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Cover: Map of Paris published in 1847 depicting Baron Georges Eugène Haussman's plan to transform Paris into "the capital of capitals." In red are the networks of new streets and boulevards and in green are the parks. Courtesy of the New York City Public Library.

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SPEED AND POLITICS

Paul Virilio

Translated by Marc Polizzotti

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Part **3**

DROMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Unable Bodies

Risk—but in comfort!

— Marshal Goering

HERMAN GOERING BECAME a pilot in the First World War because he had a tendency toward rheumatism and thus, as a foot soldier, suffered from the long marches.

In the course of the various battles, especially since the seventeenth century, awareness had grown of the increasing problem of military infirmity. A flourishing industry developed: orthopedics. It was discovered that the damage caused by the war machines to the mechanics of the surviving bodies could be compensated for by other machines—prostheses. While in France the handicapped are exempt from military service, this is not the case in Germany: in 1914, the German army had few or no exemptions, for it had decided to *make physical handicaps functional* by using each man according to his specific disability: the deaf will serve in heavy artillery, hunchbacks in the automobile corps, etc. Paradoxically, the dictatorship of movement exerted on the masses by the military powers led to the promotion of unable bodies. The use of the technical vehicle is at this point so assimilated to that of the surgical prosthesis that it will be some time before the French military

command finally hands the tanks over to personnel other than the "one quarter sick with malaria, the rest rehabilitated young men who had never seen battle" (Renaudel's report).

In 1921, Marinetti metaphorizes about the armored car: the overman is over-grafted, an *inhuman type* reduced to a driving—and thus deciding—principle, an animal body that disappears in the superpower of a metallic body able to annihilate time and space through its dynamic performances. Vain attempts have been made to fit Marinetti's works into various artistic and political categories; but Futurism in fact comes from a single art—that of war and its essence, speed. Futurism provides the most accomplished vision of the dromological evolutionism of the 1920s, the measure of super-speed! In fact, the human body huddling in the "steel alcove" is not that of the bellicose dandy seeking the rare sensations of war, but of the doubly-unable body of the proletarian soldier. Deprived, as he has always been, of will, he now requires physical assistance from a vehicular prosthesis in order to accomplish his historical mission, Assault. The dromomaniac's kinetic superpower is suddenly devalued. The war of attrition had already shown the disdain in which a mobile mass reduced to inaction was held, and the nature of the treatment reserved for it. Practical war revealed its impotence as a dominant dromocratic agent, the motor and producer of speed on the continent. Nonetheless, the world war having sanctioned the high command's intellectual bankruptcy and the triumph of industrial warfare, everyone felt an insatiable need for manpower. The processes of military proletarianization proved more than ever to be indissociable from those of industrial proletarianization for the generals who, despite themselves, had become "territorial administrators."

Ferry states: "*Now everyone knows that the structure of a battlefield exists...* The greatest possible technical distribution of terrain is

necessary, and if it takes 200,000 men to bring it about, then the government will negotiate with its allies." "Countries such as Italy and Portugal have admirable reserves of men... Here you would not even notice the shortages imposed by the war," writes an official emissary in 1916. Governments bargain over and hastily exchange their working-class cattle, bragging about "their resistance to low temperatures, their sobriety and their aptitude for labor." They dip heavily into colonial properties, Creoles or Blacks from Senegal, workers from Morocco, and especially tireless navies from Indochina by the tens of thousands—other natives such as the Madagascans preferably being reserved for combat... If naval warfare, by becoming permanent and total, engendered one of the first mass mobilizations, the perspective of total warfare on the continent, as early as in 1914, obviously requires a new social project, an original type of proletarianization.

Practical war divides the Assault into two phases, the first of which is the creation of the original infrastructure of future battlefields. This infrastructure consists of new railroads and stations, telephone installations, enlargement of roads and tracks, the parallel lines of departure, evacuation routes, shelters, etc. The countryside, the earth is henceforth given over, definitively consecrated to war by the cosmopolitan mass of workers, an army of laborers speaking every language, the Babel of logistics.¹ Both the arsenal and the war personnel already take on a kind of peaceful, or rather political, air; they return to highway surveillance. Already we find the beginnings of what will become deterrence: reduction of power in favor of a better trajectory, life traded for survival. The status quo is the depletion of the earth. In 1924, the military monk Teilhard de Chardin writes in *Mon univers*: "We still need mightier and mightier cannons, bigger and bigger battleships, to materialize *our aggression on the world*."

Dromocratic intelligence is not exercised against a more or less determined military adversary, but as a permanent assault on the world, and through it, on human nature. The disappearance of flora and fauna and the abrogation of natural economies are but the slow preparation for more brutal destructions. They are part of a greater economy, that of the blockade, of the siege; strategies, in other words, of depletion.

