

James Bridle

# STATE TO STATELESS MACHINES: A TRAJECTORY



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St. Kitts and Nevis is an island nation in the Eastern Caribbean, twin fragments of an ancient volcano wreathed in clouds and rainforest, and rising out of the deep, blue waters of the Antilles. At just over a hundred square miles, and fifty-five thousand or so residents, it is the smallest sovereign state in the Western Hemisphere. At the turn of the millennium, the islands' economy was in trouble: sugar production, the dominant industry since the 1940s, had declined to such a degree that the government was forced to shutter the state-owned sugar company, closing down refineries and leaving former plantations derelict. Unlike larger and better connected Caribbean islands, St. Kitts and Nevis had neither developed strong tourism nor, like some of its neighbors, had it taken advantage of complex tax laws to lure international finance to its shores. But starting in 2006, the country was to find itself a pioneer in a new kind of industry, one which traded not in offshore capital, but in the very stuff of nationhood itself: the right to claim citizenship.

In 2006, a Swiss lawyer named Christian Kälin arrived in St. Kitts with a proposal. He wanted to restructure the country's decades-old citizenship laws to enable wealthy individuals from overseas to buy themselves a St. Kitts and Nevis passport. Kälin was a key figure in Henley and Partners (H&P), a once obscure wealth management firm based in Zürich, and while many of his clients could lucratively move their money around the world, moving themselves with it was more troublesome to do. Investors in China, Russia, and many other countries wanted the ability to travel freely to the places where they wanted to spend their money: namely, North America and Europe, which have strict entry requirements for visitors of many nationalities. St.

Kitts passport holders, though, can travel visa-free to 132 countries worldwide, including Canada, the United States, and the European Union. Under the express purview of the President of St. Kitts and Nevis, a deal was made: anyone willing to invest a few hundred thousand US dollars in the islands could acquire a precious St. Kitts passport. The deal specified that each investment was to include US\$400,000 spent on real estate and, in consequence, land value rocketed and luxury condos sprouted up along the seafronts of Basseterre and Charlestown. Although, as there was no requirement for these new citizens to actually live in the country, these properties were mostly left empty. In a neat piece of continuity, a further US\$250,000 were earmarked for the Sugar Industry Diversification Foundation, a charitable trust set up by Kálin and intended to generate jobs for those who had lost work in the cane fields. Significantly, the trust's altruism has been called into question because it has never made its accounts public. It has been investigated numerous times. In 2016, auditors from Ernst & Young reported 'vast unexplained extraordinary expenditure',<sup>1</sup> and in 2018 a new government promised to replace it with a more transparent and accountable alternative.<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, the passport scheme accounted for around one percent of St. Kitts and Nevis' GDP. By 2014, this had risen to 25 percent. The scheme's success triggered a scramble for citizenship-by-investment (CBI) programs around the world, many of them led by H&P, the only firm with a track record in the industry and already in possession of a global Rolodex of investors seeking more powerful passports.<sup>3</sup> Other Caribbean nations—namely, Antigua and Barbuda, St Lucia, and Grenada—were the first to copy the scheme. Europe then got involved; first in Cyprus and then Malta, where EU passports are now on offer for as little as €800,000 and a perfunctory background check.<sup>4</sup>

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1 'Audit reveals 'vast unexplained expenditure' by St Kitts-Nevis sugar industry fund', *Times Caribbean*, 18 December 2016, <http://timescaribbeanonline.com/audit-reveals-vast-unexplained-expenditure-by-st-kitts-nevis-sugar-industry-fund/>.

2 'New investigation conducted into St Kitts-Nevis sugar fund', *Caribbean News Now!*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.caribbeannewsnow.com/2018/05/01/new-investigation-conducted-into-st-kitts-nevis-sugar-fund/>.

3 Atossa Araxia Abrahamian, *The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen*, New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2015.

4 Simon Tulett, 'What Price Would You Put on a Passport?', *BBC*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-41013873>.

