

The Algorithm is the Musket

Written by Ali E. Erol

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ALI E. EROL, OCT 6 2025

In his work “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” Tilly (1985) famously wrote that “war makes the state,” and as a result, the state expands its wars and extractions to wage more and larger wars. While his analysis focused on 17th-century state formation, the mechanism he outlined remains relevant. As the nation-state was forming up to be the political expression of capitalism through relying on merchant-financiers to raise armies and collect taxes, today, the U.S. relies on Silicon Valley’s AI firms to militarize borders and streets. In either case, the working class foots the bill twice: first by producing wealth that capitalists siphon into the war industry, and again when the state dispossesses them of healthcare, housing, and a livable environment. Perhaps the cannon forged the modern state, but the algorithm is forging its successor.

When explaining the formation of the nation-state as a legalized version of a protection racket that protects the interests of the bourgeoisie, Tilly broke down this process into four interlocking activities: war-making, state-making, protection, and extraction. Each works to build power through coercion while dressing it up as legitimacy. What I want to do here is move through these four stages one by one. First, I sketch the logic as Tilly laid it out, followed by a brief historical example to show how it played out in Europe’s rise. Finally, I bring it into the present by showing how the same mechanism operates through ICE and the AI firms.

War-Making

For Tilly, war-making is the state’s project of defining and defeating an external enemy as a political technology. By positing an outside threat, the state legitimates permanent mobilization, concentrates coercive capacity, and reorganizes society around the needs of force. The boundary between “outside” and “inside” is deliberately elastic. Those once inside the polity can be redefined as enemies when their loyalty no longer serves state expansion, whether branded “traitors,” “terrorists,” or “unpatriotic.” Early modern Europe perfected this logic. The French Revolution’s *levée en masse* transformed subjects into conscripts, fusing citizenship with warfare; Napoleon institutionalized permanent war as the motor of state power. Britain pursued the same strategy at sea, where its navy secured trade routes and turned “defense” into an engine of empire. In both cases, the perpetual manufacture of external enemies justified ever-growing military and fiscal machinery—the very architecture of the modern state.

The US reproduces this dynamic by securitizing migration as a threat and waging a *continuous border war* that militarizes domestic governance. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operationalize that war with a digital arsenal supplied by private firms. These include “pattern-of-life” analytics platforms, such as the case with Palantir’s systems, which stitch together financial, employment, and DMV records into targetable dossiers. Another example is autonomous sensor towers and aerial surveillance provided by defense-tech contractors, for example, Anduril’s technological systems. These private companies extend the state’s eyes across wherever it is deemed a hostile terrain. During the “war on terror” period, such technologies were in their infancy, and the terrain was the Middle East. Today, however, the US Armed Forces are urged to use the cities in the US as training grounds for such technologies. In other words, the enemy is a necessary, artificial manufacture that justifies the existence of the development of such technologies that are used at the will of the state. The designation of an adversary justifies a standing, ever-upgrading capacity for coercion. The private vendors furnishing that capacity become structural partners of the state, and *war becomes a modality of domestic rule*, now prosecuted by algorithms rather than artillery.

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State-Making

If war-making looks outward, state-making turns inward. The state, claiming a monopoly on legitimate violence, eliminates domestic rivals to secure its coercive monopoly. For Tilly, this meant the suppression of feudal lords, private militias, and regional sovereignties that once shared in the use of force so that only one actor can define law, enforce order, and extract resources. As with war-making, the distinction between *rivals* and *citizens* is slippery. The same populations that provide labor and taxes can be designated as rivals the moment they contest the state's authority. In early modern Europe, this logic produced the modern bureaucratic state. The Tudors crushed feudal barons and outlawed private armies, centralizing legal authority in the Crown. Richelieu and Louis XIV perfected the model by stripping nobles of independent power, corralling them into Versailles, and building a professionalized bureaucracy in their place. "National unity" was not an organic cohesion but the pacification of rival sovereignties—a consolidation of violence that made future wars and capitalist extraction possible.

In the United States today, state-making unfolds through the suppression of alternative sources of authority within its territory, especially immigrant communities that develop networks of care, solidarity, and survival. ICE's raids, detentions, and deportations aim to dissolve forms of collective power that operate outside state sanction. Here again, AI firms play the role of co-sovereigns. Predictive policing software flags *risky* neighborhoods; license plate readers map movements across entire cities; biometric databases reduce the body itself to a data point for verification or exclusion. What Tilly called the suppression of bandits and lords finds its contemporary echo in the dismantling of any networks that the state casts as rivals to its monopoly and ability to apply coercive power. In other words, state-making is not only about erasing disorder but about ensuring that all forms of belonging, mobility, and livelihood flow through the state-capital nexus.

