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Reflections on the U.S. – P.R.C. War
and Taiwan's Role in Technological Totalization

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# From "Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier" to "Chip Foundry for the Borg": Reflections on the U.S. – P.R.C. War and Taiwan's Role in Technological Totalization

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## Abstract

This essay examines the dystopia of militarized technological totalization concealed by the competing dystopias that currently dominate the political imaginary in discussions related to East Asia. It provides a brief history of dual use technology, the outsourcing of IT production to East Asian states, and the global system of U.S. monetary imperialism, showing the links among the three. After charting out the cascade of effects due to Donald Trump's Executive Order 13806 that sounded the beginning of the tech and trade war between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, the essay turns to a reading of Paul Virilio's 1977 classic, *Speed and Politics*, to reconsider the role of anthropological difference in the looming catastrophe emblematized by autonomous weapons and biologistical supply chains with a life of their own. The essay ends with a reflection on the way in which the social relation called translation is being reduced to logistical imperatives that "lock in" a dystopian future.

**Keywords:** Paul Virilio, Peter Button, Yuk Hui, translation, logistics, anthropological difference, liberalism, dual use technology, dystopia, Yellow Peril.

## Dystopia

Amidst the avalanche of dystopian scenarios these days coming from all quarters, there hardly seems to be any need for a new one. Yet when it comes to the Western Pacific, one scenario has become so dominant, it risks clouding our ability to perceive other threats. Michael Fuchs, a senior researcher at the Center for American Progress, a think tank that espouses neoconservative positions such as American exceptionalism and corporate sovereignty (Robinson 2018) under cover of center-left labeling, gives voice to this dystopia when he writes:

"the CCP [the Chinese Communist Party] is setting up a surveillance state that pulls a page from George Orwell's 1984 dystopia"(Fuchs 2019). On the opposing side, economist Michael Hudson offered at roughly the same time what might be considered a "minority report" in the political dystopia department:

> The American promise is that the victory of neoliberalism is the End of History, offering prosperity to the entire world. But beneath the rhetoric of free choice and free markets is the reality of corruption, subversion, coercion, debt peonage and neofeudalism. The reality is the creation and subsidy of polarized economies bifurcated between a privileged rentier class and its clients, their debtors and renters. America is to be permitted to monopolize trade in oil and food grains, and high-technology rent-yielding monopolies, living off its dependent customers. Unlike medieval serfdom, people subject to this End of History scenario can choose to live wherever they want. But wherever they live, they must take on a lifetime of debt to obtain access to a home of their own, and rely on U.S.-sponsored control of their basic needs, money and credit by adhering to U.S. financial planning of their economies. This dystopian scenario confirms Rosa Luxemburg's recognition that the ultimate choice facing nations in today's world is between socialism and barbarism (Hudson 2019b).

Yet these are not the only dystopias on the horizon. Another dystopian scenario intimately linked to massive historical transformations known as the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016) that belies exclusive association with a particular political ideology or the politics of a single nation-state is also on the agenda. Characterized by a new range of "disruptive" technologies that are fusing the physical, digital, and biological domains, the fourth industrial revolution denotes both a tendency towards a phenomenon alternately known as "convergence", "singularity", or "totalization", and a tendency to expand beyond or overcome the limits of such totalization. As used by media theorist Yuk Hui, the term "technological totalization" refers to a common denominator, a common future imaginary, shared among diverse historical theorists of technology, including Teilhard de Chardin (1881 – 1955), Jacques Ellul (1912 – 1994), James Lovelock (b. 1919), Joseph Needham (1900 – 1995) and others. As technology

becomes autonomous,[1] with "its own rules of growth and its own rhythms of development" (Hui 2019, 29), the system constituted through that process becomes a "superorganism" that can no longer be understood through oppositions such as that pitting the biological against the mechanical. This unprecedented development opens the way towards a new form of domination, which Hui calls the "algorithmic catastrophe" (Hui 2019, 206).

My concern in this paper, originally conceived as a *position paper* (i.e., conceived as a *polemic* – a word whose proximity, via etymology, to war is well known) for the International Center for Cultural Studies, Taiwan, is not to examine the problem of algorithmic catastrophe *per se*, but rather to illuminate the conditions that conspire to make it part of our present, if not a future inevitability. To that end, I will examine the implications of the "tech war" underway since 2018 between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China.

## Executive Order 13806

Executive Order 13806, from July 18, 2018, is one in a flurry of Executive Orders and Presidential Memoranda issued over the past year (2018 – 2019) by Donald Trump, President of the United States of America. Trump's America, supported by a large part of America that does not recognize Trump, perhaps even thinks of itself as a #Resistance to Trump, is a state with the avowed aim to be the global leader in new dual-use technologies. Part of a long line of pronouncements by U.S. elected officials, military generals, policy planners, and think tank researchers calling for the United States to maintain a position of dominance at the intersection between technological innovation and military superiority, Executive Order 13806 differs from its predecessors by aiming for the militarization of logistical supply chains.

Two other recent directives that deserve mention in this context include: *The Presidential Memorandum on Spectrum Strategy* from October 25, 2018, which calls for U.S. global

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[1] As Bratton (2016) shows, autonomy does not necessarily mean consciousness or intelligence but can refer to an automated architecture amounting to computational sovereignty. Fazi (2018) displaces the question of "Can machines think?" to "Can a machine think anything new?", breaking the tradition of relying on mimesis as a litmus test. My goal in this essay is not to shed light on these ideas and the debates surrounding them but to focus on the way in which the time for debate and the invention of new relationships is being preempted by political events. The difficulty of questioning the accelerating militarization of disruptive technologies that will in many respects determine living conditions in the future is an excellent indication of the progressive loss of the autonomy of social theory.

leadership in 5G technology, essential infrastructure for data-intensive warfare conducted with autonomous weapons; and *Space Policy Directive – 4*, a Presidential Memorandum from February 19, 2019, that establishes an organizational basis for the "full spectrum dominance" that had been the stated goal of the now defunct U.S. Space Command (U.S. Space Command 1997, 5).

Logistics, information technology, and war: among these three, the least sexy – logistics – might well be the most dangerous. The day after Executive Order 13806 was published, Fox News reported the Pentagon's push for massive development and procurement of AI and biomimicry weapons, none of which are controlled by any international treaty. An interagency task force followed up with a white paper in September, titled *Assessing and Strengthening the Manufacturing and Defense Industrial Base and Supply Chain Resiliency of the United States*. Two months later, two bipartisan congressional commissions, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission and the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, each came out independently with annual reports both issued on November 14, 2018 that portrayed the People's Republic of China (and the Russian Federation) as a national security threat while providing a pretext for outlining a new mobilization system that would join government and the private sector in a single goal of dominance through new technologies. Moving into 2019, the White House followed up, declaring a national emergency, with the *Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain* (May 15, 2019). Several hours after the Executive Order announcement, the U.S. Commerce Department added Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd., China's premier communications technology corporation and a key global player in the new 5G technology upon which so much of future tech innovation depends, to its "Entity List," noting that Huawei, "is engaged in activities that are contrary to U.S. national security or foreign policy interest" (Paletta et. al., 2019).

Taken together, these documents suggest the largest restructuring of U.S. industrial and foreign policy since Ronald Reagan initiated the shift towards combining speculative finance and the life sciences in a new form of global militarism based on debt imperialism (Cooper 2008). The NDS report is particularly important, providing a glimpse into the Manichean ideology that defines a world view of great power competition that has apparently become dominant among U.S. elites, garnering bipartisan support. In the words of one U.S. defense establishment dissident insider, "the worldview embodied in the current document", which will not be

reviewed again until 2022, "could well be so deeply embedded in national security discourse and bureaucratic practice as to be virtually irreversible" (Foster 2019). At the heart of this restructuring, which amounts to an "unadulterated call for a new Cold War", are logistics and supply chains. The restructuring essentially calls for the militarization of supply chains and full-throttle development of dual-use information technologies necessary to the development and deployment of ethically indefensible autonomous weapons. Even if the "trade war" were to end soon, the "tech war" is not going to end with it. In fact, it might be better to ask if the current "tech war" is not simply the manifestation of a permanent feature in the world system? More concretely, a war situation is developing in the Far East. So far it includes: a very real arms race, trade war, cyberwar, information war, and a real race to build the infrastructure for the battlefield for tomorrow's not-yet-real hot war(s).

