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ByGregor Claude

A recent report, *Wide Open*, by the think tank Demos takes the metaphor of open source and runs with it – right into the closed kernel of the modern state. Gregor Claude examines the debris

What would an open source government look like? The question is being asked not, as you might think, by wild-eyed, fast-coding techno-anarchists intent on squatting the geopolitical noosphere, but in the pragmatically modernising world of New Labour think-tankery. A new report, *Wide Open: Open Source Methods and their Future Potential*, was published this April by the British think tank Demos and co-authored by Downing Street insiders Geoff Mulgan and Tom Steinberg. It explores the lessons, methods, and success stories of open source, and offers suggestions about how they might be applied to governing people rather than code. But can you really open up the state to distributed tinkering, and if so, what would that mean? I can think of a few things that would make my list but I don't think that's what they have in mind: debugging the police, rebooting the kernel panic on terror, compiling a few decent hospitals...

Open source has firmly established its role in non-commercial software production, but it has also generated a buzz about its wider social and political applications for some time now. Radical writers and activists were the first to get excited about it, but now it has also found an important niche in the business plans of commercial giants like IBM and Sun Microsystems. And predictably, in tandem, open source software is also appearing on the to-do lists of official political bodies, whether states or NGOs, who are wary of the strategic implications of being locked into a relationship with Microsoft.

But Mulgan and Steinberg want to think beyond simply installing Linux on the computers of Whitehall. Admirably, they know enough about computers to recognise the limits of applying the metaphor of open source to anything other than software. Source code is the human-readable computer code which is compiled into the machine-readable software that computers actually run. The state may sometimes have a newspeak translation problem, but it is not the same as this one. What Mulgan and Steinberg really want to think about is how a less than popular state can connect with what it sees as apathetic populations and engage their energies. They list the aspects of open source that they feel may prove particularly valuable, including:

- transparency
- vetting of participants only after they've got involved
- low cost and ease of engagement
- a legal structure and enforcement mechanism
- leadership
- common standards
- peer review and feedback loops
- a shared conception of goals
- incrementalist – small players can still make useful contributions
- powerful non-monetary incentives

Much of this reads like the virtues of a dependable community social club. But above all, the report and its recommendations is primarily about open source as metaphor for a new organisational model, one which turns away from the hierarchical and the bureaucratic in favour of the decentralised network.

This is in some ways quite a departure – hierarchy and bureaucracy has been the form of the modern state throughout its existence. Rulers and their thinkers have conceived of the state as a ‘body politic’, with the sovereign as the controlling head and the rest of us as subordinate organs, for almost as long as there have been states. The metaphor is found in the Hindu Vedas and the Mahabharata, was given a particularly influential elaboration in Plato’s *Republic*, and it has become more or less common sense in the era of the modern state. It is a metaphor extended beyond the state to society at large by the discipline of Sociology – Durkheim considered his new science as opening up the possibility for a kind of medical practice capable of treating the pathologies of the modern social body when its ‘organic solidarity’ was threatened. Max Weber, on the other hand, despaired that the all-pervasive organisational practice of bureaucracy was so ruthlessly efficient that, once entrenched, nothing could displace it, and humanity faced an ever-more organised, bureaucratised and hierarchical future.

Is it really possible that the British State might break with this organisational orthodoxy? Could New Labour have discovered (and modernised, of course) the philosophical disorganisationalists Deleuze and Guattari? In their book *Thousand Plateaus*, their concept of the body without organs is, in its most basic sense, an argument against rigid, bureaucratic organisation. Against the organised body, with its strictly delimited division of labour between its specialised organs, its static fixity of functions, and its hierarchical system of control. The body without organs is dynamic, flowing, collective and... open. It is not anti-order, but its order is ‘rhizomatic’, like a decentralised network, rather than ‘arborescent’, branching like a tree from a single source. To organise is to segment a dynamic flow of energies into discrete containable units, and above all, to coordinate those units with a single command structure. So what would the state, the head and chief organiser of the body politic, want with a headless rhizome?

Mulgan and Steinberg’s encouragements centre on using open source methods as a new organisational model for re-thinking (at least to some extent) the relationship between state and society. Open source methods of organisation appear to them to offer the possibility of blurring the boundaries between the state and the public. One of the claims made for open source organisation in software is that it breaks down the boundaries of one of the basic units of economic production, the firm. Production is no longer something that takes place in a particular time (the working day) and place (the factory or office, or even something that happens among a tightly defined group (employees)). Rather, creativity and production is something that is at least as likely to happen outside the boundaries of the firm. What then becomes important is not to try to recapture this creativity inside the boundaries of the firm, but to allow some of the boundaries of the firm to dissolve, and to merely coordinate the flows of creativity in such a way that the porous firm can profit from it.

Whether or not open source coordination can be effectively deployed by the state is an open question. Mulgan and Steinberg do put forward several notable, if low-key suggestions. What they call ‘pre-legislative scrutiny’ appears to amount to online focus groups to help legislators research public opinion about pending legislative proposals. In local government the scope suggested is even bolder: with these ‘very local rules’, they write, ‘there is no reason why they could not be opened up to popular ownership’. Sure, why not, but it does leave you thinking that after all that optimistic open talk, tossing us local by-laws for our popular ownership is a pretty paltry offering. ‘Free the source code to a few parking lots and business licences!’ – not sure quite who that rallying cry is directed towards. The voluntarist minorities who are bothered about parking and zoning restrictions are presumably already well known at their town halls and council meetings. These are obviously not suggestions for dissolving the boundaries of the various organs of state or re-thinking the principle of bureaucratic hierarchy. Rather these are suggestions about how an existing bureaucratic hierarchy can deploy a strategy of porosity and openness to extend itself into the ‘community’, and with them comes a strong resonance with other New Labour community building projects.

In the final days of the dotcom bubble, virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier noted sceptically that as a computer scientist, people were always telling him that his field was the 'central metaphor of everything'. Open source has for many become yet another central metaphor of everything, and it's hard not to be a little cautious. There is clearly an appetite for experimentation here, but it is the appetite of the New Labour rootless moderniser who, having lost any real political constituency years ago, will try anything to reach out and touch The Community. Whether it succeeds in anything more ambitious than a suggestion box on Downing Street's website is another question.

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<http://www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/wideopen/>

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