Modern Gods and Central Machinery

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Author's Note:

"Modern Gods and Central Machinery" is a short story seeking to explore some of the concepts touched upon within liberal radicalism. It places an emphasis on the overarching themes of centralization and decentralization and focuses in particular on the concept of data as labor. The societies seen in the story's vignettes attempt to illustrate primarily a hyper-centralized post-market society, enabled by an all-powerful machine and fueled by data generated by the society's population, as well as a society built upon decentralization. The story takes metaphors used to describe markets and the allocations of goods and services, as well as concepts relating to labor and property, and explores them literally through the alternative history of these centralized and decentralized societies. The story does not take an explicit normative stance on any of these ideas or societal designs; instead, it presents only a fictional illustration of centralization, decentralization, and the role data and questions of societal organization play in the developing of these societies.

References (works that inspired the original concept of the story):

Lange, Oskar. "The Computer and the Market". Accessed 17 November 2018.
    http://econc10.bu.edu/economic_systems/Theory/NonMarx_Socialism/Soc_Contraversy/l
    an ge_computer_and_the_market.htm.

Posner, Eric, and Glen Weyl. *Radical Markets*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

"Brought to you by OSKAR – let us decide for you". The ubiquitous slogan was emblazoned on the side of the small, cubic aircraft with the trademark yellow smile in place of the O. The drone raps its aluminum arm against the steel door with three precise strokes, each half a second apart, as it hovers with the brown cardboard box in its grips. Three men dressed in nondescript blue-gray hoodies, jeans, and sneakers pass the drone on the sidewalk as they walk briskly from the direction of the city center, likely having just finished up a shift at the Mine. The drone waits a further 20 seconds, as scripted, before raising its arm again for a second set of three taps on the door. Still no answer.

The drone begins to execute its no-response protocol, submitting a query to the OSKAR repository for the package recipient's personhood dashboard. The information is transmitted to the drone almost instantly. Andrew Ericson, 26 years old, employed by the Mine as a senior Processor. The drone examines his current token price and scans for any recent volatility, finding only a decent price with a steady upward trajectory typical of those in this neighborhood. Finding this adequate token price, the drone is permitted to knock one final time before leaving with the package and enacting a no-show penalty short to Ericson's token price. As it raises its metal arm again, the door suddenly swings open.

Andrew stands there, slightly frazzled, wearing a generic tailored grey shirt and navy-blue pants. "Sorry, sorry – I must have fallen asleep, I was working some more intense simulations at the Mine today." The drone, completely unresponsive as it is a machine, extends its arms towards Andrew and places the package in his hands. As soon as he receives the package, which is significantly heavier than its cubic foot volume would suggest, the drone speeds away back towards its hive on the city outskirts.

Andrew shuts the door and walks back into his home. He places the package on the table and begins to open it with a knife, knowing exactly that it would be this week's groceries. The quality of groceries Andrew has been receiving over the last few years has increased significantly, and he believes in all honesty that it is one of the most overlooked parts of improving your token price. He opens the box fully. Inside, all the perishable goods he needed restocked were packed tightly, with every modicum of space filled to optimize for packaging efficiency. He takes them towards the kitchen and begins to place them in his shelves.

Still not fully awake from his earlier nap that the drone had interrupted, Andrew decides to go for a coffee and a walk. Checking the box again, he finds one iced bottled coffee there, somehow still chilled despite the lack of ice in the box. Of course OSKAR would have anticipated that he would need this coffee. Ever since he was promoted at the Mine and began to work in more advance simulations and generating more valuable data for OSKAR, Andrew had noticed that his needs – and preferences, as he always likes his coffee iced – would be anticipated with far greater frequency and accuracy. He was not sure whether this change was because of the increase in his token price, which increased the quality of the goods and services he was getting overall, or because he was just generating more data at the Mine these days. Either way, it was a welcome improvement. Andrew grabs the coffee from the box, laces up a pair of casual gray running shoes, and heads out the door.

