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Mobilization of the Planet from the Spirit of Self-Intensification

Peter Sloterdijk

In this essay, the interpretation of the present is based on a philosophical kinetics originating from three axioms. First, that we are moving in a world that is moving itself; second, that the self-movements of the world include our own self-movements and affect them; and third, that in modernity, the self-movements of the world originate from our self-movements, which are cumulatively added to world-movement. From these axioms, it is possible to more or less entirely develop a relationship between an old world, a modern world, and a postmodern world.

If we want to show the world in its motion as pregnant with catastrophies, we have to assume that today's world process has received its dynamics from the initiatives accumulated over the past centuries. Thus, a perception of the present that claims to be at the level of real events presupposes something that has hitherto been successfully rejected by intellectual conscience: a physics of freedom, a kinetics of moral initiatives. Let's say it openly: This is the end of aestheticism in cultural theory. The seemingly most empty, the most external, the most mechanical—movement (which had been left to the physicists and sports medicine doctors to research)—penetrates the humanities and at once turns out to be the cardinal category, even of the moral and social sphere.

As an expression of movement, the ethical-political adventures of the human mind become a branch of physics. While all over the West ethics commissions gather for seminars, while everywhere people with good intentions sacrifice their weekends to discuss the principles of new morals in idyllic sites of evangelical academies and political study centers, the best-guarded secret of modernity seeps from the hermetic studios of fundamental philosophical research into the world. What nobody wanted to know became unambiguously evident. What nobody wanted to understand, angrily and stridently forced its way into our thought. Once it has been spoken out loud, the revealed secret evokes the question: Why hasn't this most

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obvious thing been given attention long ago? Some urbanists and a few military theorists who were willing to speculate knew it first; dubious philosophers who distrusted modernity thought about it; Schizos in intellectual circles in big cities followed the urbanists' example and got really into it; swanky Art and Literature sections in newspapers started talking about the matter—soon there will be many of them who say that they always knew it. Knew what? Well, the trivial fact that kinetics is the ethics of modernity.

What is worrisome or even obscene about this can only be diminished by referring to the old doctrines of progress that we are very familiar with. There, the relationship of morals and kinetics seemed still to be controlled morally. As a matter of fact, modernity has also defined itself from the beginning in kinetic terms because it determined its mode of realization and existence as advancing and progressive. Progress is the expression of movement in which the ethical-kinetic self-awareness of modern times expresses itself most powerfully and at the same time is heavily disguised. If we mention progress we mean the kinetic and kinetic-aesthetic fundamental motive of modernity, which has as its only goal the elimination of the limits of human self-movement. At the beginning of progress there was the presumption, whether right or wrong, of a "moral" initiative that cannot rest until the better has become the real. It belongs to the experience of real progress that a valuable human initiative comes "out of itself," that it tears apart the old limits of mobility, that it broadens its work spectrum, and that it asserts itself with a good conscience against inner inhibitions and outer resistance.

In the political, technological, and historical-philosophical doctrines of progress, the ongoing epoch declared its kinetic self-evidence. However, what it did not admit loudly was its secret inclination to take the moral motives seriously only to the extent that they serve as engines of outer movements. It is part of the essence of a progressive process to begin with ethical initiatives in order to continue its kinetic self-movements. It remains one of the great secrets of "progress": How was it able at its initial spark to meld together morality and physics, motives and movements into an active unit? This secret leads us into the center of what modern philosophy calls subjectivity. Its essence is inseparable from the mysterious initial force that expresses itself as the ability to ignite new chains of movement, which we call "actions." If something like progress does exist as a matter of fact it is because movements originating from subjectivity do undeniably take place. Kinetically they are the material that modernity is made of. When a subject gets to the point of carrying out the thought "progress," then within him a self-igniter introduces progress-like self-movements. Whoever really knows what progress is already is moving toward what has been conceived; he knows it because he has progressed and is progressing further. Those who understand what modernity is can only understand it based on the self-igniting self-movement without which modernity would not exist. He must have made a step forward in his self-creation—the step that remains the kinetic element of further progress. Progress is initiated by this step toward the step that at first introduces itself, by itself, in order to run over itself. Therefore, the term "progress" does not mean a simple change of position where an agent advances from A to B. In its essence, the only "step" that is progressive is the one that leads to an increase in the "ability to step." Thus, the formula of modernizing processes is as follows: Progress is movement toward movement, movement toward increased movement, movement toward an increased mobility.

