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Félix Weygand

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The State and “the Information Society”:

25 years of experts’ reports

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Biography:

Félix WEYGAND was born in 1959. After 20 years of professional experience in telecommunications and ICT companies, he began research on politics and ICTs for the Media, Information and Knowledge Research Laboratory of the Mediterranean University at Marseille. This research led to a doctorate in Information and Communication Sciences, which he was awarded in November 2003. Félix WEYGAND gives classes at the School of Journalism and Communication at Marseille and the School for Advanced Internet Applications. He has also been elected delegate for information technologies to the Conseil Général des Bouches du Rhône.

Introduction: what the experts have to say

The advent of the “information society” is related to the free-market globalisation of economies. Whether encouraged or unwelcome, these are processes whereby states lose part of their power. As a result, the highest authorities have continually sought the opinion of experts for over 25 years in an attempt to understand the “Information Society” and to define the public sector’s role. We have chosen to present six texts that form part of this consultation process.

1. 1978: the computerisation of society

In response to the questions raised by what is referred to as the crisis at the time, the Nora-Minc report replies that, “the growing computerization of society lies at the heart of the crisis. It may aggravate or help to resolve it.” [Nora-Minc, p.9].

This text already contains all of the problematic issues raised by our enquiry today:

- The realisation that free-market globalisation stems from the nascent “information society” that is going to extend beyond the rationale of nation states.
- The description of the risk of this policy losing ground if the institutional structures appropriate to a global information society are not developed.
- The affirmation of the need for new forms of public sector regulation intermediating between political power and market and social forces.
- The call for State reform through the voluntarist development of what is now called e-government.

Experts do not doubt the State’s ability to voluntarily seize upon these questions and deal with them through leadership. They even indicate that this transformation will require a voluntary limitation on the exercise of power, ‘The State cannot impose change, it can only create the conditions in which change is possible. Through the institutional shake-up that it causes, effectively applied computerisation may be the driver of this change.’ [Nora-Minc, p.107]. Computerisation means that civil society can have a direct impact on itself without the mediation of politics. Paradoxically, several of the topics dealt with are treated in a manner that seems to go against the wish to devolve political power.

The computerisation of society stems from the convergence of information technology and telecommunications. The authors invent the neologism *telematic* to give an idea of this process

and describe a dual risk: a loss of national independence and a loss of State power with regard to companies. In view of this risk, France needs to reorganise this area under the leadership of a powerful ministry of communications; given this strong base, it subsequently needs to initiate an “international telecommunications group” with other states. [Nora-Minc, p.75].

We consequently saw a lack of global and political response to the global information society from this period onwards. The free-market choice, which is already at work in this process, threatens policies themselves. “The free-market approach tends to confuse history and economic laws. Policies (...) vanish and become less the arena of explicit and carefully considered action and more the domain of the unsaid.” [Nora-Minc, p.119]

The “Information Society” project may correspond to this risk, as it does to the parallel risk of an “Orwellian State.” Such a society does not govern itself based on the past, it regulates itself.

Regulation designates the process of interaction between civil society, State and market and is structured thanks to the information that enables the whole to function. The report describes various levels of regulation: the ruling level operated by the State, which co-ordinates or acts directly, the market level, “based on the pricing system, (...) where the spontaneous desires of groups are expressed and arbitrated, insofar as they are related to goods and are quantifiable,” and the level of “information agora” where “relational and cultural projects” spontaneously come into contact. [Nora-Minc, p.124 and 125]

Although it may be called upon to relinquish some of its prerogatives, the State is needed to lead the way and set an example initially by applying the computerisation process to itself: e-government as a tool of State reform is already recommended, while concern is expressed regarding the threatened freeze that its failure would imply. As far as this prophetic launch is concerned, the report foresees the need for a delegation for government reform and ad hoc inter-ministerial committee meetings, yet the first such meeting was only to take place twenty years later.

1980s

Faced with these opportunities and risks, the State was to react with partial success during the years that followed in keeping with the French tradition of large *Saint-Simonist* projects and industrial policies.

Thanks to the commitment of the telecommunications authorities based on innovation by the CHET teams of Lannion, the Telephone Upgrading Plan succeeded in giving the country a

modern and high-performance digitised network. The services were marketed by a State monopoly according to rules of pricing standardisation that reflected a political rationale of regional planning. Despite the overall failure of the *Cable Plan*, aimed at continuing this effort by giving major agglomerations broadband fibre optic networks, the development of Minitel, both technically and in terms of its economic model, was to crown the success of the telephone network. At the beginning of the 1990s France took its place as a nation that performed particularly well both technically and industrially, having conceived and set up an original model for marketing the new services engendered by the convergence of information technology and telecommunications.

