

Would You Press the Button?

William Nava

The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.

– Gustav Landauer¹

Introduction

Count Leo Tolstoy outlines the following scenario in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894).² A man – I’ll call him Anatoliy – chooses to live by the “Law of Christ”: he will never initiate violence and never contribute to violence. Knowing that the Tsar’s taxes fund war, Anatoliy abstains from paying them. State officials suspect subversive intentions, and question Anatoliy. He assures them that he has no political motivations. He simply will not pay to fund the initiation of violence against a fellow man because that would be against the Law of Christ. The state officials do not want to punish Anatoliy. Everyone in town affirms that he is an exemplary citizen and a wonderful husband and father. But he will not budge in his convictions. The state has no choice but to incarcerate him.

Consider any government program that you strongly oppose. Is it the war? You pay for it. Is it government protection of the finance industry? You pay for it. Is it the welfare state? Or the war on drugs? Or surveillance programs? You pay for all of them. When you go into the office every morning – or the factory, or the store, whatever the case may be for you – your hard work, your sweat and passion, funds something that you find morally reprehensible. Like Anatoliy, you are forced to pay for it.

This problem is not about particular policies. We all agree and disagree with different programs. The problem is that being forced to fund activities we oppose is built in to how governments operate. As a result, virtually anyone who wishes to live a life of

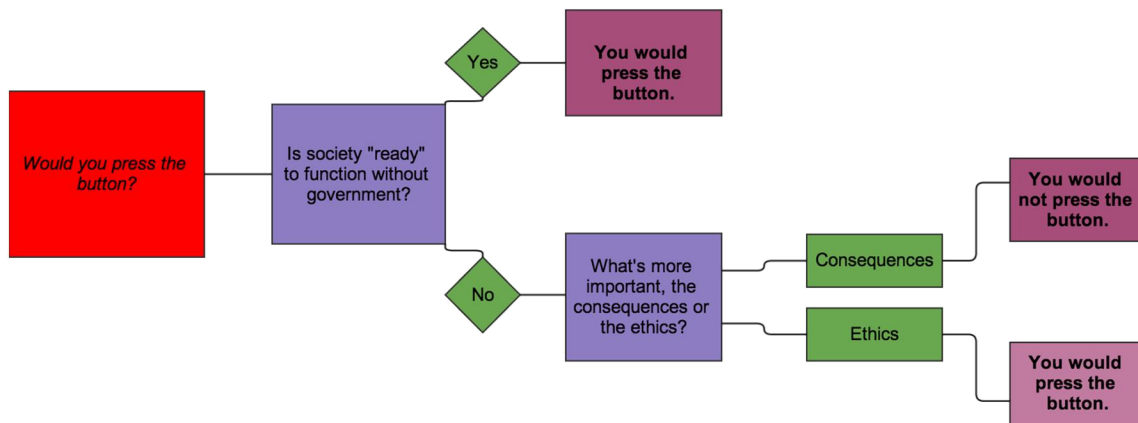
¹ Quoted in Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R. F. C. Hill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), chap. 6.

² *The Complete Works of Count Leo Tolstoy* vol. 20, ed. and trans. Leo Wiener (London: G. J. Howell, 1905), chap. 9, para. 34.

conviction and integrity must face being locked in a cage for years under subhuman conditions. For “tax evasion.”

Now consider a question often discussed by radical libertarians: imagine that you have access to a button that when pressed would bring about the immediate end of government. Would you press it?

Answering this question typically involves balancing the ethical concerns outlined above against the perceived *necessary evils* required for society to properly function.



Most considerations of the button can be reduced to this simple decision procedure.

The problem with this traditional line of reasoning is that it neglects to examine what the phrase “press the button” actually means. What *is* this “state” that this button would suddenly eliminate, and what would it mean for it to end? Careful analysis of these questions suggests that everyone – regardless of the considerations above – should want to press the button, and presents practical strategies for actually doing so.

What is “the state”?

Max Weber famously defined a “state” as “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*” (emphasis in original).³

³ “Politics as a Vocation,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946)

Let's test the usefulness of this definition by using it to pinpoint the state within a specific territory: the United States. Using Weber's definition, what *is* "the state" in the U.S.? Who are the people that form the "human community" that constitutes our "state"?

Weber argues that, in a modern state, it is the leaders in positions of power that make up this human community.⁴ In the U.S., that would be the President, members of Congress, Supreme Court Justices, and perhaps the heads of the administrative agencies. Intuitively, this seems correct. These are the people who seem to decide how and toward what aim Weber's "monopoly of ... physical force" is used.