Once outside, Andrew takes a left turn at the corner and continues walking down his block. He is just coming up on two years since he first moved to this this neighborhood, which he did as soon as he crossed the necessary token price threshold for OSKAR to grant him an apartment here on the first floor of a three-story townhouse. He really liked this area – it was

clean, walking distance to the Mine, and mostly populated with other young, upwardly mobile

Mine workers generating relatively more valuable data. To Andrew, it was, in a word, nice.

As he crossed the third street on his walk and rounded the next corner, he notices a pile of

trash bags, about waist high, sitting on the sidewalk. Strange, he thinks. There were never trash

bags sitting on the side of the road, since OSKAR arranges for near instantaneous trash pickup in

this district. Its models for anticipating waste output in the higher order districts are incredibly

accurate, and the data generated by - and consequently token prices of – these residents usually

ranks them fairly high on the priority list of executing on these models. As such, there was

almost no chance of there being trash bags simply laying on the sidewalk at this time unless

OSKAR was being updated, and the next public holiday wasn't for another 3 months. Andrew

approaches the trash, taking his phone from his pocket as he walks to call in the trash pickup –

this counts as both off-the-clock and situational data generation, which means it could probably

boost his token price by a cent or two.

Just as he was enjoying this extra little bonus his early evening walk had brought him,

Andrew is suddenly startled by what appeared to be some movement of the pile of trash. He

pauses, thinking he might be imagining it or that he is still groggy from his nap. As the trash pile

seemed to move again, Andrew realizes it was not the trash moving, but rather something or

some*one* inside it. Curious, Andrew bends down and prods a trash bag.

"Fight me!" A young woman, appearing slightly older than Andrew himself, suddenly

pops out from the trash pile. She crouches on the ground, dressed in all white robes, dirtied by

the trash she had been laying in, that contrasted starkly with the blue-grey ensemble of Andrew

and almost everyone else in this neighborhood. As she observes the startled look on Andrew's

face and his clothing that indicated he was in no way a trash collector, her demeanor softens.

"Oh, I'm so sorry – I thought you were the trash collector. They keep trying to move me off this sidewalk, and being aggressive is a good way to get them to short my token price" she explains.

"Oh I – no I just thought I'd call in the trash. It's usually picked up almost immediately."

"Why would you do that?" replies the woman, as if it were not obvious.

"Because… there's a token bonus for it? Just thought it would be useful…"

"Oh pshhh! Token price yuppie. What good is that if other people, if *machines*, own most of your tokens anyway?"

"Oh I don't know, maybe having better things, better services, a better life?" responds Andrew, both incredulously and now a little offended. "You should talk – look at you, you're lying in a trash pile! How are you even here? I thought there weren't any homeless in this area. Don't OSKAR personnel move all of you to the outer districts?"

"Woah, slow down there, Questions. That was a lot all at once. I'm not homeless though – well, I am, but it's fine, I'm doing it on purpose. Anyway, that token stuff doesn't matter anyway, all it does is keep people working for those machines and giving them data to make them stronger."

"Yeah, so OSKAR can be better for us! Why am I even explaining this to you, this is pointless. And what do you mean you're doing it on purpose? You're clearly homeless and hungry, that can't be on purpose. Whatever, this is a waste of time. I'm going home," says Andrew, turning towards the direction he came and starting to cross the street.

"Wait wait!" yells the woman. "You're right. I am homeless and hungry, and my token price is down to the point where I don't receive goods anymore and can't make discretionary transactions either. You seem like you'd have a decent token price – any chance you could help

me with a meal or just some food? There hasn't really been anyone walking around here that's

been willing to help."

"Yeah.. yeah alright" sighs Andrew. "Let's get you some food. I still don't even know

your name though."

"Thank you so much. It's Morgan," replies the woman. "And as an extra thank you, I

have something to offer you too."

