

to have lived a full life, to have achieved some degree of mature integration, and to have made our unique contribution to our common human quest. This is a profound, accessible and wide-ranging work that will speak to each reader's journey towards wholeness.

## ECOLOGY/POLITICS

### THE ANTHROPOCENE AS CAPITALOCENE

By David Lorimer

#### THE END OF THE MEGAMACHINE – A Brief History of a Failing Civilisation

Fabian Scheidler

Zero Books, 2020, 426 pp., £19.99, p/b – ISBN 978-1-78904-271-9



This highly acclaimed book, a best-seller in Germany when it appeared, is one of the most important that I have ever read in understanding the roots of the destructive forces that threaten our very future. It spans 5,000 years of history, showing how what the author calls the three tyrannies of militarised states, capital accumulation allied to structural violence, and ideological power – reinforced by the fourth tyranny of linear, mechanistic thinking – have been steering both ecosystems and societies to the brink of collapse. Nowhere have I read such a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of what is undoubtedly an integrated system intent on perpetuating elite domination and control, historically based on actual and structural violence inherent in empires since Athens. The Megamachine of the title is taken from Lewis Mumford, whose work I also refer to in the Kingsnorth review above.

From 1348 to 1648 (the end of the 30 years' war), the foundations of our current world system were laid: 'an economy that aims for endless accumulation of capital; competing territorial states with centralised armies, police forces and bureaucracies and an ideology touting the expansion of the system as a blessing on the history of mankind.' (p. 85) In the first part, Scheidler explains the origins of the military-industrial complex in a chapter entitled Metal – mining, armament and power over nature. He notes the significance (p. 27) of a dominating male deity replacing earlier goddess cultures, and later incorporated into the patriarchal system and the self-image of governing elites. About three-quarters of the Roman state budget was deployed on military expenditures (for mediaeval France and England, this rose to 85%) – and this was correlated with the decisive role played by standing armies, the spread of silver money, and markets. Moreover, Roman 'publicani companies' foreshadowed the joint stock corporation with its aim of endless capital accumulation. We find this same dynamic in the Genoese and Venetian bankers where accumulated capital is always looking for new investment opportunities to drive further growth.

The increasing influence of banks (p. 110 ff.) centralises financial power as they demand monopoly rights, especially for mining, as a quid pro quo for continuing their lending and expanding the war economy (war is still hugely profitable). Largely as a result of lending for wars, Emperors like Charles V fell deeper into debt, and the author shows how

this same system enabled the appalling cruelty inflicted on southern Central America, where an estimated 50 million inhabitants were eventually reduced to 3 million. The conquistadors were driven by the international money and debt machine, visiting unspeakable violence in their quest for the mineral wealth required by the money-war complex. The details recounted are truly harrowing, while natives – and later slaves – were not even considered human, although they were candidates for conversion to Christianity, whose claim to universal truth (p. 77) is later appropriated by science.

The central myth here is that 'the West advances progress throughout human history', and this has taken various rhetorical forms of missionary justification: Christianity, salvation, civilisation, reason, democracy, competition and free markets. The author shows very clearly how power is systemically maintained by violence, massacre, genocide, persecution, and repression. The crushing of egalitarian and resistance movements – peasants in reaction to land-grabbing enclosures that destroyed their community-based cultural foundations, heretics (and witches) as in the Cathars and the Anabaptist movement seating to emulate Jesus himself (pp. 90, 122), and craftsmen resisting industrialisation whereby they are uprooted and obliged to become wage slaves; then the destitute of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when poor laws were abolished. Both the slavery system and factories represent the progressive commodification of the human being, also underpinned by the mechanistic worldview that seeks to explain life in terms of the lifeless. An interesting correlation identified is between powerlessness and the development of apocalyptic visions. (pp. 63-73)

A further key theme is the tension between the concentration of power inherent in centralised elite governance and genuine democracy in terms of self-organisation and self-determination. The author maintains, rightly in my view, that the history of modern democracies must actually be written as a history of restricting democracy and keeping concessions within limits – one sees this in contemporary EU rhetoric whereby democracy needs to be maintained through censorship of free speech. He identifies and explains five filters: representation, money, debt, voting and civil rights, and public opinion. Representation maintains 'right thinking' elite influence, as do the other factors. James Madison observed already in 1787 that the US would best be ruled by 'a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their country.' (p. 212) The filter of 'public opinion' is the most evident today, and the author explains the history of concentration of the press in a few wealthy hands, and the development of sophisticated psychological manipulation techniques through propaganda to manage perception and behaviour. The ultimate aim is system control – ultimately down to our very consciousness and emotions – with its underlying mechanistic/engineering picture of both humans and society. Lenin envisaged government by a trained elite, the same underlying basis of technocracy – the people and freedom cannot be trusted so we need 'guided democracy' and the artificial manufacture of consent.

As with Paul Kingsnorth, there are an enormous number of further rich insights to be gleaned from this radical and seminal study, so I will focus on his final chapter on possibilities of exiting from the Megamachine. There is a little doubt in my mind that we are in a period of cultural disintegration, which also helps explain the appeal of populism with its simplistic demonisation formula for uniting against an enemy. The real dynamics are inequality leading to resistance and revolt, historically responded to by repressive violence in an effort to maintain business as usual; and

elite arrogance and unaccountable abuse of power leading to resentful populism and attempts to contain this through censorship means of an alliance between governments, corporations, think tanks, and intelligence agencies.