Today, the citizenship business is worth billions of dollars<sup>5</sup>—and H&P is still the largest player.<sup>6</sup>

The development of the citizenship industry is an example of financialization: the process by which assets—goods, services, or risks—are made amenable to exchange. The asset in question here, however, is national identity, which despite a turbulent and relatively short history, is usually depicted as solid and unassailable. In this context, there is a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the contemporary rise in nationalist politics and the hardening of borders around the world (for example, the construction of fences and walls, the implementation of ever more draconian security regimes, and the use of revocation of citizenship as punishment) and, on the other hand, the increasingly fluid exchange of national identities available to the very rich. Nowhere, perhaps, is there a more extreme example of the privatization of state assets than in this marketization of national identity itself. This is all made extremely visible in H&P's own annual Passport Index and Quality of Nationality Index. These are global surveys of travel freedom and local benefits, ranking the world's countries based on the freedom—of movement and from accountability—they offer their citizens.<sup>7 8</sup>

The impact of this latest round of global financialization is not limited to those who directly access the service. It also surfaces in the form of shifting property prices, weaponized by oppressive states against the least fortunate. Glittering towers rise on the corniches of the Mediterranean, but stand as empty as their digital doubles on the websites of Chinese property firms. These luxury boxes are not really living spaces. They are safety deposit boxes for capital flight and down payments on new identities, while the populations living in their shadows remain immured by the local corruption that feeds

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5 'Golden Passports', *BBC Assignments*, 24 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswf50>.

6 Jason Clenfield, 'The Man Who Helps Countries Turn Investments Into Passports for the Rich', *Bloomberg News*, 12 March 2015, <https://skift.com/2015/03/12/the-man-who-helps-countries-turn-investments-into-passports-for-the-rich/>.

7 Henley & Partners Passport Index, <https://www.henleypassportindex.com/>.

8 Henley & Partners Quality of Nationality Index, <https://www.nationalityindex.com/>.

upon any new revenue.<sup>9</sup> Far worse awaits those to whom market forces are applied forcibly, like the undocumented residents of Gulf states forced to accept paid-for citizenship in the far-off and impoverished archipelago of the Comoros.<sup>10</sup> But in an act of autocannibalism that we should be familiar with by now, yet never seem to fully grasp, the weightiest victim of the virtualization of citizenship will likely be the state itself.

In *The Invention of the Passport*, historian and sociologist John Torpey describes the emergence of the passport as a process by which people ‘become dependent on states for the possession of an “identity” from which they can escape only with difficulty and may significantly shape their access to various spaces.’ But he also emphasizes the ways in which the increased regulation of movement actively shaped the form of states themselves: ‘The emergence of passport and related controls on movement is an essential aspect of the “state-ness” of states.’<sup>11</sup>

Thus, to undermine the passport is to undermine the state, and it is one of the reasons why illegal and undocumented migrants are so often figured as existential threats to nations. It’s also why we find those willing to subvert governance and democratic processes working alongside those who seek to subvert the identity of a state itself.

From the beginning of their expansion, Henley and Partners (H&P) turned to political as well as financial manipulation experts to assist them in their efforts to spread the gospel of citizenship-by-investment (CBI) and to ensure its continuity. A hidden camera recording, which went viral in St. Kitts a few weeks before the islands’ 2010 elections, featured Lindsay Grant, a presidential candidate running on an anti-corruption platform, accepting a massive \$1.5

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9 James Bridle, ‘The Rise of Virtual Citizenship’, *The Atlantic*, 21 February 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/02/virtual-citizenship-for-sale/553733/>.

10 Atossa Araxia Abrahamian, ‘Who Loses When a Country Puts Citizenship Up for Sale?’, *The New York Times*, 5 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/sunday/united-arab-emirates-comorans-citizenship.html>.

11 Jon Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

million bribe<sup>12</sup> from an unnamed, also hidden 'property developer'.<sup>13</sup> On the back of this revelation, Denzil Douglas, who partnered with H&P to set up the original CBI scheme, was soon re-elected for a fourth term. Although the video was released anonymously, it was widely assumed to have been the work of a clandestine, London-based political consultancy called Strategic Communication Laboratories Group (SCL Group).<sup>14</sup> Since then, SCL Group has been discovered to be active in at least six Caribbean nations, all of them with active or potential CBI schemes. In each case SCL Group worked closely with Christian Kälin to identify investors, talking points, and electoral audiences for political campaigns sympathetic to CBI.

In 2012, Alexander Nix, the CEO of SCL Group, became the head of a new company-within-the-company, funded by the American hedge fund billionaire and libertarian conservative Robert Mercer. This company was Cambridge Analytica, and it would become notorious in 2017 when Nix was caught on camera boasting to an undercover reporter that he had worked on more than two hundred elections across the world, including Nigeria, Kenya, the Czech Republic, India, and Argentina, and had been closely involved in the election of Donald Trump, illegally harvesting millions of Facebook profiles and using the personal data they contained to create micro-targeted and legally dubious political advertising.<sup>15</sup> Under questioning by British parliamentarians in 2018, Nix admitted that Kälin and he had a 'relationship' during SCL Group's campaigning in the Caribbean, and that 'he may well have made contributions towards the election campaigns'.<sup>16</sup>

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12 'Bribery video surfaces on YouTube By Sheena Brooks', *St Kitts & Nevis Observer*, 22 January 2010, <http://www.thestkittsnevisobserver.com/archives/bribery-video-surfaces-on-youtube-by-sheena-brooks>.

