

Temporal Dimensions of Hierarchy and the Pace of Domination

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People forget the dromological dimension of power: its ability to inveigle, whether by taxes, conquest, etc. Every society is founded on a relation to speed. Every society is dromocratic.

~Paul Virilio¹

The role of speed in how our societies are being structured is crucial. It is one of the key junctures at which the clash between top-down bureaucratic and horizontal democratic modes of management is taking place.

The supporters of the Capital-Nation-State complex that today dominates the planet claim that the world nowadays is too complex for larger portions of the population to have a more active engagement with politics. That's why they would argue for the supposed merits of bureaucratic management – with both the state and the capitalist market being different versions of it. Capitalism and statecraft share the same roots of specialization, pyramidal layering, impersonality (disregard of context), and meritocratic careerism. Max Weber, staunch supporter of bureaucracy, suggests that:

the purely bureaucratic type of administrative organization... is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings.²

The efficiency argument is among the ones most often brought up in defense of the status quo and is the one most related to speed. It tends to equate rapid pace with efficient management. Weber himself lists speed among the key merits of bureaucracy:

Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised

¹ Daniel L. Potter, "Dromomania: Reading Paul Virilio," *Medium*, October 19, 2020, <https://medium.com/@llull/dromomania-reading-paul-virilio-5764f4bf0cfa>

² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 223.

*to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, and especially in its monocratic form.*³

And indeed, a dialectic relation between rapid speed and power accumulation can be observed. The logic of domination requires that one outmaneuvers the rest, getting first to a given space, leaving no moment for reaction to opponents, thus getting to exercise dominance over space and time. The essence of such dominance over populations in either peacetime or wartime is about gaining and maintaining their submissiveness through “efficient” bureaucratic means, such as governmental or military apparatuses.

The importance of speed was recognized by the forces of domination since antiquity. The 6th century BC Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu noted in his *The Art of War* that “Speed is the essence of War”. The Nazis too used it as the key component of their military strategy – the Blitzkrieg or “lightning war” – during the WWII.

The role of speed is also a tool in societies that are not in a state of military conflict. Machiavelli advises the prince to act swiftly and all at once when it comes to the use of violence (i.e. when the need arises for the hegemon to assert their dominance).⁴ This lesson is also understood and implemented by contemporary Trumpism in the USA. The strategy used by Trump and the MAGA movement, as asserted by one of their main strategic architects Steve Bannon, is “flooding the zone” – doing as many things at time as possible so as to not leave time for reaction to those who oppose their authoritarian project.⁵

The logic behind every hierarchic, bureaucratic mode of social organization is to exclude as many people from political decision-making as possible. And one of the means for doing this is through increasing the speed with which decisions are being made. With greater pace there is less time for popular deliberation. It is no wonder that oligarchs of all types always push toward the view of politics as a race. A contemporary example is tech mogul Peter Thiel who claims that:

*We are in a deadly race between politics and technology.[...] The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism.*⁶

Bureaucracies of both fragmented (capitalist) and centralized (statist) type always strive to enclose public space and time away from societies en masse, placing them instead in the service of narrow layers of managerial classes and business elites. An ever increasing pace of decision-making excludes increasing segments of the populace, leading to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. This is the very idea behind bureaucratic careerism in the state sector and capitalist antagonism in the private one. It is a race in which there necessarily must be losers, whose numbers increase with the passage of time, and winners, whose numbers decrease. Authority and wealth are interrelated, and the question of speed

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 973.

⁴ Moutusy Maity, Nandita Roy, Doyeeta Majumder, and Prasanta Chakravarty. 2024. “Revisiting the Received Image of Machiavelli in Business Ethics Through a Close Reading of *The Prince* and *Discourses*.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 191: 231–252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05481-2>

⁵ FRONTLINE. “Steve Bannon | The FRONTLINE | PBS | Official Site | Documentary Series Interview.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed January 27, 2026. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/steve-bannon-5/>

⁶ Thiel, Peter. “The Education of a Libertarian.” *Cato Unbound*, April 13, 2009. <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian/>

plays central role in how they will be distributed in society. We cannot but agree with French philosopher Paul Virilio, when he suggested that:

Speed is the unknown side of politics, and has been since the beginning: this is nothing new. The wealth aspect in politics was spotlighted a long time ago. it was a mistake[...] to forget that wealth is an aspect of speed.[7]

As the temporality of decision-making for the great majority of people shrinks, so does their leisure time. For the humans of capitalist modernity, the borders between work and non-work are increasingly blurred as the bureaucratic nature of the Capital-Nation-State complex constantly attempts to creep and control every aspect of their social and individual experiences. And the deeper its logic penetrates everyday life, the harder it gets to break away from its grip.

