**On Technology and Imperialism**

Human rights violations are commonly associated with underdeveloped or third world countries. Be it political instability or fragile economy, the precarious position in which many countries find themselves in is ripe for abuse. Rights, law, economy and stability all depend on an existing structure by which to be exercised, enforced and respected: if such structure is weak, all else will be weak as well. Postcolonial, war-ridden, poor and small countries all suffer from this (weak structures), in way or another. These are also all descriptions that we don’t associate with developed or first world countries. Places such as Germany, UK, France and US are powerful figures in international relationships, and are usually quoted as models to follow, from everything to economy and education to urbanization and laws.

The advancement of technology is associated with the advancement of humankind, with good reason. It is because of finding more efficient and better ways to perform a task that we evolved; such achievements are of course unique to humans in that they depend on our intelligence and sapience to be created. Traditionally, technology has been synonymous with development, and with it, extended survival: pasteurization, vaccines, penicillin, and cryptography are among some of the creations of a development, with remarkable results in life expectancy, medicine and communications (PEAPT, 2013). Traditionally, as well, technological advancements have been in service of the state - which is in service of its people - in times of war (Booth, 2013). WWI and WWII saw a tremendous increase in production of technological advancements in a diversity of fields: warfare, communications, medicine, food production, manufacturing, material science and computer science are amongst the most prominent fields that were heavily promoted in wartime in the pursuit of national defense.

It is obvious that the world powers would be interested in developing technologies for their defense if they are the ones whose safety depended upon it. But it becomes a full circle when said countries are also seen as role models because of their technologies, ignoring the reason these came to be: superiority, advantage and longevity. In times were wars are gone, the development of new technology has decreased from an exponential growth to a linear one, as there is no real need to develop new things (Monge, n.d.). Once crises were done, the heavy lifting came to the hands of the private sector, when governments realized that there was no justification for them to invest so much in creating material they potentially don’t need. Resorting to outsource technological development is a smart move from governments, as they can depend on companies to deliver quality products while not minding all the details (Booth, 2013).

On a wider lens and following logical steps: technological prowess is equated with economic stability, which is then related to political and ideological superiority. Technology has been traditionally produced in times of war - in particular, World Wars - which have engaged world powers; by result, world powers are leaders in advancement. Looking at the countries that remain in the lead after 20th century wars (WWI, WWII, Cold War), we have the US and UK as prime examples, the birthplaces of capitalism. Between the 16th and 19th century, the UK (Great Britain) participated in imperialism, being the country with the most off-seas territories; after the fall of the Spanish empire in 1820 and with the growth of the US both in territory and in power, both countries participated in a ‘new imperialism’, characterized both by off-seas territory acquisition (in Africa, Central America and Asia) and particularly, building their empires with new technological advances and developments: (Gilmartin, 2009), (Booth, 2013)

*“The Eurocentric (or Westcentric) idea that conceptualizes Europe and North America as modern has substantially reinforced the assumption that the West constitutes the source of modernity that eventually went global (Bhambra, 2007).”* (Wilkens, 2017)

This becomes a self-fulling prophecy, in that a Westcentric approach to international relationships has made underdeveloped countries follow Western ideals, because they are more powerful, because they have better technology, because they are successful, which in a misguided analysis, proves that they are better and so should be followed. This is reinforced in countries where there is history of interventionism and meddling of some kind: in Latin America, for example, US interference created a dependence on North America which, when deprived, created a power vacuum that created a plethora of issues, namely, weak government and civil structures.

