

Social Self-Defence and the Modern Megamachine

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Introduction

We live in historic times. The system of global order is in a period of deep, seismic crisis. The old world is dying, and what will come in its place will be determined by the actions of the present.

This paper is intended as a small contribution to the ongoing discussions about what to do in this situation. It will be divided in two parts; part I will offer an analysis of the system of global order and its current crisis, part II will discuss principles for orienting our efforts to cultivate the seeds of a new world in this context.

Part I. The Modern Megamachine

In the modern era, the past 500 years, a singular system for ordering social life has for the first time, through European colonization, become global in scope. This system has four co-constitutive pillars; 1) the modern state, 2) capitalism, 3) ideology, 4) modern science. We will begin with a cursory overview of this system, beginning with the state. We can define the state as a network of institutions that exercises administrative power over social affairs. We can define power as "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events." The state system is ancient, and in general has three central spheres of operation:

- 1 **Political economy:** Institutional decision-making organising social affairs, including economic production and distribution. The modern state is organised bureaucratically, characterised by the formalisation and de-personalisation of the state institutions, further entrenching authority in the institutional position rather than the individual occupying it.
- 2 **Physical force:** Organising means of violence (e.g. army, police) to enforce and protect this order.
- 3 **Ideology:** Shaping perception to perpetuate and legitimate this order.

Another definitive characteristic of the modern state is sovereignty, the notion that the state has absolute authority within a certain territory, delineated by a border. Historically, political institutions have appealed to divine authority for legitimacy; with the invention of the modern state in 17th-18th century Europe, and the advent of secularism, state authority has been detached from divine right, to effectively be established upon nothing but its own claim to authority.

The state's power increases in a zero-sum manner; that is, the more power the state has over social affairs, the less possessed by the rest of society. The state thus acts to appropriate this power from society, using strategies involving each of its three central spheres of activity, including plunder, enslavement, colonization, etc. The result is a hierarchical, stratified social order, with an elite ruling class populating the state apparatus and the upper echelons of society, and the subjugated labouring masses, whom the elite direct for their own interest. The root tendency driving this process is what we can call the 'lust for domination', or power-hunger and greed.

We can thus characterise the general aim of the state apparatus in a two-fold manner; the first dimension is the accumulation of power, or the systematic concentration of power into the institutions of the state apparatus using the techniques discussed above. The second dimension is control, or action to preserve the state's power over social affairs in order to maintain the process of accumulation, utilizing these same techniques. We can identify three stages of control; 1) control through violence, which is the weakest form, indicating the state's lack of legitimacy; 2) non-violent control, where the state need not resort to using violence; 3) self-control, the strongest form, where the state order is internalized by a population, and they control and exploit themselves. Consider for example the prevalence of violence in many so-called 'third world countries' where state control is less absolute, as opposed to in first-world countries, where the state has such a grip on power there is rarely a need to resort to violence. Thus, to maximize control, the state seeks to create a tame and docile populous willingly submissive to state authority and accepting of the prevailing social order.

A corresponding impetus is the accumulation of wealth, which functions through the leveraging of control over affairs of political economy, such as production and trade, to develop mechanisms for funnelling wealth from society to the elite classes. We can characterize the general means of wealth accumulation as 'extraction', or the forceful removal and appropriation of wealth, in the form of natural resources (e.g. mining), human labour, surplus products and capital, etc. In the modern era, this role has been played by capitalism.

Capitalism itself can be understood as a collection of mechanisms and techniques for the ceaseless production and accumulation of wealth. Many of these techniques, such as market exchange of commodities, finance, profit motive, etc., long pre-date the emergence of capitalism. Yet in capitalism, we see the expansion and ascension to supremacy of market exchange, and thus also of commodification, including of humanity itself through wage-labour, the predominance of these mechanisms in ordering the economic activity of society, and the utilisation of these techniques to facilitate accumulation via extraction.

Capitalism has been entangled with the state since its origins; it remains dependent on the state to create and secure markets, property rights, etc., and functions closely with the state apparatus to administrate and manage the affairs of society. To understand this entanglement, it is helpful to consider Braudel's analogy of the economy as a three-story house; the bottom level is of subsistence, the family economy. The intermediate level is the market; characterized by transparency, competition, and direct producer-consumer relation. The top level is of large corporations, characterized by opacity, monopoly, and manipulation. This top level, unique to the capitalist epoch, is for Braudel the realm of 'true' capitalism, and is where the entanglement with state manifests; from the legal formation of the joint-stock corporation to facilitate colonization and plunder, to the 'too-big-to-fail' corporate sector receiving bailouts in 2008 and 2020.