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Only because of the validity of this formula are ethics an immediate result of kinetics in modernity. Ethical imperatives of the modern type that are not at the same time kinetic impulses no longer exist. The categorical impulse of modernity is: In order to be continuously active as progressive beings, man should overcome all the conditions where his movement is reduced, where he has come to a halt, where he has lost his freedom, and where he is pitifully fixed.[1]

To the same degree as we modern subjects understand freedom *a priori* as freedom of movement, progress is only thinkable for us as the kind of movement that leads to a higher degree of mobility. In a physical sense, movements toward freedom are always steps toward freedom of movement. We always mean self-movement even if we talk about self-determination. Before any differentiation between "being" and "having to be doing," the meaning of "being" in modernity is understood as "having to be" and "wanting to be" more mobile. Ontologically, modernity is a pure "being-toward-movement." This interpretation of being is valid *for us* due to the fact that it becomes irresistibly real *through us*. It is irresistible because it cannot be reached by any counter movements and because the resistance leads to moral ruin. It becomes real because it is executed by us in a mode of spontaneous will that does not allow criticism. In "being-toward-movement," these circulating motives seem to come from the innermost of what we ourselves want and have to want. If the fundamental process of modernity promotes itself as a "human movement to free oneself" then it is a process that we absolutely do not want and a movement that it is impossible for us not to make. It seems that there is a moral kinetic automatism working that "condemns us not only to freedom" but also to a constant movement toward freedom.

If we realize the great changes of the modern world within ourselves, we immediately notice in our steps toward a higher mobility a deep contradiction. It is true that we have achieved an enormous range in numerous areas through the movement progress of modern generations, and what members of the modern bourgeoisie and middle class have achieved in the course of less than two centuries in the fields of politics, economics, language, information, traffic, expression, and sex can almost be considered a miracle. There is the evidence of a kinetic "tradition in modernity," no matter how suspicious the continuation of this tradition may be. However, in order to teach the agents of modernity a kind of astute mobility, most steps toward progress have also led to new types of forced movements that wrestle with the suffocating endings of premodern times regarding unknown forces and miserable energy.[2]

Modern "dynamism" has made a contribution toward preserving the mindless rigor among super-mobile forms. Whoever wants to know what this means in detail has to find the right

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1. Marx was the first who saw through the moral mystification of kinetics. He found that the kinetic "moral law" did not truly enter the interiority of a conscience of duty but that the conscience itself can be mobilized as a duty to make revolution. The kinetic imperative is therefore less an ethical, but rather a kinetic maxim; it does not so much express what you *should* do, but what you have to *overthrow* in order to do it, namely all conditions that inhibit kinetic potential.

2. Traditionally, the spirit has a precarious relationship with movement, except that it supposedly blows where it wants (which may be understood as a complement to those who are inspired and which should in addition explain that it is not our fault if there is no wind in our spirit). If we want to understand this relationship positively, it could tentatively be characterized by five criterion: contextuality (spirit understands what is happening outside it); self-perception (it guesses how it is doing); self-limitation (it is aware when it is enough); reversibility (it has "*Spiel*," it can do what it can do, back and forth); and spontaneity (not only can it go on as in the past, but it can also make a new start; if necessary it can even surprise itself). These criterion only guarantee an intelligent effect if they appear together—if separated from each other they guarantee intelligent stupidities (for example, our life as it is).

   Editor's note: Spiel could be translated as play, meaning to have play or flexibility and elasticity, or play as in a game, but it also means to play by heart, as in to know something very well.

answer to the question: What do machines, industrial companies, and executive staff have in common with politics and economics?—and to discover that these three agents contain an exemplary kinetic lesson for the citizens of modernity since they demonstrate effectively what self-movement wants and does: To start operations in order to be operating, to start up in order to keep running at any cost. This is the art of automation, which does not make any fundamental distinctions between intelligent machines and human agents. When the kinetic self starts operations and takes the initiative, it becomes the central agency of the self-operated operation by its "own" power.

