

# **Vital Cells**

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How can we dispense with the tenacious Western illusion of the subject that hampers autonomous organizational projects? How do we become the sort of people who can take a revolutionary situation to its conclusion? In this ambitious and polemical proposal, Kevin Suemnicht enlists cybernetics to rethink vitalist revolutionary organization from the ground up.

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Isn't this the answer to the question, 'what are we?' We are habits, nothing but habits  
— the habit of saying 'I.' —Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

From the Arab Spring to the George Floyd Rebellion, the past decade has witnessed a global series of insurrectionary events that has emboldened the imagination of revolutionaries worldwide. Through intensive preparation, timely escalation, and the innovation of leading gestures, autonomous revolutionaries have frequently proven themselves capable of functioning as the most advanced element within these social movements. However, such moments of rupture have also tended to be confined to an exceptional space and time unable to enact enduring transformations of everyday life: hemmed in by counterinsurgency, they eventually succumb to a reabsorption and sublimation within the channels of normal life, with all the attending breakdowns of insurgent relationships this carries with it. In the time that remains between now and the next wave, how are we to proceed?

It is our gambit that many of the autonomous movement's limitations are themselves organizational — a perception that we believe is widely shared. For too long, the anarchist and autonomous movement has refused an intensive and protracted theoretical debate on organization, with the result that our thinking on the matter has remained in a state of self-incurred infancy. Where this debate did occur, it often found itself trapped within a sterile opposition between formality and informality that is as fallacious as it is reductive. Although many of us correctly identify the obsolescence of principal models handed down to us by the 20th century — we want neither One Big Union nor the classical cadre party of Marxist antiquity — our prevailing mode of organization (herein referred to as “the milieu”) is severely lacking. Are there other organizational forms that remain untried?

In what follows, we propose a fundamental shift in the way our movement relates both to itself and to the broader world. In doing so, we turn to an unlikely source. While it is often the object of justifiable criticism by revolutionaries, we suggest, perhaps controversially, that cybernetic thought offers an overlooked resource for organizational innovation within autonomous revolutionary currents.

In the mid-twentieth century, anthropologist and systems theoretician Gregory Bateson published a text analyzing the causes of alcoholism and recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous, entitled “The Cybernetics of the Self.”<sup>2</sup> In the program and organizational structure of AA, Bateson saw an example of the nascent cybernetic epistemology that he himself was helping to pioneer.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, Columbia University Press, 1991, x.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Bateson, “The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism” in *Steps toward an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, 309-337.

Consider the commonplace failure of individuals suffering from alcoholism to beat their addiction through self-will: the alcoholic, upon awakening from a drinking spree, will tell herself that she will not drink again, only to find herself drinking a short time later. Despite her best efforts, she cannot beat the addiction relying upon self-will alone. According to Bateson, the logic of alcoholism stems from an epistemological error characteristic of all Western thought, namely, the belief in the autonomous self. Given that the nature of the illness is epistemological, only an epistemological change can defeat the cycle of addiction.<sup>3</sup>

One of the chief merits of Systems Theory consists in providing an alternative view of the self, one which corrects the West's underlying Cartesianism. If Alcoholics Anonymous offers an exemplary case study, this is because, through the Twelve Step program, the alcoholic "surrenders" the epistemological assumption of her autonomous individuality, and instead yields to a power beyond the self that will "restore [her] to sanity."<sup>4</sup> This power, which manifests in theological beliefs and in participation within the AA group, allows the alcoholic to insert herself within a system that perpetuates sobriety by deactivating an obsessive relation with the self.

Beyond this epistemological reorientation, cybernetic principles are also mirrored in AA's organizational structure, whose only consistent feature lies in the adherence to the structure of the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions. AA has millions of members worldwide without any kind of centralized authority. The early experience of Alcoholics Anonymous was marked by a rapid grassroots expansion of the organization, which branched out like a meme or a virus, with dozens of local groups becoming hundreds and then thousands. Since anyone can create a new AA group, this expansion is achieved through the principle of attraction rather than promotion.

For revolutionaries, the allure of AA's organizational features should be apparent: to be able to organize masses of people without a central authority and through immanent self-organization mirrors the revolutionary process itself. What is even more decisive, however, is the link it establishes between getting organized and becoming-otherwise. In this, we see what could be called a *vital principle of organization*, in which getting organized means following trajectories that allow us to overcome obstacles standing in the way of realizing our potential.

What if we were to apply this same vital principle to the autonomous revolutionary current? Can we foster political formations premised on a direct link between organization and human needs? Can we move beyond ideology and organize ourselves in such a way that we can grow in political power while overcoming the struggles we face in our everyday lives?

What follows is a provocation designed to open a field of experimentation and further debate.

## The Cybernetic Episteme

Cybernetics is the study of control, and it is the direct precursor to systems thinking. As an epistemology — a way of knowing the world — cybernetic thought considers how relations among actors produce systems with regulatory and purposive features. In this, it rejects simple causal models (*a causes b*) and in favor of a circular causation wherein each part of the system

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<sup>3</sup> It warrants clarifying that what follows is not an essay about sobriety, nor do we speak for Alcoholics Anonymous. We also do not claim that AA has political intent, nor that it is not without its contradictions. Merely, we believe that its organization can be a productive site for thinking about general organizational questions.

