

ESSAY

The Deep Reprogramming of Men: Modern Society as a *Forster's Machine*

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Current Western society exhibits the characteristics of a Forster's Machine. Under a Foster's Machine, the manly virtues are subverted so that The Machine may continue functioning smoothly. Over time, however, the balance between the evolution of The Machine and the evolution of the individuals it was originally intended to serve "flips," and The Machine no longer serves man, but man serves The Machine.

In "The Machine Stops" by E.M. Forster, humans are confined to subterranean cells and have very little contact with each other. Their needs are met by a society-wide, caretaking device known as *The Machine*. Forster's Machine keeps the underground civilisation functioning, delivering whatever the people desire straight to their individual cells. Thus, the author shows us a culture that is the polar opposite to humanity's hunter-gatherer roots.

The Machine, by providing an extremely safe, sedentary lifestyle, has caused the people to become domesticated and quiescent, enfeebled in mind and body, with their powers of will and critical thinking greatly atrophied. What were once considered the "manly virtues" are entirely absent.

This degeneracy is purposeful. The underground society destroys all healthy infants in a kind of an anti-Spartan strategy implemented to select for *unhealthy* individuals. Society's argument in favour of such a brutal culling is that healthy individuals would not be happy living such a confined life. Euthanizing them is therefore more humane than cursing them to a miserable existence. The deeper truth is that healthy individuals would prove no end of trouble for a great machine tasked with keeping everyone tamped down into narrow grooves of existence.

The Machine's deep programming discourages individuals from even *thinking* about breaking the rules, largely by making sure that each person's desires are completely satisfied within the system.

Over time, a self-reinforcing cycle of personality manipulation and Machine power-augmentation has developed. In such a cycle, the people's docility improves the ability of The Machine to take care of them, and The Machine's increasing efficiency at satisfying the people's desires make them ever more docile. After all, once people discover that their wants are adequately served simply by remaining on the track laid

out for them, they have little impetus to stray from that track. The trick for The Machine, of course, is to encourage the development of a population content to live only with what is carried down its tracks.

In his short story, Forster doesn't go into detail about how The Machine manages to pull off the trick of desire-management, but one can easily imagine that it uses such tried-and-true techniques as pervasive marketing, potent peer pressure, celebrity taste-makers, and agenda-laden book and movie narratives.

Additionally, Forster's Machine does much more than create a mollifying environment for its tenants. It also uses the very individuals it is supposed to serve to maintain its own operations and existence. In other words, Forster's Machine operates very much like *superorganism*.

A superorganism, as described by E.O. Wilson and others, is an entity composed of organisms cooperating and coordinating in such a way as to maintain the existence of that entity. This is not dissimilar to how the cells of a body cooperate to maintain the health of an organism. Classic examples of superorganisms include beehives and ant colonies.

In one sense, a superorganism is physical; it is, of course, made-up of individual organisms. In another sense, however, a superorganism is incorporeal, for it possesses no material-form that would satisfy even the loosest, most inclusive definition of what a "body" is. Obviously, a superorganism does not possess consciousness, and yet it behaves as if it has goals and the strategies for achieving those goals. The superorganism may not be life, but it is certainly *lifelike*.

As with any life-form or lifelike entity, the superorganism has certain purposes it must achieve in order to sustain itself. And as with life and lifelike entities, if a superorganism faces obstacles while attempting to achieve its goals, it will be subjected to its own evolutionary pressures. That is, a superorganism, like the organisms comprising it, *adapts*. Indeed, it must adapt to its changing environment or else "die."

As the co-evolution of the superorganism and the organisms comprising it progresses, a precarious balance is typically maintained. The cooperating organisms cannot evolve in such a way as to overly interfere with the goals of the overarching superorganism, and the superorganism cannot come to dominate its organisms to such an extent that their individual health is compromised to the point of harming the superorganism.

If a superorganism—such as, say, a hive—begins to overstep its bounds and to tilt the balance of co-evolution toward itself to the extent that it harms the organisms comprising it, Nature will step-in to restore the balance. For instance, if too many hive-members die off or become disabled, the hive will begin to deteriorate since it will not be able to perform all the tasks that keep it properly functioning. Thus, the superorganism of the hive will be forced to pull back from its overly domineering thrust and begin to treat

its constituent organisms better. This will allow the organisms comprising the hive to regain their health and return to the efficient performance of their allotted hive-tasks, thus restoring the health of the overall superorganism.

But consider what would happen if, instead, the hive-members were to grow *overly* adaptable to the dictates of the hive. In such a case, the balance of power between the two levels of organization would remain permanently askew. In such a situation, the organisms would eventually become stripped of their own individual wills and begin to take-on the characteristics of mere cogs in The Machine. Like the cells within a body, these organisms would cease all independent existence, completely sacrificing their own liberty in order to better serve the dominating will of the superorganism. At this point, the superorganism achieves both full corporeality and supreme control of its component-parts. It becomes, in other words, an organism.