"What's that?" asks Andrew. Everything Morgan had said up to this point had been so

unusual that he couldn't help but be curious about what this homeless woman, who clearly had

nothing in her possessions and no token price whatsoever, wanted to offer him.

Morgan smiles knowingly, as if reading Andrew's thoughts. "OSKAR is incredibly

centralized and so powerful because it harnesses the power of all of you Processors to become

all-knowing. But it also owns you. It's basically a god." She pauses as they rounded the corner.

"So," she continues. "Want to help me rebuild a god?"

…

As Dan2h slogged through abstract after abstract of the millions of volumes in the

Institutional History section, his mind began to wander to the dark corners of his anxiety as to

whether his research would yield any results whatsoever, or if he was just wasting his time going

against years of academic and historiographical orthodoxy for his dissertation. The Department

committee had laughed in his face when he presented his hypothesis that he could trace the

origins of their societal design, rooted in the fundamental principle of decentralization, to a

revolution that had occurred in a distant society that was run by a computer. The Department

head had scoffed and told Dan2h that the very notion of this idea flew in the face of hundreds of years of historiographical, political, and economic consensus. Nevertheless, the University's policies did not permit the Department to prohibit Dan2h's research, though they certainly expected, and indeed hoped for, his failure.

In the twenty-three months since he began his dissertation, Dan2h had made little progress in uncovering any definitive record of this pre-societal civilization. It was back in his second year at the university when he first started discovering the inconsistencies in his Institutional Origins class, which was a core course required of all new graduate students and discussed the origins of the institutions that govern that world today and intellectual movements that served as their foundation. Over the course of that year, Dan2h, along with two hundred other user handles scattered across the globe, would congregate in the University's Interaction Portal to experience and discuss the history of institutions and the foundations of decentralization.

The deep foray into the catalogues of papers and artifacts in the Institutional History section of the University's knowledge repository promoted Dan2h to recall some of the canon of ideas that they were taught had led to the foundation of this society. Prior to the advent of the technological systems that allowed humans to organize in the global, distributed manner they do in the present, humanity had been organized in a way where people banded together in groups based largely on geographical distributions of populations and the shared features that had subsequently been developed as a result of this proximity. These groups then proceeded to develop their own shared beliefs, values, and ways of life that often brought them in conflict with one another. They sought to expand themselves, to enslave and conquer those around them, and

remake the world in their own image. The conflict and bloodshed led to the formation of borders, both physical and imagined, and the world became increasingly partitioned.

As each of these societies developed individually, the emergence of a new technology changed the nature of the way these groups interacted with each other, and indeed the very nature of the way each of these prehistoric individuals communicated with each other. These technologies allowed for geographically dispersed individuals to communicate shared information, often on publically visible platforms, that suddenly rendered the partitioning of the prehistoric world far less effective than it once was. The world became more open, and information was shared far more freely than it had ever been before, as groups of people began to learn and interact more with the rest of the world.

These innovations were further developed upon by various individuals and communities to become increasingly secure and decentralized. It was this decentralization that served as the underlying principle of the formation of this society. People began to believe that the decentralization of power, of value, and of authority was the best way to achieve an equitable society. They first built technologies that were designed around and enabled these principles, and then used these technologies to implement these ideals in the design of societal institutions. These developments lay at the foundation of the world that eventually became the present-day world, and the teachings of the Institutional Origins class officially designated this period as when the foundations of contemporary institutions were first established.

It was a particularly linear narrative. Perhaps too linear, Dan2h believed. He was intrigued by the idea that the emergence of technologies that allowed for information communication was never co-opted by any singular individual, and that global networks of communication would naturally lead to decentralized principles instead of the concentration of

power in the hands of those who controlled these networks. It seemed incredibly dubious to

Dan2h that a world so partitioned and individualized, with so many groups at odds with one

another, would be able to smoothly adopt a technology that suddenly brought all people together

without any one group attempting to use this network to control power and centralize authority.