We can get a sense here of the manner in which state and capital operate together as part of a singular apparatus of accumulation and control. Before elaborating further, we will first briefly examine the other two pillars, beginning with modern science, or 'technoscience'. Science, the systematic investigation of nature, is an ancient practice. Modern technoscience is distinguished by its mathematization and orientation to predictive power; the accepted scientific theory is the one that offers the most accurate prediction of the greatest number of phenomena. This practice has dramatically deepened our insight into the workings of nature, and simultaneously our capacity to control and manipulate natural processes, manifesting as technological power.

In the modern epoch, the application and utilization of science has been primarily controlled by the state and capital. This has yielded developments such as industrial production, weapons of mass destruction, genetic manipulation, etc, along with new sciences of management expanding the capacity to control and direct human relations and natural processes, as well as demands for new resources and technologies of extraction, which together have been utilized for the apparatus' accumulation of wealth and power.

If the state and capital constitute the body of this global apparatus, and technoscience the manner in which this body is constructed, then ideology is its 'spirit', or that which animates its activities. It incorporates values and beliefs, utilized to promote the propagation of this order and the division of society to solidify control, e.g. ethnic/civilizational supremacy, patriarchy, nationalism, etc. Ideology is central to the system, and vital to the functioning of each of the other pillars, though we will not analyse it further here.

Now that we have examined each of the four pillars of the global system, we can turn to examining this system as a whole. The system itself can be understood as a project for ordering the activities of both social and ecological life in order to facilitate the system's accumulation of power and wealth. It is helpful to think of this system as a 'megamachine'; the concept 'megamachine' was first used by Mumford to describe the social organization of Ancient Egypt; a construction project like the pyramids involves the large-scale organisation and direction of labour, resources, technology, scientific knowledge, etc., and sufficient politico-economic and ideological authority to create and maintain such an organization. The result is that these different aspects become like cogs in a large machine, which as a whole is directed toward the accomplishment of a certain goal, in this case the pyramids. The point is that authority is used to organize and direct social life to achieve its own ends in a manner resembling a large mechanism, where the value of each part is a function of the role it plays in this mechanism.

In this sense, the modern system can be understood as a global megamachine, oriented towards power and wealth accumulation. An important characteristic of the megamachine is that it has a fundamental tendency towards expansion, a consequence of the drive for accumulating power and wealth. First, the spatial sense, or the tendency to expand outwards and increase the amount of territory and resources it controls, which we can call an imperial or colonial tendency. The second dimension is the expansion of power within various spheres of social life; that is, progressively deepening and widening its capacity to administrate and control social and natural life, as they are incorporated, managed, and directed towards the ends of systemic accumulation. This manifests as increasing state

power in regulating social affairs, and the incorporation of more aspects of social life into the market system via commodification.

We can gain further insight by elaborating on the nature of social life. It is helpful to think of society as a particular kind of organism, its life constituted by social activity, including its politico-economic organization, language, culture and belief systems, which together form the interconnected ecology of a society. We can call this interwoven field of activities, traditions, and relations the 'lifeworld' of a society, which collectively serve to distinguish one particular society from another, analogously to the way the personality and experience of an individual human differentiates it from others. Further, social life is not separate from the natural environment in which it is situated; a society emerges from and persists in a two-way relationship with its surrounding environment. All are situated within the global web of social and ecological life, which we can call the 'biosphere'.

In biological terms, we can view the megamachine as almost a kind of parasite, growing out of and fundamentally dependent on the social organism and the biosphere, which vampirically sucks out energy and resources from the world via accumulation, displaying a cancerous ceaselessly expanding growth pattern. In sociological terms, we can view this parasitic activity as the colonisation of the social world and the biosphere at large, through techniques of control and extraction. However, the technological image of the megamachine reveals another important dimension of this system; its aim is to administratively manage and direct, or 'tame', natural social and ecological processes, through the utilization of techniques. In this sense, it can be understood as a social and biological engineering project; an effort to shape natural processes to facilitate ease of control and maximal accumulation. We can characterise the effect of this process on society as, to use Öcalan's term, 'societycide', or the disintegration of the basis for social life. The most direct example of societycide would be the colonization of one people by another and the systematic extermination of their lifeworld, but in the megamachine's engineering operation we see the erosion of social and ecological life in general, as it is increasingly transfigured and incorporated into this accumulation regime.

