

"The One Who Really Scares Me"

- PAUL VIRILIO

interviewed by DOROTHEA HAHN

The French philosopher Paul Virilio on the New War and how it works, and why the installation of missiles around a French nuclear power plant is an act of war. Also why PV is more afraid of Bush than he is of Bin Laden. And why he shouts "Merdel" in the face of politicians and media makers. Original to *Die Tages Zeitung (TAZ)*

~ *Monsieur Virilio, you are a philosopher and you are concerning yourself with all kinds of catastrophes.*

> **Paul Virilio (PV):** I am a warchild.

~ *(But) now, we are having all kinds of catastrophes all in one go: terrorist attacks, bombings, bacteriological threats. Are there any known precedents to this situation?*

> **PV:** We see here a breaking point within the (classic) economy of war, a breaking point of historical significance – comparable to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For more than fifty years, we have been living in an intermission within the economy and politics of war: we have been brushing with the infathomable then: (total) annihilation. For me, Auschwitz and Hiroshima are crimes against humanity. The attack on the World Trade Centre too, is to me a crime against humanity – I wouldn't say that of the attack against the Pentagon. It is a crime that alters the character, the economy, and the politics of war.

~ *Did that come totally out of the blue?*

> **PV:** What we have witnessed in the 20th century is the dilution of war. It first happened in a subversive form during the decolonisation struggles. Then came guerrilla wars, including

their urban varieties in Latin America. Subsequently we had terrorism, as with the Palestinian, which can possibly be justified, and also in Germany and Italy. What Clausewitz already feared in *On War* is taking place now. The destruction of the World Trade Centre is the direct consequence of the evolution of war into chaos.

~ *Officially we are not at war. There is no known enemy.*

> **PV:** That's exactly what the change is about. I insist on the word 'war'. Clausewitz calls war "the continuation of politics by other means". This is a type of war we have been accustomed to in the walk of history: the so-called *guerre substantielle*, a conflict with declaration of war, known enemies, battlefields, etc. But Clausewitz also feared that, beside the political war, there would also develop a *guerre accidentelle*, a formless war, a war without declaration of war, without acknowledged enemies and stated war-aims, apart from the catastrophe.

~ *But there has been no clear policy before this war either.*

> **PV:** And that while we are already in the domain of the accidental war. A trans-political war. This is an extraordinary occurrence. It means the end of deterrence as it was invented after Hiroshima. There was an armament race, but a situation of no-war obtained. With the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, we have left the stage of the equilibrium of terror that was the basis of deterrence, to enter the disequilibrium of terrorism.

~ *What you call the disequilibrium of terrorism is something that yourself already announced eight years ago, at the occasion of the first attack on the World Trade Centre. How did that idea occur to you at the time?*

> **PV:** I am originally an urbanist and an architect. I have reckoned that the truck that entered the WTC with 600 kilograms of explosives was intended to bring the whole tower down. 20,000 people were working in the tower at the time. Its collapse could have caused the other building to come down, and in all 40,000 people could have been killed. That is in the order of magnitude of the Hiroshima bomb whose explosion erased the life of 70,000 human beings in one go.

~ *What kind of reactions did you get during the mid-'90s to the forewarnings you formulated in your book *Un paysage d'évenements*?*

> **PV:** People told me: you are a pessimist. You are apocalyptic. (And in any case:) you exaggerate.

~ *But what do you think should have happened?*

> **PV:** One should have taken that (first) attack seriously, and convened the members of the

United Nations in order to tell them that this occurrence heralded the advent of global terrorism. A chaos, to which we will be unable to put an end, if we let this form of warfare develop any further. A war without winners. Only losers.

~ *Was there an error of judgement from the side of the United States?*

> **PV:** The West as a whole failed then. And the United Nations. And the NATO too. The attack was a clear sign, a clinical symptom, just like with a disease that indicated the large-scale terrorism to come.

~ *You talk global terrorism. But you do not mention names or ideas.*

> **PV:** At this moment [mid-October] Bin Laden appears to me to be not sufficiently important a personage to explain all that happened. I am still not convinced that Bin Laden stands entirely alone in this affair.

~ *Who else do you think?*

> **PV:** That's precisely the question. I do not know. We find ourselves in the mist of war. A situation where the enemy does not make himself known, remains anonymous, and is suicidal to boot.

~ *Monsieur Virilio, what is the relation between the demise of the Soviet Union and the current situation?*

> **PV:** The equilibrium of terror precluded conflicts on the global scale. It allowed, however, micro-conflicts to arise and develop, the more so since these were provided with ever more modern weaponry and techniques. One example: the Americans did not act very responsibly when they equipped the Afghans with state-of-the-art ground-air missiles in their struggle against the Russians.

