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Rewriting Another Modernity from the Global South.
The Viet Minh and the use of Vegetation as a Political Agent

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Abstract

This paper argues that vegetation can be used as a tool in the struggle by the weaker against the stronger. I do not mean the art of camouflage, nor a return to a primitive state; rather, I mean that vegetation can be used as a subordinate weapon for the preservation of autonomy. In this case, vegetation is neither a planning tool or a management tool; it offers a possibility to escape from the colonial grid and to disappear. Vegetation has also been used to create the conditions to live different and autonomous lives apart from state authorities, as James Scott describes it in his book *The Art of not Being Governed*. Vegetation was often used as a political agent in asymmetrical or revolutionary wars, during decolonizing process, as theorized by Mao Tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh. I will use the Viet Minh Guerrilla during the first Vietnam conflict as a case study to explore these and related issues. From a theoretical point of view, I argue that the use of vegetation contributed to the reconstruction of another modernity, upturning the conceptualization of culture as a key point of reference for modern society. In the case of the Viet Minh, Nature replaced Culture to form a new agency that was able to destroy a modernity construct based on infrastructure and total territorial planning. Nature was defined as the new point of departure instead of culture, and helped to form a revolutionary society.

Keywords

Modernity; culture; nature; vegetation; guerrilla

This paper purposes to analyze the relation between territorial planning and theory. Field work has presented territorial planning as a technique and an action against a pre-existing reality. But it can be seen as well as a theoretical activity, that is to say as an action which is part of an ideological set of tools to organize territory for a state administration.

Culture, Nature and Modernity seen from Europe

From the beginning of colonial conquest, the colonial subject is supposed to be a savage. In the late nineteenth century Social-Darwinism played a crucial role in arguing scientifically that African, Asian, Indian were all beneath the European race in terms of racial classification.

Culture has always been considered as a concept born inside the city during the Greek civilization. It was a value and a heritage circumscribed inside the city for centuries. There was a direct link in European culture between civilization, culture and city, which was pushed ahead by the colonial system. The essence of the the colonial subject became inseparable from civilizing the savage. Nature was defined from the beginning in opposition to culture. Marcus Colchester's definition is fairly precise: "In ancient Greece, untamed nature was perceived as the domain of wild, irrational, female forces that contrasted with the rational culture ordered by males. In this world view, not only was nature a dangerous threat to the city state, but the wilderness beyond was peopled by barbarians, the epitome of whom were the Amazons — long haired, naked, female savages who represented the antithesis of Greek civilization".[1]

Colonization established a direct link between culture, civilization, and the city. Considered as a savage, the colonized is put outside the civilization. Its uncivilized figure clearly refers to nature as its unique domain. We must have in mind that in English, *"savages",* which is a word that comes from the French word *"sauvage"* and the Spanish *"salvaje,"* which signifying *"forest inhabitant."* Civilizing the savage could be considered as bringing the city to the savages. This is one of the tasks of the civilizing mission of colonization.

The myth that the city in the colonial space was the colonizer's construction is still very present in our contemporary society. Catherine Coquery Gondrovitch, who specifically studied African Urban History, demonstrates that colonizer importance in urbanizing was not as important as was previously supposed. It is interesting here to note a long passage that describes what I mean precisely "The decisive supposed role of the western initiative: the colonizers would have created their cities, often ports, either strategic implanted knots *ex-nihilo* or, from thin villages at the heart

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1. Colchester 1994, 11.

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of a zone to be conquered and to be exploited. Certainly it was exact. But very partially. Most of the time, Europeans community, only a few number of people were worried about a fast efficiency. They especially used the existing centres. But they selected, among the African villages, those who would become in turn the centre of their power."[2]

Let us have a look at the etymology of Metropolis. Metropolis is a Greek word, coming from μήτηρ, or *mḗtēr,* which means "mother" and πόλις, or *pólis,* meaning "city" or "town." In the antiquity, Greek colonies referred to their mother cities as their Metropolis. The subjection link between these two territories was established in the beginning. The use and abuse of Metropolis and Metropolitan in the colonial context functioned as the marker of the active domination of the western world on the non-western. Whatever the domain of excellence, "the one relationship that does change is the hierarchical one between the metropole and overseas generally."[3]

This domination was not only political and economical. It was activated in the remodeling of the colonial cities in Africa (Dakar, Johannesburg, Dar-es-Salaam) and in Asia (Delhi, Saigon, Shanghai). City reshaping was conceived as the insertion inside the existing urban fabric of landmark buildings. Architecture and urbanism were used to inscribe these European cultural fragments in the metropole. European architecture was used both to materialize the inferiority of other cultures (African, Indian or Asian) and to materialize the colonizer power. Territorial planning, as well as infrastructure construction overseas, has to be seen as part of the European project; it sits in a strict relation with modernity as a global project. It was the construction of a mobility network that made for trading policy, displays of force abroad, and the aesthetic representation of the European power.

