

MODULE 6

WHITE PAPER: GOVERNMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY

I. NORMATIVE SYNTHESIS

THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

In the explicitly political domain, the difficulty of technology appears not simply as an influence upon the means of governance but as a factor that reorders the very conditions under which political judgment must be exercised. The focus of this module lies in its retrieval of **prudential judgment** as the irreducible core of political authority—and its demonstration of how technocratic approaches to building and enforcing technocratic systems outsource governance to impersonal policies and thereby undermine the very conditions prudence requires. This difficulty is not new, but intensified by the technological perfusion of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—with the imminent possibility of yet further rapid intensification with the advent of AI.

The conversation structuring the module begins from a classical insight often obscured in modern political discourse: namely, that political authority is not primarily a matter of rule application or technical expertise, but of judgment exercised on behalf of a community. Prudence (*phronēsis*) is the virtue by which an authority discerns how general principles (the products of legislation and especially established by constitutions) ought to be applied in the variable particular circumstances: taking account of unforeseen contingencies not anticipated by established policies or principles, the inevitable limitations of human capacity, and the periodic pursuit of competing goods within the community—the matters most commonly dealt with in the day-to-day of political life. Unlike the methods employed by technological rationality, prudence cannot be reduced to calculation or rigid formal procedure—but this allows it to respond to these problems in an agile fashion—without needing to recalculate a system. Most of all, this prudence presupposes experience, a familiarity with needs and aims of living persons and their diverse situations (and thus a kind of subsidiarist structure rendered actionable through proportionate scales of governing bodies and offices), responsibility for consequences that cannot be fully anticipated, and an ability to take thoughtful counsel about resolving complex situations irreducible to norms previously legislated.

We attempted in Module 6 to show that modern technocratic governance proves **structurally hostile** to this exercise of prudential judgment. Technocratic systems are designed to minimize intellectual discretion in favor of standardization, expansive scalability, predictability, and—as ever—efficiency. Decisions increasingly fall into frame as technical problems to be solved by expert knowledge, data analytics, and administrative process that diffuse accountability for decision making across a multitude of nodes rather than as prudential judgments requiring deliberation and the shouldering of moral

responsibility by leaders who make decisions. As a consequence, responsibility itself becomes outsourced to the systems of rules and regulations rather than something taken on by the persons exercising authority, shifting governance from the human to our technological systems of evaluation.

This shift does not occur through explicit rejection of prudence. Rather, prudence becomes considered *operationally inconvenient*. Judgment is difficult to justify in systems that demand transparency, auditability, and legal indemnity. Prudence requires responsiveness to particularity—understanding how the part belongs to a whole and by what principles that whole itself is ordered—while technocratic systems push everything towards conformity to pre-established norms, conventions, and categories decided in advance. Prudence accepts uncertainty and the possibility of judgments that are technically incorrect but morally righteous; technocratic systems seek elimination of any possibility other than the “correct” solution—ignoring that there may be no such solution definitively identifiable as such. As a consequence, prudence’s displacement does not result in not wiser decision-making, but governance—even if it comprises a greater totality of “information”—nevertheless substitutes compliance with procedures and policies for genuine and properly human political virtue.

To understand properly this analysis, we must note that prudence is not merely one political virtue among others; it is intrinsic to the very exercise of authority. Authority, that is, must be exercised *for* the sake of others. In circumstances where outcomes are uncertain and the pursuits of diverse goods are often incommensurable, decisions require someone who can take on the role of authority, who can *determine* the order of the state. To govern without prudence therefore is not simply to govern *poorly*, but to **fundamentally misunderstand what governance is**. Political authority reduced to system management ceases to be authority in the true sense—that is, as something which must always be vested in persons—and becomes mere administration, wherein everyone (from the highest to the lowest members) functions only as a part of the machine.

This further helps us to understand why appeals to “expertise” often fail to resolve political conflict. Expertise concerns the application of means to contexts of precisely delineated actions. But more often than not, political conflict entails the need for *re-ordering* of means *outside* any previously determined contexts. Genuine political prudence, conversely, operates always through the discernment of ends and subsequent ordering of means in a hierarchical fashion—and thus, concerns the *good of the whole* in light of *the good as such*. Technocratic governance tends to collapse this hierarchy by treating political questions as though they were technical ones. When this collapse occurs, disagreement is reframed as ignorance or irrationality rather than as legitimate argument over what constitutes *the good* and the *righteous means to attain it*. This technocratic reframing erodes civic trust in authorities (especially when they operate only as administrative functionaries) and exacerbates polarization, even as it claims to render politics ideologically neutral or capable of navigating a pluralistic society. That is, rather than actually eliminating them, the supposedly neutral technocratic paradigm of government merely obscures the ideological principles determining its policies.