13 Rosie Perper, 'Cambridge Analytica's Parent Company Reportedly Offered a \$1.4 Million Bribe to Win an Election for a Client', *Business Insider*, 21 March 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/cambridge-analytica-scl-group-1-million-for-election-win-bribe-2018-3>.  
14 Ann Marlowe, 'How Cambridge Analytica fueled a shady global passport bonanza', *Fast Company*, 7 January 2018, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40571052/how-cambridge-analytica-fueled-a-shady-global-passport-bonanza>.

15 Georgina Lee, 'Q&A on Cambridge Analytica: The allegations so far, explained', *Channel 4 News*, 26 March 2018, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/cambridge-analytica-the-allegations-so-far>.

16 Tom Goodenough, 'Is Alexander Nix gravely misunderstood?', *The Spectator*, 8 June 2018, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/is-alexander-nix-gravely-misunderstood/>.

However, long before it became the *bête noire* of the 2016 U.S. election and the subsequent Brexit referendum, SCL Group was seeding chaos across the Caribbean in the service of H&P. Political campaigns in Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda were tainted with torrents of false stories planted in the media. Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves of St. Vincent and the Grenadines accused the company of illegally employing political activists in 2010. The Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago opened an investigation into SCL Group's involvement in the country's 2013 election.

Just as the CBI schemes did, so this political chaos extended to Europe. When the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed by a car bomb in October 2017, she had for some time been investigating links between the Maltese government and H&P.<sup>17</sup> In an email exchange with Kälín in May 2017, Caruana Galizia highlighted the damage his company's involvement was doing to both the political consensus and the domestic economy of Malta: 'I'm afraid that we in Malta cannot see the back of Henley & Partners soon enough, whatever the impression you may have been given by the alacrity of certain corporate services providers to jump on your bandwagon and help you flog Maltese citizenship to eastern potentates, including a Chinese aluminium billionaire on Forbes list who is registered to a first-time-buyer's tiny flat in a side street in the village of Naxxar.'<sup>18</sup> At the time of her death, Caruana Galizia was facing multiple defamation lawsuits, including from H&P, as well as the founder of Malta's Pilatus Bank, Ali Sadr Hasheminejad, an Iranian businessman arrested in the U.S. for money laundering and sanctions-busting, and a beneficiary of a H&P-facilitated St. Kitts passports.<sup>19</sup>

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17 'British MP highlights Caruana Galizia murder investigation as The Spectator links Henley & Partners to Cambridge Analytica', *Times of Malta*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180327/local/uk-mp-claims-caruana-galizia-was-investigating-cambridge-analytica.674689>.

18 Daphne Caruana Galizia, 'Christian Kalin of Henley & Partners knew back in March that the general election was imminent', *Running Commentary: Daphne Caruana Galizia's Notebook*, 12 May 2017, <https://daphnecaruanaagalizia.com/2017/05/lecture-good-journalism-somebody-made-millions-selling-passports-shady-people-worst-parts-globe/>.

19 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, 'Bank criticised by Daphne Caruana Galizia under scrutiny in Brussels', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/02/daphne-caruana-galizia-was-being-sued-defamation-at-time-of-her-murder>.

There is always a violence inherent in financialization that emerges, under pressure, whenever it is deployed. Financialization enlarges and amplifies existing inequalities, and ripples seismically across domains and disciplines. It is not possible for it to do otherwise, nor is it possible to harness it for so-called 'good'. This is as true of the marketization of national identity pioneered by H&P and abetted by SCL Group as it is of the wholesale financialization of personal data and social relationships brought to its acme by Facebook and exploited by Cambridge Analytica. The question that remains for artists and other practitioners working in this field and interested in its questions is whether interventions within such a system can produce meaningful change, or will only support and amplify existing inequalities and violence.