*“The relationship between civil society and the state, which was seen as naturally given in Europe, did not correlate with indigenous imaginations nor had the colonial state tried to account for them in the creation of these new structures. Indigenous people were placed into a state of perpetual unfreedom, excluded from rights in which the created state became a structure of dominance (Sen, 2002; Halliday, 2005; Hinnebusch, 2013).”* (Wilkens, 2017)

It is ironic that the same countries whose position and/or identity has been lauded as role models, be it in international relationships, politics, economy or law, are at the core of what caused some or all the issues in other less powerful countries that cascaded into deeper human rights violations. But, considering the clear power imbalance between them and the deep societal resentment and conflict born out of the structural separation of the powerful and powerless, it makes sense see the powerful as ‘better’:

*“(...) a central aspect of postcolonial studies is the critical reflection of discursive productions of truth. Said offers an analysis of how hegemonic discourses within and beyond academia have constituted a barbaric and inferior other, the Oriental, in opposition to a modern, rational, and superior Europe and North America. This binary production based on “the ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’” (Said, 1978, p. 1) exemplifies how knowing turns into a mode of domination through the construction of the “other.” This relationship of power is reproduced through the different institutions and cultural productions of the West, which constructs a suitable Orient that confirms Eurocentric narratives of superiority.”* (Wilkens, 2017)

Wilkens and Said talk about the Oriental in clear differentiation from the Occident and Westcentrism, but it is important to note that this “otherness” is not exclusive to the Orient (Eurasia), but rather to anything that is not traditionally Occidental, namely, not part of North America (specifically, US or Canada, but not Mexico) or Western Europe. While Central and South America are also considered to follow Western ideology and certainly are part of the geographical Occident, the power imbalance between North and Central/South America leaves them out of the core Westcentric countries.

The power imbalance is exacerbated by the dependence of technology. Where it has become intrinsically linked to capitalism and the private industry, it has also shifted its purpose of advancing humankind to serving corporate overlords: developments are not done out of utility or improvement but rather out of profitability, investigation is only promoted if it will serve an economic purpose, and anything that does not fall in that scope has a hard to near impossible chance of being funded (Mejia, 2004). It is no secret that the scientific fields that are not in service of a private company have little to no chance to get funded. A known case in the last years is the positions of NASA vs SpaceX: NASA has had its funding cut time and time again, and so their investigations are very limited, whereas SpaceX, a private company, with corporate investors and clear economic goals (see, for example, the recent pre-sale of tickets for a ride in a moon-destined rocket). Another more alarming example is the lack of investigation and development of renewable energy resources, done in clear service of the interest of oil conglomerates.

Western culture is based in technological development as the basic cultural-politic option, by which it become a means of control, serving the interests of its creators (Booth, 2013). Where traditionally technology was done almost exclusively by the state - and so the government and its laws where the cultural-politic basis - the extensive dependency on companies has made capitalism and economy a core aspect of control (Crespo, 2008). Imperialism is no longer just the extension of territory, but rather, the extension of influence, in the manner of dependency:

*“In its classical use, imperialism is understood as a policy by a nation to extend its sovereign power and control over another nation and its territory. Empires have been described as the historical products of “successful” imperialist policies (compare Hobson, 1902; Young, 2001; Lenin, 2010). However, in the wake of the Cold War and the changing status of sovereign states in the context of globalization, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have famously presented a contemporary reading of empire. A central observation is that today’s power structures are de-centered and de-territorialized. In contrast to the idea of a nation-state leading an empire, they identify processes unfolding with global capitalism as the source of power (Hardt & Negri, 2000).”* (Wilkens, 2017)

The ever-growing field of computer science and related digital fields has captured the attention of companies and governments alike by the immensity of opportunities it creates in minimizing costs, maximizing impacts and creating plausible deniability in anything done through it by the inherent anonymization of dehumanizing digital communication through identity obscurity. This last point is what makes it so attractive as a warfare method: ‘cyberwarfare’ has been in steady increase over the past 10 years, reaching international fame with the 2016 election meddling by Russia in the United States. The state comes back into developing technology because, once again, it needs it: battles and wars are now fought over access and information, in both offense and defense, giving rise to psychological warfare in the manner of misinformation, infiltration and manipulation. These concepts are well-known, researched and exploited in the Information Security field; the national interest in the “talent shortage” in InfoSec comes precisely out of the need for technical skills for national defense.