The module further highlights how technological mediation increases the *distance* between decision-makers and those affected by decisions. Large-scale data systems and abstract models replace direct

knowledge of persons and places. This distance makes prudential judgment more difficult, not only noetically but also morally. Responsibility becomes diffused across systems, agencies, and algorithms. No one decides; the system produces an outcome. Thus we connect here the theme of scale introduced in Module 3. Political authority, when it is exercised at scales exceeding the capacity for sufficient human familiarity for prudential judgment, inevitably relies on technological mediation to function at all. Yet **this reliance intensifies the very problem it seeks to solve**. The larger and more complex the system, the less room there is for the familiar knowledge required to exercise prudential judgment, and the more governance must be justified in strictly technical terms. As such, prudence is squeezed out not by malice, but by a self-complexifying and ever-compounding set of systemic necessities.

Our discussion also attended to a crucial asymmetry: technocratic systems are adept at enforcing compliance but poor at cultivating consent in an authentic sense, which always requires a kind of non-technical but rather experiential knowledge. Consent given on the basis of purely theoretical knowledge may be valid under extraordinary circumstances, but it is an imperfect consent. Prudence, by contrast, operates through trust and familiarity—knowledge of a different kind, that is—such that its judgments are understood to aim at the shared goods between persons that are realized in the actual conduct of life. But when governance is exercised through technological systems—systematic governmental forms or procedures, anonymous institutions, reports from distant agencies staffed by unknown persons, regulatory enforcement mechanisms and policies—it ceases to appear as a human act directed toward the common good and instead appears as nothing but an impersonal and faceless force. Consequently, political legitimacy dissipates in proportion to the expansion of bureaucracy and reduction of authority to the exercise of administrative function.

We should not interpret this situation as a conspiracy or ideological plot of secret, malevolent forces. As with earlier modules, the seminar insists that the displacement of prudence is largely an unintended consequence of implementing technological rationality. Systems are adopted because they promise efficiency, fairness, outsourcing of labor, diffusion of responsibility, lessening of leadership's burden, and the reduction of unnecessary risks. Yet in displacing judgment from the personal to the impersonal, they undermine the very goods they are meant to secure.

However, we do not propose a naïve return to pre-technological governance. Technological instruments and systems, understood and employed rightly, can assist rather than displace prudence, and do so by providing information, extending and streamlining certain forms of communication (though it should not aim to do this for **all** communication), and enabling the coordination of action at large scales for many good purposes: such as overcoming natural disasters, food shortages, military conflicts, policing unrest, and maintaining genuinely beneficial governmental programs where they are needed (i.e., the exercise of subsidiarity). The difficulty arises, however, when these tools which ought to be designed to assist judgment are allowed or created to replace the virtue of human prudence. Governance thereby becomes a process of managing and applying systems rather than a habit of guiding a community toward shared goods.

Any adequate philosophy of political authority, so we claim, must focus its own development on the virtue of prudence in its governing citizenry and recognize the fragility of the conditions under which every government inevitably operates. Political problems cannot be solved by better systems alone—and the tendency to attempt solving every problem by the implementation of a new or better system, at the cost of outsourcing judgment-making to its processes, intensifies the fundamental problem.

This module also prepares us for the considerations of the final two modules. Communication technologies (Module 7) often further strain prudential judgment by accelerating anticipated speeds of response and collapsing distance, while the synthesis concerning the whole person (Module 8) reveals that political disintegration ultimately mirrors and intensifies personal disintegration. A polity incapable of political prudence not only evacuates its own authority and responsibility, but so too habituates its citizenry to act without individual prudence.

We conclude therefore with both a warning and a call: technological governance may increase administrative power, but without prudence it cannot promote or long-sustain genuine political authority. Authority, like technology itself, constitutes a difficulty requiring continued striving rather than a problem asking for a solution. As such, it can be exercised well or poorly, but it cannot be automated without self-amputation.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS INDICATED

1. Reassertion of the common good

The module underscores the need to recover the notion of the common good as irreducible to technical optimization. Governance must be oriented toward shared human flourishing and not system performance or observance and implementation of policies and regulations. Invariably this mistakes the means as the ends.

2. Limits on technological governance

Not all social difficulties admit technological solutions. The module calls for principled limits on data collection, automation, and algorithmic decision-making, especially where they obscure responsibility. This requires a shift in the mentality of citizens, however: we must lead by taking an active role in governance, rather than allowing it to be outsourced to bureaucrats or administrative systems.

3. Restoration of political prudence

Political leaders and institutions must resist the temptation to defer judgment to technical expertise alone. Expertise informs prudence; but it does not replace it, and the belief that it does proves catastrophic. Cultivating prudence in civic life requires *many* persons operating at *properly proportionate levels of knowledge*—political prudence, that is, belongs not merely to a national elite but must be developed and exercised at every level of government, from the smallest town, to the state, to congress, the executive, and the highest levels of judiciary.

4. Subsidiarity and local authority

Coextensive with the restoration of political prudence at appropriate scales, therefore, we emphasize **subsidiarity** as a counterweight to technological centralization. Decisions should be made at the lowest level competent to address them, preserving intelligibility and accountability, and recruiting *help* (rather than *control*) from more powerful levels of government.

II. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

CENTRAL QUESTION

How do governments both shape and become shaped by technology, and in what sense can governance itself be understood as a technological form (or means) with distinctive risks and responsibilities?

PRINCIPAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readings:

- McLuhan 1964: *Understanding Media*, c.21, “Press: Government by News Leak”.
- Barba-Kay 2023: *A Web of Our Own Making*, c.3, “The Sound of Our Own Voices”.

Background Readings:

- Simon 1949: *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, c.9, “Democracy and Technology”.
- Marx 1994: “The Idea of ‘Technology’ and Postmodern Pessimism” in *Does Technology Drive History?*
- Barba-Kay 2023: *A Web of Our Own Making*.

ORIENTATION

Module 6 explicitly turns to the political domain, examining the reciprocal relationship between technological development and governmental structures and practice. Rather than treating technology as a neutral object to be regulated by external political authority, the seminar advances a more demanding claim: modern governance increasingly operates according to the logic of technological revealing, and thus government itself can come to function as a technology.

Again, this does not mean that government is reducible to machinery or software. Rather, it indicates that administrative rationality takes on the criteria ordinarily applied to technological systems—namely, efficiency, standardization, scalability, and control—and thus a technologized way of thinking comes to dominate political life, reconfiguring the ends of governance in terms of what can be technically managed, controlled, and optimized, rather than what can be prudentially understood or integrated into the pursuits of human flourishing.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Government as a technological builder / mediator

Governments are among the most powerful builders and mediators of technological environments. Through their creation and maintenance of infrastructure, policies and regulation, creation of incentives and disincentives, and (especially in the twenty-first century) capacities for data collection and use, political institutions bear heavily upon the technological conditions under which individuals and other institutions act. Increasingly, geopolitical conflict seems concerned with the determination of those conditions themselves

At the same time, governments increasingly depend upon complex technological systems to function effectively across the scope of the regions and persons governed. This dependence introduces new vulnerabilities in the exercise of government and often constrains political imagination to what can be supported and managed through their technological systems. At the international level, this results in political strife less over territory and natural resources and increasingly over the shared technological systems by which discourse and commerce are structured.

2. Administrative rationality obscures political judgment

When governance understood as practical wisdom oriented toward the common good suffers a shift to governance understood as administrative management of populations, the nature of the political itself becomes obscured. Policy decisions are increasingly framed as technical problems requiring expert solutions rather than prudential judgments requiring deliberation and the assumption and exercise of authority.

This shift displaces political responsibility into administrative function, rather than being taken up by persons. When decisions are justified as technically necessary, accountability is diffused and dissent is framed as ignorance or irrationality.

3. Surveillance and datafication

A key focal point discussed within the module is the expansion of surveillance and data-driven governance. Technologies that promise security, efficiency, or convenience enable unprecedented visibility into individual behavior—making them targets for increased pressure and control.

The danger of surveillance lies not only in its potential for despotic abuse but in its normalized acceptance and the subsequent paradigmatic shifts that follow. Political freedom becomes constrained within ever-narrowing channels of control against the background of ever-expanding datafication of the citizenry.

4. Scale and distance in political authority

Technological mediation allows governments to act at scales previously unimaginable. While this enables coordination and responsivity in important moments of crisis, warfare, and the like, it also increases the distance between decision-makers and those affected by decisions, straining the possibility of the familiar knowledge needed for actual prudence. A citizen in the middle of the country finds

himself increasingly affected by decisions made by persons with whom he has no primary, secondary, or even tertiary relationship—separated often by uncountable degrees.

Loss of proportionate scale therefore undermines trust and legitimacy. Political authority becomes abstract, experienced primarily through systems rather than persons.

KEY EXPLANATORY CLAIMS

1. **Government is both regulator and producer of technological environments.**
Understood as an *extension*, government has always been itself a kind of technology—the extension of reason’s governance over lower appetites, putting order into relation; with respect to a *mode of revealing* and a *system*, modern technological environments have fused more closely with the structure of political authority—as both its responsibility and its product.
2. **Technological systems reshape political ends, not only means.**
This presents a highly-complex causal relationship: succinctly stated, as technology shapes culture—most especially regarding homogenization and large-scale systematization—political ends shift from cultivating the common good to maintaining the order of the system.
3. **Administrative efficiency displaces prudential judgment.**
Prudential judgment for daily governing operations requires a kind of intimate knowledge that cannot be affected at large scales; and thus, in a homogenized and systematized governance structure, the efficient application of policy becomes the standard means for resolving problems.
4. **Surveillance threatens the meaning and practice of citizenship.**
This constitutes a change in the habit of political engagement: citizens cease to operate as participants in a common, deliberative order and instead operate as objects managed within the administrative, technical system. This seems fundamentally to undermine what it means to be a citizen.
5. **Political scale intensifies technological dependency.**
When the population directly governed by centralized authorities grows numerically large and geographically far-flung, technological interventions become increasingly important to exercising functions of governance. As a necessary result, the relationship between citizens and their government becomes *depersonalized* and increasingly *technologized*.