

Temporary Authoritarian Zone

JOHN ARMITAGE

Consider Virilio's (2002) conception of the contemporary American territorial assemblage, of lines of territorialisation and deterritorialisation and, in particular, the narrative he constructs in *Ground Zero* around the series of events that happened on September 11, 2001 in New York City and Washington DC. Before us, we had a repetition of the first attack on the World Trade Centre in 1993, and the ushering in of a frightening escalation of the new era of terrorism. Indeed, the exceptional aspect of the second attacks in 2001 was that al Qaeda's two primary hijacked airplanes did bring down both of the World Trade Centre buildings. So, September 11, 2001 was yet another strategic event which further corroborated for Americans their passage towards new military assemblages in the 21st century. Thus, with the September 11, 2001 attacks, we had relayed before us acts of 'total war' (Virilio, 2002: 82; original emphases), which were extraordinarily conceived and performed, and with a bare minimum of means. Certainly, as acts of total war, they were very 'simple' manoeuvres. By contrast, the damage inflicted on the Pentagon by the third hijacked airplane was of comparatively little import because "what exploded in people's minds was the World Trade Center, leaving America out for the count" (Virilio, 2002: 82). American capitalism, "the apparent economy of the planet", hence found "itself lastingly affected by the dystopia of its own system" (Virilio, 2002: 82). This, Virilio (2002: 82) tells us, meant that, on September 11, 2001, "the Manhattan skyline became the front of the new war".

To substantiate his claim, Virilio (2002: 82; original emphases) argues that the "anonymity of those who initiated the attack merely signals, for everyone, the rise of a global covert state – of the unknown quantity of a private criminality – that 'beyond-Good-and-Evil' which has for centuries been the dream of the high priests of an iconoclastic progress". But this is where the contemporary problems of the American territorial assemblage arise. For, according to Virilio (2002: frontispiece; original emphases), "the events of September 11 reflect both the manipulation of a global sub-proletariat and the delusions of an élite of rich students and technicians who resemble nothing so much as the 'suicidal' members of the Heaven's Gate cybersect". Undeniably, in today's "American megalopolises", there are increasingly deterritorialised assemblages, sub-proletarian frontiers and movements, areas and districts which are forbidden territories "occupied by an ethnic group foreign to the others, clashing over a building or a street corner" (Virilio, 2002: 77). As Virilio (2002: 77; original emphases)

puts it, such machines, such 'resettlement territories', are "urban zones where the margin becomes the mass, a lawless world of deterritorialized destabilization, deception, joblessness, and social de-regulation".

These are the contemporary problems of the American territorial assemblage, and of the American inhabitants of an ever more deterritorialised landscape. Yet Virilio (2002: 78) maintains that Americans have no possible way of escaping the fact that "the terrorist phenomenon begins in everyday life" or the fact that, as Gregory Clancey (2006: 49-76) has written, for much of the 20th century, American 'de-urbanisation' has had its origins in war or warlike conditions and the emulation of the battlefield, which, according to Virilio (2002: 78; original emphases), was "essential to the fanatical advocates of techno-scientific Progress" who "saw that progress as an assault on nature". Furthermore, do not the fantasies of al Qaeda's élite of rich students, by virtue of its acknowledged breaking of the 'civilised' rules of war, and by way of its 'suicide missions' into the heart of global finance capitalism, also abrogate to itself the right and power to drive people in all directions at will, from the September 11, 2001 massacre on the 'battlefield' of New York City to slaughter in the strategic bombing of Washington DC? It is hardly surprising, then, that America's 21st century emblematic spaces are not variations on the city but mutations of the camp, that experimental yet 'Temporary Authoritarian Zone' outside the law involving the quarantine of 'suspicious elements', concentrated yet deterritorialised multicultural populations on the periphery of urban centres, new and diverse resettlement procedures undertaken not far from American towns and cities; camps such as the one built by the American military as part of the 'War on Terror' for detaining 'enemy combatants' in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Americans must therefore learn to fear their own territorial assemblage as it inaugurates newly deterritorialised assemblages of civil war within America's own porous borders, within its own, perhaps fatally weakened, democracy. For the continued rise of terrorism alongside multinational drug and human trafficking mafias and so on forge their own forms of militarised movement, panicked immigration, emigration and displacement. Contemporary mechanisms of American 'de-urbanisation', then, are nothing if not the emergence of a global battlefield where sub-humanity is controlled not by technoscientific progress but by organised crime's military assault on the city.

References

- Clancey, George. "Vast Clearings: Emergency, Technology, and American De-Urbanization, 1930-1945". In *Cultural Politics 2* (1), pp. 49-76 (2006).
- Virilio, Paul. *Ground Zero* (Verso, 2002, London).