While the turnaround of liberalising and dismantling monopolies was made a decade previously across the Channel and the Atlantic, an alternative model was to grow up in France. It is founded on a purely political rationale of regional planning, as well as voluntarist technological and industrial development and based on commissions and public monopolies. The Théry report offered the most complete theoretical overview of this concept, which was also to be the last of its kind.

2. 1994: information highways

The commissioning of the Théry report on information highways was prompted by questions regarding the possible applications of information technology by citizens: “In this context I would particularly like you to look at the way in which information highways could contribute to projects of general interest such as regional planning, education, training, research, culture, national health and urban policies.”[Théry, p.61]. The expert is concerned by issues that are quite clearly somewhat different:

- The topic of information highways is crucial and strategic, political interest in this issue was signalled in the USA, but the internet model developing there cannot live up to such a challenge because it does not incorporate forms of payment for services.
- The growth of *information highways* in France is a vast process, which in itself should create jobs, as well as technological and industrial growth. This huge process should take over from the modernisation of the telephone network.
- In order to achieve this, the model of telephone network digitisation needs to be reproduced in terms of infrastructure deployment and the economic model of Minitel needs to be applied

to payment for content services. The information highways are only a new stage in the development of France Telecom's network. At this stage fibre optic technology will replace the local loop and copper pairs, the videophone will replace the telephone and multimedia content will replace Minitel's teletext.

- The rest: content, uses, services, in short everything referred to in this report as, "the risks and opportunities for society" will be on achieved when we have strong infrastructure and the right economic model. Based on a rationale of industrial policies, the State should offer the appropriate tools to society, which will then develop as expected.

France Telecom can be the only player with this ambition that the State should be involved in, by offering financial support and, above all, by not paralysing it with ill-timed de-regulation. "To imagine that the deployment of information highways in France can take place without a major strategic initiative on the part of France Telecom could be a serious error of judgement." [Théry, p.110]

Seen in this light, it was possible to carry out this major process at a reasonable cost. In order to replace copper wires with fibre optic technology, annual investments had to rise from FF5 billion to FF10 billion, representing a total of between FF150 billion and FF200 billion over 20 years. The added value expected from the development of services alone should be around triple this amount [Théry, p. 102] and, as well as maintaining staffing levels at France Telecom, it should facilitate the transition to a telecommunications and services sector in which employment should soar from 300,000 jobs to 600,000 in 2005 [Théry, p.57].

This text is the last presentation of an argument that has since been abandoned: namely that the sovereign decides based on the public's best interest and, through a major equipment plan, organises society by giving it a framework for growth. Almost nothing was retained from the Théry report other than its title, while the question of French-style information highways was not taken any further.

3. 1996: the "information society" networks

Less than two years later the question of major public infrastructure plans, the liberalisation of the sector under consideration and alternatives to the internet model were swept aside. The Miléo report contains the first comments published by experts after the commercial democratisation of the internet and the Telecommunications Act of July 26th 1996. This text no longer refers to a

regulatory State because the proliferation and speed of innovation no longer makes it possible to interpret changes clearly enough to commit public powers to weighty and ambitious projects. Competition is the best form of adaptation that society can opt for in view of these changes. It is consequently worth liberalising society, with globalisation already making purely national initiatives ineffective.

While these three arguments are accepted, there are still mitigated feelings regarding the solidity of the basis for these choices. The preface to the report presents the new doctrine while leaving policy questions open at the same time:

Should the scale of market regulatory authorities be transferred from a regional and national level to a European and global level? Should priority be given to independent regulatory commissions within ministries, to judges over civil servants and politicians? The main overall conclusion of the research(...) was to advocate liberalisation processes adapted to the French context. [Miléo, p.14 and 15]

However, a closer look reveals that the coherence of the doctrine is flawed:

While the discourse on information highways insists on the fact that these should be accessible to all in a logic of universal access (...) it affirms that the construction of such networks can only be carried out at the initiative of the private sector in a context of total competition.

