance activated by issues such as global surveillance, the nearing end of net neutrality, and political apathy in the developed world, opportunities for new forms of networks as platforms for political positioning and organization are becoming real possibilities for active exit spaces. Mesh networks and the technology that fuels them are rapidly becoming more available with projects like Occupy.here and Alternet, an easily buildable dark net model and a proposal for a 'plug-and-play' mesh network node, starting to hint at consumer-grade accessibility where before they have required significant technological nous. [xxi]

Hirschman, even writing in the midst of the political dissent of the late 1960's was aware of the imminent failure of voice; of the institutionalisation of protest and the securitisation of public space in which to perform it. At the same time, the totalising global hegemony of political institutions shaped during the Cold War saw the Koreshans and the American communes as some of the last attempts at practicing the imaginable alternative in the US and perhaps the developed world.

Now, with network technologies, used by communities in a new way, we're maybe beginning to glimpse an alternative definition for exit. One where, the physical movement of a disgruntled polity

across the Earth is not necessary, when political space can be carved out from the networked society.

With a more massive uptake of the technologies that enable this space-building, it's possible that we may also find real spaces in which to practice a politics of agonism, one that recognizes the viability of imaginable alternatives instead of subverting or subsuming them.

BIO:

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[i] HIrschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty; Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 4

[ii]Graeber, David. “The Practical Utopian’s Guide To The Coming Collapse” *The Baffler* No.22 (November 2013) http://www.thebaffler.com/past/practical_utopians_guide (accessed July 9th 2014)

[iii] HIrschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty; Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 124

[iv] Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* London, Verso, 2013, 73

[vi] Revell, Tobias. "Designed Conflict Territories" tobiasrevell.com (September 2013) blog.tobiasrevell.com/2013/09/designed-conflict-territories.html (accessed July 10th 2014)

[vii] HIrschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty; Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 106

[viii] The 'Rectilineator' was a giant ruler constructed to be perfectly straight. It would descend into the ground as it lengthened if we indeed, did live on the inside of a hollow sphere, and head away from it if we lived on the outside. Of course, it descended. ‘If you build it, they will come.'

[ix] Fogarty, Robert S. (1975). *American Communes, 1865–1914*. Journal of American Studies, 9, pp 145-162 doi:10.1017/S002187580001029X

[x]Hirschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty; Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 117

[xi] BlueSeed (https://blueseed.co/) exists almost expressly for this aim.

[xii] Mieville, China "Floating Utopias" In These Times (September 2007) http://inthesetimes.com/article/3328/floating_utopias (accessed July 10th 2014)

[xiii] Steinberg, Philip E. et al. Atlas Swam: Freedom, Capital, and Floating Sovereignties in the Seasteading Vision, Antipode Vol. 44 No. 4 (2012), 1532-1550

[xiv] Anderson, Nate & Farivar, Cyrus "How the feds took down Dread Pirate Roberts" Ars Technica (October 2013) http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2013/10/how-the-feds-took-down-the-dread-pirate-roberts/ (accessed July 25th 2014)

[xv] Koutroumpas, Vaggelis, email to author, 14th July 2014

[xvi]HIrschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty; Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 94

[xvii] Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* London, Verso, 2013, 19

[xviii] Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* London, Verso, 2013, 5

[xxi] Occupy.here: http://occupyhere.org and the Alternet: http://www.sarahtgold.co.uk/the-alternet