Upon closer inspection, however, Weber's answer is too imprecise to be meaningful. Even the lowest level government bureaucrat has some discretion over how the state's power is used in individual cases. By virtue of electing leaders, voters also have indirect – but cumulatively very real – legislative and executive power. If participation in directing the violence monopoly constitutes being part of the state, then *a majority of U.S. citizens* are "the state."

It is true that the discretionary powers of voters and bureaucrats function within the framework of much broader decisions made by political leaders. Yet the power of political leaders to make these grand decisions itself functions within a larger and highly limiting framework built into the structure of government. In the United States, the system of checks and balances, media pressure, financial pull and voter power all heavily influence, limit, and partially decide the actions that political leaders can and do take. So, if we're looking for the ultimate source of discretionary power over the legitimate violence monopoly, we don't find it in Weber's political leaders.

The truth is that state-actors – be they voters, bureaucrats, or the President – have relatively little power over the state apparatus. They're more like lever-pullers and button-pushers for a mechanism that is already there, operating within the logic of its pre-programmed machinery.

To be sure, there are groups that arguably reap benefits from the state: corporations, special interest groups, etc. But whatever your view on the relative gains of these groups, it is clear that these groups do not, individually or cumulatively, *constitute* the state, any more than bureaucrats, voters, or political leaders do.

⁴ Ibid.

The conclusion we're compelled to accept is that, to contradict Weber, the state is not a "human community." There *is* an entity that claims monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force, but it is not a group of people. What is it then? Is it the Constitution or the sum of legal statutes? These, as mere pieces of paper, have no agency and thus can hardly be said to "claim" anything. Besides, the Constitution and the legal code are routinely ignored and sidestepped as part of the political process.

The collective interpretive framework

The only answer we seem to be left with is that the state is not a *physical thing*, but a kind of social *structure* – a pattern of behaviors throughout society. Though closer to the truth, this answer needs specification. What constitutes this structure? What characteristic(s) must a social structure have in order to qualify as a state?

We could simply identify patterns of behavior that all states share, and define the state accordingly. But this would leave us with at least one obvious ambiguity: what distinguishes states from mafias? Like states, mafias enforce edicts by threat or use of physical force, employ hierarchical structures of power, and provide services and protection for those within their jurisdiction. In terms of patterns of behaviors, there is no easy way to distinguish between states and mafias.

This is because the key piece of what makes a social structure a "state" is still missing. Social structures always exist alongside mass interpretations of the activities that make up those structures. All human social structures are therefore accompanied by a *collective interpretive framework* (CIF) – a shared lens through which a critical mass of people perceives their society. The difference between a state and a mafia is that a state has *legitimacy* – that is, it is largely seen as a normal, inevitable, necessary, and fundamental aspect of social life. This legitimacy is a function, not of patterns of physical behaviors, but of the CIF through which those patterns are viewed by the majority of the society in question.

Consider the Anatoliy scenario again. What might those same patterns of behavior look like if seen through a different CIF? It might have nothing to do with a "state," and might require no words that presuppose a state – such as "police" or "taxes" – to explain

it. It could just as easily be described as “the actions of a very large organized crime syndicate.” Or simply, “an odd pathological ritual in which some people participate.”

What the state actually *is*, then, is not a kind of social structure, but rather a kind of CIF. Specifically, a “statist CIF” is any CIF that lends legitimacy to social structures of organized violence.

This distinction between social structures and their accompanying CIFs is important because it is CIFs that determine human behavior, and therefore the structure of society. In the case of the state, all state actors – the vast majority of society in one way or another – act as they do because they perceive the state to exist. And the state manifests only because state actors act as they do.

If tomorrow it did not seem perfectly normal and legitimate for a critical mass of people to send their children to public school, to pay their taxes, to wear their police uniforms, to appear for a summons, etc., they would not do so. And if they did not, *there is nothing “the state” could do* about it. There would be no state to speak of. People every day act in a manner consistent with the CIF “a legitimate monopoly on violence exists,” and it is only through these actions that that CIF manifests as its corresponding social structure.

What would it mean to eliminate the state?

Once we understand that the state is nothing more (or less) than a culturally shared state of mind, we can indulge our previous hypothetical and ask: what would the “button” have to do in order to terminate “the state,” as we’ve just defined it?

Whatever the button does, it must do it to society’s collective psyche. There is nothing else – no institution that exists outside our mass state of mind – for it to act on. So whatever method the button uses, the concern of society being “ready” or “fit” to function without government is dissolved, because the moment the statist CIF disappears is the very moment that society is ready for statelessness. If CIFs determine our behavior, then it is functioning within a statist CIF that makes our actions unfit to function in a world without government. Once some other kind of CIF replaces our statist CIF, our

actions will correspond to the new CIF. Since that new CIF is stateless, by definition our new actions will correspond to a stateless world.⁵

Put another way: ending the state – pressing the button – *is* the process of having society become ready to function without the state. When we are clear that “the state” is simply a mass frame of mind, there is no other meaning of “ending the state” that makes any sense.