Some players, particularly in the industrial world, will question the coherence of these two objectives and above all, the regulatory framework allowing them to be achieved simultaneously (...) Some industrialists have expressed their scepticism regarding the ability of this regulatory schema, seen as excessively liberal (...), to stimulate the accelerated growth of multimedia services and information highways. [Miléo, p.122 to 124]

In return for this perplexed stance, the voluntarist discourse on State reform is fleshed out. In the section *The role of the State at a crossroads* in the chapter entitled *What sort of public policy?* the report claims that the State has to familiarise citizens with the uses of information technology and equip itself with such technologies in order to benefit from them not only to improve public services, but also to rejuvenate its image as, “the low-level of computerisation of public services is damaging their effectiveness in terms of their internal development and relations between the authorities and citizens.” [Miléo, p.111]

This reflection turns out to be fruitful, as the subject of State modernisation via the Internet is to assume increasing importance.

4. 1997: the internet - a real challenge for France

As the result of a project created by the prime minister, this report tells us that it identifies “concrete measures for building the French information society,” it specifies that the internet is an “exceptional tool” for “a better quality of life” and for “a fresh economic upturn” that “serves French culture.” The question is no longer whether the “Information Society” is in the process of taking root, the challenge for France is to gain a better position in this society to, “make our country a global showcase in the use of new technologies in the year 2000” [Martin-Lalande p.3]. To this end, the development of a “true IT and networking culture” is presented as a pressing obligation for any government.

The section devoted to this question opens with an indictment: the State is not fulfilling its role in providing information, access to public services still caters to much for the needs of these services and not enough for requests from the public, while administrative procedures have transformed the user into a translator of complex texts and not the beneficiary of simple solutions. Given these dysfunctions, “citizens have the right to better service on the part of the State and new technologies will make it possible to achieve this rapidly.” To do this, the report indicates two objectives: “New information and communication technologies should be (...) a pivot for the modernisation of the State. (...) The State has to network its authorities, namely to switch from computerised management to computerised communications. The better its communication is, the better decisions will be.” [Martin-Lalande, p.21 and 22].

The State is obliged to set an example to society, now while these proposals fully evoke the anticipated advantages of networking, the report’s evaluation of the authorities’ capacity to implement such proposals is more conservative. The report concludes that the State has to apply a strong voluntarist policy in pursuing reforms if it wishes to be successful.

A new step forwards is taken based on the extensive research done by Jean Paul Baquiast, for whom, “the Information Society is in the process of changing the State.”

5. 1998: the internet’s contribution to modernising the running of State

The Secretary General of the Inter-ministerial committee for information technology and government bureaucracy from 1984 to 1995, Jean-Paul Baquiast, is a fervent supporter of the computerisation of government and its reform through the internet.

In view of free-market liberalisation, the “Information Society” needs States, because a society deprived of efficient authorities resulting from a lost opportunity to change, runs serious risks:

Neither our global society, nor societies that remain national or regional, can do without a public authority (...) In the era of globalisation and the virtualisation of many activities, we cannot not stop inventing and introducing public service networks and content through international negotiations whereby ordinary citizens and major economic players can collaborate. [Baquiast, 1.1.5]

Sub-titled *Administration 1998-2001*, the programme put forward is a truly Herculean task with deadlines are fixed to encompass the IT shake-up caused by the year 2000 and the switch to the Euro. It aims to save the State by modernising it through far-reaching changes: “As far as government is concerned it should continue to offer and above all to adopt a new pace, by prioritising reactivity. Internet means speed and doing things quickly these days (...) means doing them well.” [Baquiast, 1.1.4]

Such a change is meaningless in terms of types of organisation based on cooperative work in a network, it involves a *re-engineering* of French administration, which has a reputation for reluctance to change. It must consequently enjoy a sustained political drive: the prime minister should play a leading role, a minister for State reform should be his “armed wing,” frequent Inter-ministerial Committees on the Information Society, like the first Committee that approved the PAGSI (Programme d'Action Gouvernemental pour la Société de l'Inform@tion) at the beginning of 1998, should orchestrate this change. Lastly, each ministry is called upon to conceive and set up, “an inter-department programme for the switch to the information society” [Baquiast, 2.3.1].

All of the lower levels of government are asked to implement new working methods and to stimulate creative thinking on the subject by making ample use of electronic forums to accelerate debate and the proliferation of initiatives. “From disorder, conflicts, in short from creativity, initiatives will certainly emerge. However, that will only frighten the bureaucrats, if there are any left.” [Baquiast, 2.2].

If we are to believe the disastrous evaluation of sociological resistance to these changes by civil servants presented by the La Coste report four years later, there must still be some bureaucrats left.