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I've spent the last few years researching citizenship-by-investment and other, related technologies: special economic zones and free trade areas (which allow for different corporate laws and permissive working practices to be deployed within particular areas), freeports and seasteads, blockchain and other supposedly emancipatory but inescapably inhuman and asset-based protocols for identity management, and new forms of algorithmic citizenship which depend wholesale on surveillance and the acquiescence of existing powers.<sup>20</sup> Perceiving these as technologies is part of the logic of 'state machines', and from the perspective of a technologist and artist, I've sought lines of code within them that could be cut and pasted, stolen outright, or refactored to more emancipatory ends. But I'm not sure I still believe in this approach. These technologies are tainted at the source by their very emergence within cultures of capitalism and the inherently racist logic of the nation state itself. They are too easily commandeered and redeployed by those with access to more network nodes, to greater carrying capacity, bandwidth, processing power and data storage—in short, by those with access to capital.

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20 See the author's project *Citizen Ex* (<http://citizen-ex.com/>) and related writings.

The state as we know it is coming to an end and, although it will not shift radically from one form to another, it is, as we noted in the introduction to the *Transnationalisms* project, already pierced and entangled with other, radically different forms—both from within and without.<sup>21</sup> What the new technologies of the state continually reveal, unwittingly and often in opposition to their stated goals, is the incredible diversity and uncomputability of their subject both at the level of the individual and at the level of physical geography. Through the network, we are all already transnational, which is revealed by social media and international finance as clearly as by our lived experience. At the same time, the accelerating and leveling actions of anthropogenic climate change forcibly remind us that borders will not protect us from what happens beyond the horizon. People are on the move, as are whole ecosystems, from deserts engulfing once fertile lands across the Middle East and spurring conflict and further migration<sup>22</sup> to forests breaking up and marching northwards in response to the transformation of the atmosphere.<sup>23</sup>

The question then becomes, what might oppose capital as the governing rhizome of whatever replaces the state? What other preexisting forms are inherently networked, bounded but shifting, near infinitely diverse, and forever resistant to capitalization? One answer to this is the world itself; that is, the category of things that includes us, non-human animals, plant life, minerals, and their attendant processes—what Jane Bennet calls ‘the ecology of things’ or ‘vibrant matter’.<sup>24</sup> Ecology has its own vocabulary of states and boundaries, constituents and participants, but they are never fixed or bounded, and they provide a template with which to think and rethink our notions of place and collectivity. The challenge is to view these things anew in light of what we have learned and can still learn from our technologies, because no ecological

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21 For more about *Transnationalisms*, see the introduction, artworks, and talks featured at <https://aksioma.org/transnationalisms/>, <http://drugo-more.hr/en/mine-yours-ours-transnationalisms/>, and <https://www.furtherfield.org/events/transnationalisms/>.

22 Alex Randall, ‘Syria and climate change: did the media get it right?’, *Climate and Migration Coalition*, <https://climatemigration.atavist.com/syria-and-climate-change>.

23 Robinson Meyer, ‘American Trees Are Moving West, and No One Knows Why’, *The Atlantic*, 17 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/05/go-west-my-sap/526899/>.

24 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

plea can be sufficient if it simply entails going backwards, or rejecting the immanent possibilities of new systemic forms.

In computer science, the term ‘state’ refers to the information retained by a system (a service, application, or device) between interactions. Seen from the perspective of an ecosystem, our reliance on states as governors of interactions seems like an original sin, relying as it does on the giving over and giving up of ownership of data and representations to extrahuman forces—servers, corporations, governments—and their subsequent retention and weaponization, whether in the form of access to information, surveillance, manipulation, or the granting and withholding of freedom of movement. ‘Stateless’, on the other hand, refers to systems built on trust and generosity, and on the individual’s agency within the larger systems it moves through and inhabits. This is the model that is inherent to both the World Wide Web—‘small pieces, loosely joined’<sup>25</sup>—and to the web of life.

So long set in opposition to one another, the technological and the ecological are slowly but surely knitting themselves together. In a future where computation is powerfully and inevitably dependent on sustainable and renewable resources—wind and solar energies, fresh cooling waters—it’s easy to imagine the collapse of networks into watersheds, wind zones, and insolation territories. Servers, like trees, are already migrating north, establishing themselves in zones of cheap hydro power and lower environmental temperatures. And, like the arrival of non-native species in a stable ecosystem, they will continue to alter the environment they find themselves in. Whatever follows in place of the nation will be another kind of machine, produced by this reconfiguration of climate, geography, social, and interspecies relationships—but it will be stateless.

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25 David Weinberger, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web*, New York: Perseus Publishing, 2002.

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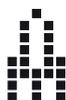
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