So this settles one matter: since pressing the button is *synonymous* with preparing society for statelessness, everyone who does not view organized violence as a virtue should want to press the button. So how do we press it?

How would the button work?

We’ve established that the job of our button is to shift the CIF through which a critical mass of people perceives society. So one reasonable suggestion might be: the button should *convince* people to abandon their statist CIF!

Anyone who has attempted this knows that this kind of rational approach will do the button no good. Even when the statist has no counter-argument, he will dismiss the matter as “unrealistic.” This is because logical reasoning has little to do with why most of us support statism.

Instead, most of us support statism simply because we already do and have for as long as we’ve been socially self-aware. Indeed, integrating statism into our developing network of CIFs was a major part of the process of *becoming* socially self-aware.⁶

The state is a CIF, not a belief. It is a mechanism for making sense of external stimuli, as distinct from a set of beliefs about external stimuli. CIFs are typically invisible to us because they are not what we see, but what we see through – especially when they’ve been so deeply embedded for so long, like a pair of glasses you’ve never

⁵ All of this assumes that CIFs determine social patterns of behavior. One possible objection is that there is something inherent to human nature or to society that somehow prevents statelessness from functioning, regardless of CIF. Rebutting this view is outside the scope of this essay. See Robert Axelrod’s *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984) and Bruce Benson’s *The Enterprise of Law: Justice without the State* (1990) for arguments and evidence to the contrary. It is worth noting here, however, that presupposing the necessity of the state is to be expected of anyone operating within a statist CIF.

⁶ Consider the following events, typical of the American childhood: reciting the pledge of allegiance; listening to the national anthem prior to sporting events; hearing the phrase “it’s the *law*” used as the source of ultimate authority and ethics; learning world history as primarily a series of empires and wars, as opposed to, e.g., the development of inventions and ideas.

removed from your eyes and which you don't even know are there. Something this fundamental is mostly impenetrable to logical argument.

Logical argument is not only practically ineffective, but also necessarily insufficient. Based on how we defined the state, people aren't ready for statelessness until they have it: since they don't have it now, they aren't ready for it now. So convincing people that statelessness is possible or desirable is not enough. By definition, people need to *view society through a stateless CIF* in order for the state to end.

To escape the statist CIF is to instinctively interpret situations like Anatoliy's in ways that do not orient around a state. When a critical mass of people does this, the button will have been pressed. Then the state does not exist. What's more: today we don't say the Sun used to revolve around the Earth but now it doesn't. We say people were once simply wrong. In the same way, the day we abandon the statist CIF is the day the state *never* existed. People simply used to do really odd, violent things.

So how do we do this? How do we learn to instinctively interpret society in new ways?

Consider a different, rather innocuous, CIF: the instinctive sense most of us have that elevators are not appropriate places for conversation. How would we shift *that* CIF? Again, it is obvious that it would not be by reasoned argument; few people actually "believe" or "support" the notion that conversation shouldn't happen in elevators, so arguing it would be futile. A violent revolution against the elevator-conversation-suppression-powers-that-be would be even more ridiculous.

What *would* work is very simple: we converse in elevators! At first it feels awkward. But as we make a habit of it, a liberating realization kicks in: there was no real reason not to do this in the first place. It becomes easy. Innocent bystanders experience a similar progression. At first they look at us suspiciously, maybe even become annoyed: "why are these people chatting away in the elevator? Don't they know that's weird?" But as they see it more, they become accustomed to it. Soon they don't even notice it as out of the ordinary. Before they know it, they're also conversing in elevators. And before all of us know it, the CIF is gone, and hardly anyone even remembers it: elevators become acceptable places to chat, like any other public space.

Applied to the state: to press the button is to *act like the state isn't there*. Because it isn't.

What is the button?

An apparently reasonable concern: “Act like the state isn't there? You mean ignore the laws and get arrested? No thanks!” But that's a statist CIF talking. The fact is that many people *already* act like the state isn't there, and more do so every day.

Consider the worldwide black and grey markets: they employ nearly 1.18 billion people, or half of the world's workers, and have a total estimated value of over \$10 trillion, greater than the economy of any nation besides the U.S. (and growing faster than *any* nation's economy).⁷ These markets successfully sidestep governments' efforts to supervise and regulate commerce.

Consider the rise of cryptocurrencies: one of the state's primary functions is the control and tracking of currency. People who use cryptocurrencies act as if that weren't the case. They aren't necessarily breaking the law or participating in activism. They're simply trading outside the world of the state.