Modernity is seen in Europe as the foundation of the state nation system, and social democracy is linked in a strict relation with the age of Enlightenment. Modernity can be seen as a set of facts that established the European power over overseas territories. From the beginning, it was a concept applied worldwide. Negri and Hardt define modern sovereignty as a concept organizing "European domination both inside and outside its border. There are two coextensive and complementary faces of one coherent action: power in Europe and Europe's power over the world."[4]

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2. "Le rôle supposé décisif de l'initiative occidentale : les colonisateurs auraient créé leurs villes, souvent des ports, ou bien des noeuds stratégiques implantés ex-nihilo ou, au mieux à partir de maigres villages au coeur d'une zone à conquérir et à exploiter. Certes ce fut exact. Mais trés partiellement. La plupart du temps, les Européens peu nombreux et soucieux d'une efficacité rapide, ont surtout utilisé les centres existants. Mais ils ont tout au plus sélectionné, parmi les bourgades africaines, celles qui deviendraient à leur tour le centre de leur pouvoir." Coquery Gondrovitch 1993, 329.

3. Said 1994, 106.

4. Negri and Hardt 2000, 103.

In his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott in two different chapters decodes the territory organization, first through total territorial state planning and then through an anti-total territorial state planning. He focuses on the transportation system, agriculture and village settlement. However, I would like here to put forward the intellectual goal of territorial planning as prescribed by James Scott in two very different ways.

In chapter two, "State Space" Scott asks us to:

> Imagine for a moment, that you are a Southeast Asian counterpart of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, chief minister to Louis XIV. You, like Colbert, are charged with designing the prosperity of the kingdom. The setting, like that of the seventeenth century, is premodern: overland travel is by foot, cart and draft animals, while water transportation is by sail. Let us finally imagine that, unlike Colbert, you begin with a blank state. You are free to conjure up an ecology, an demography, and a geography that would be most favorable to the state and its ruler. What, in those circumstances, would you design?[5]

In chapter six, "State Evasion, State Prevention," Scott asks us to:

> Imagine, once again, that you are a Southeast Asian counterpart of Jean-Baptiste Colbert. This time, however, your task is not to design an ideal state space of appropriation but, rather, the precise opposite. How would you go about designing a topography, a subsistence strategy, and a social culture that was as resistant to sate formation and appropriation as possible ?[6]

The territory outside the city, and especially the agricultural space, was considered as the first space of capital accumulation from Greek civilization to nineteenth-century European colonization. Appropriation of new state space is strictly linked to the visibility of the whole agricultural space and its workers and owners. What is planted, what is harvested, where it is stocked, and how much it is sold for are *the* important questions for the state administration. By contrast, a space that doesn't allow appropriation as state space should be a space with low visibility, with cultivated lands not visible, even to the trained eye.

Construction or deconstruction of the appropriated state space is linked to visibility as a major factor of space organization. Analyzing the politics of vegetation in relation to agriculture, natural spaces, and conservation is a way to investigate the politics of space, as well as the regime of governance of the territory itself.

Plant life is central in the development of modern operational spatial framework. To focus on plant life is to juxtapose several scales. The micro-scale of plant life includes botany and economy, while the macro-scale includes vegetation and cultivation; lastly, the territorial scale includes ter-

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5. Scott 2009, 40.

6. Scott 2009, 178.

ritorial planning and infrastructures.

Plant life has been a subject of study and contemplation for botanists, a source of wealth via spices or coffee, a field of production for the agricultural plantations, and an exotic subject for travel tales. During the 17th and 18th century, vegetation had a central position in the whole Western society. Its power was enhanced: the plants analyzed by botanists, drawn by naturalists, and acclimatized in the botanical gardens were modified to be more robust and productive. For this reason, from the very beginning, plants were fundamental to the creation of colonial space. It is well-known that flows of capital, maritime industry and market capitalization were orchestrated around plants. But we can also say that the colonial territory was structured at the service of plants. There is a reversal of the rules of the game here: the cultivated areas are ordering the whole territory, even the city. To that extent, plant life has a certain autonomous agency, the major/minor relationship between built and non-built space is inverted. Linking this inversion to the economic, financial, and political conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism allows us to re-read these territories in a different way, for their planning and their iconic architectures. To treat vegetation–plant life–as a political agent enables us to foreground the ways in which vegetation orders social and economic relations. It is an ordering agent of the colonial and postcolonial territory, of agricultural planning, and of urban space.