## Cold War 2.0 and Dual Use Technology[2]

In the context of a concern for *supply chain transition* and *global dominance*, it would be useful to review the historical relationship between the economic development known as the "East Asian Miracle" and profound changes in the U.S. military-industrial complex. For much of the Cold War up until the 1970s, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) relied on a system of military standards and "military specification," dubbed Mil-Std and Mil-Spec respectively, that rigorously distinguished between civilian and military industrial supply chains and products. Unique defense requirements like electromagnetic pulse (EMP) resistance effectively precluded the use of most civilian microelectronics. Until the 1970s, the DoD Mil-Spec procurement supply chain represented a sizable portion of the overall market, and, in parallel, was the major source of funding for the cutting-edge research and development in microelectronics. Between supply chains and R&D, the DoD could effectively assure not only that key military technologies were in the hands of U.S. firms but also that the supply chains for weapons procurement were mostly kept "in country".

From the mid-1970s onwards, however, advances in semiconductor fabrication changed the economics of the supply chain. New technologies such as metal oxide semiconductor

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[2] The first three paragraphs of this section paraphrase research presented by Danny Lam, a Research Associate at the Waterloo Institute for Sustainable Energy, University of Waterloo, for Defense Info, a defense-related think tank (Lam 2018).

technology (MOS) and complementary metal oxide semiconductor technology (CMOS) offered a way to produce integrated circuits (ICs) at considerably lower cost for the civilian sector than Mil-Spec ICs. As production exploded, costs decreased dramatically. Although the DoD initially regarded these technologies as unsuitable for defense applications because of EMP vulnerabilities, by the early 1980s the civilian microelectronics industry had progressed exponentially (Moore's Law), leaving Mil-Spec generations behind.

The "East Asian Miracle" is thus intimately connected to the story of military supply chains and dual use technologies. East Asia began playing a role in the US microelectronics supply chain (the largest consumer market in the world) with the U.S. occupation of Japan and the Korean War, as Japanese factories were mobilized to produce equipment for U.S. forces.[3] The outsourcing of electronics factories to East Asia beginning at the end of the 1970s was accelerated by the fortuitous end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc beginning in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the hazards of nuclear war seemed to decline precipitously. The memorandum issued in 1994 by Secretary of Defense William Perry, known as the Perry Memo, effectively put an end to the system of Mil-Spec and Mil-Std that had assured the protection of dual use technology through the Cold War. The East Asian Economic Miracle was based in part on the progressive relocation of the U.S. IT industrial base to facilities in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, followed later by Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and China, etc. By the late 2010s, the global electronics supply chain became dominated by players in East Asia, with the U.S. maintaining a substantial lead only in high value-added activities like design and manufacture of parts with high margins.

Executive Order 13806 intervenes in a situation where supply chains have become highly globalized. Given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of total "decoupling" of supply chains from nations such as China that are now deemed, according to the NDS definition, as strategic adversaries, one can say with confidence that the real goal of Executive Order 13806 and associated documents is political rather than economic. A few basic facts about 5G promote this view: 1) it has inherently military applications; 2) military force, which is dependent to a large extent on speed, is inherently logistical; 3) 5G technology represents an important acceleration in the speed of mobile data communications; 4) *ergo*, 5G is part of the recursive

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[3] Recent research showing that Korean *chaebol* benefitted enormously from the militarized economy (Glassman and Choi 2014). Perhaps in the near future a comprehensive narrative of East Asian economic development in relation to the liberal warfare state will be possible.

circuit between autonomous acceleration and militarization. Executive Order 13806 is a political directive. It aims to institute a new kind of feedback mechanism that definitively binds the technological innovation in information technologies to military posture. It is, as Etienne Balibar observed in 1973, part of the "permanent 'industrial revolution' of capitalism" (Balibar 2019, 5) that ties together questions of imperial population management, labor value, technological innovation, and, as we see here, war.

## U.S. Monetary Imperialism and Hegemonic Transition

Parallel to the military-industrial supply chain transition, a new form of monetary imperialism catapulted the United States into the role of hegemon in a system of accumulation by debt, or debt capitalism. Beginning in the first half of the 20$^{th}$ century, the US had maintained its ascendant position in world affairs due to its status as a creditor nation dating from the First World War, when it had bankrolled England and France in their fight against Germany. Within several years after the end of World War Two, the United States had cornered 75% of global inter-governmental gold reserves. Yet its global military deployment and military adventurism fighting communism around the globe was heading, by the end of the 1960s, to a severe depletion of US gold reserves. This monetary crisis would lead the United States, under Richard Nixon, to declare an end to the gold standard in 1971, setting the stage for a historic transformation in the basis of US hegemony from credit to debt. Following the end of the gold standard in 1971 and the institutionalization of the dollar as the exclusive currency for oil purchases in 1973, the United States was able to create and sustain unique conditions for global dollar hegemony. The operation of this hegemony was based on using sovereign debt as an instrument for capital accumulation without fear of the consequences. The nations that had hosted production outsourced from the United States had no other choice but to use the dollars acquired through the sale of those products on the U.S. market for the purchase of U.S. government issued bonds in the form of Treasury Bills. Historically, the East Asian nations (Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, and the People's Republic of China) have been the largest purchasers of these T-Bills, as they are known. T-Bills effectively became the instrument of a new monetary imperialism that enabled the United States to occupy a singular position as the principal beneficiary. Nations with large reserves of T-Bills were, in effect, subsidizing the massive and ever-increasing levels of sovereign debt in the United States. Given the extent to which up to half of that debt can be attributed to military and security spending, it is logical to

conclude that the nations buying T-Bills were effectively bankrolling U.S. global militarism. Economist Michael Hudson succinctly explains: "When the People's Bank of China buys U.S. Treasury bonds, it's financing America's dual budget and balance-of-payment deficits, both of which stem largely from military encirclement of Eurasia – while letting U.S. investors and the U.S. economy get a free ride" (Hudson 2016). This form of monetary imperialism backed up by the incomparable strength of the United States military and its forward deployment in a chain of over 800 bases around the globe formed, for several decades, an incredibly effective feedback loop that permitted financial interests to exercise global hegemony by relying on the administrative and military resources of the U.S. state.

The new geography of global supply chains that had started to crystallize in the 1980s combined to create, with the collapse of protections around dual use technologies at the end of the Cold War, a situation whose volatility was hidden behind a new discursive apparatus: the narrative of *democratic transition*. Expanding on patterns established during the Cold War, a considerable amount of intellectual labor was organized on both sides of the Pacific to assure an historical and epistemological framework in which the emerging newly industrialized economies (NIEs) of East Asia and Japan would fit into a larger narrative about historical transitions – a cornerstone of the ideology of colonial–imperial modernity – that fit the aims of postcolonial global governance on the basis of unrivaled U.S. financial and military hegemony. This was the story about nations that had once been authoritarian but had subsequently transitioned or were transitioning towards "democracy" and open markets. This narrative, sustained over decades, has proven particularly effective at diverting attention from the military-industrial supply chain transition that accompanied the transition to debt capitalism . In effect, populations on both sides of the Pacific have been insulated, as a result, from questions about the role of East Asian frontline states (and particularly their one-party "democratic" state and corporate elites) in the maintenance of U.S. monetary imperialism backed up by a global garrison state.

The growth of China's economy and the importance of Chinese migrant labor since 1980 gradually came to pose a major challenge to this hegemony, raising the specter of a different kind of transition than the one that had been carefully staged and studied since the Cold War. Instead of a transition that consolidated the existing form of hegemony girding the world-system, i.e., a so-called *democratic transition*, China's development heralded a change in the hegemony itself, a *hegemonic transition*. Seen from the perspective of the world-systems

theory developed by Immanuel Wallerstein and associates beginning in the 1970s, China's growth answered one of the primary underlying questions that had motivated the entire research project. If, as Wallerstein held, the modern world-system could essentially be categorized into a hierarchical, tri-modal distribution (periphery, semi-periphery, and center), upward movement across strata for individual nations was, historically-speaking, practically impossible. China's growth over the past four decades would seem to have created an historically unprecedented example: a country moving up from the periphery into the semi-periphery, with significant sectors of the urban population moving into or close to the center, combined with a strong likelihood that continued momentum would just as swiftly push the entire nation into the coveted ranks of the center.