The economic war currently ravaging the earth is but the *slow phase* of declared war, of a rapid and brief assault to come, for this is what perpetuates, in non-combat, military power as class power. From time immemorial, the caste of hunter-raiders has been unproductive, although it provided the group's food. Along with the science of weapons, it has always fostered methods of depletion—what today we call *food power*. Thus when Venice, that floating nation, that country in which no one had ever “set foot,” stopped being the premier economic and naval power because of the discovery of America and the new Atlantic politics of Europe, it providently turned back to the interior, to agrarian power and terrestrial property, for it knew that the loss of *sea power* meant an immediate threat of suffering *food power*, always the law of the two types of humanity.

In the same way, the United States, after their first failure at intensive conquest in the 1930s (“declare peace in the world”), today lead a war without mercy against Green Europe (campaign against the peasants, control of food industries, grain embargoes, etc.). It is precisely the “futility of wealth” that provides the ground for conquest. American dollar-politics is only one sign of the *intensive growth* of American military might, momentarily robbed of its *extensive growth* by the failure in Vietnam and the nuclear standoff. But here again we must admire the speed with

which the U.S. replaced their geo-strategic bombardments on North Vietnam (systematic destruction of flora and fauna in the rural environment) with an impressive abandonment of technological material when they retreated from the terrain, making their enemies their best customers, as General Giap's recent declarations could lead us to believe.²

Timeless dromological methods: in the seventeenth-century, when Colbert launches his economic politics with the idea of promoting “national wealth,” a “national product,” he prepares the way for Louvois' war-effort by “making sure needs are created,” by triggering in his neighbors “the prodigious consumption of his so numerous products,” as Sir William Temple says.

For his war-sites, Louvois was directly inspired by Roman proletarianization, while Colbert reproduced the Athenian economic system that had finally brought about the collapse of Lacedaemonian power. As Lyautey writes in 1901, “The tactic of economic penetration alone is worth every other taught in the military academy.” The dromocratic expansion of Greece had also found itself blocked at every turn by the military status quo. The native barbarians had learned to organize militarily in the West. The other colonial satellites collaborated in Greek politics. It is at this point that Athens renounced its system of extensive (rapid) penetration to adopt a system of intensive (slow) penetration; external military engagements were replaced by the abrogation of natural economies in the interior (agrarian reform, urbanization, creation of workshops and factories, etc.).

Athenian currency, spread over the entire Mediterranean basin, pouncing on the economies of the big cities, created such an inflation of exchanges that it became fatal—notably to Sparta's equilibrium, which for its part had chosen the opposite solution:

conservation of the State apparatus by abolishing military and monetary movement.³

Aristotle wrote the epitaph to Lycurgus' system: "The essential object of any social system must be to organize the military institution *like all the others*."

In Sparta the opposite happened. In the first Hellenic democracy we already find most of the great Western themes, except for the main one: mobility. Whereas everything was sacrificed to make the State a single war machine, the eventuality of its being mobilized in a real conflict seemed fearsome to the Lacedaemonians, as if the hazards and uncertainties of battle would destroy their overly precise military mechanism.⁴

The Spartans have been called a people without history. In reality, by their hostility to every form of constitutional metamorphosis, they *refused* History as the kinetic reference of their existence. First, by not turning toward the sea and its vehicular empires—thus separating themselves from the totality of Hellenic cities—to go settle in the very heart of Greece and colonize the Messenians, Greeks like themselves. Then, by eluding for almost two centuries after the Lycurgean experiment the consequences of their military might, by fleeing those of their victories. And it will be precisely the Spartan military State's victory over Athens that will subvert its perfection: "The Lacedaemonians might date the beginning of their corruption from their conquest of Athens, and the influx of gold and silver among them that thence ensued" (Plutarch, "Life of Agis").

What the armies couldn't do was accomplished by economic warfare. The dilemma of the status quo, of military non-intervention, was resolved once and for all, not only for the Mediterraneans, but for the Western world to come.

By the middle of the third century, following the collapse of the Lycurgean immobile machine, there remained only about a hundred Spartans who still owned shares of the State. The rest of the population, says Plutarch, became a miserable crowd without legal status, a social mass that the military State had taught to live only for a war that would never come, and that from now on didn't know what to do with its existence. When the State itself survived as no more than a dream of the past, a handful of remaining sadistic customs, the Spartan world sank entirely into anomie.