What about personal ambition? Greed? The perfect yet often coincidental amalgam of individual

opportunism and mass gullibility? All of these characteristics still existed among people today

despite their having consciously pursued an equitable society built on decentralization, and

Dan2h saw no reason why they would not plague their prehistoric ancestors in the same way –

ancestors that, if the academic consensus is correct, were driven far more intensely by tribalism

and partitioned the world to reflect their mutual antagonism.

Dan2h had spent the next few months on video immersion calls with every faculty

member and expert community on early Institutional History, trying to explain the perceived

inconsistency in the existing historiography on the roots of decentralization and the societies that

preceded it. Almost every supposed expert he consulted responded with varying degrees of

skepticism, ridicule, and exasperation. It didn't help that at the time, Dan2h was only a second

year graduate student, who many of these expert communities perceived as stepping out of line

and deliberately upsetting the order of the Institutional History community. He was given a

warning from his advisers that he would not be taken seriously in the academic community if he

continued to pursue this baseless conspiracy theory. Rather than dishearten Dan2h, however, the

mass skepticism he faced had only convinced him more than ever that his theory was not

mistaken. It appeared to him that perhaps the reason his suggestions seemed so bizarre to all of

the experts he had consulted was simply because nobody had ever bothered to investigate the

accuracy of the consensus on institutional origins.

Motivated as he was, Dan2h was, until this week, still short on any considerable findings that would support his objection to the academic consensus. A few days prior, he had been referred to a researcher in pre-societal Institutional History that had spent most of his career researching the possibility of conflicts and movements that may have played a role in the early formation of decentralization. Dan2h had not immediately been made aware of the existence of this researcher because much of his work was considered fringe research, well outside the realm of the Institutional History mainstream. The researcher had pointed Dan2h towards a journal that would validate many of his theories on the early conflict surrounding technologies to transmit information. The journal supposedly details the rise of actors that, through utilizing these methods of transmitting information, created products that, while providing individuals with a certain amount of utility, was also able to harness the "data" of people, a precursor to the contemporary Value Exchange for individual labor. The researcher had told Dan2h that he hypothesized these actors were able to use this data to become so ingrained in this prehistoric society that they were able to themselves centralize so much power and authority and eventually supplant the institutions of social organization that it had grown within.

Dan2h had been captivated by the researcher's theory, and now sought to find the original copy of the journal, hoping to unearth how institutions of decentralization and the roots of modern society had emerged from this theorized hyper-centralized society. It was this search that had brought him to the Central Archives, a storage complex for various archives and pieces of knowledge discovered or generated that could be accessed through virtually through a Portal.

Dan2h reached the location that the Central Archives' directory had said the journal would be located. He saw a small brown notebook with there, bound and fastened with a leather strap. Dan2h snatched up the notebook, trembling slightly with excitement that this moment may

finally be his first breakthrough in a hunch that had driven his most important work to date. As

he unfastened and opened the journal, a sheet of a different material from the rest of the

notebook falls to the ground.

Dan2h picked up the sheet and saw that it had been handwritten on. Scrawled onto the

sheet appeared to be a poem of some sort. It read:

Ours is one governed by modern gods

Of our own design and creation.

But one hears only the broken and disheartened,

The angry and the stagnant,

Of one and many damned utopias.

Hark the chorus of crisis unfolding.

It begs for a remedy,

And the practical respond with a flurry of practice

With little regard for the root of it all –

The idea and the design.

One is a builder,

An architect, a creator

Of anything and everything for all and one.

What does that look like?

And how would it all be engineered?

Piece by piece

The machine grows more complex.

And one's reflection is seen in the machine.

Hundreds, no, thousands, no, millions or billions!

One stares into the mechanical overlord

And a kaleidoscope of self stares back.

A redesign then, perhaps,

Or a reassembly of mechanisms

To fix the broken

and lift the disheartened.

To not silence, nor amplify,

The chorus of crisis

But to shape its voice

Into the dispersion of an idea.

And one watches as the thought

Flourishes.

An exercise in the architecting

Of prosperity or equality or of values abound.