For a rupture with the status quo of domination to be initiated, social movements should strive at recreating a truly public space and time. This implies for the creation of localized grassroots institutions that democratically empower communities to self-manage public affairs and set up their own rules, norms, and self-limitations. And for the avoidance of parochialism, as well as for the very coherent functioning of societies, each such participatory institution should link itself to other such deliberative bodies, forming democratic confederations that sustain the horizontal flow of power.

One such truly public spatiality has radical implications on the flow of time. It signifies the emergence of a truly democratic temporality, which allows for decision-making processes to span through geographies, circulate among all members of society, and have a truly plural and inclusive character. It is a reshaping of power from below for the sake of equality, freedom, and dignity that allow people, rather than lifeless bureaucratic mechanisms, to set the pace and rhythm of their life in common. As Virilio suggests, *human dignity insisted on the right to walk, a rhythm not extorted from the body by command or terror.*⁷

A characteristic example is the autonomous system developed in Chiapas by the Zapatistas. Their communities have been managing public affairs on the basis of direct democracy for decades, via dense network of popular assemblies connected through councils that they call “Caracoles”. This word, as Alessandra Pomarico explains, *literally translates as ‘snails’, ‘shells’, ‘conches’, or ‘spirals’, all of which symbolize traits of Zapatismo such as slowness, the circles of their assemblies, the open-ended process of autonomía, and so on.*⁸ It indicates both a connection to the Zapatista indigenous culture (in which the snail plays an important role), as well as it symbolizes a democratic temporality (what has been termed *Speed of the Snail*⁹), which aims at encouraging grassroots participation, inclusively, and pluralism.

To avoid confusion it is important to underline that the temporal dimension of direct democracy discussed here does not indicate a reality of endless assemblies where people spend most of their times in infinite discussions that lead to no decisions. This is nothing but a caricature and a distortion of any meaningful democratic project. What a truly public temporality would

⁷ Daniel L. Potter, “Dromomania: Reading Paul Virilio,” *Medium*, October 19, 2020, <https://medium.com/@llull/dromomania-reading-paul-virilio-5764f4bf0cfa>

⁸ Alessandra Pomarico, “Echoes of Zapatismo outside Chiapas,” *Internationale Online*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.internationaleonline.org/contributions/echoes-of-zapatismo-outside-chiapas/>

⁹ Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, *The Speed of the Snail: The Zapatistas’ Autonomy De Facto and the Mexican State*, University of Bath Centre for Development Studies Working Paper No. 20 (February 15, 2013), SSRN, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2401859>

imply is that it won't strive at attaining quick short-term results that sustain authority in the hands of narrow elites, but will give instead emphasis on the inclusion of all members of society in decision-making processes that concern life in common in the long-term. This means that decisions could be made at assemblies and council meetings where specific time frames will be determined by the community so that such encounters reach to decisions without ending up too tiresome while allowing for the equal participation of all its individual members. Also, issues that concern wider regions will have to be given a temporal framework that allows for them being discussed and ratified by concerned communities, rather by one central government. A democratic system of such type may require more time to reach a decision than a centralized bureaucracy, it nonetheless will produce decisions that will be more long-lasting as they will be discussed by and agreed upon by the greatest amount of affected people. It is a temporality that prioritizes social and environmental resilience instead of wealth and power accumulation.

With all this said, it becomes clear that one of the crucial fights that societies are about to give in the 21st century is about time. Will we allow a bureaucratic system to continue speeding up its exploitation of us and the natural world we are inseparable part of, or are going to set up a radically different temporality that will allow for a truly democratic and ecological society to emerge? It is a dilemma at the threshold of which we currently stand. But we must avoid the impatience that has been taught to us by the dominant system, since it may lead to a quick disappointment and retreat into a privatized type of life. Instead, we must arm ourselves with critical persistence and patience, since as Palestinian sociologist Mohammed A. Bamyeh correctly observes:

Historical change, after all, is a change in ways of looking at the world, and entails an expansion of the realm of the possible, gradually and one step at a time. And the idea is based on realities—not the “reality” I just criticized, but the ignored realities of social self-organization and organic anarchy, mobilized as critique and alternative to the repressive capacities of modern states, especially those based on an ideology of settler colonialism. Out of this awareness, this consciousness, the no-state approach begins to take root, one step at a time, and with it the no-state will one day become our reality, also one step at a time.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *The No-State Solution: Histories and Realities*, Panarchy, 2025, <https://www.panarchy.org/palestine/nostatesolution.html>

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