~ *Do you find the response to the latest attacks more appropriate than eight years ago?*

> **PV:** What I have been hearing over the past month or so is hot air, babble and gobbledygook. *Merdel!*

~ *You're getting loud, Monsieur Virilio?*

> **PV:** We should take the facts seriously. We should analyse the occurrence as it presents itself. But instead one gets propaganda and noise. In the media, we are almost back where we were eight years ago. They're talking ideas and ideologies, Islamists and the such. Of course there is an Afghan dimension, and an Islamic one, and a North-South component, and the economy plays a role... but the situation is much more complex. One will not stop

global terrorism with ideology.

~ *When you speak of old wars and new (types of) war(s), do you mean that there are good wars, which can be won, and bad wars, where no one can win?*

> **PV:** I wouldn't say that. War used to be a means of aggrandising territories, of obtaining riches, or women. Nowadays there are only losses. Before, wars were waged with battles, these days the organised accident has taken that role. A terrorist attack is an organised accident, especially when its perpetrators remain anonymous. The difference between an attack and an accident reduces to zero.

~ *Economic interests behind this conflict do not interest you?*

> **PV:** Of course there is petroleum in Central Asia, and you have the problem of drugs, and without these terrorism and the arms trade would not come to the fore. But one should not limit oneself to economic analyses one should also take the strategic interests into account. Take the attack of eight years ago: no strategic analysis of it was ever undertaken. It was said that its authors were Islamic, they were arrested and duly put in jail, and that was it.

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What is the difference between a terrorist and a soldier?

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PV: A soldier is a (professional) murderer, and he can be killed (in turn). A terrorist is an anonymous entity, who preferably kills innocent bystanders, in order to provoke a scandal and engineer irreversible hatred.

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Would that mean to you that the victims of Hiroshima were less innocent than those of the World Trade Centre?

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PV: I have always said and written that Hiroshima was a crime against humanity. Just as Auschwitz. What started in Guernica went on in London, and then in Hamburg, intensified in Dresden and culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And so the political war was transformed into terrorism on a massive scale.

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Before you had been differentiating between the (attacks on the) Pentagon and (those on) the World Trade Centre.

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PV: Had a terrorist chartered plane destroyed the Pentagon, then we would have stayed within the military format (of war). Like in Pearl Harbour. It would have been a war-initiating attack upon a military target belonging to the enemy force, which one might want to define as the Headquarters of world domination. I do not by any means excuse such a deed. But it would not have attained the dimension of a crime against humanity. What happened with the World Trade Centre (however) did alter the nature of these attacks.

~ *This brings in a gradation of sorts between the victims.*

> **PV:** Whatever one may say about these things cannot be politically correct. You have to dirty your hands. There is no such thing as politically correct military thinking. Even if politicians, both on the Left as on the Right have been for years pretending otherwise. War must be thought out from the reality of war itself. Not from some kind of ideals. There may be justified wars. There are no innocent armies.

~ *Superior civilisations?*

> **PV:** You're making fun of me? I am no believer in Nietzsche's *Uebermensch!*

~ *I'm only talking about current affairs. About Messrs Bin Laden, Bush and Berlusconi. [Signor Berlusconi (aka 'il Cavaliere'), the Italian PM, had just a few days earlier made quite intemperate remarks about the "inherent superiority of Western civilisation"].*

> **PV:** The one who scares me the most, at the moment, isn't Osama Bin Laden, but George Walker Bush. His intellectual capacities don't match up to the current circumstances. He is a small-time guy, whereas our time needs a Churchill or a Clemenceau.

~ *What do you have to say about the reaction of the Americans?*

> **PV:** Catastrophic. I believe bombing Afghanistan is counter-productive. Bombs won't solve the situation in which the world is now.

~ *A so-called anti-terrorism policy is being currently implemented in Europe.*

> **PV:** Indeed. Missiles have been deployed in France around nuclear power plants. Deploying ground-air missiles around the La Hague atomic enrichment facility and other, secret, installations is an act of war. This makes very clear that we are not any longer in a situation of terrorism pure and simple. We are involved in a new war. This is not being taken seriously enough.

~ *The government says it wants to protect the population.*

> **PV:** We are (in fact) being treated like children. We *citoyens* are being infantilised. We are being treated as if one wanted to avert panic. There is a denial of the truth. This amounts to a form of censorship. Truth is always the first casualty of war.

~ *(But) who is the enemy in this war?*

> **PV:** I am addressing all peace loving people and all democratically minded citizens: if we do not quickly identify the adversary, we will plunge in chaos. We are on the verge of

(triggering) an international civil war. An unheard of occurrence. And one has even more to fear that this international civil war will also degenerate into a religious war.

~ *You are being very pessimistic.*

> **PV:** Not so. I am not pessimistic at all. I am a victim of war, and I have been a soldier in the war in Algeria [France's decolonisation conflict 1957-1962]. I am not spreading mist around, of the sort one reads in the paper nowadays. No, today there are no longer pessimists and optimists. There are only realists and liars.

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