Perhaps then in a synthesis

Of thought and engineering,

An emergence of ideas and research,

And a rebuilding of the modern gods.

Dan2h was unsure of whether the poem had any significance to the events detailed in the journal. Regardless, the poem seemed to have been placed in the journal for a reason, having been deliberately tucked behind the journal's leather cover and strap. Turning his attention to the journal that may hold the key to all the work of his entire career, Dan2h begins to read the entries that would hopefully describe the origins of decentralization.

…

"So explain this to me a little more," says Andrew, as he scans the token app on his phone screen against the cashier's reader and passes Morgan the cylindrical wrap indicative of OSKAR's standard café food packaging. They make their way to a table in the corner, Andrew unlocking the chairs with his token card as they sit down.

Andrew and Morgan had found themselves in a somewhat cramped café at the very edge of Andrew's residential district. The evening rush had subsided, and the only activity in the room is the occasional custodial drone wiping down tables, the dull near-silent hum of its flight punctuated only by the occasional clink of silverware on tables as the last few patrons finish up their meals. A faded OSKAR logo, with its smile almost completely invisible, gazes over the room from the back wall. Andrew had never been to this part of the area before, let alone this café. Morgan had suggested that they choose a more dated establishment that probably had not been patched with new OSKAR hardware, as she was insistent they find a place where they would not be overheard.

Andrew watches silently as Morgan unwraps and begins to eat the wrap that he had given her. She takes slow, measured bites, in a manner far too composed for someone who apparently

had not eaten for a number of days. Andrew notices, for the first time, the small details of her

appearance that he had been too startled to take in before. Her platinum blonde hair, unkempt

and windblown, frames a face that is defined by its serious eyes, positioned right above the dark

circles of many sleepless nights. Yet he notices some peculiarities too. Her white robes, stained

and frayed as they are, seem to be made of some kind of quality silk material, a type of color-

fabric combination usually observed in the upper tiers of token price. She eats in a manner

indicative of some kind of familiarity with consumption protocols, and she seems far too familiar

with the neighborhood that they are in for an average tokenless person. Andrew is intrigued by

these apparent inconsistencies, and it keeps him in his seat.

"Actually, explain all of this to me," says Andrew, gesturing towards Morgan and

expanding the scope of his inquiry to her entire state of being. She finishes her wrap, brushing a

few crumbs off the corner of the table, and looks back at Andrew, gathering her thoughts.

"I'm guessing you mean me and why I'm doing all this, right?" asks Morgan, anticipating

the question as if it were explaining everything about herself was something she was frequently

asked to do.

"Yeah, and what you mean by rebuilding a god," replies Andrew. "You also clearly

haven't been homeless for long, judging from those robes," he added.

"Okay, let's start from the beginning," says Morgan. She briefly pauses to gather her

thoughts and to think about what the beginning actually meant. "You're right. I haven't been like

this for very long. My family has a pretty high token price and I've spent most of my life in that

kind of environment. I actually lived in the RE neighborhood before I started working on this

project."

Andrew is surprised and it shows. "So you were living in a high priority OSKAR district and chose to give all that up as what… some kind of experiment?" he asked incredulously.

"No, not an experiment. I guess you could call it a protest of sorts," replies Morgan. "Alright, this is where it gets a little complicated. I've always hated the way OSKAR has taken all our agency away from us. Can you imagine being able to make decisions for ourselves? Or to simply not have a literal majority share of yourself owned by a machine? That's what I want to fight against," she explains.

"Sure, but OSKAR is a machine. There isn't really anyone to…" begins Andrew.

"To fight against? Sure there is," interjects Morgan. "Do you know how OSKAR came to be? It's not widely known or discussed, but it didn't just suddenly start existing. It was created. By people." She paused, readying herself to explain the origins of the machine. "OSKAR was originally started to provide free services, goods, and content to people. People would sign on and get access to all this, but in return OSKAR would learn more and more about their habits, their beliefs, and their preferences. They were able to collect so much of this information that they could then approximate what everyone would do in any given situation, providing them with exactly what they wanted at any given time. They were able to make OSKAR indispensable because nobody else could compete with the precision and information that they had gradually, over the course of decades, collected from their unsuspecting users. That's how the OSKAR we know of today eventually came to be."