The West persists in repeating Plutarch's lesson, "obeying a law that it doesn't even know, but that it could recite in its sleep." *Stasis is death* really seems to it to be *the general law of the World*. The dromocrat constantly stifles the democrat of Lycurgus'—and Mao's—original revolution. It is enough to hear the speeches of today's Chinese leaders about "consumer goods" to know that the old thinker did no more than delay the institution in China of the West's fearsome system of intensive growth, and whether it is conveyed by orthodox Marxism or liberalism is of little import! Just as Hitler could only begin lightning warfare through the economic system of Doctor Schacht, and Roosevelt could only begin total warfare through the New Deal.

Stasis is death, the general-law of the world. The State-fortress, its power, its laws exist in places of intense circulation. In a recent work, Georges Huppert attacks the common notion that the *general and positive sense* of history appeared in the eighteenth century and gave rise to important works only in the nineteenth.⁵ He cites the example of a group of erudites, *mostly of the legal profession*, who, toward the middle of the sixteenth century, proposed (in the words of one of them, La Popeliniere) "an idea of perfect history." At the same time, the new European States were tending among

themselves to reestablish the notion of legitimate war (or legalistic war), in the Roman manner (Livy, I, 32, 5–15). The State's historical ideality comes out as soon as war itself is reborn in ideal forms, is technically distinguished (thanks to centralism) from a simple punitive expedition, and tears itself loose from local compromises to approach a rigorous original concept.

In fact, history progresses at the speed of its weapons systems. At the end of the fifteenth century, it is still for Commynes a stable memory, a model to be reproduced. Annals are seasonal, like the war that returns every year in springtime. Linear time is eliminated, as it was from the ancient fortress in which "the enemy Time" was beaten by the static resistance of the construction materials—by duration.

Historical creation also begins to function like the ancient war machines that carried out their destructive movements on the spot even after the invention of the ballista and the catapult (around 405, at the siege of Motza). If Hegel "gets bored seeing Livy repeat for the hundredth time descriptions of battles against the Volscians, occasionally limiting his narrative to: 'In this year, war was successfully waged against the Volscians,'" complaining of the "abstract representations," it is because the historical content is literally that of a communique (the first ephemeris of projected societies, comparable to what, in the nineteenth century, the monotonous detail of secret police reports represents for a sociology that becomes more widespread). Here we are dealing with works that are practical in ways that Hegel could not imagine.

And if Livy endlessly resumes the litany of his commentary, it is because repetition is then the means of reaching vaster fields, a work-in-progress.⁶ The narrative material can only function by being repeated one hundred times. Through repetition, it eliminates

chance and makes the Reason in these stories a war machine that deploys its forces by multiplying them. In the same way, it is understandable that just when artillery and military highway surveillance became part of the State system, especially under Sully, historical language passed literally from the *comparative* to the *positive*; in other words, *with no comparison of intensity!*

Accession to history becomes accession to movement, distant result of the accession to power of those "border prowlers, idlers of Apocalypse, living free of material cares at the edge of their domesticated abyss" (Julien Gracq), populations that appear and disappear on the borders of the Roman Empire, "thumbing their noses at war," on whom, as Livy adds, *"it clearly cannot be imposed."*

In the beginning of our era, the wave of dromocratic elites comes from Germany, from the banks of the Danube or elsewhere, and finally breaks over Western Europe. Suddenly, it is no longer might that makes right, but invasion, the power-to-invade. The hierarchy of the raid, born on the road during the "unbridled exodus of the mob of hunter-raiders, is superseded by the protocol of the stopover and of apportionment." When finally this dromocratic power abusively settles on the European territory, it still doesn't change the nature of its constitutional schema and, in guise of being dispersed, the organization of feudal society will remain that of troops on the march.

"The relations between the various lords were exactly defined, and despite haggling and petty bickering, when an important war or a crusade regrouped this ever-armed milieu, every knight knew exactly where his place was." The hierarchic distribution is already a marching order, the layout of territory a theater of operations. The architecture of command posts plays the same part as that of the pelagic acropolis or of the Algerian blockhouse. The feudal

role is semi-colonial, since it perfectly distinguishes *the mastery over the earth* by the military occupier from its *landed ownership* by the native.

For the dromocratic State, mastery over the earth is already the mastery over its dimensions.

The ancient cadastral law prolonged nothing else, as Colonel Barrader writes in *Fossatum Africae*: "Centuriation is the very foundation of mass education, of their civilization...the indelible trace of a possession-taking that *divides to conquer*." This indelible dichotomy is the one that exists between the nature of the moving-power of invasion and that of the landowner's (or sedentary worker-producer's) relative inability to move, to displace himself, attached as he is to his little parcel of land; the dichotomy between the geography of the inhabitant and that of the passer-by. The *trace* of the Roman path is usually no more than a continuous line, held over from the general schema of centuriation. Thus everything is simple: the military State is on the road, the payment of the cadastral tax is evaluated by the meter coverable, and thus defensible, we could say, by the army, the troop of horsemen, "that luxury-people."