Protection

If war-making defined external enemies and state-making suppressed internal rivals, protection completed the circuit by presenting the state as a shield for its clients, who were the merchants, landlords, and financiers whose capital sustained its wars and administration. Yet, as Tilly observed, protection was less a public good than a racket. The state safeguarded the circulation of wealth, not the safety of its people. In practice, security was reserved for private property and its owners. England's navy patrolled trade routes under the banner of defense, but in reality, it protected the profits of slave traders and plantation owners, turning the Atlantic into an armed marketplace. France's monarchy promised protection to compliant peasant communities while erasing those who resisted taxation or religious conformity. In other words, *protection* of the nascent nation-state during early capitalism was conditional on your contribution to the reproduction of state power, whether through taxes, trade, labor, or loyalty. The rest were expendable. The promise of safety masked the selective violence that sustained the capitalist state.

Today, the U.S. reproduces this racket through ICE and its private tech partners. Officially, ICE is framed as protecting the American public from criminalized outsiders. In practice, it protects capital: agribusiness, construction firms, and service industries that rely on undocumented labor remain untouched, while workers themselves are made deportable at will. AI surveillance tools, from Palantir's integrated data systems to Anduril's autonomous towers, are sold as protective shields but function as profit-making contracts guaranteed by public funds. The "clients" here are not the working-class taxpayers footing the bill but the private firms whose technologies are embedded in border policing. In other words, protection is less about shielding society from danger than about ensuring that the flows of capital, such as labor, logistics, and data, remain undisturbed, disciplined, and profitable.

Extraction

Extraction is the material foundation of the state. Armies, courts, and bureaucracies required continuous streams of resources siphoned from society. In early modern Europe, this took the form of direct taxation, forced loans, colonial plunder, and later bonded national debts. These were all mechanisms for channeling wealth upward from peasants and workers to merchants, landlords, and financiers. The Bourbon monarchy in France bled the peasantry through the *taille* land tax while nobles and clergy remained exempt. In England, excise duties and customs tariffs expanded alongside a national debt that repaid not the poor but the creditors who had financed wars. The result was a circular

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engine: wars demanded extraction, extraction deepened debt, and debt enriched those positioned closest to the state's purse. In this sense, extraction became governance itself, the fiscal logic through which protection and domination were made indistinguishable.

ICE and its AI contractors sustain the same logic under new guises. The extraction is double: first, by dispossessing workers of healthcare, housing, and environmental security; and second, by rerouting public funds into corporate hands. The denial of universal healthcare is a form of fiscal extraction. The billions that could sustain working-class lives are freed for defense, surveillance, and data infrastructure. For instance, U.S. health spending reached \$4.5 trillion in 2022, and models suggest a single-payer system could save over \$450 billion annually. Meanwhile, federal defense expenditures alone hit \$874 billion in FY 2024, and proposals to funnel increasing AI/tech funding into defense and border surveillance are already underway. Tariffs, too, are framed as national protection but function as regressive taxes, raising consumer costs while subsidizing elite-controlled industries. For example, 2025 U.S. tariffs are estimated to push consumer prices up by 1.8%, amounting to a \$2,400 loss per household, with lower-income households bearing a disproportionately heavy share. Meanwhile, the gains from protection fall to elite sectors likely to receive import-substitute subsidies or exemptions, turning tariff policy into a state-sanctioned transfer from consumers to favored capitalists. Moreover, the massive environmental resources needed to cool ICE-linked data centers, such as vast quantities of water and electricity, are diverted from communities facing scarcity. That sunk cost is justified by mobilizing *national security* discourses, but is in fact an industrial subsidy to AI firms whose products are sold back to the state. The result is what economists call "AI Capex": capital expenditures on surveillance infrastructure that are ballooning U.S. GDP figures, forestalling recessions, and enriching C-suites, all while intensifying working-class austerity. In Q1 2025 alone, global data center CapEx jumped 53 % year-over-year to \$134 billion, with hyperscaler spending driving much of that surge. This boom is not marginal: JPMorgan forecasts that data center spend could boost U.S. GDP by 10–20 basis points in 2025–26. Extraction, in this sense, remains what it was in Tilly's account: the continuous transfer of life-sustaining resources from the many to the few, mediated by the state's coercive apparatus.

State, The Algorithmic Leviathan

Tilly's fourfold schema of war-making, state-making, protection, and extraction describes the mercenary monarchies of early modern Europe. Yet the mechanism he identified remains the grammar of state power, now mediated by algorithms rather than gunpowder. Where France conscripted peasants and Britain floated bonds, the United States securitizes migration and outsources coercion to Silicon Valley. The enemy is manufactured, whether pirate, terrorist, or illegal immigrant, to justify permanent mobilization. The state then consolidates authority by suppressing rivals, chiefly by criminalizing dissent and tightening surveillance across daily life. It extends *protection* to its structural partners, who are the tech and security elite, while subjecting the working classes to dispossession. And it extracts the means of reproduction not by seizing crops or hearths, but by denying healthcare, raising consumer costs through tariffs, and diverting environmental resources into data infrastructures that sustain ICE's digital empire.

The pattern is the same: the state remains the executive committee of capital, and its survival depends on constantly rearticulating threats that warrant repression and justify extraction. What distinguishes the present is that the musket has become the algorithm. ICE's fusion with AI is not an aberration but the logical extension of centuries-old dynamics of organized coercion. Just as Tilly argued, war still makes the state, but today, the wars are algorithmically targeted, fought at borders and within cities, and financed by the dispossession of the very people they claim to protect.

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