I use the word vegetation as it was defined by Buffon in 1749, where "all the plants inside a defined area" constitute an areas vegetation[7]. There is a strict relation between market, empire, and plant life. The key role assigned to plant life in the colonial system is what I am defining as "vegetation as a political agent."

During the same period of time, vegetation was also used in another way, that is, to struggle against the colonizer by people, or in the decolonizing process. If vegetation has been a tool employed in the struggle by the weaker against the stronger, it was because it was seen also by natives, slaves, or oppressed people as a weapon in itself. I do not refer here only to the art of camouflage, nor to a return to a primitive state; rather, vegetation is used as a subordinate weapon for the preservation of autonomy. In that case, Vegetation is not a planning tool or a management tool. Vegetation offers a possibility to escape from the colonial grid and to disappear.

Culture, Nature and Modernity seen from the Global South

Vegetation was often used as a political agent in asymmetrical or revolutionary wars, during the decolonizing process, as theorized by Mao Tse-

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7. «Ensemble des plantes d'un endroit.» Buffon, 33.

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-Tung and Ho Chi Minh. It was a very powerful weapon throughout the Vietnam's war, and more specifically during its first phase, the Indochina War (1945-1954). I will focus in this section on describing guerrilla action, and the subjection link that exists between the spaces of organization put in place by vegetation, on the one hand, and the way this specific natural space was used to reinvent different human activities, on the other.[8] The use of vegetation as a political agent in war time could be considered as a mass weapon in itself.

First, we have to revisit the concepts of culture and nature concepts and as redefined them through by independence movements in the forties1940s. The redefinition of these concepts works at the same time, at both a very pragmatic level and at a theoretical level.

It was a matter of fact that many guerrilla movements had to first gain to their cause the large part of the rural community for then to be able to attack urban areas. Their progression into the city space was risky, as it was the space of colonial representation with the presence of an important concentration of the legal army, the presence of the colonial administration, and of the European community. These guerrilla movements developed themselves for strategic reasons, but also for ideological reasons in the countryside, in the natural space, and in the natural environment to then progress to the city space.

The strategic reasons of this location in the natural, rural environment are military. For instance, it allows them to be at a long distance from the different sites where legal armies are stationed. This is not the only argument in favor of the natural environment as a source of guerrilla planning, and particularly wild nature, but the ideological reasons are much more complex. Partially, we have to refer ourselves to culture; it was a place to find the local culture, itself untouched by colonial assimilation. Wild nature was a place to reinvent the local culture away from the colonial administration. The new local culture, under development there, had to compete the universal culture imposed by the colonizer. This nature, untouched by urban civilization, was clearly seen as a place untouched or sidelined by colonial administration (except for plantations). Two cultures were in opposition, one within a minor c, the local millenary Vietnamese culture, in this particular case and the other one within a major C, the European one, imported by the colonizer. The European culture was representing progress in the technical fields (scientific, medical, etc. …) and imposed its civilizing mission.

The local culture found, at this time, the place to reinvent itself in the countryside with the peasants, or in the remaining wild spaces (forests,

8. The word vegetation is defining both "natural spaces" not constrained by human actions such as forests, mountains, etc. and "artificial natural spaces" such as fields, pastures, planted forests or largely transformed by human actions.

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swamps, mountains, and so on …). The natural environment is seen as the only jewel box for the new rising power, a place of legitimacy to reconquest the ancient link with the territory itself and its inhabitants. Nature was used to reinvent links with topography, history, and local culture, but also peasants, fields works, and crafts. The Viet Minh used nature, and especially vegetation as a source of power. It was a military and a political movement that was conquering the territory, transforming it from the natural space to the urban space. It was using nature as a weapon in se. The Viet Minh were are fighting Modernity as a European project supporting European Imperialism, which that was put into crisis by these guerrilla movements.

The Viet Minh guerrilla begun its conquest in the countryside where it found large support from peasants. To win the territory from countryside to the city was seen at the same time as both a cultural movement and a political movement. Reintroducing the local culture, here Vietnamese, as secular, as noble and vital, was an ideological way to introduce other values far away from the occidental ones. We have to remind ourselves that assimilation has always been the only organized policy in the French colonial space. Culture has been underestimated in many national liberation struggle. Amilcar Cabral, in a text titled "*Le rôle de la culture dans la lutte pour l'indépendance*" written for a UNESCO meeting in 1972 in Paris, argued "that culture is a method of group mobilization, even a weapon in the fight for the independence."[9] References to the peasant works are very present in manifestos texts from Mao Tse-Tung, Amilcar Cabral, or Ernesto Che Guevara, and there are also many important theoreticians such as Pierre Bourdieu, Andre Gunther Frank and Giovanni Arrighi that worked on peasants labour, struggles and education in the sixties. This important corpus linked politicians, agriculture labour forces, and theoreticians in the southern countries.