<sup>4</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 25.

affects all the others and is affected in turn (*a* affects *b*, which in turn effects *a*...).<sup>5</sup> Systems respond to *information*, the ‘differences that make a difference’ and exhibit regulatory mechanisms via *feedback loops* or processes by which information recursively affects the system. At the heart of cybernetic thinking is an emphasis on the analysis of *processes* rather than an analysis of things. Cybernetics does not care what a thing is, but instead considers only the processes that have produced it and what the thing itself can do.

Cybernetics has become the dominant episteme of the 21st century.<sup>6</sup> An episteme, according to Foucault, is the condition of possibility for thought within a given historical conjuncture.<sup>7</sup> Cybernetics, while evoking an image of the computer sciences, vastly exceeds the realm of technology and instead refers to a general approach to knowledge that itself transcends any particular discipline. All disciplines today consciously or unconsciously draw inspiration and insight from the cybernetic mode of thought, with the result that *the cybernetic episteme is largely unthought*. Critics of cybernetic government will deride cybernetics while in the same breath evoking myriad concepts that emerged from, and rest upon, the cybernetic episteme.

This confusion can be seen in the very term “cybernetics” itself, whose etymology is to steer, to navigate, or to govern. The question is: who is doing the steering? Is it an army of faceless technocrats? Or might the steering agency be a property of the system itself? It must be admitted that, as revolutionaries, we want to steer the processes of social change toward rupture and a communal mode of life, just as our enemies seek the eternal reign of Empire.

There is a cybernetics from above, but there is another from below. Consider the following contrast:

From the perspective of Empire, the aim of cybernetics is to render populations into governable objects, to make the systemic characteristics transparent and to intervene within their terrain. Cybernetics, at this macro-level of statecraft, becomes a position from outside, a gaze from the panoptic towers of technocratic government onto the swarming masses. Today, the dominant mode of government as well as the organization of the economy can be said to be of this transcendental-cybernetic type. Broken windows policies – infamous for increasing the arbitrariness of police violence – are an example of this type of cybernetic governance. Criminality, abstracted into a spreadsheet of criminal incidences, is targeted at a population level; neighborhoods with statistically higher “rates of crime” will tend to be subject to more aggressive police presence.<sup>8</sup> Through algorithmic analytics, the international Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development promotes “data-driven innovation” for “growth and well-being” as a means to predict consumer behavior and promote economic resiliency in the face of systemic perturbations.<sup>9</sup> In these and other ways, through a polymorphous fabric of apparatuses, the abstract forces of Empire create an emergent order with greater stability than anything predicted by 20th century revolutionaries. While no single person or institution steers the system, the cyber-

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Kauffman defines cybernetics as “the study of systems and processes that interact with themselves and produce themselves from themselves.” Cited in Andrzej Targowski *Cognitive Informatics and Wisdom Development*, IGI Global, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that the term cybernetics has itself fallen out of favor. Today systems thinking, computer sciences, and related fields draw from cybernetics as its precursor, but rarely evoke it as a concept. Nevertheless, the postulates of cybernetics form the bedrock of all contemporary systems thinking.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey L. Vagle, “Tightening the OODA Loop: Police Militarization, Race, and Algorithmic Surveillance” in *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* 22 (1), 2016, 101-138.

<sup>9</sup> OECD. *Data-Driven Innovation: Big Data for Growth and Well-Being*. OECD Publishing, 2015.

netic structure is a network of preventative measures, apparatuses of measurement and control, complete with systemic redundancies to reimpose order even within momentary systemic crises.

There is also a micro-level cybernetics, where information and feedback loops create regulation without recourse to the transcendental apparatuses of government. The FitBit on a wrist, for example, provides its wearer with statistics on their performance, thereby generating feedback loops that alter behavior. When we speak of ecology, so too are we speaking of a process by which natural beings respond to and are altered by environmental fluctuations. An agglomeration of negative, positive, and balancing feedback loops creates the fluxion and dynamic movement of the world just as humanity too creates and responds to these same mechanisms, regardless of whether we are conscious of them or not.

There is no question here of glorifying or promoting the immanent mode simply because it does not contain a hierarchical commitment. In fact, the immanent cybernetic perspective might even facilitate a stillmore entrenched and effective mode of government.

Unsurprisingly, immanent cybernetics has become the reigning ideology of Silicon Valley and its ascending technocratic class. The transition to the cybernetic episteme was itself spurred forward by the children of the New Left. As Adam Curtis has shown, the mass proliferation of communes that exploded in the wake of the failures of the student movement consciously embodied the organizational principles of the cybernetic episteme, from use of feedback to facilitate group cohesion to the construction of geodesic domes.<sup>10</sup> Countercultural intellectual Buckminster Fuller, who popularized the domes, initiated a design revolution incorporating systems thinking — the emphasis on connectivity and feedback — to imagine a new society that was networked and nonhierarchical. As the network of communes imploded under its own weight, many former communards became pioneers of Silicon Valley and exported their utopian vision into the technological infrastructure of the cybernetic era, laying the groundwork for what Deleuze terms the society of control.<sup>11</sup>

Intuiting the connections between governmentality and Silicon Valley, theorists within the autonomous movement have leveled strong critique against cybernetics as ethically void and hopelessly managerial.<sup>12</sup> For such thinkers, cybernetics is inherently a tool of Empire which cannot be used for anything but rendering the world governable. In a recent article on cybernetic governmentality, Emmelhainz describes the political horizon of the cybernetic critique, calling for resistance to its episteme through “presence, embodiment, immediacy, and human memory” and to “find new ways to create life as opposed to turning it into data.”<sup>13</sup> Ethically, such sentiments are virtuous. Yet they offer us little by way of how we should strategically proceed, and thus are limited in their political potency. How are we to reattach ourselves to presence when world-history itself is plunging in another direction? In reality, once an episteme is established, there is little hope of its reversal. Cybernetics, as such, is unlikely to ever be defeated (moreover it’s unclear *what* would be defeated). It can, however, be put to other uses.