Adopting the language of world-systems theory developed by Wallerstein, Giorgio Arrighi and Beverly Silver wrote in 1999, "U.S. adjustment and accommodation to the rising economic power of the East Asian region is an essential condition for a non-catastrophic transition to a new world order" (Arrighi & Silver 1999, 289). As we now know two decades later, U.S. elites, fractured as they were, never seriously confronted this question at the level of state and military policy in the years leading up to and following China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Instead, the U.S. state/corporate nexus pursued a dual-track policy that accommodated China in a feverish gold-rush climate of industrial outsourcing on the one hand while aiming to maintain U.S. global military and monetary hegemony on the other. In hindsight, there was probably widespread hope that Chinese elites would, for a mixture of ideological and economic reasons, opt of their own accord for a democratic transition under U.S. hegemony rather than a full-fledged hegemonic transition in the world order. This possibility remained an open question until Xi Jinping assumed control of the party-state apparatus. Perhaps it was thought that Chinese elites would take encouragement from postwar Japan, a staunch U.S. ally and a model of democratic transition that has nevertheless been ruled by a single party – one with established links to war criminals, fascists, and militarists, with only a brief 18 month interruption for nearly seven decades. The one problem with this narrative is that it occurred after the U.S.-engineered collapse of the Japanese asset price bubble in 1991 had ushered in decades of stagnation. If anything, Japan was a negative model for Chinese development strategy.

Today, as the conditions for a non-catastrophic transition erode, one can only speculate as to what kind of political developments in China might have been possible had U.S. elites prepared

national and global institutions to facilitate a hegemonic, rather than a democratic (i.e., regime-change), transition around China's unprecedented economic growth. Needless to say, this kind of transition hardly implies a simple substitution of one nation for another in a system of neoimperial rule, much less shutting a blind eye to interstate competition, but rather denotes a guided transformation in the world-system, ideally with a vision for establishing the basis for environmentally-conscious economies of contribution and cooperation that would sustain decolonization in all spheres of life while fostering new forms of transnational social solidarity.

Instead, the new Cold War being fought today around high-tech supply chains and disruptive technologies is a response by U.S. and Chinese economic and political elites to the growing crisis of the monetary imperialism model. Michael Hudson explains with characteristic clarity:

> the fight really is over what kind of planning China and the rest of the world should have: by governments to raise prosperity, or by the financial sector to extract revenue and impose austerity.

> U.S. diplomacy aims to make other countries dependent on its agricultural exports, its oil (or oil in countries that U.S. majors and allies control), information and military technology. This trade dependency will enable U.S. strategists to impose sanctions that would deprive economies of basic food, energy, communications and replacement parts if they resist U.S. demands.

> The objective is to gain financial control of global resources and make trade "partners" pay interest, licensing fees and high prices for products in which the United States enjoys monopoly pricing "rights" for intellectual property. A trade war thus aims to make other countries dependent on U.S.-controlled food, oil, banking and finance, or high-technology goods whose disruption will cause austerity and suffering until the trade "partner" surrenders. (Hudson 2019a)

Hudson's analysis points to the way in which economic sanctions, used with increasing frequency by the United States, are part of a punitive arsenal of measures designed to enforce compliance with a global system of debt capitalism and monetary imperialism. This use of economic sanctions has come under increasing scrutiny from critics who see in it an indiscriminate means of targeting a civilian population, analogous to crimes of war (Cockburn 2019; Hernández and Maldonado 2018; Halliday 2000; Max-Neef 2014; de Zayas 2018).

**Recursivity**

Today, one must ask whether a *Chinese dystopia*[4] is not being used as a pretext to silence questions about autonomous weapons and the application of AI to warfare?

Needless to say, the development and deployment of a new generation of weapons that are the most fearsome innovation in warfare since the invention of the atomic bomb requires a considerable amount of effort to defuse inevitable public opposition. In a timely interview at the end of 2018 summarizing his recently published book, Daniel Ellsberg, the former RAND Corporation analyst who leaked the *Pentagon Papers*, explains an important historical precedent for thinking about AI's induction into the battlefield of today and tomorrow. When faced with ethical concerns among scientists working on a nuclear weapons program, the United States government encouraged participation by actively spreading false intelligence (what today might be called "fake news") about a non-existent Nazi nuclear program (Ellsberg and Jay 2018). By 1944 at the latest, British Intelligence had solid evidence that Germany had stopped its nuclear program in 1942. Adolf Hitler, whose idea of *Lebensraum* (the concept of an exceptional right to spatial expansion based on an anthropological type) emblematizes a fanatic obsession with biopower, took most seriously the warnings coming from his scientists that an atomic bomb could potentially incite an uncontrollable fusion explosion, leading to the extinction of life on Earth. Similar warnings were being issued by U.S. scientists at the same time. As scientists working on the atomic weapons program became concerned about the political ramifications of the weapons and began advancing proposals to avert a future nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, the government of the United States made a conscious decision to withhold evidence about the premature termination of the German nuclear program in order to assure that scientists with ethical qualms would feel compelled, under the pressure of an arms race, to participate.

With the *information skirmishes* that rage around today's *transitology wars*, it is often difficult for non-specialists to judge. One recent report in *The Verge* sounded the alarm with the type of sensationalist headline that is hardly exceptional these days: "China is about to overtake America in AI research" (Vincent 2019). The basis for such claims, however, turns out to be

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[4] In a study of contemporary translation, Tong King Lee argues that the protocols of the translation industry have favored an overwhelmingly dystopian image of contemporary China. See Lee 2015.

predictably flimsy, relying solely on a single metric – the number of scientific publications and citations – compiled, as is increasingly the case in today's information skirmishes, by a private think tank with commercial interest in the research area. According to less chuckleheaded research out of Oxford University, the United States is ahead in all AI metrics (hardware, research, algorithms and commercialization) except the volume of data to which it has access (Ding 2018).

While alarms are being sounded with greater frequency, from whence comes this overwhelming confidence, expressed through media, think tanks, and scholarly institutions, that the correct alarm bells are indeed being rung? What is at stake, in truth, is social mobilization. Alarmist assessments of present and developing threats have since the Cold War played a crucial role in the manipulation and mobilization of popular opinion. The Global War on Terror, concomitant with the popularization of new information technologies, has exacerbated that tendency.

Today, we stand on the edge of an abyss. Unlike nuclear weapons, proliferation in autonomous weapons will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to control.[5] In 2018, China joined, somewhat reluctantly no doubt, a group of twenty-five countries, leading scientists, and artificial intelligence experts in support of a ban (Busby & Cuthbertson 2018). The U.S., Israel, France, the UK, and Russia lead opposition to meaningful international action. The U.S. and Israel, the two world leaders in autonomous weapons (followed by China and the UK), absurdly insist on the "benefits" of such technology. For at least a decade, U.S. commentators have attempted to portray autonomous weapons as a "humane" innovation destined to minimize casualties (Lewis 2013, Dvorsky 2015). Arguments such as these, which rely on casualty figures from the U.S. military which is known to grossly underreport the number of civilian dead and wounded (Airwars Staff 2019, Prashad 2019), ought to be dismissed outright. Indeed, debates over the relative violence of technological innovations in warfare can only divert attention from the deeper implications for political organization. Technologically-assisted "full spectrum dominance" is really about the terrifying politics of an emergent system – a type of biologistical entity. It is, in effect, a chilling answer to the haunting question raised by Yuk Hui,

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[5] Now that the United States has withdrawn from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Agreement signed in 1987, the international edifice of non-proliferation, bans on testing, and strict limits on development and use of nuclear weapons is threatened with total collapse and a renewed nuclear arms race appears inevitable.

a prominent media theorist: "will cybernetics be the superior war machine and what will be its appropriation?" (Hui 2019, 31)

Usually when we think about the incorporation of AI into logistics, we think of drones that will cover "last mile delivery." Once militarization enters the picture, however, not only the stakes but also the image changes. Dubbed the "battlefield singularity," the introduction of AI into weapons systems and battlefield decision-making processes is certainly revolutionary in its own right, but what is surely most radical over the long term is the feedback system developing between AI weapons and AI-powered logistical supply chains. This tendency goes well beyond the trend of modern warfare since the twentieth century to extend to infrastructure and all forms of productive capacity. It signals, rather, that *militarization has become the real driver behind technological totalization* and not the other way around.