Furthermore, given the inherent predatory, militaristic nature of the megamachine, there is a tendency to weaponize civil activities, for example selective restrictions of water or food supplies. This is part of the megamachine's totalizing effort to break resistance and deepen control, incorporating every sphere of social life, including political, economic, and legal pressure, ecological manipulation, and propaganda, as constitutive of various forms of 'war by other means', e.g. 'lawfare', economic and ideological warfare, etc. The consequence of these practices, coupled with physical

violence, is a form of militarized control and extraction, where every area of social and ecological life is turned into a front in a total war against the biosphere.

This brings us to the present crisis, unique in human history, which threatens the end of the modern megamachine, and cataclysmic transformation and potential collapse of the biosphere itself. The root of this crisis is what we can call 'the saturation problem'. Through the modern era, the megamachine has grown to encase the world in a toxic web of iron and silicon, the strands of which overlay, shape, and direct nearly everything. Given that the megamachine is based on extractive accumulation, it is dependent upon an outside, on external social and ecological life, from which to extract. However, through the modern era, the megamachine has expanded to an extent that a small, ever-shrinking amount of outside remains, and it is becoming insufficient to fuel the system's ever-expanding growth. The lifeworld is becoming saturated by the megamachine, the limits of the lifeworld are being reached; the parasite has grown to a scale that it is consuming its host, which it is dependent on.

This situation is centuries, even millennia in the making. Given the nature of the megamachine, and provided its continued expansion, this situation was inevitable. The effects of this crisis resonate throughout the planetary lifeworld, and manifest as cracks within the global order and crises in every sphere; ecological catastrophe and climate collapse, increasing social division and unrest, economic crisis and crash, mass psychosis and alienation, institutional breakdown and declining political legitimacy, etc. Yet this is a long-term historical process, in which we are only in the early phases; the crisis escalates and deepens with each passing day. The most recent period of COVID, itself a product of this saturation, represents a massive jump in these developments.

The system is aware of this crisis; it acts in desperation to produce new outsides, such as in the development of new market spaces (like 'data mining'), and so-called 'disaster capitalism' or the utilization of destruction from war or natural disaster as an opportunity for capitalization. But these efforts are unsustainable; the approach of the system is to redouble the accumulation efforts (as seen in financialization and austerity under the neoliberal turn), to take what it can while it can, continuing with the same pathological logic that led us to this point. As a result of the crisis, the system's hold on power is slipping, and it is increasingly turning towards violence to preserve control, as we see in the authoritarian turn of states around the world, and the escalating criminalization of challenges to state power, and in particular the monopoly on legitimate violence, under the war on terror.

The modern epoch and its ordering system will pass away, just like every age before it. The question is how it will pass away, and what will come in its place. This is as yet undetermined, and this history is being made by the developments happening now. The danger, however, lies in the fact that the scale and power of this system is many orders of magnitude greater than any preceding it, which corresponds to the potential impact of catastrophic systemic collapse.

Furthermore, the system now is effectively out of control. Consider that there are nodes of power, like imperial states or big corporations, and individuals within institutions hold sway, but no one individual or institution is on its own capable of stopping it. The system is not on the whole even consciously willed by these actors, it is a product of the competitive interaction between actors in this field of relations, called the international geopolitical arena, or the global market. The system is a runaway train, being carried on by its own momentum; a kind of golem, a zombie machine, threatening to destroy us all. This is the situation that we as a species find ourselves in today.

Part II. Social Self-Defence

We will now discuss principles for resisting against the megamachine using the conceptual lens of social self-defence. Consider that in individual self-defence, an individual acts to respond against a threat to their well-being in order to preserve their life. The same principle holds for social self-defence, as society defending the well-being of its lifeworld. A straightforward example would be the mobilization of a population to defend their homeland against invasion. Yet as we saw, the threat to social life posed by the megamachine is multi-faceted, threatening the basis of organised life itself, and so our conception of self-defence must be correspondingly deep.

We will first examine further the nature of social life. For our purposes here, it is simpler to consider social life as a unified whole, yet reality is more complex, for society is not homogenous, and many elements of society actively support the system. Society, like every organism, is endowed with the capacity to defend and reproduce itself, and to develop over time in an evolutionary course. Following Öcalan, we can isolate three fundamental dimensions of social life; 1) politics, or free decision-making about the collective affairs of society (including economy), 2) morality, the values and principles that guide action in light of the responsibility entailed by being part of a collective, and 3) culture, the creative traditions of understanding, invention, and expression. These constitute three essential threads of social life, and without any of them social life will decay. The crux of the matter is the capacity of a society to freely determine its own self-creating evolution. The name of this capacity is self-determination.