After all, the truth is that the revolutionary milieu has long been cybernetic. Whether we speak of running a common project such as a social center, or the ebbs and flows of our affinity groups, or calls for the creation of zones of heterogeneity — we are participating in the creation of

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Curtis, *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace*, BBC.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript On the Society of Control,” in *October* (59), 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, trans. Robert Hurley. Semiotext(e), 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz, “Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth,” *eFlux* (122).

systems, and we will be subject to systems dynamics. “Try. Fail. Try again. Fail better,” the OODA loop, or praxis are ways of describing feedback mechanisms. The epoch-defining technics of the Hong Kong rebels, the meme-with-force, swarm warfare, to say nothing of the perennial calls for the creation of mesh networks, are all propelled by cybernetic principles. The denial of these cybernetic features only undermines our self-reflexive capacities and, therefore, the production of revolutionary positivity.

As the control society continues to develop, the material bases for its revolutionary overthrow transforms along with it. In the 20th century, the dominant sites of struggle occurred within the paradigmatic institutions of its time — the factory, the university, the hacienda, for instance. Today we witness a diminishing role of these sites within the revolutionary process, which itself corresponds to the changing nature of power. To the extent that they correspond to these institutions and associated identity groupings, classical social movements represent a waning lever of power.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the meme-with-force, which courses like flows of information through the global proletariat, corresponds more closely to the material infrastructure of our time.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, we seek to affirm the materiality of thought — to base revolutionary practice on the real conditions of our epoch and to discover the revolutionary capacities that we already possess.

Cybernetics thus poses the terrain upon which the struggles of the 21st century are to be waged, for better or for worse. Nevertheless, the common posture towards cybernetic government within the autonomous milieu tends exclusively toward its negation. By positioning cybernetics in strictly negative terms, as an enemy to be combated, we are engaging in unhelpful polemic, and we become all the more governed by that which we refuse to understand. The matter at hand is not a choice between the “toughest or most tolerable regime,” but rather, as Deleuze says, the inevitable confrontation between enslaving and liberating forces within these regimes.<sup>16</sup> While cybernetic governmentality is an enslaving force, it is at the same time the material reality within which contemporary struggle is forged. Today’s struggles are not simply waged within the factories and universities but rather over the metaphysical terrain of control systems themselves. *The opposite of cybernetic government is not its outright destruction, but rather the destitution of its governing mechanisms.*<sup>17</sup>

Today, our task must be to marshal cybernetic principles toward structural exile and the creation of a revolutionary force. In either instance, however, ordering principles will be operative — they already are and always have been. There is no outside to governmentality, just as the

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<sup>14</sup> Those who cling to this power — today’s Left — have become less than an anachronism; it has become a method for those who continue to be associated with the lapsed mode of production to maintain some semblance of power. By clinging to these specters, the Left only contributes to counterinsurgency.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Torino & Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes-with-Force: Lessons from the Yellow Vests,” Mute Magazine, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, “Postscript.”

<sup>17</sup> It may be possible to see parallels between the project of the vital cells and the work of Hardt and Negri. A few clarifications are therefore in order. We agree with Hardt and Negri’s call to orient struggle within the terrain of the society of control. We also understand Empire as a global world-system exceeding the sovereignty of particular nation-states (which may, however, be undergoing a process of fragmentation today). Our project, however, differs in key regards. First, Hardt and Negri maintain a constituent view of politics — that the creation of flexible regimes of labor and the connectivity afforded by the internet is producing a new political subjectivity, the Multitude, which in turn might one day achieve a “democracy on a global scale” (Multitude, xi). Although Hardt and Negri insist on the necessity of an ‘exile’ from Empire, for them this initial defection is a preliminary stage toward a recomposition of institutions of democracy at a global scale. For us, it tends instead toward a process of positive fragmentation. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000, and *Multitude: War and Democracy in an Age of Empire*. The Penguin Press, 2004.

project of governing is always incomplete. Either we cede the space of cybernetic systems to our enemies, to those who keep us down, or we create mechanisms by which regulatory processes are immanent to our own vitality. To take the revolutionary process further, to bring Empire to its knees, the party of anarchy must become the party of an *other* order. The unfreedom of anomie must be replaced with the freedom of revolutionary positivity and the overcoming of all the historical limitations that we have inherited from our broken world.

## Two Forms of Faith

An organization capable of addressing the problems of our time must be able to concretely improve the lives of those engaging in struggle. Revolutionary organizations must succeed at, or make *plausible* the possibility of, fabricating a happy life for those participating. That is, it must proceed according to the vital principle where organization is oriented toward overcoming our immediate problems. Naïve and messianic faith in the power of revolution to fix our worldly problems are each misled — *the revolutionary process itself must contain the power to depose Empire, while healing our souls.*

However, the dominant mode of its organization today — the milieu — creates problems within struggle which it is unable to resolve. This, in turn, causes comrades to seek solutions outside, which tends toward their incorporation within various wellness trends. Let us look at each of these features in more depth.