As a form of emergent organization, the AI-powered supply chain will be increasingly imbued with an exponential capacity for self-valorization and expansion. This is a concrete instantiation of the phenomenon that Yuk Hui has persuasively described under the rubric of *recursivity*. Formerly thought to be an ineffable quality exclusive to organic life (celebrated in the form of a unique capacity for "self-reflection"), recursivity today has irrevocably entered the realm of a new hybrid form of technical objects, at once machinic and organic. In effect, the supply chain is taking on a life of its own, becoming a properly bio-logistical entity. Mediated by finance-fueled militarism, its end is the delivery of fearsome new autonomous weapons, based on biomimicry and AI, that will create "life" in order to destroy "life", for the goal of senseless accumulation. Henceforth, the war machine will serve the needs of the biologistical supply chain, not the other way around. In advancing the concept of a properly bio-logistical emergent form of organization that takes the form of a militarized supply chain, I am consciously moving the debate forward from earlier visions based on the assumption of a strict divide between organic and inorganic, human and machine. Where three decades ago Miguel De Landa perceptively understood that "humans" would become, "no more than pieces of a larger military-industrial machine" (De Landa 1991, 2), today we are called upon to acknowledge that the military-industrial machine is not only "taking on a life of its own" but also veritably blurring the category of life itself. To paraphrase De Landa, the military-industrial machine is becoming no more than a piece of a new emergent organization with lifelike qualities.

**Technological Totalization**

To acknowledge the reality and the future potential of the surveillance state dystopia gaining institutional momentum in China and elsewhere is not to deny that it also functions in an ideological fashion to divert attention from a parallel dystopian scenario linked to massive historical transformations known as the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016). Lack of sensitivity to this *other* dystopian scenario suggests that we have not yet learned the lessons imparted nearly four decades ago when Paul Virilio presciently observed that, "history progresses at the speed of its weapons systems" (Virilio 1977, 90). Perhaps we simply do not know what to do in the face of an indictment as comprehensive yet abstract as Virilio's. If so, it is time to learn.

Very much informed by the arms race of its day, Virilio's *Speed and Politics* (1977) relentlessly drives home the message that modern liberal democracy, no less than the totalitarian enemies through which it has defined itself, is essentially a planetary machine of species war and destruction that takes the form of an increasingly autonomous logistical enterprise. At the heart of this logistical enterprise lies a single imperative: acceleration. Technological leadership, the true source of an affective sense of unjustified superiority with which the historical West is associated, amounts to the creation, unwitting and unseen, of the "infrastructure of future battlefields" (Virilio 1977, 85). Each new, vaunted technological development is but an infrastructure that both supports the projection of war and serves as the matrix for identifying new targets. Writing in 1977 before the definitive collapse of strict divisions between civilian and military production, Virilio had already foreseen the conundrum of dual use information technologies in a world irrevocably marked by total war. The irony, however, is not limited to the discrepancy between liberal democracy's peace-loving self-image and its war-addicted reality. Where liberal democracy prides itself on having realized a form of political organization that corresponds better than any other to the collective power of rational decision, its ascendancy is based on the capitulation to a militarized logistics over which it exercises no dominion. The imperatives of acceleration and efficiency at the core of logistical enterprise operate autonomously as a new subject of history. The truth of this logistical civilization – characterized by "colonial genocide" and "ethnocide" (70) – culminates finally in an irresistible historical teleology: "it continues according to the arms race, at the speed of the new capacities

of the vectors, until one day it will dispossess this last man… lead[ing] us to renounce solitary human decision in favor of the absolute miniaturization of the political field which is *automation*" (Virilio 1977, 164). 1977 was still too early to have a good sense of the development of algorithmic governance, yet clearly the problem of automation was on the agenda. Virilio concludes *Speed and Politics* with the admonition that liberal democracy, supposed to be a more perfect form for the representation and realization of the collective will (of a people), ends up administering the termination of human decision via its capitulation to logistics (under which algorithmic governance is subsumed).

One of the important warnings to take away from *Speed and Politics*, before we move on, is that the programs of transition designed to respond to or avert dystopia might themselves be complicit with the logic of acceleration that Virilio memorably called *dromology* (Virilio 1977, 69). In Virilio's view, every attempt to contest one hegemonic transition by a counter transition – such as positing the socialist transition in opposition to the capitalist one – has merely resulted in an increase in the rate of militarized acceleration on all sides. Virilio's unflinching critique is an intriguing example of a relational approach that begins to grasp the liberal warfare state and its illiberal enemies as a systemic whole. The problem, needless to say, lies in the tendency to promote inaction through cynicism. Since transition and counter-transition form a mutually-reinforcing cycle of acceleration, one is goaded into concluding that resistance is futile.

To my mind, this unfortunate conclusion is amplified by the narrative voice adopted by the author of *Speed and Politics*, which creates a subjective position of omniscient distance from which to measure the cycles of acceleration. The dromological equivalence between actually-existing socialist societies and capitalist ones is a welcome theme, one that was undoubtedly innovative for its time yet also representative of a nascent right wing turn in Western European intellectual life following the major defeat suffered by the Italian left in 1977 and the concomitant turn away from Althusserianism in France at roughly the same time. Symptomatically, the narrative lacks precautions against creeping cynicism. Blanket statements about the Cultural Revolution or the Russian Revolution conceal the fact that in the mid-1970s, most of the relevant archives were simply out of the reach of French-based researchers such as Virilio—who was linguistically unprepared to read them, in any case. Among the several references to Mao Zedong in *Speed and Politics*, those that call attention to the supposed "embarrassment" on his face (Virilio 1977, 56) and depict him as an anachronistic "old thinker" (Virilio 1977, 89) outflanked by the development of the society of consumption

create a composite image of an easily dismissed historical personage left behind by history. In the end, the narrative voice adopts a position of *distance* in relation to its object of study, as if trying to evade the object without having to confront it, read it closely, and intervene in the messy protocols of translation. This gesture replicates the dromological economy of distance that vanishes in the face of acceleration, effectively leading Virilio to write his own self-critique: "the speed of this vision—ideally without obstacles—causes *distances to approach*" (Virilio 1977, 94).

As the book rushes headlong into a riveting indictment of military-industrial civilization, it still cannot escape the *speed of identification*. If, as we are told twice, "speed is the hope of the West" (Virilio 1977, 70 and 78), then the mode of identification is the motor of speed. This is not simply the identity of an area associated with superiority but also the identity of a subject of knowledge. *Speed and Politics* leaves open the possibility of the most cynical conclusion: because the astute dromologist knows that capitalist transition and socialist transition are ultimately equivalent at a dromological level and since, furthermore, socialist transition is at best a comic anachronism, *ergo* only a fool would give up claim to the one criterion of decisive superiority that enables a dromologist to articulate his critique first. Critique, from this perspective, is both an effect and a proof of dromological superiority. It can only be undertaken by suturing the critic's position to that of the dromologically-superior population/area. If global populations are divided, from a dromological point of view, into "hopeful populations" that command speed and "despairing populations" overtaken by it (Virilio 1977, 70), then the dromologist would be the one who trades hope for critique, leaving intact the structure of demographic division.