This self-initiating subject is the miller of the "mill of modern times that is grinding itself"—as the poet Novalis, in his 1799 essay on Europe,[3] referred to the principal course of the human-nature factory that started its operations at the time, and which gained impetus through prosaic self-motivating entrepreneur types, Protestants, Brits, Prussians, and professors. At the same time, Novalis was the first to bring up the concept of the kinetic utopia of modernity by thinking the subject and the machine together in the image of the "mill itself," "the real perpetuum mobile driven by the stream of coincidence and swimming in it," combining both kinds of movement (endogenous self-movement and exogenous external movement) into common motion—a motion of course where that which is dynamic is equally miserable, a drift driven by the I into mindlessness, catastrophe, loss of inhibition, death.

The diagnostic power of Novalis's formulations was not understandable to us in its full extent before today. In the meantime we know without a breath of romantic irony *what* the self is able to achieve in *its* machine even if it is not quite a self-grinding mill. At least one of its utopian plans has been accomplished by modern society: the plan of complete automobilization—a circumstance in which every adult self moves itself at the wheel of its self-moving machine. Since in modernity the thought of the self without *its* movement is impossible, the I and its automobile belong together metaphysically like the soul and body of one and the same movement unit. The automobile is the technical double of the always active transcendental subject.

Therefore, the automobile is the sanctum of modernity, it is the cultural center of a kinetic world religion, it is the rolling sacrament that makes us participate in something faster than ourselves. Whoever is driving an automobile is approaching the divine; he feels how his diminutive I is expanding into a higher self that offers us the whole world of highways as a home and that makes us realize that we are predestined to a life beyond the animal-like life of pedestrians.

From the view of motorists, we lived for a while in the Messianic time, in the fulfilled time where two-stroke vehicles were parked peacefully next to two-cylinder vehicles. The low-emission Messiah ruled in his celestial empire; with electronic ignition and ABS, with a controlled catalytic converter and turbo charger he lifted up his people to a celestial ride. But not all contemporaries let themselves be convinced that this ultimate automobile empire was paradise on earth. The antagonist had a finger in the pie and made sure that general self-movement turned occasionally into general immobility. In such moments we become aware, although we want to deny it, that we have already been chased out of the paradise of modernity, and that in the future, we will have to learn the postmodern stop-and-go by the sweat of our brow. Therefore, the endless traffic jams each summer on Central Europe's highways (and the legendary power blackouts in New York, which make us feel nostalgic)

3. *Editor's note:* Sloterdijk refers to Novalis's "Europe-Essay," also titled "Europa" or "Die Christenheit oder Europe," a lecture presented in 1799, later published in 1826. In this text, Novalis critiques the use made of philosophy after the Reformation as a rejection not only of religion, but also of the past and imagination, which places humans in the highest position within a "perpetuum mobile"—a mill grinding itself.

are a phenomenon of historical-philosophical or even religious-historical importance. Such situations represent the failure of fake modernity, the end of an illusion—like a kinetic Good Friday when all hope for redemption by acceleration is lost. On these glowing hot afternoons in the funnel in Lyon, in the hellish Rheine valley near Cologne, or caught in Irschenberg, Europe's longest parking lot, in a 30-mile-long caravan of immobile and hot steaming steel, dark thoughts rise into the air just like black exhaust fumes; drivers gain historical-philosophical insight; critical words for civilization pronounced in glossolalia escape their lips; the obituaries of modernity blow out of the side windows; whatever school degree the drivers have, they come to the conclusion that it cannot go on like this for much longer. A foreshadowing of another "era." Even those who have never heard of the term postmodernity are already familiar with the thing itself on such afternoons in a traffic jam. And in fact, this can be formulated in terms of cultural theory: where unleashed self-movement leads to a halt or a whirl, the beginning of a transitional experience emerges, in which the modern active changes to the postmodern passive.