The reigning paradigm of organization among the autonomous revolutionary current today is the “milieu,” or radical scene: a mode of organization premised upon small groups of friends who stand apart from society and attempt to intervene within social struggles. Like all organizational forms, it has its history. In recent years, the insurrectional anarchist milieu has functioned as the unfortunate child of the formality/informality debates within insurrectionary anarchism. By refusing to stake out a place within the ideological pantheon of existing political forms, by asserting its position in the mode of a non-position, the milieu functions as an axiomatic default that has excused itself from the realm of critique on the grounds that it proffers no ‘models’ of its own: ‘autonomy’ becomes a stand-in for the milieu itself.

Yet the organizational form of the milieu stands in the way of its revolutionary potential in a variety of ways. While it imagines itself as standing outside society as a space of purity and safety from the bad ways of society, the milieu continually recreates a tyranny of structurelessness, as its informal organization reproduces existing social hierarchies. While its naive politics of friendship has certain advantages in terms of fostering political intensities, it tends toward a form of cultural and racial closure that prevents political relations from being fostered *across* social differences. Finally, with the milieu we lack the means to foster the capacities of our comrades. On one hand, we tell ourselves that we are all equal, while at the same time vast differences in experience and inequalities in our relations speak the truth of our situation.

Without the practical means of overcoming such immediate obstacles, many comrades within the milieu project their immediate material, existential, and spiritual desires onto the futural event of revolution. That is, until they drop out of the movement altogether.

Outside the milieu, the bourgeois order offers us a parade of wellness trends to cope with the objective misery of our era. Wellness trends reproduce the dominant mode of subjectivity under capitalism — the epistemological error described by Bateson — in that they are premised upon



self-cultivation with little regard to broader social processes which initially produce unwellness. Meanwhile, these trends pose unrealistic and normative models of health, which either remain unreachable or else are achieved only at the expense of creating a wholly interior life cut off from and hostile to other people. From an organized form of misery, we are encouraged to strive for a relative and individualistic peace. By seeking 'wellness' in isolation, by managing our bodies with austerity, we further entrench a condition of alienation that only diminishes our powers. Ultimately, wellness cannot make us well, for the simple reason that it represents the existing system's effort to resolve its own contradictions. Whereas the milieu and the wellness apparatus each reveal themselves to be forms of faith, we instead propose that the mode of organization needed should unite organization with the vital principle. It is to this proposed organization that we now turn.

## Vital Cells

What would it mean to step beyond the milieu and create an organization premised upon difference, resilience, personal and collective growth, and the actual overcoming of the problems of the world?

We propose the model of the *vital cells* as an alternative mode of organization which *moves through our current organization* onto a new plateau while transcending its limitations. In fact, in those places where our movement is strong, many of these principles are already being practiced.

Drawing upon the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous, vital cells is an organizational model characterized by a *distributed network of cells* composed by *interchangeable individuals* who are animated by *common principles* in response to *concrete problems*, a network which is easily *reproducible*, and which integrates *feedback mechanisms to guide group development*.

Let us consider each of these features in turn.

## Cybernetic Organization

In a distributed network individual nodes communicate with one another without recourse to a centralized agency.<sup>18</sup> While perhaps nobody would reject such a model, vital cells are distinguished from other decentralized models through the use of an underlying *protocol* and an emphasis on *extrinsic relations*.

Extrinsic relations refer to the autonomy of individuals in relation to cells. Manuel Delanda describes this distinction between relations of interiority and those of exteriority as follows:

Unlike wholes in which 'being part of this whole' is a defining characteristic of the parts, that is, wholes in which the parts cannot subsist independently of the relations they have with each other (relations of interiority), we need to conceive of emergent wholes in which parts retain their autonomy, so that they can detach from one whole and plug into another one, entering into new interactions.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The term vital cell may evoke images of 20th century militant groups. Such groups, however, are characterized by decentralized cells that respond to imperatives from a central command. The distributed model of the vital cells do away with central command while maintaining the cellular structure.

<sup>19</sup> Manuel Delanda, *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 10.

From a system's perspective, relations within a system are not premised upon the *identity* of the part with the whole.<sup>20</sup> Individual parts comprising the system maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis the particular cell and its other participants. A single part, importantly, can therefore relate to several cells simultaneously. Using the network terminology, the vital cells are the *vertices* — the nodes of a system — while the individuals participating are the *edges* — the vectors of communication between nodes. Since the cells possess no transcendental totality but are themselves based upon principles of ephemerality and heterogeneity, they can arise in response to problems and dissolve when they have completed their given task. Such a model stands in contrast to the constituent model of classical organizations wherein individuals are subsumed within local chapters that are in turn subsumed by national and international bodies (relations of internality).

Through the concept of extrinsic relations, we can begin to think about organization without recourse to the sterile opposition between formal/informal organization. Since participants in the vital cells retain their distinctness, organization emerges through the interactions of fundamentally singular pieces.

Alcoholics Anonymous offers an example of these principles in action. Here, organization develops through individuals' participation in autonomous meetings. A given individual may attend several meetings per week, each being composed of a different network of alcoholics. In this way, there is a general circulation among participants within the various meetings. There are no mechanisms for drawing together the entire AA body. Various regional and national meetings do exist, but participation within them is voluntary and composed of delegates from various meetings. Moreover, larger scaled meetings have little effect on the daily operations of AA groups, which always remain locally independent and responsive to their particular contexts.