That is the reason why Daniel Vukovich's analysis of a *transition internal to the semantic structure of the word liberal* is so important to the critique of contemporary sinological transitology in Vukovich's recent work, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China*. Changes in the meaning of the word liberal accompanied the birth of a new biopolitical regime, drifting from the word's original reference to non-manual forms of labor and the freedom that came with them. After becoming first associated with anthropologized class difference, relegating the "great unwashed" of the modern working class to the status of the illiberal, the word finally arrives at its modern connotation of an *ism* at the vanguard of *universal transition*. "Our interest here in etymology is, to summarize, the transition from a class/social distinction to the more familiar discourse of political liberalism

and thus of illiberalism, not so much as a political ideology (*a la* communism) but as a type of regime defined by being not-liberal" (Vukovich 2018, 21). To my mind, the emphasis here falls on the existential implications of the verb *being* rather than the noun regime. If illiberalism "index[es]…ugly people and classes" (Vukovich 2018, 21), that is because *democratic transition itself is a form of anthropological indexing*. Hence the importance of recognizing that the word liberal, now virtually synonymous with a supposedly universal form of historical transition, underwent a transition of its own. This transition conceals the shame of the term's utter dependence on colonial and class difference—slavery—behind a taxonomy of inferior types of government surreptitiously cross-indexed to a range of anthropological types. The critique of militarized dromology brilliantly launched by Paul Virilio four decades ago can no longer afford to indulge in making such concessions to the biopolitics of anthropological and colonial difference.[6]

## Executive Order 13806 and Taiwan

Over a decade-and-a-half ago, I argued that the global crisis of sovereignty acutely in evidence around Taiwan's international status tells us something crucial about the operation of biopower (Solomon 2004). The crisis of sovereignty, from which no nation, not even the United States, is spared today, is a crucial vector for the articulation of militarization to the technological totalization. If the metaphor of an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" (TIME 1950) used by Douglas Macarthur describes Taiwan's role in the first Cold War, what would be its role in the second one?

Cold War 2.0, in which Taiwan inevitably becomes once again a *theater of operations*, begins with a reactivation of old circuits from the first Cold War, particularly those that link information technology to militarization (De Landa 1991) that developed at the end of the Second World War. On the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act, President Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook account announced large new expansion projects in Taiwan by the rent-yielding monopolies of U.S. surveillance capitalism, Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and Facebook (Tsai 2019). At the beginning of 2019, Google's hardware chief Rick Osterloh

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[6] Happily, this is one of the major improvements made by *Wars and Capital*, Alliez and Lazzarato's 2016 update of Virilio but there is no space here to discuss the way the authors place the problems of anthropological and colonial difference at the heart of their understanding of the liberal warfare state.

confirmed that Taiwan is home to Google's largest R&D center in Asia with plans to double that in the future. On June 27, 2019, Qualcomm, the world's largest mobile chipset supplier, announced construction of a new R&D center in Hsinchu, Taiwan, devoted to 5G and AI. As U.S. corporations such as Google, Microsoft, Amazon and others comes under scrutiny for links to the U.S. military, occasionally inciting opposition from their U.S.-based workforce, one has to wonder to what extent the outsourcing to Taiwan of research in AI and cloud operations as well as training in global market penetration is designed to relocate controversial research offshore, away from the U.S.? Besides massive new arms procuration, Taiwan is also actively developing and expanding its arms industry, including drones, cybersecurity, intermediate range missiles, submarines, fighters, etc. Regardless of the answer to that question, the real challenge for democratic politics comes from the growing synergy between monopoly[7] or platform capitalism and militarization.

In view of Taiwan's leading role in the semiconductor industry, perhaps "chip foundry for the Borg"[8] would be an apt metaphor to describe Taiwan's role today. Needless to say, the "Borg" could be alternately Chinese or American; the only necessary condition increasingly appears to be the opposition itself.

In the face of this other dystopia that is neither "Chinese" nor "American", we need an historical account of how liberalism actively produces its illiberal enemies and how the relation between the liberal warfare state and its illiberal enemies inevitably induces accelerated technological totalization through militarization while concomitantly promoting the social violence of economic exploitation. One example of what that history would look like would be the recent work done around the crucial role played by Wall Street in financing German rearmament under Adolf Hitler in the 1930s—a ploy originally designed to turn a profit while cultivating a proxy in central Europe to counter the rise of communism (Sutton 2010; Kinzer 2013; Talbot 2016). A full account of the intimate historical relation between liberalism and its enemies would begin with the history of the slave trade and the colonial extraction industries, incorporating the sort of work done by Lisa Lowe in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Lowe 2015) or Ian Baucom in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy*

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[7] Taiwan has the highest per capita level of Facebook penetration; Microsoft has a monopoly on cloud computing for the corporate, government, and educational sectors; and Google has a monopoly on mining of big data through search-related access.

[8] The Borg are a pseudo-species of cybernetic beings who operate as a single, integrated combat unit, appearing in the *Star Trek* film franchise.

*of History* (Baucom 2005). Not only were many of the foundational thinkers of modern liberalism personally involved in colonial enterprise and the slave trade, the slave trade itself transformed states, colonies, and kingdoms. In Africa, the slave trade destabilized kingdoms, promoting new forms of despotism and civil conflict; in the American colonies, it led to civil war. A review of liberalism's birth in the material practices of colonialism and slavery would set the basis for a political understanding of *liberal disavowal*, a crucial condition for complicity. Such recognition of *disavowal and complicity* would set the stage to consider the role of settler colonialism in the establishment of the modern university, with the aim of understanding the founding exclusions of race and class that characterize institutional knowledge production in fields, such as east Asian studies, devoted to those 'non-Western' areas supposedly prone to produce illiberal polities (and hence in need of a "democratic transition" that provides cover for market penetration and financialization).

In lieu of such an account, one of the most interesting things to note specifically in relation to Taiwan is the way in which volition is evacuated from the island territory's relationship to the future. According to my own unscientific, largely anecdotal observation, one of the themes that comes up constantly in discussions within Taiwan about its position vis-à-vis the US and the PRC is the *lack of choice*. Taiwan has no other choice, it is often said, but to align itself according to a logic of the lesser of two evils with the United States of America against the Chinese dystopia thought to be of greater imminent danger. Rather than weigh this assertion on its own merits, I think that the most important issue is to take seriously the idea of a lack of agency. As we have seen with Virilio, logistical automation of the arena of political decision is one the greatest threats of our time.

The lack of choice is complemented by a phenomenon that I call the *postulate of postcolonial immunity*. This phenomenon, which must be distinguished from the liberal disavowal and complicity that characterizes imperial nationalism, is an outgrowth of the sense of victimization that accompanies postcolonial nationalism. In the face of an enduring power imbalance between postcolonial and neo- or postimperial states, the logic of victim nationalism encourages political actors and intellectuals in the postcolonial state to imagine a relation to domestic politics in the neoimperial one that is exempt from responsibility. Since the postcolonial actor occupies a marginalized position relative to the neoimperial one, the postcolonial actor feels a sense of entitlement to cooperate with neoimperial actors and discourses, even ones that perpetuate the source of neoimperial hegemony. As long as

cooperation or strategic alliance is deemed beneficial to the immediate objectives of victim nationalism, the postcolonial actor espousing them believes that he or she is not responsible for the ramifications of such alliances to domestic politics in the neoimperial state, which are treated as an external given.[9]

In view of this debilitating systemic feature that uses the power differential between postcolonial and neoimperial states to mobilize postcolonial populations' support for neoimperial hegemony, I would like to indulge in a thought experiment to trace the cascading ramifications of Executive Order 13806 as it constructs its own momentum of financial relations, strategic commitments, weapons development and transnational right-wing politics. Due to my poor ability as an investigative journalist, this is necessarily an incomplete and largely impressionistic sketch whose value lies in describing the type of relationships that proliferate in the wake of postcolonial immunity and the fantasy of the West.