Can we gain a serious theory of the present from these flickering observations? They do their job well enough if they help to create suggestions for our next step, which consists in applying the term mobilization to describe and explain the basic process of modernity. At first, let us ignore any premature consideration regarding the unavoidable shock over such a word choice and its inherent consequences and concentrate on strengthening the evidence that in kinetics, modernizations always have the character of *mobilizations*. Of course, we could also proceed inductively and discretely, and apply, so to speak, a method of infantry, and in the slow course of hearing evidence we could gather innumerable descriptions of the current *status-lapsus-quo* of the processes in the spheres of biology and noology: the number of billionaires is multiplying; the butterflies of our childhood are no longer around; tourism to faraway destinations and armament budgets are rising significantly; the populations in modernizing countries are exploding while those in modernized countries are stagnating; holes in the ozone layer over the poles are expanding rapidly; the sneaker business is flourishing while the one for surfboards is dropping; the trees of low mountain ranges are changing color and growing only short brush-like crowns; there is South African fruit in Bavarian weekly markets; the flight time of nuclear missiles from the Ural Mountains to Bad Godesberg would take 420 seconds; and so on. However, the endlessness of such statements only makes sense if they have found their common denominator in the concept of mobilization, which at the same time makes a statement about the essence of the many separate processes; essentially, what is happening today is mobilization. Through the variety of different interpretations, modernity as a process has been shaped as a kinetic pattern that can be identified as the pattern of mobilization.

Whoever takes offense at the military connotation of the term has the right initial instinct. Mobilization is a category of a world of wars. It includes the critical processes by which combat potentials at rest reach the point of operation. It is not acceptable that the repugnance toward this idea, and even more the disgust for the actual deed, make us blind to the circumstance that the fundamental kinetic pattern of this process—as self-actualization through the mission—is not at all specifically military, but rather that it expresses the fundamental principle of all modern undertakings of self-movement. The aesthetic shudder from the word could easily seduce us to turn away from the only concept that gave the name to the dynamic pattern of modernization.

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4. *Editor's note:* Ernst Jünger's 1932 essay, *Der Arbeiter* (The Worker) describes a totalizing conception of society as the complete mobilization of the worker. It was Jünger's reactionary and conservative views that gave his works the "notoriety" that Sloterdijk invokes.

In this context, we cannot ignore some notorious works by Ernst Jünger[4] who, as we know, in the early '30s was already divorcing the phenomenon of mobilization from its specific military context in order to apply it to the process of modern society as a whole. From the point of view of the history of ideas, his affirmations have been wasted for half a century—they have not been used, but scandalized; not been accepted, but mainly, they have not been examined, hated rather than disproved, discriminated against rather than declared outdated. As a matter of fact, there is a reason for the general reticence against Jünger's reflections, which have raised suspicions of fascism. Whoever only wanted to apply his evil and cold optics in the analysis of the late-modern processes would run the risk of reviving Damascus in a historical-philosophical sense. Far beyond Jünger's intention, the category of mobilization can liberate intuitions that are not compatible with the Sleep of the Just in the project of modernity. The ominous formula of "total mobilization" prepares for the still scandalous, almost unbearable recognition that in the modern world there is a fundamental political-kinetic process that neutralizes the *de facto* morally important difference between war and work, a process that increasingly abrogates the former difference between rest and action. This precisely is the uncanny mobilization process that brings all the reserves of power to the "front" and that pushes forward all potential toward realization. From the dubious time-diagnostic exercises by Jünger—the evil man who we would only cite from a great distance, but never without respect for his perceptiveness[5]—finally the definitions of modern technology emerged, not yet realized, as the "mobilization of the planet by the Gestalt of the Worker"; the latter, of course, does not refer to the Marxist subject of history, the proletariat, but the planetary subject of mobilization, trembling from working out, hardened from pain, the neo-objective high-performance type in his decided mission for the action system that is exalting itself, arming itself, throwing itself to the front, also called the progressive action system (whether we mean a firm, class, people, nation, block, or state of the world is irrelevant on this level of action).

