

## “Would You Press the Button?”

by  
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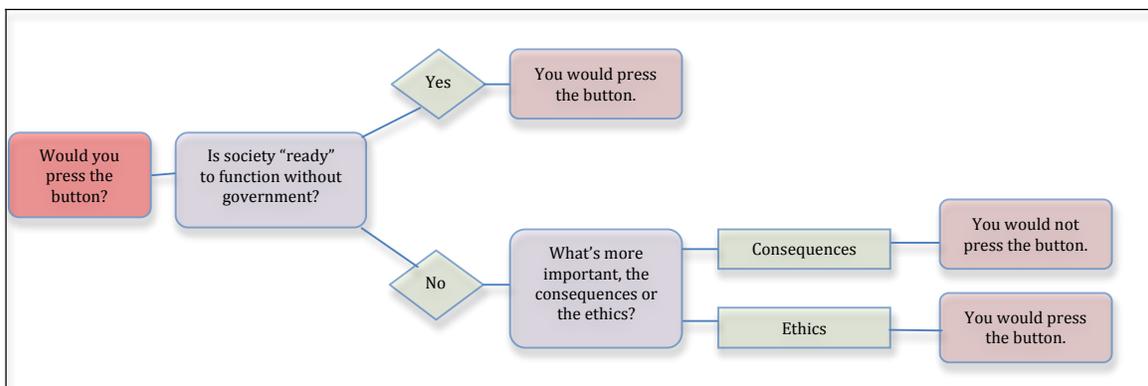
Leo Tolstoy outlines the following scenario in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Anatoliy chooses to live by what he considers the “Law of Christ”: he will never initiate violence and never contribute to violence. Knowing that the Tsar’s taxes fund war, Anatoliy abstains from paying them. State officials 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.<sup>1</sup>

Consider any government program that you strongly disapprove of. 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 whatever policy it is that you disapprove of. We all agree and disagree with different programs. The problem is that being forced to fund activities we disapprove of is built into the deepest fabric of how governments operate. As a result, virtually anyone who wishes to live a life of conviction and integrity must face being locked in a cage for years under subhuman conditions. For “tax evasion.”

Now consider a classic question: 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).<sup>2</sup>

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 United States? Who are the people that form the “human community” that constitutes our “state”?

Weber argues that in a modern state such as ours, the leaders in positions of power make up this human community.<sup>3</sup> So 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 on ... physical force” is utilized.

But upon closer inspection, Weber’s answer is entirely inadequate. 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 very real – legislative and executive power. If participation in directing the violence monopoly constitutes being part of the state, then *a majority of American 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 violence monopoly, we don’t find it in Weber’s political leaders.

Another way to think about this is to consider the United States of thirty years ago. Almost all political leaders of the time have been replaced. Would we say that the state today is a new state? Would we say that someone successfully “pressed the button,” ended the state, and a new one took its place? Of course not. The current state is a seamless continuation of the same we’ve had since the American Revolution, though all the political leaders have changed. If Weber’s definition were wholly appropriate, a new political leader would mean a new state, but this is clearly not how we think of the state.

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-determined programming.

Sure, there are special interests that arguably reap benefits from the state: politicians, corporations, minorities, etc. But whatever your view on the relative gains of these groups, it is clear that these groups do not *constitute* the state. They may or may not *use* it to their advantage, but they *are* not it.

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, laws and the Constitution are routinely ignored and sidestepped as part of the political process.

The only answer we are left with is that state is not a *physical thing*, but a *conceptual structure*. Though accurate, this answer is vague and wants specification.

What constitutes this structure? Where is this structure to be found? If our button is going to eradicate the state, it has to know where the state is. The state exists in the same place *all* concepts exist: in minds.

"The state" is in essence no more real than the idea that elevators are not places for conversation. It is a shared lens through which a critical mass of people perceives society. It is a *collective interpretive framework* (CIF) held so strongly and unanimously that it determines human behavior and social organization. Claiming monopoly over the use of force is a defining characteristic of the state, and its manifestations in physical reality constitute some of its other properties. But a particular CIF is what the state *is*.

This distinction might seem trivial, but it cannot be emphasized enough: 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 a critical mass of people neglected to send their children to public school, to pay their taxes, to wear their police uniforms, to appear for a summons, etc., *there is nothing "the state" could do*. 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 the CIF manifests at all.

### **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 the hypothetical and ask: how might the button work? 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. It is functioning within the statist CIF that makes society unfit to function without government in the first place.

Put another way: ending the state *is* the process of having society be ready to function without the state. When we are clear that “the state” is simply a 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 hold organized violence as a positive value should want to press the button. But let's not stop there. Now that we're on the same page, let's make that button.

### **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 a reasonable suggestion might be: the button should talk to people! The conversation could look something like this:

The Button: “Hey bro, the state is in our heads and we don't need it. It is an inherently violent arrangement, and it is possible for us to have everything we have and more *without* that violence. So stop believing in the state. What up, you with me?”

Well-Meaning Skeptic: “But who's gonna build the roads? And protect the poor? And ensure security from foreign invasion? And deliver mail? And...”

The Button: “[insert logical arguments]! [insert a million possible alternatives]! [insert persuasive statistics]!”

Well-Meaning Skeptic: “I don't know, button. It sounds good *in theory*. But it's not realistic.”