Several months after Executive Order 13806, the Vice Minister of Defense of the Republic of China, Chang Guan-chung (張冠群), implicitly referred to it at the US Taiwan Defense Industry Conference held in Maryland on October 28, 2018, by calling for the incorporation of Taiwan's semiconductor industry into the militarized US supply chain (Liberty Times 2018). The fact that the Conference was chaired by Randall Shriver (薛瑞福), the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, might not seem to warrant further attention until we remember that Shriver's resumé is an important piece in the puzzle of revolving door relations among industry, government, and right-wing politics that has taken hold of the U.S. policy elites driving the identification of industrial and defense policy at the heart of the new Cold War. Appointed to the Department of Defense through the personal intervention of alt-right political czar Steve Bannon before the latter left the White House in August, 2017, Shriver was the founder of The Project 2049 Institute, a think tank that draws links and funding not just from the normal foreign policy agencies in the governments of the U.S., Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, but also from the U.S. defense industry and private equity, as well as regime change agencies like the National Endowment for Democracy (Cartalucci 2016;

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[9] Postcolonial immunity is intrinsically related to a corollary postulate, that of the    fantasy of (the unity of) the West, without which postcolonial immunity would be impossible. Following a movement analyzed by Naoki Sakai, the West is in practice constructed only via operations such as claims to postcolonial immunity that call forth an imaginary cartography of civilizational difference: "The unity of the West, therefore, is always its *putative* unity; it is something to be called for, and yet, in the presumptive and essentialist investment, it is naturalized and presumed to be a given" (Sakai 2005, 191).

Blumenthal 2018), and private foundations with Fascist heritage like the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, which enjoys multiple ties with Japan's defense ministry (Cassano and Kotch 2018). Taiwan-related research and talking points from The Project 2049 Institute, such as researcher Ian Easton's (易思安) *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and America's Strategy in Asia* (Easton 2017), receive considerable bandwith in Taiwan. Easton's book has been translated into Mandarin and articles from him appear not infrequently in Chinese translation and in English in on-line media such as the Storm Media Group (established by Columbia Business School graduate and former CEO of high-tech investment-oriented Fubon Securities David Chang 張果軍) and in print media such as the *Taipei Times*. Easton's argument is noteworthy because of his insistence that U.S. – R.O.C. relations should move beyond arms sales to include defense industry cooperation. Recently, Easton has taken the criminalization of China to an extreme, hyperbolic level, asserting that "China is the strongest and smartest strategic rival the US has ever faced. By comparison, the Nazis, Imperial Japanese, and Soviets were poor, simple, crude, and unsophisticated" (Easton 2019). Among those reasons that Easton gives for China's diabolical success, the control of U.S. universities, media, and "thought leaders" occupies a salient position. Paralleling his earlier calls for defense industry mobilization, Easton concludes his recent appeal with a call to mobilize knowledge production across multiple domains to support the war effort against China. Easton's arguments amount to a new form of total mobilization system.

The growth in work like Easton's, including that of former Canadian intelligence officer J. Michael Cole (寇謐將; Cole 2018), suggests a new flexian[10] persona increasingly common in "Taiwan Studies" that straddles the line between policy and advertising copy for the defense industry while basking in the prestige of think tank, media, and/or academic respectability.

The ideas behind Executive Order 13806 clearly do not come out of the blue, but have been developing for some time, notably in the work of Peter Navarro (b. 1949), Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, and largely thought to be a major influence in dressing Trump's oligarchical rentier economy with a veneer of anti-China economic nationalism. A visit to Taipei in early November, 2018, by Alex Gladstein, chief strategy officer of Human Rights Foundation, the not-for-profit front behind The Oslo Freedom Forum, pushed further the effects Executive Order 13806. Following Navarro, Trump, and Chang, Gladstein joined

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[10] A term devised by Janine Wedel to describe individuals who operate at the nexus between official and private power.

what was by the end of 2018 a well-orchestrated chorus of voices calling for the integration of Taiwan's semiconductor industry into a U.S.-led militarized supply chain (Tran 2018). The Oslo Freedom Forum, an instrument for regime change that uses human rights as cover, is largely funded by Donors Capital Fund (Blumenthal 2013). Fueled by the Koch brothers, Donors Capital Fund and its affiliate Donors Trust has bankrolled the U.S. right's fight against unions, public schools, climate scientists and more (Kroll 2013). Oslo Freedom Forum's founder, Thor Halversson (b. 1976), has also reportedly funneled money into Islamophobia propaganda and proto-fascist organizations (Barrows-Friedman 2013). Halversson's cousin, Leopoldo López (b. 1971), is a U.S.-educated leader of the Venezuelan right-wing opposition to Bolivarian socialism. López co-founded the local regime change vehicle, Popular Will, with Juan Guaidó, the face of a Washington-backed coup attempt against the government of Venezuela that started at the end of 2018, aiming to privatize Venezuela's oil and mineral reserves and place them firmly under the control of U.S. corporations. It is no coincidence that Taiwan's government under President Tsai Ing-wen has been a major donor of US-orchestrated "humanitarian" aid to the Venezuela opposition in a program unmistakably designed to match and provide cover for the humanitarian crisis incited by criminal measures that the US government calls "economic sanctions". As Christiane Vollaire observed in an important critique of the aesthetics and politics of humanitarian aid to Africa, the so-called "humanitarian" aid dispensed by the liberal warfare state is invariably a fig leaf for the belligerence and repression spilling over into war crimes and coup d'états that assure the relative stability of the neoimperial extractivist industries (Vollaire 2007).

While my description of these flexian networks, which point to a hornet's nest of bitterly contested political narratives concerning democracy and regime change, falls far short of the kind of detail required to accurately map out transnational right-wing networks that could serve as a credible basis for further discussion, it does adequately demonstrate the existence of the circular relationships that articulate financialization and technological innovation to militarization. The "revolving door" through which flexians travel is one of the best-known metaphors for one type of rampant recursivity that characterizes society today. Acknowledging this rampant circularity, I wish to underline a point that is not ideological but concerns rather the prominent role of logistics in the elimination of choices in the present that could lead to alternative futures.

**Militarized logistical modernity, the modern regime of translation, and the future of anthropological difference[11]**

One of the most important questions to be posed to the process of technological totalization concerns its relation to the aesthetic ideology of anthropological and colonial difference essentially indebted to literary and philosophical romanticism. Yuk Hui's *Recursivity and Contingency* offers an interesting contribution to thinking about this question as he traces the origins of the metaphysics of technological totalization in the attempts by idealist philosophers of German romanticism to address the difference between the machinic and the organic that modernity exacerbates and inflates. More than the question of the opposition between the machinic and the organic (which Hui claims is effectively anachronistic), the point to which I would like to draw attention concerns the status of the aesthetic ideology at the heart of literary and philosophical romanticism. It is crucial to cross-read Hui's historical narrative with the deep and abiding investment in political and cultural romanticism that continues to define a feedback loop comprised of the intersections among language, people, and knowledge. This is the place where the modern nation-state, the area-based disciplinary divisions of humanistic and social science knowledge, and the protocols of the modern regime of translation and linguistic labor are bound together.

As Peter Button has shown in *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (2009), Chinese writers in the 20th century recognized early on, through their engagement with realism, that an aesthetic ideology of figuration was indeed the central problem of colonial-imperial modernity. Even a hasty connection—all that we have time for here—between Button and Hui reveals that the problem of technological totalization hinges in the end on the problem of anthropological difference and its significance for modern (bio)politics.

One of the crucial preliminary steps towards applying the fruits of this sort of cross-reading centers on thinking through the relation between logistics and translation. The discussion of "Virilio's logistical Modernity" (Bratton 2006, 10) in one of the preceding sections sets the stage for this move by teasing out those places in Virilio's discussions of logistics where the

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[11] This section was originally written as a separate essay commissioned by invitation and first published by *The Contemporary Journal*, the online journal of Nottingham Gallery (https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/) .

modern regime of translation is active, albeit in repressed form. The modern regime of translation, to summarize rather quickly, postulates an anthropological image in the figure of the fictional totality of a language. This totality, which can only be arrived at through an implicit operation of translation that creates the conditions for the discrimination of separate, discrete languages, becomes in turn the figure or image of the determinate community, or people, to which a specific language is supposed to correspond. The image of the totality of language, configured through a repressed operation of translation, is sutured to the image of the unity of a people in a process that Naoki Sakai brilliantly terms *cofiguration*. As a critique of configuration, Sakai's theory of translation is in effect a critique of the Romantic equivalence between nation and people that forms both the basis of the modern human and social sciences as well as the basis for the geopolitical organization of global populations into sovereign nation-states. In this final section, I would like to sketch out the implications of this approach, while simultaneously filling in some of the many missing details, for rethinking the aesthetic ideology that sustains the on-going and escalating war in the Western Pacific.