Consider the Silk Road: people trading drugs online – not necessarily for activism, but just because they want drugs. Even when the government shut the website down, competitors surged.⁸ Just like that.

Consider Defense Distributed: 3-D printed guns. 3-D printed anything, for that matter. The government claims the right to regulate the sale and manufacture of any and all goods. Cody Wilson basically never noticed. He posted blueprints online. When the state ordered Wilson to take his blueprints down, he complied; but only after they had been downloaded over a hundred thousand times.⁹ Now they're out there, for anyone with a 3-D printer to use. What's “the state” gonna do about it?

⁷ Robert Neuwirth, “Shadow Superpower: Forget China: the \$10 trillion global black market is the world's fastest growing economy—and its future,” *Foreign Policy*, October 28, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/28/black_market_global_economy.

⁸ T. W. and the Data Team, “Silk Road Successors,” *The Economist*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/05/daily-chart-13>.

⁹ “3-D printed gun blueprints pulled from Internet, at request of State Department,” *CBSNews*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/3d-printed-gun-blueprints-pulled-from-internet-at-request-of-state-department/>.

Consider that approximately 1 billion people worldwide live in squats.¹⁰

Consider that in 2011, 73% of all charitable contributions in the U.S. came from private individuals, totaling \$217.79 billion.¹¹

Consider that as a result of online communication services, the United States Post Office is breathing its dying breaths.¹² These innovations didn't intentionally neuter the USPS – they simply didn't care about it; hardly even noticed it.

Consider the restaurant industry, which regularly pays employees cash. It's illegal yet everyone knows about it. Does anyone care? Consider how routinely undocumented immigrants find work. Consider the widespread practice of marriage for papers. Consider the growing peer-to-peer economy. Consider illegal file sharing.

The list goes on and on. *Demonstrative experience* shifts a CIF. When non-state institutions successfully offer cheaper and more effective alternatives in areas over which the state claims monopoly, people *experience* statelessness in those areas.

More people and more areas, until critical mass: that's the button.

None of this requires convincing. Shifts in CIF tend to happen gradually and without fanfare, so we're usually not even aware that they're happening to us. Someone who regularly practices illegal file sharing interprets this sector of the world statelessly, even if she "believes" in the state. By spreading the practice of illegal file sharing, she contributes much more to the button than anything she could say if she were convinced. By arguing against the state we highlight its existence and thus move conversations into the statist CIF, thereby perpetuating it. Of course, it is a good thing when someone is genuinely convinced. But more often than not this does not happen, and even persuasive argument can sometimes be counter-productive. By contrast, living outside the statist CIF is infectious and never counterproductive because it already is the final goal.

None of this is meant to deny that there are, in physical reality, people willing to use weapons to enforce the monopoly on violence. But the various examples above demonstrate that with creativity, innovation, and a little risk-taking, we absolutely *can* circumvent the violence and live, exchange and associate freely and peacefully now.

¹⁰ Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*. London: Routledge, 2004.

¹¹ "Charitable Giving Statistics," *National Philanthropic Trust*, 2013, <http://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics>.

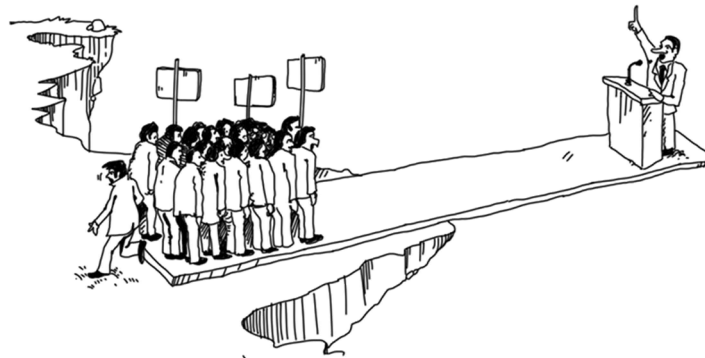
¹² Ron Nixon, "Postal Service Reports Loss of \$15 Billion," *New York Times*, November 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/us/politics/postal-service-reports-a-nearly-16-billion-loss.html>.

Conclusion

Here's the best part: this is all already happening. This essay is not so much a call to action as it is a product of the action already taking place. The growth rate of state-bypassing alternatives is expanding fast, as is the perceived legitimacy of these alternatives. The button is moving toward critical mass, and because the process is gradual, there is no precise moment at which we'll know that we have pressed it. In the meantime, we just live on outside the state, helping the button along through the natural spread of demonstrative experience that happens when people interact with each other.

To put it simply: from now on, when asked the question, "would you press the button?" my answer will be: "I *am* pressing the button. What are you doing?"

THE PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THEIR TRUE POWER



The button.