A fundamental failure of the milieu mode of organization lies in its immense vulnerability to full-on social collapse. Every step we take toward organization can come crashing to the ground after a single catastrophic event. The lesson to be taken from such implosions is that singular individuals must not decide the success or failure of a vital cell. Autonomous organizing is strongest where communication and flow between several independent groups is maximized. The more individual members confine themselves within a singular group (and thus become identified with it) the more fragile the organization will become. The greatest stability is achieved when a multiplicity of actors prevents any one agent from determining the system's successes or failures. Through extrinsic relations, vital cells must therefore instead strive for a systemic *robustness* in which overlapping and redundant processes increase the stability of the system.

In practice, vital cells are formed with a small number of comrades: we suggest 5-10 individuals within a cell. Each person should participate in two cells simultaneously. The first cell is the 'primary' cell and is composed of members already within the milieu or is the cell that you initially join. Having found a home cell, each member of the vital cells should strive to create a second cell composed of participants outside the milieu (or who are not currently organized). The home cell should communicate with its members to promote the organization of the second cell. Having organized two cells, the individual should cease to expand quantitatively and should instead grow qualitatively. This prevents a "growth-at-all-costs" mentality, while still allowing

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<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, if one piece or a set of pieces comes to dominate and to impose identification / subjugation upon others, this process can be called "overcoding" and marks a transition from relations of relative exteriority toward relations of interiority. Indeed, every system produces an internalizing property — that is to take the relations of exteriority and to render them enduring properties of a fixed system. There is, therefore, a tension among systemic forces and the production of a remainder, or that which evades systemic capture.

particular cells to expand. Once a cell reaches its maximum capacity it should split into two or more cells. Through this process, the cells can expand in each direction. Over time, connections between groups of cells will change, and we can imagine several ‘sections’ of cells emerging over time. Finally, cells should incorporate expiration dates at which the cell disbands, and a new cell is formed out of its pieces. This serves to prevent stagnation, promote opacity, thereby making them illegible to the police, and to form a greater number of intensive bonds among other comrades.

For vital cells to maintain consistency there must be an underlying *protocol* which animates group activity within certain parameters. According to Alexander Galloway, protocols are the “conventional rules that govern the set of possible behavior patterns within a heterogeneous system.”<sup>21</sup> The concept of protocol is derived from the practical workings of the internet, where a small number of basic underlying protocols (TCP/IP and DNS) dictate the contours of the network, specifying how information travels throughout the network and mapping network addresses to network names. In AA, the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions form the protocol, which provides the basic information necessary for the system to operate. Through these simple underlying principles, a network is given the underlying stability through which it can function and without which communication between nodes would not have the necessary consistency to work together. Protocols are thus a form of control which promotes advantageous behaviors within a system, while disinhibiting others. Crucially, should we desire the vital cells to have a revolutionary content, the protocol will need to code directly for revolution. If certain of our projects have proven vulnerable to a liberal drift, this is because a revolutionary protocol was not in place to countervail such a tendency.

How are protocols produced? It is a difficult question – how are we to decide the protocol for the vital cells without recourse to a central agency that first articulates and establishes it? The initial protocols should be determined through a sustained conversation on the values and principles *already animating the autonomous movement*. This is to say, we already possess protocol – commitments that allow for existing milieus to function with a basic degree of consistency. The challenge is to articulate these protocols, to draw them out of our collective unconscious from within our forms of organization as they currently exist. We will find that, in fact, protocols already exist, but act as unrealized ideals that cannot be clearly stated. By rendering them explicit, we allow for debate to occur around them and thus for these protocols to evolve through conscious group reflection. In the conclusion below, we include a set of questions which may aid conversations in this direction.

Simple protocol allows for mimesis while allowing for systemic reproduction within acceptable limits. Also, it’s important to note that organization will proceed from initial contact points – it will not proceed based upon abstract calls for organization but will emerge from actual organizational efforts. In other words, having a powerful set of underlying principles will allow participants of cells to splinter and form additional cells in response to problems.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, The MIT Press, 2004, 7.

<sup>22</sup> It bears noting that while we should promote group unity, we should also recognize that splintering when ideological or practical arguments arise can be productive. We think especially in terms of a “liberal drift” wherein groups that initially are committed to revolution may moderate over time. To keep these groups in our orbit, while allowing radicals the chance to maintain revolutionary consistency can perhaps be a means of mitigating the harmfulness of the liberalizing tendency.

Again, we return to the example of AA which spread rapidly during its early years in large part because the simplicity of its protocol allowed many autonomous groups to rapidly grow in response to the problem of alcoholism. We have reproduced the Twelve Traditions of AA below to serve as an example of a protocol. If our groups do not grow, it is because they are operating under a set of underlying assumptions that do not promote growth. Should we desire to scale up our organization, we will need to adopt principles that can be easily propagated.

Finally, despite the vital cells being a response to the obstacles confronting the autonomous milieu, we wish to stress once more that the goal of this mode of organization is to *develop within* rather than *polarize against* existing milieus. In this way, we imagine the milieu as the first stratum of organizational consistency, with vital cells forming a second more coherent stratum, and with discrete public-facing projects and formal organizations forming a third concurrent stratum.

Having outlined the basic features of the organization we imagine, we turn next to feedback as the second pillar of the vital cells.

## Critical Feedback

Feedback occurs when a system responds to its own outputs. For our purposes, feedback mechanisms are a means by which the outcomes of our behaviors and actions can be analyzed and altered. We consider what we tried to do, how it worked, and what we would do better next time.