If we now want to try again, under very modified constellations, to make the concept of mobilization fertile for a theory of modernity (of course on a different path than Officer Jünger, decorated with Merit), our attempt will only remain promising as long as we are aware of the discomfort from the concept and use it for a critical perspective. This concept keeps the memory of the violent core of scientific, military, and industrial leading-edge processes alive—especially in a time when these enter a smart phase where violence becomes informational, cool, procedural, and analgesic. (What is the code of the new phase? —Change from heavy industry to fast information? —Change from working society to learning society? The former was probably somewhat dirty whereas the latter will be as clean as a bathroom on a Swiss highway service area.) Especially because the concept of mobilization—due to its uncanny, even devastating connotations (Jünger's highly unnerving attempt in this direction cannot be repeated)—resists a complete positivization, it is more apt than any other to describe a "civilizational" mechanism that uses all the modern advances in ability and knowledge, mobility, precision, and effectiveness for the strengthening and destructive processes, for armament, expansion, self-empowerment, and mutilation of cohesion. Mobilization as a fundamental autogenous process of modernity leads to the provision for constantly growing movement potential in order to keep positions that turn out to be impossible as positions and become unsustainable through the conditions and effects of these provisions. This is where the vast area of kinetic paradoxes opens itself up to an alternative

5. The short text written by Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt—Gegenstrebige Fügung* (Berlin, 1879), published posthumously, might serve as an example of the free interaction with another evil man of our century, Carl Schmitt, who conceived of the civil war of the world.

critique of modernity. Thus, criticism of society becomes criticism of a false mobility. If, after the debacle of Marxism and after the ambiguous fading away of the Frankfurt School, there is the possibility of a third version of an ambitious critical theory, it will probably only be in the form of a critical theory of movement. Its therapeutic criterion would be the differentiation, if it is possible to make it precisely, between real mobility and false mobilization. Its offensive claim for truth would be based on the idea that the kinetic realm contains a spectrum that reaches from the physiological to the political. Through a critical theory of mobilization, the gap between the thinking process and what really happens with basic principles would be bridged—thinking "outside" would no longer exist, a theorist would have to be asked with every sentence if what he is doing is a sacrifice to the false god of mobilization or if what he is doing is clearly different from this. Because a theory can only be critical, no matter what critical semantics it transports, if it annuls in the worst of all possible directions its kinetic complicity with the movement of the world processes. Therefore, it remains open if such a "third" critical theory can exist only as a nominal value or if it can still be executed. If it were possible, it would establish itself from the very start as a preschool of demobilization. Only as a tranquil theory of movement, only as a quiet theory of loud mobilization can a critique of modernity be different from that which is criticized—everything else is the rational makeup of complicity, giving the train that is already running a push, consciously or unconsciously, mimesis of the basic process in the process of reflection.

Such a "tranquil" critique, however, cannot possibly produce its own beginning by itself, its own arising from the urge to make it different. The fact that it cannot do that is one of the enigmas that is concealed in the omnipresent chitchat about postmodernism. Because whatever wanted to be *after* modernity would have experienced and brought to an end such a modernity—nobody can claim that this was the case in any essential regard. All that can be said is that we had experiences with the so-called postmodern passive and that it does not take much more to admit that we, especially in the prospective view, have come to the suffering side of modernity. In this case the following formula is valid: The more modern, the more postmodern. For the style of a "third" or postmodern critical theory, this is of great significance because in order to know what it talks about it must have unreservedly been involved with the postmodern melee—otherwise it would never turn to the other side of things. But it will first have to explain to us, or rather demonstrate to us how it will find its way out of the *Tempodrom* to something truly different. The question of the possibility of a truly different "third" critical theory is thus reduced to the classic enigma of how it will be possible for beings who are through and through condemned to act to be still in the midst of the storm.[6]

Only as a tranquil theory of movement, only as a quiet theory of loud mobilization can a critique of modernity be different from that which is criticized [...].

It is now understood what the memory of movement brings to us: The approach to the epistemologically inscrutable point where a theory without wisdom is not even useful as a theory. Why should it precisely, out of all things, be kinetics that should become the school of calmness? It is hard to imagine what physics and metaphysics will have to say to it. But whatever objections they have shall be the beginning of an investigation into the progress of the process on the passive side of stronger self-mobilizations that is running *through us on top*

6. *Editor's note:* The German idiom *die Stille im Sturm* describes the experience of a war going on outside and a calm in relation to it. Yet the alliteration and the notion of calm fall out in the translation.

of us. In the face of what happened, we ask ourselves what it was that turned out to be so different. It turned out differently than it had been thought, but how should we have thought it?

—translated by Heidi Ziegler

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