This kind of rational approach will do the button no good. 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.

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 removed from your eyes. 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.

Consider Anatoliy's case again. What would that scenario look like seen through a stateless CIF? It would have nothing to do with a "state," and require no statist CIF language like "police" or "taxes" to describe it. One stateless way of interpreting it might be as, "the actions of a very large organized crime syndicate." Or simply: "an odd pathological ritual in which some people participate."

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?

I likened the state to "the idea that elevators aren't 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 proposition that conversation shouldn't happen in elevators, so arguing it would be futile. A violent revolution against the elevator-suppression-powers-that-be would be even more ridiculous.



Marijuana is normal because enough people act like it is.

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 safe 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).<sup>4</sup> These markets successfully sidestep governments' efforts to supervise and regulate commerce.

Consider Bitcoin: one of the state's primary functions is control and tracking of currency. People who use Bitcoins literally 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. Again, not necessarily for activism. Just because they want drugs. And the state is just not part of the equation. Even when the government shut the website down, it was back up in a matter of weeks.<sup>5</sup> Just like that. What “state”?

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.<sup>6</sup> Now they're out there, for anyone with a 3-D printer to use. What's “the state” gonna do about it?

Consider [Detroit Threat Management](#): a private police and protection agency in Detroit. If there's anything the state claims monopoly over, it is policing. But in the face of the city government's incompetence, a private institution stepped in.

Consider that approximately 1 billion people worldwide live in squats.<sup>7</sup>

Consider that in 2011, 73% of all charitable contributions in the U.S. came from private individuals, totaling \$217.79 billion.<sup>8</sup>

Consider [The Seasteading Institute](#), which is working on building free, autonomous cities in the ocean.

Consider that as a result of online communication services, the United States Post Office is breathing its dying breaths.<sup>9</sup> These innovations didn't intentionally neuter the USPS – they simply didn't care about it; hardly noticed it.

Consider what the [Khan Academy](#) makes possible for education. Do we really expect that people will continue to send their children to public school when free and better alternatives become increasingly visible?

Consider the restaurant industry, which regularly pays employees cash. It is illegal yet everyone knows about it. Does anyone care? Consider how easily undocumented immigrants find work. Consider the widespread practice of marriage for papers. Consider illegal file sharing.

Consider every item on Jeffrey Tucker and Max Borders's incredible "[50 Ways to Leave Leviathan](#)," and a million more.

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

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

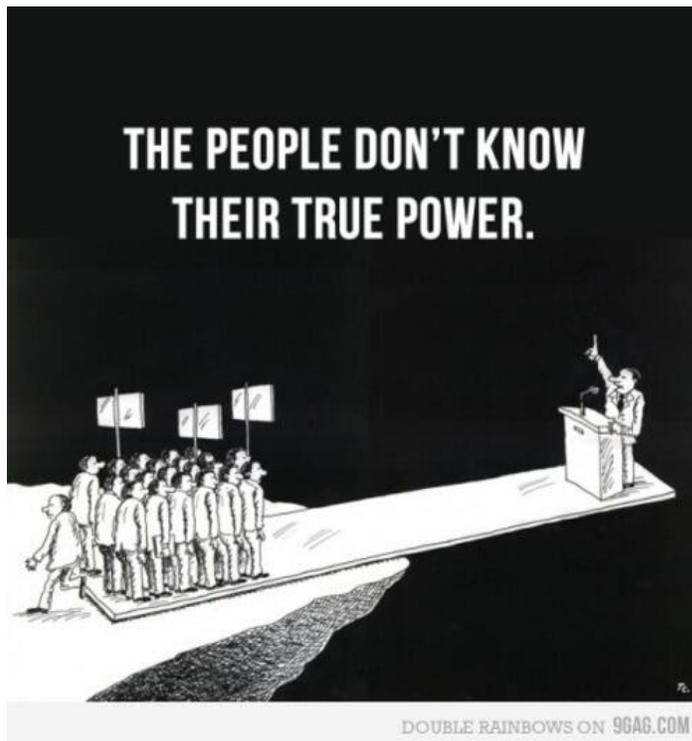
None of this requires convincing. Someone who regularly practices illegal file sharing interprets this sector of the world statelessly, even if she "believes" in the state. By spreading the practice of illegal file sharing, she contributes much more to the button than anything she could say if she were "converted." 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 persuasive argument becomes 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.

## **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 freedom movement's growth mechanism is established and experiencing inevitable exponential expansion. In other words, we have already reached the preliminary critical mass necessary to ensure that we eventually reach absolute critical mass. Until absolute critical mass, we just live on outside the state, inadvertently 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 button.

## Works Cited

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), <http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/dss/Weber/polvoc.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, "Politics as a Vocation."

<sup>4</sup> 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](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/28/black_market_global_economy).

<sup>5</sup> Devin Coldewey, "Silk Road 2.0 rises from the ashes – with improvements," *NBC News*, November 6, 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/technology/silk-road-2-0-rises-ashes-improvements-8C11545412>.

<sup>6</sup> "3-D printed gun blueprints pulled from Internet, at request of State Department," *CBS News*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/3d-printed-gun-blueprints-pulled-from-internet-at-request-of-state-department/>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> "Charitable Giving Statistics," *National Philanthropic Trust*, 2013, <http://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics>.

<sup>9</sup> 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>.