Andrew listens, and despite his initial skepticism, finds himself jotting down notes of Morgan's explanation. It sounded ridiculous, but being honest with himself Andrew realizes that he had genuinely never considered how OSKAR had come into being. Growing up, he and everyone else had simply been taught that it was just always there, a constant presence, always

accessible and always reliable – a comfort that could be universally relied on. The idea that

OSKAR was created and slowly grown by a group collecting the information about people

seemed, no matter how far-fetched, like a logical possibility.

"Okay, so let's say that everything you're saying is how this all happened," says Andrew,

after a long pause. "How does that fit into what you're doing here and why you're in your

current state?"

"When I discovered how OSKAR came to introduce tokenized personhood and how it

came to own a majority share in everyone, I also discovered a loophole," replies Morgan.

"OSKAR was able to roll out tokenizing all people because they had been so integrated into the

process of obtaining goods and services that, if you wanted to participate or to even survive in

society, you had to comply with their tokenization. I then discovered that OSKAR only owns

shares of someone's token if it deems it valuable to own – it was originally a way to incentivize

people to produce and feed it more information to make it stronger, since their token price would

go up and they would receive better services from OSKAR. But I found out the opposite is also

true. If someone's token price decreased to the point that OSKAR decided it wouldn't be worth it

to own shares, it would start to sell off shares of that person's token. You could get yourself

back."

"But that's insane! You would have to completely destroy your life," blurts out Andrew.

Then, remembering how he had found Morgan, her entire situation and explanation suddenly

makex sense to him. "So you're doing all this deliberately to tank your own token price? To..

what, buy yourself back?"

"Something like that. I'm trying to detach myself from the OSKAR network, to try to

start a feasible way of living outside of a dependence on OSKAR," says Morgan. "OSKAR's

power comes from the fact that it has a monopoly on the provision of anything, as well as a

monopsony on our labor. Think about it – everyone you know gets everything in their life from

OSKAR, and probably works at a Mine, generating information to make OSKAR stronger. There

isn't any viable way to live outside of this system. OSKAR is a god that controls everything that

people are able to do!"

"So how are you going to try to get out of it? It sounds like you need people to know

about your protest, right?" asks Andrew.

"Why do you think I'm telling this to you? I see you've already been taking notes,"

answers Morgan, smiling as she glances at Andrew's brown notebook with its leather strap

hanging open. "I guess I'm not really sure. Maybe someone will read that someday. Maybe

nobody will. We'll see," she continues, suddenly switching to a far more hesitant demeanor that

contrasted starkly from her earlier enthusiasm.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, him processing everything she had just explained to

him, and her pondering, for the most fleeting of moments, her commitment to her cause and

whether anyone would care about it or her.

The café had completely emptied out over the course of their conversation. The last of the

drones had hummed their way back to their shelves, and the only sound in the room is the silence

that hangs between Andrew and Morgan. The faded OSKAR logo, with the shadows of the

café's furniture cast across it, stares down with an increased presence, somehow more ominous

than it was before.

Morgan finally breaks the silence. "I guess I just have an idea that there are other ways to

live than by having a machine make our decisions for us. Our world is so big, yet we've given all

of the power in it to a single machine, that we ourselves created." She pauses and waits for

Andrew to respond. He doesn't, and instead sits listening intently, pen in hand but not writing.

Morgan continues. "Maybe we can move beyond that, this world governed by modern gods."

Andrew scrawls a quick note in his notebook. He stands up, turns around and, still silent,

walks out of the room and back towards his home. He does not look back. The ubiquitous,

unchanging blue-grey of the neighborhood's palette seems a lot greyer tonight.