Feedback within systems, however, must be oriented toward a common goal of the system. There is therefore a directionality within the feedback process, a process of developing consistency and stability amid the underlying chaos of its internal processes. There must, therefore, be a means of determining and developing this directionality. Unlike the apparatuses of cybernetic governmentality, we don't pose a normative framework toward which the directionality of a system turns, besides that of revolution. We must distinguish, however, between a contrived or teleological notion of directionality, and an open-ended directionality. Whereas a normative model presupposes an underlying principle of natural order, our mode does not posit any metaphysical order beneath the flux and chaos of the universe.

The mechanism we propose to guide the feedback process is the simultaneous act of *critique*. When united, feedback and critique become *critical feedback*.

Critique is the task of identifying the vectors of power that constitute the self.<sup>23</sup> Through critique, we come to identify the operations of governmentality on our bodies and on the production of ourselves as subjects. Identity distinctions, markers of physical and mental ability, categorizations of mental health, traumas, group dynamics, drug addiction – all these features that compose us as subjects are simultaneously vectors of power. This organization of traits we

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<sup>23</sup> We draw our concept of critique from Foucault who describes the critical task as follows: “And if governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. Well, then!: critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.” Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth, Semiotext(e)*, 2007, 47.

can call “subjectivity.” The critical task is to identify these vectors, and thereby to render them as problems susceptible for intervention.

Critique allows us to discover how our identities and ways of being have been produced by the apparatuses of the social order. These apparatuses name the enemy, the practices of our domination whose destruction marks the road to our liberation. To engage in critique is to make a vow to join a process of becoming-otherwise, of casting aside the infernal inheritances that have made us as we are. The task is thus not only one of negating every apparatus of subjection, but also of fabricating a process of becoming-otherwise, of becoming-revolutionary, of inaugurating the people to come.

Feedback and critique come together to inform a process of rehabilitation designed to unravel the habitual performances that produce identity. We come together, articulate a path of becoming-otherwise, and then provide feedback for those engaging in the process. How have we done? Are we challenging our habitual modes of being in the world? Where have we fallen short? What are the means that would allow us to overcome these limitations? What steps must be taken? Habit is a powerful force: should we attempt to become-otherwise outside the consistent feedback of others walking a shared path, we are likely to fall back within the patterns of behavior and conduct that have defined our lives hitherto. In this way, critical feedback is a foundational method for any process that challenges historical subjectivity.

The first problem that the vital cells attempt to address is thus the problem of historical subjectivity. At the most basic level, this is just to say that we are subjected in ways that reflect the violence of this world – we are subjected as men and women, blacks and whites, settlers and colonized. A major problem with the Left is that it calls for us to be otherwise – to cease reproducing vectors of historical violence. And yet, it offers us no practical means by which we could overcome these dynamics beyond cancel culture and vague calls for restorative justice. Simultaneously, we nevertheless must recognize that no revolutionary organization can proceed without posing a provisional solution to interpersonal conflict – failure to address racial and gender questions has consistently undermined the autonomous movement. Moreover, by anchoring the vital cells within questions of power and inequality, we hope to avoid the pitfalls of the cybernetic communes discussed above by turning the navigation of power into an engine of becoming-otherwise.

We reject the naïve position of self-abolition posed within nihilist anarchism.<sup>24</sup> The selves offered to us by the reigning order must indeed be abolished, but an insurrection is not capable itself alone of providing an *enduring consistency for revolutionary subjectivity*. This is to not say that we shouldn’t become race traitors, abolish gender, and embark in a thousand experiments

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<sup>24</sup> The following quote from Baeden is representative of this tendency, which correctly poses identity-abolition but offers no means of achieving it beyond pure negation: “Let us take this criticism further, by locating the Self alongside the state, the commodity, the family, and gender as a fundamental form of capital and consequently a terrain in which to do battle, and a limit to be destroyed. From here on, we cannot allow ourselves to be limited to a vision of unlimited sharing between coherent Selves. Such maintenance of the atomized forms, regardless of what is held between, is just a reshaping of misery. Rather, it is necessary to immediately engage in the sabotage of the Self, the strike against subjectivity. What separates me from you, what forms me and constitutes my entirety must be put into question and undone. Beyond the obvious need to destroy my gender, my race, my class position there is the more vital need to struggle against my image, my technologies of the self, my singular debility.” Anonymous, “Identity in Crisis,” in Baeden — *Journal of Queer Nihilism* (Vol. 1). For a more recent example see Alyson Escalante, “Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto,” 2015, online here. For a critical appraisal of this tendency, K. Aarons, “No Selves to Abolish: Afropessimism, Anti-Politics, and the End of the World,” *Mute Magazine*, 2016. Online here.

in being radically otherwise and militantly hostile to the forces of subjection. But we cannot do so without a means of organization that can nurture and allow other ways of being to flourish beyond moments of rupture.