Whereas Babel is the story of universal communication lost in the past, Machine Translation (MT) offers us, according to former British prime minister Theresa May and many others, the promise of universal communication to be realized in the future.[12] Among the most common applications for MT today, two are salient: the service industries, exemplified by the tourism industry, and the military. These two aspects amount to the two sides of capital's relation to labor. The *concertation* of labor is defined as getting all actors in the same productive team to communicate effectively. The *reproduction* of labor can be seen as enabling labor sufficient communicative autonomy to maintain itself at a level statistically, if not individually, stable enough to assure the conditions of capital accumulation through production. On the one hand, since labor has been, up to now, the one commodity that capital cannot autonomously produce, the problem of balancing the former against the latter occupies a central ideological task. On the other hand, an excess of either communicative concertation or autonomy threatens capital's ability to control the extraction of value from labor. Hence "communication" also names, under capitalist relations, a "state", specifically, a state of perpetual war, the genealogy of which begins with the biopolitical invention of nation-state languages through the modern regime of translation.

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[12]   My thanks to Stefan Nowotny for drawing my attention to May's address at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on January 25, 2018. The full text of May's address can be accessed at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/theresa-may-davos-address/ .

If the computational media insinuating themselves into translation practice today are distinct "because they have a stronger evolutionary potential than any other technology" (Hayles 2018, 33), the role of temporality is central. In truth, the principal challenge posed by computational media today is not the ethics of their relation to the human, but rather the ethics of their temporality. The problem is acceleration, or the speed at which the speed of change is increasing. Social institutions – among which the Humanities are paramount – available for making visible the exponential calculus of acceleration in relation to social geography make visible the place where capital "hits the ground" (Neilson and Mezzadra 2019, 22) in relation to cultural knowledge. These institutions are today overwhelmed by the alliance between financialization, largely driven by algorithms, and the reduction of life to code and code to exchange value. This is what Toni Negri calls the peculiar form of "tautological time" that is characteristic of the moment when information technologies invade the social, definitively eroding the measure of value (Negro 2003, 27).

Negri's notion of tautological time is particularly pertinent in the context of the modern regime of translation, which has perennially reserved a special place for tautology as a remedy for the problematic unity of language and a people essential to the construction of the modern nation-state.[13]  As Naoki Sakai observes:

> It is not possible to know whether a particular language as a unity exists or not.
> It is the other way around: by subscribing to the idea of the unity of language,
> it becomes possible for us to systematically organize knowledge about
> languages in a modern, scientific manner. (Sakai 2009, 73)

In the modern, essentially Romantic, understanding of language, adherence to the idea of the unity of language occurs precisely through the figure sketched by the tautology between a language and a people. Although each of these two terms, people and language, is characterized by an irresolvable indeterminacy, they are put into relation in such a way that they work to posit and determine each other in a tautological fashion (Agamben 2000, 66). As the unity thus obtained is based on constant delineation of cultural entities that lack inherent stability, it always calls for reinscription through practice. This is where translation comes in. Relying on

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[13] The concept of the "modern regime of translation" has been developed at length by Naoki Sakai. For one example, see: Naoki Sakai, "The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation", *The Eighteenth Century* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 105–108.

a representational schema that posits two or more linguistic unities separated by a gap, which translation purportedly bridges, the modern regime of translation effaces that practical aspect of the situation calling for translation – incommensurable discontinuity in the social. While the practice of translation is singular in each instance, the modern regime of translation inserts that form of singularity into a representational economy that makes it look as if the unity of language – and the borders between different languages – precedes the situation in which translation is called for. In other words, the modern regime of translation interdicts the singularity of the relationship, diverting attention away from the primary experience of discontinuity, by definition unrepresentable, towards the secondary experience of the transition from discontinuity to continuity. The gap thus "bridged", of course, is nothing but the spectral return of the "gap" that was posited in the first place. Sakai's theory of translation proposes a way to understand translation that preserves the experience of discontinuity and the political labor of bordering, without which the essentially social, practical aspect of translation could not be understood. He stresses:

> It is therefore important to introduce difference in and of language in such a way
> that we can comprehend translation not in terms of the communication model
> of equivalence and exchange, but as a form of political labor to create continuity
> at the elusive point of discontinuity in the social. (Sakai 2009, 72)

The temporal difference introduced by computational media has far-reaching implications for translation as a form of social practice. What is happening today is that the historical tautology between language and people characteristic of the colonial–imperial modernity can now be definitively located on one side of the nature/culture continuum, even as cybernetic hybrids proliferate. [14] It is emblematic that an elected politician such as Theresa May – symptomatically dubbed the "Maybot" in a prescient nod to her role as a political crash test dummy – would like us to celebrate MT as the final triumph of nativity. Go anywhere, speak your native language. Yet, as the homophony between MT and "empty" suggests, this is a

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[14] I prefer the use of "colonial–imperial" rather than "colonial/imperial" because I am not trying to suggest a relation of substitution between two terms but rather an integral connection. In sum: modernity is, by definition, bi-polar. While this point has received quite a bit of attention, theorists often write about different types of modernity (colonial, imperial, alternative, etc.) as though it were possible to think of these categories autonomously. I am arguing instead that they must be thought in the form of a relation that precedes the two terms being related. That approach, in a nutshell, is how I understand translation and briefly accounts for the reason why I reject theories that view it primarily as a bridging technology.

pyrrhic victory, exactly like Brexit. Tautology, in the broadest sense of an interminable "backstop" of exchange value, becomes not an element *of* history, but rather the only ground on which history can be thought. As Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero remind us, the connection between biological species, taxonomic (or hierarchical) classification, and capitalist value is fundamental to the operation of biopower today (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero 2009, 4). This is no longer the history *of* species difference, but history *as* species difference, or history as meme.

The multitude of questions and anxieties that I have about the biopolitics of capital's "native language", so to speak, begin not from the application of technology to translation, but rather from the premise that translation is a point of intervention into the apparatus of specific or species difference characteristic of the colonial–imperial modernity. This apparatus is composed of two distinct forms of difference, the colonial difference and the anthropological difference. The latter refers to the two principal "others" of *homo sapiens* represented by animals and machines in their relation to language and tools. The former stands for the presumption that certain populations within *homo sapiens* are closer – by virtue of their superior mastery of language and tools – to the ideal image of *homo sapiens* than others. The reduction of translation to logistical transfer and the grounding of that operation in an imaginary cartography of spatialized difference – principally nation-states and "civilizations" – is a common feature of the modern regime of translation. Because that imaginary cartography is associated with the logical economy of species or specific difference, it is intrinsically related to deep-seated presuppositions concerning the essence of the human. In other words, the modern regime of translation joins the two faces of the apparatus of species difference (colonial and anthropological difference) – to a cartography of milieus or areas that serves as a basis for "encoding" and "decoding" translational exchange. The area is thus imbued with an "organic" or "natural" quality that hides its extremely theoretical nature, facilitating the capture of labor through logistical control of communication and the extraction of surplus value therefrom.

The modern regime of translation thus partakes of an aesthetic ideology concerning the essence of the human, and, more specifically, of an improbable vision of a specific area – the West – as the site within which the true essence of the human finds realization. It is important to remember, however, that the West itself is nothing more than a fantastical projection, or abstraction, of social relationships of domination and exploitation in the same way that commodity is an abstraction of labor. Translation is one of the principal forms of labor through

which this abstraction gains social currency, or again, becomes both hard specie and a site of speciation in the social.