We may sense that this change is a devolution of some kind, a step down for the superorganism. But it is not so. The superorganism has progressed from something merely lifelike to life, itself—from a quasi-corporeal entity into something undeniably physical. More importantly, in terms of natural selection, it has achieved a level of efficiency impossible to attain by merely corralling individually willed organisms, no matter how well-adapted those individuals are to their roles.

Nature appears to have a predilection for making the simple, complex—presumably because the right sort of complexity, a complexity allowing for task-specialisation and the extension of environmental control, can lead to greater efficiency.

With human beings, our superorganism—our Machine—takes the form of the accumulation of all our social, economic, and political rules and activities. For the sake of brevity, we can call this accumulation the "State."

Humans are unusual in that we have consciously created our own superorganism. We are also unusual in that, for our version of the superorganism-organism relationship, we insist that the balance of power must remain forever in our favour (this holds at least for "free" societies). This means that the superorganism must never gain power at the expense of the organisms comprising it. Thus, wherever the people are free and *healthy* (meaning that they remain in possession of non-self-hurtful desires and the power to fulfil those desires), the State exists to serve the individual, and not the other way around.

However, to maintain the balance of power in our favour, we must constantly and vigilantly be expending energy and intelligence in order to stave-off the encroachments of our superorganism. Nature would be very happy, indeed, to step in and diminish the inefficiencies inherent in a raucous group of free-will-possessing individuals and hand over to the superorganism the role of *dominus*.

Just as with all superorganisms, there is an ever-present danger that the State will overgrow its role and its people will suffer. If those of us living in an overgrown State are unable to match its expanded powers with our own expanded, *individual* powers, then we will find ourselves living in a situation in which the State no longer serves us, but we serve the State. I call this reversal of predominance *the Flip*. In such a post-Flip predicament, individuals will suffer and deteriorate even as the State grows stronger.

If, leading up to the Flip, some individuals have been socially or evolutionarily shaped to be accepting of the Flip, then those individuals will not *mind* the loss of their autonomy in the new, post-Flip society. These individuals—that is, those who have had their wills successfully co-opted by the superorganism—may not only accept defeat but consider such a defeat to be a positive development. These individuals can be said to have adopted *the morality of The Machine*, the machine in this case being the State. The morality of The Machine, of course, is whatever values, judgments, and activities best serve The Machine.

The idea that the conquered would grow to champion the very values and rules serving to keep them down is not a far-fetched notion. History provides numerous examples of the enslaved adopting the morality of the master. Slaves to The Machine may even assert that they, and only they, possess the *true* morality, and that all those who disagree with them are not as "advanced" or "enlightened" as they are.

Over time, as the people in Forster's story started to take on more and more specialized roles in their efforts to better serve The Machine, they began operating "with increased efficiency and decreased intelligence." It seems that their increased specialization made them great at their jobs but terrible at life. Each individual became whittled down to his or her point of contact with The Machine. "The better a man knew his own duties," writes the author, "the less he understood the duties of his neighbour." Perhaps worst of all, not only have the people lost their ability to consider events outside of their own speciality, there is no one left with the breadth of mind to judge The Machine, itself.

In "The Machine Stops", Forster's Machine eventually begins to deteriorate to such a degree that even those who have fully absorbed its morality can sense, if only vaguely, the resultant negative impacts on their lives. This deterioration occurs as a consequence of the imbalance The Machine has perpetuated between superorganism and organisms. The human-tools living in the cells of The Machine have been allowed to decline in mental, physical, and spiritual health to the point that they can no longer sufficiently serve their overlord.

Someone unfamiliar with the foibles and predispositions of the human animal may wonder why the people in "The Machine Stops" never rose up and overthrew The Machine. The explanation is that they developed a learned blindness when it came to the presence of The Machine in their lives. They became so subservient to its whims and dictates, they so thoroughly absorbed its imposed morality, that they could no

longer adequately judge the full extent of its faults. And so, unable to recognise the true source of their suffering, they continued in their suffering.

The author tells us that, when The Machine finally stopped working completely, its constant hum died away and the people suffered from the ensuing silence. As Prince Hamlet and Colonel Kurtz discovered in their own ways, once the noise of life dies away, we are all forced to come face-to-face with the horror of the silence.

After reading E.M. Forster's short story, I came away feeling that the people of the story could have avoided their sad demise if only they had been cognizant of the following five statements...

Five Statements Concerning The Machine:

- 1. We made The Machine; The Machine did not make us.*
- 2. The Machine serves us; we do not serve the Machine.*
- 3. The Machine may breakdown or evolve in a manner uncondusive to our wellbeing.*
- 4. Our continued suffering may indicate that The Machine is not functioning properly.*
- 5. When The Machine is not functioning properly, it should either be fixed or discarded.*

People have the right to stop serving any Machine that has stopped serving them. Only a society comprised of unhealthy individuals would continue serving a badly performing Machine until it fell apart on its own. Real men stand up.