Self-determination is often defined as the right of a people to their own nation-state. The content of self-determination, however, is self-governance; the capacity of a society to determine how to organize their own social structure, and thus collectively determine their shared fate. The basic principle is that all affected by something must have a say in determining that thing. There is an essential entanglement between self-determination and democracy, which literally means 'people's rule'. The point is that self-determination entails genuine democracy and vice versa, such that the collective organizes and governs its affairs in a cooperative manner.

The issue of social self-defence today is the struggle for realizing collective self-determination. This struggle is framed at the global level by the modern megamachine, which as we have seen has systematically eroded and robbed society of its capacity to perform these activities. The ultimate aim of this struggle is the dismantling of the modern megamachine and transforming the global order; in effect, altering the course of human evolution and ushering in a new epoch of human history. This is a long-term aim, though the conditions of possibility for this transformation are set by the present crisis. The relevant question is what to do in the short-medium term to defend society, and cultivate the ground for this transformation.

We can gain insight by looking to examples of such anti-systemic movements around the world, such as the Kurdish freedom movement or the Zapatistas. The approach of these movements is to develop an alternative or antithesis to the global ordering system of the megamachine from the outside based on bottom-up self-governance, rather than the megamachine's top-down administration, through local, democratic grassroots mobilization and self-organization. These efforts involve building structures that facilitate the development of the control local communities have over their own affairs and their capacity make decisions about their affairs for themselves. Examples of these structures include assemblies, committees, communes, etc., of which there is a long history. Central activities involve the development of control over key areas of social life, such as food, water, shelter, and safety. The fact that part of the megamachine's control strategy involves making society dependent on the system to provide for its basic needs makes the self-organisation of mutual aid institutions that can provide for these needs fundamental to social self-defence.

It is significant that these forms of organisation function simultaneously as political spaces, expanding people's capacity to become involved in decision-making, and ethical spaces, where deliberation is transparent, and members of the organisation can hold one another accountable. Recalling the essential entanglement of politics and morality, democratic self-organisation is essential for society to defend itself against the lust for domination, which can be checked by such

institutions. Democracy (distinct from the sham of contemporary so-called 'liberal democracies') is inherently opposed to domination, and is premised on dissent and disagreement on a shared, common platform. This is a key part of the ideological struggle against the megamachine, which involves developing a democratic culture based on alternative values, such as freedom, equality, communality, and ecological sustainability, as well as a culture of collective education to uproot and unlearn the ideologies of the megamachine that replicate themselves in the hearts and minds of the people, and ideologically challenge the operations of the system.

Another dimension of the struggle for a global re-ordering involves transforming the scale at which this order functions. This re-scaling operates at two levels; 1) increasing power of the local scale to determine their own affairs, and 2) developing links between organisations at the global level. This is an extension of the internationalist tradition, but is expanded to incorporate the mosaic of autonomously self-organised collectives. There is a tension between local autonomy and being a part of a larger global collective, parallel to the tension between individual liberty and communality, which must be continuously navigated.

This approach is based fundamentally on a certain dual-action, comprised of preserving the traditions of communality, freedom and resistance present within society yet eroded by the megamachine, while developing social practices and institutions that facilitate the development of new forms, values and imaginaries for social life. We can call this dual activity a 'dialectic', or an evolutionary course where each of the two dimensions are run through with one another in a developmental give and take; that is, a preservation, recuperation, and moving beyond of what was through the construction of new forms and structures which are suited for the present conditions.

This approach represents a search for an alternative path from the projects of 20th century leftism, such as the USSR, which sought to attack and take control of the structures of the megamachine in order to direct their operation towards the development of socialism. From the perspective of the approach discussed here, the argument is that while many things can be learned from these experiences, these projects failed to curb the advancement of the system because they did not sufficiently break with the operations of the megamachine, preserving for example top-down state administration and extractive industrialism. This alternative approach is motivated in large part by this failure, and seeks to break with the system in a deeper, more fundamental way, by building and defending structures of a new order.

It is insufficient, however, to simply break with the system and organize autonomously. The scope of the megamachine

encompasses much of the infrastructure through which modern social life functions. Moreover, we must remember that the megamachine too is organismic, and so creatively responds to defend and preserve its ordering system. As mentioned before, we can think of it like a web, where any attempt to break free is met with the production of new strands to capture the flight of freedom and incorporate it back into the system. It is thus necessary to engage with the megamachine in the practice of social self-defence and autonomous development. Further, given that the megamachine operates in every sphere, it is imperative that society responds in kind. What is needed is the effort to cultivate new lifeworlds, embodied through the activity and organisation of peoples fulfilling the needs of developing social life, on the basis of the traditions and legacies of freedom and resistance inherent in every society. Part of this involves pushing back the megamachine in order to make room for this development, and defending against the megamachine's attacks on every front; working in, around and through it, like a flower growing through concrete.