In order to illustrate this point, allow me to return to the application of MT in the service industries and in militarization. The former is the site of some of the most exploitative working conditions today as well as of the compensatory catharsis offered to increasingly precarious labor in the scant moments of "leisure time" allowed by capital. The latter involves the militarization of communication itself, including, eventually, the militarization of bacteriophagic communication. If, as Virilio says, "history progresses at the speed of its weapon systems", the current conjuncture is one of intense "progress".

A concrete manifestation of the communicational dialectic between militarization and artificial intelligence (AI) is probably best seen in the type of liberal biopower being deployed today, and projected into the future, against China. The dystopian scenario everywhere in evidence today, as a teleological inevitability, is that robots not only will supplant "Chinese" labor in "the world's factory", but, when armed and quite likely operating semi-autonomously, will also constitute the most fearsome type of army the world has ever seen.[15] Swarms of drones powered by AI and biomimicry technologies will stand ready to suppress the inevitable *gilets jaunes* type of insurrections from the "yellow hordes" abandoned by the bioinformatics

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[15] The recent call by Giselle Rampersad (Associate Professor in Innovation with experience in the defence industries amongst others) to catapult Australian industry into the fourth industrial revolution through investment in a new generation of information-technology powered weapons illustrates one way in which a scenario, described above as dystopian, might nevertheless seem attractive from a certain perspective. The pretext for intense Australian government investment in its defence capabilities, particularly naval capability, is, of course, a perceived threat from China. This pretext has become such an integral part of contemporary Australian public discourse that it hardly needs to be mentioned. The only direct reference to China in Rampersad's appeal concerns the introduction of industrial robots that are said to be "even cheaper than a Chinese worker". Rampersad stresses that "Another feature of industry 4.0 [i.e., industries associated with the fourth industrial revolution] is the digitisation of the supply chain". She concludes that "If done well, defence investment will make as powerful a contribution to the nation's economic prosperity as its military security". Rampersad's article thus argues implicitly for a scenario in which security is guaranteed by IT-fuelled weapons systems in a world characterised by robots replacing "Chinese" (i.e., cheap) labor. Giselle Rampersad, "Building Our Own Warships Is Australia's Path to the Next Industrial Revolution", *The Conversation* November 23, 2018, https://theconversation.com/building-our-own-warships-is-australias-path-to-the-next-industrial-revolution-105984.

economy.[16] The final irony of liberal biopower is not just that this plan will be executed in the name of freedom, but that none of it would be possible without the massive purchase of US debt by China and other Eurasian countries, who are at once the primary support for US monetary imperialism and the principal targets of its global garrison military.

Today, as the United States is planning its most ambitious restructuring of industrial/foreign policy since that of Ronald Reagan and aiming for what has been characterized as the "militarization of supply chains", I am suggesting that a form of "Yellow Peril" discourse is being mobilized anew to lend ethical and political legitimacy to such frightening militarization.[17] Historically speaking, the older form of Yellow Peril discourse, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was primarily concerned, beyond an affective investment in racism, with normalizing the logic of species difference though the aesthetic exemplarity of the anthropological type. The thing about "Chinese" that was most frightening was not this or that specific characteristic, but rather their supposed *lack* of a fixed, identifiable national character. Hence, Yellow Peril functioned primarily to legitimate taxonomies of specific difference in terms of the universality of human essence as represented by an anthropological type associated with a supposedly superior area, i.e., the West. Attachment to this taxonomy has not waned, even as it increasingly reveals itself to be untenable. As Peter Button persuasively argues, "[The] logic of the type has historically manifested itself in the West precisely in relation to what it [the West] conceived of (and viscerally feared) as an unassimilable exterior".[18] The crux of this fear – associated with essentially unstable borders (of the West, of the human, etc.) – lies

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[16] The term "yellow hordes" was used by the satirical Twitter account "Bellingdog" (@Bellingdawg) as a caption to a photo of *gilets jaunes* protesters in Montpellier, France, on January 5, 2019. Although the Bellingdog account was subsequently suspended by Twitter and can no longer be accessed, the tweet was widely circulated, including by the right-wing conspiracy website Zero Hedge. See: Tyler Durden [pseud.], "France Ablaze Again; Yellow Vests Rage After Founder Arrested; Cops Punched, Tear Gas Deployed", *Zero Hedge* January 5, 2019, https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2019-01-05/france-ablaze-again-yellow-vests-out-en-masse-after-founder-arrested.

[17] A thorough account of the transformation initiated under Ronald Reagan in the economic, scientific, monetary, and discursive basis of US Imperialism can be found in: Melinda Cooper, "Life Beyond the Limits: Inventing the Bioeconomy", in *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 15–50. See also: Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1; William D. Hartung and TomDispatch, "The Pentagon's Cunning Plot to Militarize the Economy", *Truthdig* November 1, 2018, https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-pentagons-cunning-plot-to-militarize-the-economy/.

[18] See Peter Button, "(Para-)humanity, Yellow Peril and the postcolonial (arche-)type", *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 443.

in the "fear of the dissolution of history as the realization of the genre of the human itself".[19] From Ronald Reagan's call in 1987 to "tear down this wall" to Donald Trump's call in 2016 to "build the wall and have them pay for it", the putative unity of the West remains unquestioned – sometimes even by those most intent on critiquing it. Poised as we are on the cusp of an unprecedented transformation in warfare, a panoply of signs point to the contemporary reactivation of the context in which Yellow Peril discourse thrives: anxiety over the logical inconsistency of "the West" and the fate of the "genres of the human".[20]

I take it as axiomatic that the "peril", if there is one, stems not from a population improbably specified as "yellow", but rather from the possibility, if not inevitability, that the appropriation of advances in biotech, information tech, and nanotech by finance capital, according to a logic of militarization and security, is exercising profound effects on the generic living conditions on our planet.[21]

While insisting that the biopolitics of translation into capital's native language must be thought of in the context of capital's permanent war against labor, I agree that it is also crucial to consider the implications for our sense of temporality. Neoliberalism colonizes time through the "cruel optimism" of a speculative future hedged against ever-deepening indemnity.[22] Colonial–imperial Romanticism colonizes time through the tautological relationship between people and language. Combined, as they are, in the deployment of computational media to translational practice, the new, neoliberal Romanticism spells the beginning of a long war of attrition to realize capitalist modernity's oldest dream: the hope that humanity's self-production – enhanced by biotech, AI, and nanotech – will immediately and fully coincide with the accumulation of surplus value. Just as "the West" might easily shift location to Shanghai, an AI might easily become a figure for the human. Wasn't Sophia (a humanoid robot developed in 2016 by Hong Kong-based Hanson Robotics) granted Saudi Arabian citizenship while such

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook The Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project", in *Not Only The Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 117.

[21] For a discussion of the central role of the colour yellow in representing the violent ambiguity of modern visual culture, see Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow, or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[22] Cf., Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

rights were being refused to that country's many migrant workers? The Maybot's promise of being able to speak everywhere in capital's native language means that we (or, more precisely, some of us) are the ones slated to become the real *robota* (forced labor).

In truth, we are being asked to look at a future populated with three classes of beings: crash test dummies, autonomous weapons, and *robota*.

It is important to remember that this is not the only version of a translation-enabled futurity to have been imagined within the horizon of the colonial–imperial modernity that we still inhabit today. L. L. Zamenhof's Esperanto and Qu Qiubai's "common language" (*putonghua*) are two examples that were both conceived, albeit in different ways, to combat the dialectic of universalism and particularism, which became codified in the modern regime of translation associated with the birth of modern nation-state languages. This was a combat directly tied to the revolutionary creation of a "people-to-come" that could not be contained in the logical economy of species and genus. In other words, this would be a type of community whose foundational theory *and* praxis would not be based on the apparatus of species difference, the template of which would be that exceptional yet ultimately incoherent area known as the West.

The struggles of today are struggles for a future. A crucial moment in the struggle occurs every time one speaks of translation into or out of a language considered "native" that is also co-figured with other "native" languages on the basis of exchange value. This is when the rebellion begins. It is the rebellion of translation, translation as rebellion, based on the essential recognition that failure, not transfer speed or nativity, is the basis of communication. To be a species, if it is to be anything at all, is nothing more than to share the condition of species-being with other species, including, of course, those that are thought to be "inanimate".

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