Grassroots movements do not subscribe to one-size fits all planning, and, as the author maintains, we are in a period of revolution without a master plan, aspiring towards a society based on cooperation instead of competition. Generically, he coins the phrase 'exit from below' to characterise decentralised initiatives based not on globalisation but glocalisation – thus modelled on the World Social Forum and Spirit of Humanity Forum rather than the World Economic Forum. Transition towns cited are a good example of reviving local communities, and the author also suggests the necessity of recovering the Commons. This search for true democracy is taking place against a backdrop of 'the legalised corruption of elected representatives,' whose campaigns rely on corporate donations, especially in the US from the pharmaceutical and food industries, and arms manufacturers. The historical task, as the author sees it, 'is to free the state from its interdependence with big business and to make it an institution obligated to serve the common good (p. 330). The model of a council based on people organising themselves and making decisions together in local units is highlighted, as is the necessity of demilitarising society – also called for by Charles Eisenstein. The peace movement needs to be much more coherently active than currently, and we need to give up our idea of controlling nature; also 'rediscovering work as a cultural activity that creates relationships and meaning' – an urgent requirement in view of looming AI unemployment.

The afterword contains a salutary diagnosis of the corona crisis in terms of corporate consolidation, and authoritarian control in response to contrived states of emergency – 'a crisis mode that suspends democracy, initially temporarily, and eventually permanently.' (p. 324) European leaders are currently exhibiting a war mentality justified by a powerful external enemy (Russia), exhorting their nations to pull together, putting aside internal conflicts, civil rights and all other issues in general, in this way distracting attention from domestic discontent. Given space restrictions, there is much that I have left out, so I strongly recommend that you put this book at the top of your reading list if you want to understand more clearly and deeply the Megamachine system in which we are enmeshed and the possibilities for a creative exit.

## WHITHER HYDRAULIC CIVILISATION?

By David Lorimer

### PLANET AQUA

Jeremy Rifkin

*Polity, 2024, 308 pp., £18.99, h/b – ISBN 978-1-5095-6373-9*



Jeremy Rifkin is the author of more than 20 best-selling books translated into 35 languages, as well as being a senior economic adviser to the EU and China on transitioning to what he calls a third industrial revolution to address the underlying causes of climate change. This is a groundbreaking contribution, rethinking our central metaphor in terms of water rather than earth, entailing a fundamental shift of ways of thinking

and hence of operating systems. Such an aquatic view of our planet is evident from space photos, as the cover illustrates. It is our planetary hydrosphere that animates all life on Earth, and which is now severely out of balance. As Chinese Taoist philosophy has always maintained, waters are a life source rather than a resource to be exploited for short-term profit.

The book begins with a series of observations and statistics relating to extreme water stress, floods, droughts, heat waves and forest fires – with more in prospect, while all this is a natural consequence our extractive, utilitarian and exploitative capitalist system driven by growth and leading inexorably to resource depletion. As I noted in my review of Joseph Campbell above, there is a huge difference between mythologies that seek to work in harmony with nature, and those considering humans as separate and superior. Rifkin takes this up as a core proposition (p. 235), noting the reaction of Schopenhauer to Kant's rationalism 'using cold, detached, objective reason to subdue, capture, sequester, and tame nature's excesses, in order to meet the utilitarian needs of our human family.' (p. 7) Schopenhauer's was the only entry to a prize competition on the foundations of morality arranged by the Royal Danish Society in 1837 to celebrate Immanuel Kant.

Against the conventional wisdom of the time (p. 254), Schopenhauer proposed that compassion, not pure reason, was the basis of morality 'and that emotions and feelings animated the compassionate instinct.' He regarded Kant's view as 'entirely abstract, wholly insubstantial, and likewise floating about entirely in the air.' In other words, it is not grounded in lived human experience, and the heart is entirely absent. Rifkin rightly identifies Schopenhauer as the first person in history to define the empathic process in a succinct fashion and notes that empathic moments eliminate the *other* (his italics). The development of AI has been largely driven by the same detached reason, data computation, algorithmic agency, and robotic feedback. We are at a critical point of choice where I believe we have to renounce our effort to bend nature to our rational will, and rather embrace nature's calling and rejoin the community of life on Planet Aqua. This entails a Goethean mindful and empathic biophilic reattachment to all that is alive so that life might be replenished (p. 260) Can we both live in part in virtual worlds, while re-embedding ourselves back into the planetary spheres, biomes, and ecosystems? This is where indigenous world views can provide priceless guidance.

The book is structured in four parts: the imminent collapse of hydraulic civilisation, the Mediterranean eco-region as the canary in the mine, the implications of living on Planet Aqua, and a new ontology for life on earth. The water-energy-food nexus is a key focus in discussing the rise and fall of civilisations, with deforestation and agriculture leading to salinisation, drought, and hence to food shortages and the need for migration (our ancestors were nomadic and adaptable, a trait now in evidence with climate refugees, a trend initially identified by Sir Crispin Tickell as far back as the 1980s. The Romans were the first to manipulate water supply on a large scale, thereby providing drinking water (and baths) for cities – the Pont du Gard feeding Arles is an awe-inspiring example. There are some fascinating figures on the growth of watermills in Europe, reaching 500,000 by the 1790s, and also of the implication of dams – there are currently over 36,000 spread across major river basins, and causing downstream ecosystem change. Then there is the use of water for irrigation, especially of cash crops, and the increasing need for desalination plants to provide drinking water for burgeoning populations. Rifkin recommends a radical shift from capitalism to hydroism (detail and implications on