In line with this principle, engagement with the megamachine must take many forms. These can include appropriation of infrastructure into the autonomous project, through e.g. developing cooperatives and local self-governance structures. There are also possible roles to be played by a state apparatus during this transitional period, to for example use as a mechanism of self-defence against incursion from international corporations, or to facilitate the transition to an alternative order. Another dimension involves pushing back and resisting the continuing expansion of the megamachine, such as its destructive pipelines, dams, etc., in order to open up room for the autonomous structures to develop.

This pushing back must also involve direct engagement with and work within the system's institutions. This can include participation in mainstream electoral politics, through lobbying and the formation of parties, business networks of economic support, etc. The principle here is diplomacy, and the willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise on specific issues (not principles). The key is that the orientation and energy base of the struggle remains directed towards and accountable to the outside, to the society. In this way, so long as they are not viewed in themselves as avenues for achieving solutions, mainstream engagement can be used to turn these institutions into sites of contestation, and provide another tool for society to use in providing for its own self-defence. The legal sphere is of particular importance here; while law under the state system is a technique for enforcing and legitimating its order of control, it is an important site where defence of the persecuted can be waged within the system, and can also be used as a technique to check and restrict the actions of states and international institutions themselves, undermine their workings from within

and issue public challenges to their legitimacy. Though we must be under no illusions here; the law is the system's own determination of moral right, and states will not hesitate to violate their own laws in pursuit of their ends, as they do constantly.

A final topic discussed here is violence. The unprecedented destructive power of modern technology, coupled with the megamachine's monopolization of the means of violence, means the distribution of the means of violence has never been more asymmetric. As we saw, the means of violence is the ultimate ground for the megamachine's assertion and preservation of control. For this reason, the system fears popular organisation of the means of violence, as evidenced by increasing criminalisation under the war on terror. This together makes the reorganisation and democratization of the means of violence a central issue for social self-defence.

In terms of the use of violence in the course of resistance, there are two dimensions to consider; 1) ethical, and 2) strategic. The ethical dimension is well-known, deserving of further discussion, for the horrors resulting from violent clashes with modern weaponry should not be taken lightly. However, we can say the framing of total war and self-defence makes this issue relatively straightforward; a people facing existential threat have the right to defend themselves by any means necessary. The strategic dimension, or whether and how a particular struggle should employ tactics of violence, must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In general, there has been a shift away from armed struggle in the global arena since the 1960's world revolutionary period, for a number of reasons that cannot be analysed here, though there remain a number of living armed struggles, for example in Balochistan, the Philippines, India and Kurdistan. The decision of whether or not to employ violence must be made by each movement in the context of their conditions, but we can say that while the redistribution of the means of violence is a centrally important issue for self-defence, it is not the only issue, and it remains by itself incapable to combat the megamachine; violence must be incorporated into the multi-faceted struggle against the megamachine on every front.

In the end, the issue is life on Earth is being suffocated by a large power-hungry machine, and it is up to us to stop it, by instituting an alternative, sustainable way of ordering our affairs. There is no set end point to this path, and we cannot know what the future will look like before we arrive, as it is determined in the walking. This path will be shot through with contradictions, which must be navigated and grappled with at every step. As the Zapatistas say, "Asking, we walk." The issue is reminiscent of Gramsci's challenge; what do we do when every action we take serves the interest of power? His answer, struggle at every turn to play one's own game. We are walking a tightrope, with the risk of transfiguring into our own enemy looming on either

side. We must grasp tightly to our principles, keep track of the dignity of every human being, and struggle to develop our own capacities.

To conclude, remember; it is we who have the power. The megamachine is a parasite, dependent on its host. If the masses, the 99%, were to spontaneously organise themselves and refuse to participate any longer, the system would be powerless. As Holloway reminds us, we, the life of the planet, are the crisis of the system; it is dependent on us, it is our exhaustion that is bringing it to its breaking point, our actions it contorts and adapts to, and our organisation it fears. The question of self-determination today is the question of human destiny; will we be brought to annihilation by a bloated, senile, power-hungry system, or will we take control of the system and move into the future in a self-conscious manner? There is little to do but fortify ourselves, and aspire to respond to the demands of our historic times.

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that "the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary." We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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