6. 2003: the hyper-republic

In September 2002 the Secretary of State for State reform ordered an audit of the, “technical, legal and sociological barriers confronting users and suggestions for solutions in terms of State reform” [de La Coste, letter by H.Plagnol].

Four months later the author directly rephrases this question, “any problem that is supposedly legal or technical (...) is just a mask for a sociological problem, which is simply due to antagonism between the French administrative tradition and the new network culture.” [de La Coste, p.6]

The minister’s question, as well as its treatment by the expert, consequently mark a new stage in a society that has already been largely conquered by use of the internet, the State is likely to become a sort of brake, with authorities that are sociologically antagonistic to the advent of the “Information Society.”

In the main body of the report the author evaluates the development of e-government. He concludes that, behind the sometimes impressive figures, the rigidity of French administration has succeeded in migrating from paper to electronic government. There are at least 394 different web sites ending in *gouv.fr*, plus another 4,500 sites run by local communities, but real online procedures are rare: 26 for the State and 43 for local communities, while the paper system has been transferred online without modification: 1,673 *Cerfa* forms were consequently turned into 1,274 PDF forms. [de La Coste, p.48].

As it will prove impossible to progress given the sociological rigidity of the administration, the author resolves the problem by creating, “an interface of electronic competencies” which should slide between users and the rigidity and fragmentation of the traditional running of the administration, “a *middle office* of specialists qualified in IT” [de La Coste p.48].

Although the practical evaluation drawn up by this report is critical, it does not translate into a catastrophic situation, since the author offers a solution to the main problem that he describes.

The conclusion refers back to the alarmist statements made in the first pages of the report:

With e-administration and e-democracy we are witnessing a historic process, similar to that of the transition from the feudal to the modern State. We are switching to the networked State. If the French State is able to decompartmentalize its administration and really function via a network, and if European States themselves are able to form “a network of States in a network,” they should have no problems safeguarding and reinforcing their own particular value system (...). Should the opposite occur, it is not inconceivable that the Orwellian nightmare may become a reality, although not in the way

that its author imagined. For large corporations that hold the keys to information technologies will not hesitate in decompartmentalizing and replacing the State in assimilating the personal information that falls into their possession and they will destroy the derisory legal barriers that the State tries erect in opposition, especially in France. Big Brother, far from being head of State, will be its worst enemy. [de La Coste, p. 69 and 70]

Conclusion

As we have seen, research carried out in 1978 already pinpointed the main problems with perceptiveness and the reference points for analysis have not changed over time. The strictly political rationale has been trapped between the pincers of two symmetrical effects of the advent of the “Information Society.” On the one hand, economic globalisation and liberalization facilitate the formation of players that are dangerously powerful to States, which move according to market forces and technical and economic performance in a global economic arena, namely the IT and telecommunications multi-nationals. On the other hand, society is avidly seizing new opportunities for autonomy and individual creativity, new communication values and new consumer uses made available by goods and services offered by companies.

In view of these developments, States need to take up the challenge of performance by applying the technological and organisational innovations engendered by the hybridisation of information technology and telecommunications to their own reforms. States also need to re-establish their relation to society by becoming more regulatory, more liberalizing and more exemplary in areas where they previously only led and governed. The search for the public’s best interest, the ultimate definition of politics, in the end no longer seems possible through purely political action. The boom in innovations since the 1970s has not only been seen in information technologies, but the growth of these technologies, the place they have assumed both as an industrial reality and in the collective imagination and public speeches, make them both the tool and the symbol of these changes.

For France the period of the 1990s marks a break: prior to the Gérard Théry report, the French *Saint-Simonist* model of a society supported by an industrial policy of large national projects was always the main dogma of the public elite. The advent of commercial internet and the transformation of the liberal standards underlying European integration into national law were to sweep away this doctrine in little over a year.

However, this new context does not seem to satisfy anybody: in the 25 years that separate the Nora-Minc and the de La Coste reports, the spectre of Orwell’s 1984 characterises the problem of

the State and the “information society” from start to finish in the eyes of experts. As far as limiting the State’s role to liberate civil society is concerned, there are doubts regarding the State’s ability to defend itself against the market forces that it has largely liberated. It is the other risk evoked in 1978 that seems more serious in the end, namely the obliteration of politics by the combined effects of liberalization, globalisation and the advent of the “Information Society.” Given due warning, did the State fail to believe its experts or did it simply fail to understand them?

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