The semi-colonial function has always been a protection racket in which the productive mass' safety is guaranteed by the tribute, remuneration for effective technological surveillance of the territory. In the same way, the Carolingian administration will be one that "straddles" for the benefit of a dromocratic State, which is careful not to demolish its internal constitution by founding hereditary land laws, or even by enlarging the royal domains (except for those that lie along the great vectors—the Meuse, for example—where its morphology "naturally" resides) in an attempt to lay its hands on all media, religious ideologies, money, knowledge, external commerce, modes of transportation and information, etc.

The Carolingian Capitularies advise the "masters of the earth" living in the ancient Roman villas (gradually transformed into command posts) to limit their land-clearing and to set up an alliance between the small and middle-sized native landowners by granting them if need be a certain on-the-spot military defense. Domination of the territorial ensemble by the occupant of the donjon (from the Latin *dominus*, "lord") is nonetheless tempered by the modest material means of what is still no more than a dispersed and foreign military minority, limited in their control of space and society, in the contributions they can exact from the native social corpus. It was also for security reasons that the Frank nobility had preferred the transparency of a populated countryside (soon overpopulated by essentially independent workers, occupied first with clearing the vast expanse of the land, then with maintaining the surrounding environment) to the impenetrable complexity of the original city.

But beyond this, *the transparency of the clearing* means maintenance of the invader's specific right over a territory in which he claims to settle, of his power to penetrate. The erection of the hillock, then of the donjon, is another answer to the problem of mastery over dimension, the latter becoming perspective, geometry of the gaze from an omnipresent fixed point—and no longer, as it was before, from the synoptic route of the horseman.

At this point, it is significant to see the cultivation of the earth restricted to an intensive exploitation of the cleared parcels, instead of spreading to the nearby wilderness through a new forward leap of the pioneering adventure.⁷ The *phenomenon of retention* has been explained by an insufficiency of agricultural technology. But I think that we must look beyond the obvious material necessities—hunting, picking, gathering of building lumber in a nearby forest,

etc.—to imperious strategic necessities created by the *technological insufficiencies of the military protector*, rather than by those of the gardener or the settler to whom the lord owed assistance and comfort in time of alarm.

Recent accounts have shown the relation between the limits of the clearing and that of human vision from an elevated site. The pioneer is more clearly called a *pathfinder* by the Anglo-Saxons. Land-clearing, the cultivation of the earth for subsistence, the receding of forest darkness, are in reality the creation of a military glaxis as field of vision, of one of those frontier deserts spoken of by Julius Caesar, which, he says, represent the glory of the Empire because they are like a permanent invasion of the land by the dromocrat's look and, beyond this, because the speed of this vision—ideally without obstacles—causes *distances to approach*. A well-known photographer writes in his memoirs that his first dark-room was his childhood bedroom, that his first lens was a luminous slit in the closed shades. In this sense, the original donjon plays the part of Marey's chrono-photography; the military lookout-post offers the invader a constant view of the social environment, primary information. Social privilege is based on the choice of viewpoint (before attaching itself to accidents of fortune or birth), on the relative position that one manages to occupy, then organize, in a space dominating the trajectories of movement, keys to communication, river, sea, road, or bridge. Whence the extraordinary diversity of social treatments in the Middle Ages, a diversity that simply represents the variety of geographical views over a "realm" that, until the nineteenth century, doesn't appear in the texts as a formal territorial entity. The hereditary right reluctantly granted in 877 by Charles the Bald (Kiersy Capitulary) will transform possession of the dominant place into permanent social domination. A

famous example is that of the Grimaldis in Monaco. The promontory overlooking the sea has since Prehistory been a privileged place; it will change hands several times throughout Antiquity before landing, by ruse, in the hands of the Grimaldis. From the tenth century onward, this family will not stop extracting honors and privileges from that initial appropriation of a dominant viewpoint. If we can then speak of class societies, we can only do so by designating the classes according to place, as we suggested earlier. If class struggles develop, they happen openly on the terrain, for the conquest of a dominant place. When the citadel or fortress is besieged, it is not simply a military, or even political, event, but a social one. Serious conflicts erupt, for example, when the protecting mission, the limit of the military scam, is violated by the feudal lords; when the "masters of the earth" claim to become its owners. In other words, when they try to unite in their hands alone the twin schemas of spatial appropriation of territory, robbing the native populations by trying to reduce their descendants to the level of *servi casati*, to the fate of tenant slaves—manpower deprived of its right to military defense.