Similarly, we must not be naïve about the possibilities of voluntary self-abolition outside the broader revolutionary process. In the structures imposed upon us by Empire, the mechanisms of subjectivity serve as a principal means to reinforce social divisions. Yet, we cannot proceed to revolution without beginning the process and pushing it to its current systemic limits, those imposed by our historical conjuncture. In this way, *revolutionary organization seeks to take us to these limits, while revolution itself will take us beyond.*

### ***Example of Critique: Feminist Consciousness-Raising***

During the women's liberation movement, critique was used to articulate women's shared experiences and political aspirations. The practice is best explained in the words of its practitioners:

Consciousness-raising groups are the backbone of the Women's Liberation Movement. All over the country women are meeting regularly to share experiences each has always thought were "my own problems." A lot of women are upset by remarks men make to us on the street, for instance, but we think other women handle the situation much better than we do, or just aren't bothered as much. Through consciousness-raising we begin to understand ourselves and other women by looking at situations like this in our own lives. We see that personal problems shared by so many others — not being able to get out of the house often enough, becoming exhausted from taking care of the children all day, perhaps feeling trapped — are really political problems. Understanding them is the first step toward dealing with them collectively, whether in forming a day care center, exploring job possibilities, or planning the best strategy for getting our husbands to help with the housework.<sup>25</sup>

By discussing their shared experiences, consciousness raising becomes the motor of political organization. In the same way, vital cells begin from the actual experiences of those participating. No program, by virtue of its partial perspective, can accommodate all the needs and desires of participants. Therefore, through critique, we can encourage embodied and lived experiences as the creative force behind our organization.

### ***Example of Feedback: Tekmil***

Whether it was during gatherings between partisans, within antifascist gyms, or in collective living spaces, recent efforts to develop the practice of *teknil* offer an example of an effort to incorporate feedback into revolutionary activity. Drawn from the Kurdish movement, *teknil* is a process of constructive group criticism. Briefly, *teknil* involves the group coming together and taking turns offering criticism and self-criticism about group dynamics. *Teknil* sessions are led by facilitators who are responsible for moderating group dynamics and taking notes on the

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<sup>25</sup> The Chicago Women's Liberation Union, "How to Start Your Own Consciousness-Raising Group," 1971.

session. Importantly, participants are not allowed to respond to criticism directly, and once a criticism has been made the same criticism is not repeated by other participants. Once each person has had the opportunity to state their criticisms and self-criticisms, the group moves to a second round where participants propose solutions to the problems raised. Through this process of group criticism, future group activity, actions, and individual and collective behaviors can be modified. Tekmil invites us to rid ourselves of egoistical attachments and open ourselves up to the practical judgments of others. This requires much practice, as does criticizing others. Autonomous experiments in teknil in North America have not yet come to fruition. We must challenge ourselves on this front – our movement will not progress without implementing feedback mechanisms.<sup>26</sup>

## Discipline and Control

While cybernetic organization and critical feedback gives us a structure and a dynamic method for dealing with group processes, incorporation of revolutionary discipline allows us to actualize political processes. In turn, through organization, we can begin to resolve the problems of our epoch and to build the material force capable of guiding a revolutionary process.

One of the most important lessons we learn from Alcoholics Anonymous is the concept of *surrender*. In the case of AA, surrender means that we cease trying to live our life on our own terms (in Bateson's terms, through the Western epistemology of individualism), and instead turn our life over to a Power Greater than Oneself.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the features of the first three steps are so powerful that they demand to be repeated:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

What we see here is the recognition of the individual's limited agency, the recognition that only something which exceeds the individual can create change, and, finally, the turning over of one's limited agency to something larger.<sup>27</sup>

This is the promise of revolutionary organization: that we can forgive ourselves for the history into which we have been born, and over which we are powerless, and that we can, in turn, live in serenity by turning our hope for change over to the process of collective organization itself. Individual faults and failures must be dealt with at an organizational level such that the individual can be freed from the burden of shouldering social change alone. That is, so long as the individual earnestly participates within the group process itself.

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<sup>26</sup> For more information on Tekmil, see the guide zine by Care Is Defense (online here) and the recent panel by the Kurdistan Solidarity Network (online here).

<sup>27</sup> Feminist critics of AA have pointed to surrender as a patriarchal concept designed by and for white men. Feminists in the program have responded to these and other criticisms. For our part, vital cells are specifically aimed at combating sexism and other power imbalances through critical feedback and discipline. See Amy Gutman, "No, Alcoholics Anonymous Is Not 'Ill-Suited to Women,'" *The Atlantic*, 2013, and Jelene M. Sanders, *Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Recovery and Empowerment*, First Forum Press, 2009.

In practice, this means utilizing the mechanisms of cybernetic organization and critical feedback to pose practical – if limited – solutions to the problems that plague us as individuals within capitalism and as participants within groups. Doing so entails that members relinquish some of their individual choice to the group process. In other words, we must voluntarily accept the discipline of the group. Of course, we also must have mechanisms in place to protect the individual, and one should always feel empowered to leave a vital cell either in the event of abuse, or should it cease to fulfill their needs and desires. This is furthermore aided by the fact that each cell maintains its autonomy and will have slightly different goals, as well as different group dynamics. Ideally, one will desire to live within discipline, as doing so will promote processes of becoming-revolutionary, and the feeling of our capacities growing tends itself to become a source of newfound happiness. For our own purposes, that of revolutionary organization, the principles of control and the partial limitation of individual agency are buttressed by the principles of critique and feedback. By engaging consistently in group processes of feedback, the control systems of the vital cell produce an agency greater than that of the individual.

In this way, and in contrast to the false notion of freedom promised by bourgeois capitalism, the vital cells instigate freedom *via discipline* and *control* – that is, by engaging in experiments in overcoming problems we create control systems for becoming-otherwise. Freedom, therefore, emerges through the wielding of control systems differently, rather than through the blanket refusal of these systems. We reject the notion that revolutionaries should move through life without communicating their goals, ambitions, and intentions with others – we must move beyond the reign of bourgeois individuality.