The General Vo Nguyen Giap book's *People's War – People's Army*, was prefaced in the 1964's Cuban edition by Ernesto Che Guevara. It was seen for both of them as a political book to propagate revolution in the Third World and also as a means to form a new group of southern countries, with a new ideology along the non-aligned movement. Guevara points out that: "Vietnam has peculiar characteristics: [it is] a very ancient civilization, [with] a long history as independent kingdom having its own specificities and its own culture. Compared to its thousand-year-old history, the episode of the French colonialism is only a drop of water."[10] Its intellectual

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9. "la culture est une méthode de mobilisation de groupe, voire une arme dans la lutte pour l'indépendance."Cabral 2013, 70.

10. "Le Vietnam a des caractéristiques particuliéres : une très ancienne civilisation, une longue histoire en tant que royaume indépendant ayant ses spécificités et une culture propre. En regard de son histoire millénaire, l'épisode du colonialisme français n'est qu'une goutte d'eau."Che Guevara 2006, 91.

independence is acquired through culture and the civilization preexisting revolution, rebellion, or guerrilla actions. Culture is replaced as an act of resistance, but also as a mass weapon.

On the one hand, urban space at this particular moment was seen only as a place of oppression and assimilation supervised by the colonizer. On the other hand, rural space was seen as a space of freedom, which kept its secular roots and history. From the dense forest or countryside to the city space, it was a collective human experience that was conducted from nature to culture by guerrilla movements. A collective and collaborative experience proposed an alternate relationship with nature, not a second--zone citizenship for peasants. Culture was not seen anymore as the one with a major C, defined in Europe and imposed in the colonial space. It was precisely this that was part of the urban colonial experience, operated by local bourgeoisie and European bourgeoisie as unique social class. This decolonizing process ideologically put in place, using culture as a mass weapon, was precisely inverting the way European colonization program-med the colonial territory. If European colonization was based on agricul-ture exploitation, it found its representation, its strength, its power and its local staff (or European community) in the city centre that was designed in total reference to the metropole.

During the whole Vietnamese war (1945-1975) thousands of soldiers and logistic workers traveled across the country without using established infrastructures. Instead, they were using pathways that were allowing them to avoid detection by the French occupiers. In this way they invented a new map. As we've already seen, this new mapping of the territory was inver-ting the relationship between city and countryside. The guerrillas created a new territory built from nature (the countryside) toward culture (the city). Airports, ports, and roads were seen as the symbol of power, a power to see from the air, space and sea using new technology. Destruction of pre-existing infrastructures is a very basic action in any war period. Cut-ting fluxes (logistics fluxes, soldiers fluxes, as well as information fluxes) is oftentimes a key in winning important battles. During the decolonizing war period after World War II, these infrastructures were supporting the colonizer power. Movement, speed, and intensity were the army obsessions to obtain the quick deployment of patrols, to pacify any place in the colony. Infrastructures were seen as a key point in the battle also because they were vectors to distribute the flux of weapons made in Europe and the United States. There were the symbol of the unlimited power of the Occident. That is the reason why each infrastructure was seen as a support systems for capitalism and imperialism. No infrastructure was a leitmotiv in this asymmetrical war. Thus this strategy was pragmatic as well as ideological.

Relying on photograms extracted from the film *Chiến thắng Tây Bắc'* (The victory of the North West) shot in 1952 by the military forces in the

Viet Minh zone, during the war against French occupation to support the conquest, one can see that these archive images demonstrate a form of counter-planning of the land that allows topography (plains and mountains), geography and the ecosystem (the forest or the savannah) to be used as a weapon. These images are depict the strength of the soldiers who are becoming one with their own territory. These three photograms discussed below are extracted from this propaganda film.

The first photogram (TC 00 29-37 B) shows a group of soldiers walking in the countryside. Disappearance is at work here as a concept. The first report is on the art of camouflage: to disappear in the natural environment is theorized as a guerrilla technique, when facing a stronger enemy. The meaning of the motto, the guerrilla is in the countryside is as a fish in the water, should be obvious.

Vegetation is used as an anticolonial weapon. It allows the magic to operate: as a magician the guerrilla is able to disappear and reappear elsewhere. Another nature definition is at work, a nature that was used not to order, and not to discipline as in the colonial project. This time nature is used to protect oneself, to hide oneself, to disappear, to reappear somewhere else, and to disappear again if necessary.