Centering this same topic around civilians comes the subject of surveillance. Where typically surveillance has been seen in dictatorships and non-democratic or authoritative governments - such as Nazi Germany, USSR, Mussolini’s Italy, Pinochet’s Cline, among others - the increasing interest of surveilling normal, law-abiding citizens is entirely new, concerning, and a clear violation of human rights - specifically, the right to privacy (Article 8 of UDHR). In 2012, Edward Snowden revealed the PRISM program by the NSA where metadata of any and all information available on anyone was gathered, both from US citizens and foreigners, in US land and otherwise (Greenwald, 2013). The outcry that followed banned the program and led to regularization of the practices done by the NSA after being taken to court several times (EFF, n.d.) but more importantly it served as a wake-up call for everyone who uses some sort of digital tool: you are being watched, you are being monitored, everything you do can and will be used against you. Where there are clear laws for protecting the privacy of citizens when it comes to physical spaces or analog communications, there is no equivalent for the newer digital devices, protocols and services. Engineers and developers have made a point towards advocating for security, but it is only after several data breaches and massive economic losses to their companies that corporate and national interest to information security has begun.

In September 13 of 2018, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the UK’s GCHQ data gathering program - which at this point has obscurely collected information over more than 17 years - was in violation of Human Rights (Bowcott, 2018). While their data gathering practices were much more concerning than the NSA’s - gathering both data and metadata - the fact remains that unjustified surveillance is a clear violation of rights, universal, constitutional, or otherwise (Amnesty International UK, 2018). Laws have not yet adapted to the new reality and endless possibilities that digital technology offer, and while there are clear attempts to correct this, movement is slow as surveillance benefits the state. Governments will always go up until the line of what is legally admissible, and so long as it can keep that line thin, it won’t attempt to correct what would otherwise limit it, even if needed so.

The concerning implications of the world’s leading nations doing this is the precedent it sets. First, by admitting gathering information from international and external sources, countries admit to espionage, which might or might not happen with the spied state knowing about it. This can cause an international political incident. Second, the routine and normalized “do, then ask” approach to law enforcement in warrantless searches and detainment/investigation without proper cause - issues that have been plaguing the US for decades against minorities - have clearly been translated into the same behaviors, but online, where there is no “law” that forbids it. In effect, actions that when taken by individuals are clearly illegal by breaching private property and its equivalent (private servers, private networks, private computers, etc.) are not sanctioned when persecuted by the state. This is the thought behind the EFF’s motto “NSA spying is illegal”: spying is spying, not matter who does it (EFF, n.d.).

But more than anything, it is the example it sets for other countries. If the established world powers regularly violate human rights, what stops other smaller, less powerful, less structured countries from doing the same? Where in the past world powers have used their own ideologies and practices as evidence of a moral superiority, there is nothing to be used now as defense for their actions. The thin excuses of national defense and the “War on Terror” that created such normalized dystopia are not sustainable when under scrutiny, which justified as national sovereignty, and any sort of attempt towards accountability is halted as it can “jeopardize” the nation’s security. A clear example of this was Belgium’s inquiry to the GCHQ on the credible claims that this institution had breached Belgacom and had been spying on Belgium; the response of the UK institution, “The United Kingdom believes that this could jeopardize our sovereignty, security and public order”, has been widely criticized and thought to be a diplomatic incident (Boffey, 2018).

A country doesn’t need to have any major crisis going on to violate human rights, nor does it need to be an underdeveloped country or otherwise conflicted. Demonstrated by mass surveillance, which has been traditionally used in countries with authoritarian regimes or at war, the US and UK and their partners in the Five Eyes Program (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, US) have consistently and pervasively engaged in human rights violation by collecting information without proper cause, consent or knowledge of its civilians. “Guilty until proven innocent”, a commonly used reverse of the law ideal of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ to mock the systematic injustice of the law enforcement departments, might not be as accurate anywhere else as it is here.

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