How often have projects failed as a result of multiple comrades deciding to skip town for several months? Or when comrades refuse to seek help for mental health issues? Or most seriously, because of committing an act of violence against another comrade? Any number of other instances when the individual refutes collective imperatives illustrates the necessity for collective mechanisms to influence individual behavior. In so doing, we can martial these control systems to foment experiments in becoming and overcoming. The absence of such mechanisms dilutes our powers and makes us beholden to individual desires (which are themselves the product of the forces of the dominant system). In this way, we seek to produce instances of *singularity*, of overcoming the individual-collective dialectic and strategically utilizing control to produce revolutionary-becoming within the contours of everyday life.

Finally, we introduce one final organizational pillar drawn from Alcoholics Anonymous – that of mentorship. Members of the vital cells should find someone from the milieu who has more experience than themselves in revolutionary organization and practice. Ideally, this person should be in neither your primary cell nor your secondary cell but who serves as a third point of contact within the broader organization. This person is someone who you should call when you need advice or who can point you toward other resources. Doing so will encourage growth among comrades as the mentor helps the initiate navigate the often overwhelming amount of information one encounters in the milieu. It bears noting here that, because of the power relations between mentor and mentee, sexual relations between the two should be discouraged. Because of this tendency, AA encourages men to sponsor men and women to sponsor women. While this may be a heteronormative framing, the point stands, and vital cells should determine ideal arrangements to prevent abuse.

Ultimately, what we speak of is *revolutionary discipline*. But by discipline, we neither refer to the microfascisms of militant cadre life that plagued the armed struggle formations of the



1960s and 70s, nor to the illusory freedom of the contemporary regime.<sup>28</sup> Rather, we point to the friction between these poles, the tension that emerges through an encounter with an agency of control of our own creation. While usually opposed, freedom and control come together at the edges of *desire* in order to break through the paralysis of our inherited subjectivities.

The truth is, we don't know what to do because we don't know what we want, and we don't know what we want because we lack revolutionary discipline. Through discipline, we pursue the clarification of our desires. If we continually set out from our desires as they have been produced by the bourgeois order, we will never move beyond our own ensnarement within the organization of desire as produced by the organization of commodity production. Liberated desire itself is not directly or immediately accessible: it is only through the friction between revolutionary discipline and desire that liberation can begin.

## Conclusion

He that overcometh shall inherit all things. —Revelations 21:7

The dream for the vital cells is that our tendency can begin to develop long-term solutions to the problems that plague us — burnout, sexual assaults, toxic masculinities, as well as poverty, the reliance upon waged labor, our dependence upon resource extraction — so that we can begin to build autonomous positivities outside the milieu. We dream of a revolutionary project where each can develop their own capacities and overcome their traumas, where everyone regardless of where they come from can move toward the beautiful idea *as they understand it*, with the help of others.

We — that is, the 'we' that stands outside the Leftist and autonomous milieus — must become the sort of people who could successfully take a revolutionary situation to its conclusion. The acute dispositions of our world have inflicted untold violence upon each of our bodies.<sup>29</sup> Any revolutionary movement must resolve these deep contradictions within the revolutionary process itself.

At the same time, what we have sketched out here does not amount to a program, but is merely one approach to a set of problems as well as a preliminary set of tools that might prove useful in moving beyond the milieu. Rather than an explicit set of instructions explaining how one begins a vital cell, we instead propose that those who resonate with these proposals come together, debate, and work through the following ethical questions:

1. *Principle of feedback*: Do we provide feedback such that individuals involved in our organization can grow?
2. *Principle of difference*: Do we organize across differences? If not, what needs to be done to make the group more resonant with its outside?

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Thoburn. "Weathermen, the Militant Diagram, and the Problem of Political Passion," in *New Formations* (68), 125-142. Online here.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, when we reflect back on the failures of the 'autonomous zones' during the George Floyd uprising, perhaps the problem was not (as is sometimes suggested) that the gestures themselves were incorrect, it's that we are not yet the kind of people who could successfully occupy a liberated territory.

3. *Critical principle*: Does the vital cell begin from our lived perceptions, from our own experiences of suffering within this world?
4. *Principle of multiplicity*: Does the vital cell allow for multiple truths to proceed toward collective growth?
5. *Vital principle*: Through our cell, do we find ourselves on the path to a more vital participation in the world? Does participation in the cell help us grow in our capacities? Does it help us overcome obstacles on this path?
6. *Principle of open-endedness*: Does it promote becoming without posing an ideal figure of growth? In other words, does our cell foster open-ended growth regardless of where one is coming from and without recourse to normative ideals (of communism, wellness archetypes, etc.)?
7. *Principle of autonomy*: Can members participate while maintaining their autonomy?
8. *Principle of revolution*: Does the vital cell maintain a revolutionary orientation while building immediate power?

When each of these questions can be answered in the affirmative, then a vital cell has been formed. (For its part, AA is able to answer in the affirmative to all but the last point.)

Out of the groundlessness and deterritorialization of the current world-order, we must set our sights on nothing less than a worldwide revolutionary organization. As the 21st century proceeds unabated, we must consider how organization can proceed from *within* the dynamics that structure our present, harnessing the possibilities of our epoch to articulate a method for producing meaningful attachments and revolutionary consistencies. By calling for a repurposing of cybernetics, this proposal aims to bind the structural possibilities of control society to the principle of vitality: to overcome the violence of history through the growth of our power. In this way, we seek to move toward a liberated existence within this lifetime.

## **Appendix: Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous**

### **The 12 Steps of AA:**

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongdoings.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

**The 12 Traditions of AA:**

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An AA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues, hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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