It seems to be a scene (TC 00 30 29 B) in the nature with soldiers, walking or waiting for something. In fact there is no movement, everything is frozen. Troops are having their lunch on the pathway. They just stopped in the middle of their traveling. They are eating their lunch of white rice, with their bare-hands. There is no need to get out from the natural environment. The picturesque is very present in this photogram, as it is a very odd setting. The disconnection of genre, between the environment and the action, should catch our attention. A new community is created, linking the human figure and nature without hierarchy. Behind this image, there is also the crucial collaborative work made with peasants. Giap pointed out that: "Our army always organized days of assistance to the farmers in the field works, in the fight against the flood or the drought. It always observed a correct attitude in its relations with the people. Never it struck a blow at its properties, were it only a needle or an end of thread."[11]

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11. "Notre arme a toujours organisé des journées d'aide aux paysans dans les travaux de pro-

So the unity with the vegetation and landscape is a reality in the muscle of each soldier who also became for some periods of time a field worker.

The last photogram (TC 00 26 53 B) presents a multitude of humans (men and women) crossing a river with rafts made of bamboos. Different characters cross the river not in a line ; rather, it's more like a fluxed form. Disorder is exploited as a tactic here. There is a mimesis with the nature development process.

Bamboo rafts were used to cross rivers, swimmers produced the energy to move the raft from one bank to another. This basic technique for crossing river was used only in the first part of the war. New equipment replaced it such as invisible bridges made from bamboo and positioned 10 centimetres under the surface of the water, which allowed them to escape the enemy's bombardment. What stands out in these peculiar inventions is the use of vegetation to support the resistance effort. Here, in this specific situation, there is the very clear idea to be one with nature. The human being is becoming again an animal, he is renaturalising itself.

The use of low technology was also for ideological reasons. Low technology was considered a condition for a guerrilla to fight a greater enemy. In this asymmetrical war: topography, rivers, and mountains became important tools and potential weapons to defeat the colonizer. French troops that did not know the territory used only the existing infrastructure to move. So it was easy to preview their movements and neutralize some parts of them during these operations. Guerrillas used to have a perfect knowledge of the territory. They used forests, fields, and mountains like they were gardens, and moved without being visible.

The route de la Cordillére was the most important road that fed the front during the Vietnamese war. The route was vital for the conquest of the power, it was considered as the main infrastructure owned and operated by Viet Minh forces. Can the Route de la Cordillére, or as Vietnamese used to call The Ho Chi Minh road,[12] be considered as an infrastructure or a anti-infrastructure ?

This is a very ambiguous and difficult question. It was not an infrastructure built off the ground, but it was functioning like a *dispositif* inserted in a topography that was negotiating with it continuously, more than imposing its own logic. It was partially buried with invisible bridges constructed under water level. It was built in a very precise way in order not be seen from aerial report airplanes and photography. Its completion and non stop exploitation throughout aerial bombing was a real achievement. It was a very hybrid construction with hospitals, dormitories, and canteens cons-

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duction, dans la lutte contre l'inondation ou la sécheresse. Elle a toujours observé une attitude correcte dans ses relations avec le peuple. Jamais elle n'a porté atteinte à ses biens, fussent il seulement une aiguille ou un bout de fil." Giap 1967, 53.

12. Cordillera Road is the Vietnamese name of the so called Ho Chi Minh road in Occident.

tructed under ground. There is no need for infrastructure as a power in it-self as guerrillas action unfolded. Infrastructure was seen only as a demons-tration of one's economical superiority not a military superiority. Perhaps that's why even the most incredible logistic that supported Vietnamese conquest, the so called Ho Chi Minh road, could be considered as the natural support given the nature to reconstruction of another modernity.

Conclusion

Another Modernity was constructed during this period by guerrillas in Vietnam. Infrastructure destroyed places to a collaborate between the en-vironment and guerrilla movements. A specific collaboration was put in place between the new Vietnamese army and peasants. A complete colla-borative system was put in place between human activities and nature. It reveals a specific attention to nature, that is, it was site specific. From a theoretical point of view, it was the reconstruction of another modernity that turned upside down the conceptualization of culture as a key point of reference for modern society. Nature replaced Culture to form a new agency that was able to destroy a modernity constructed on infrastructure and total territorial planning.

Édouard Glissant characterizes another modernity by the fact that it can accept a degeneralization process. He is mixing ideas from culture, politics, and human relations when he argues that: "The Western work of "generalization" has for centuries equalized diverse community tempos and tried to order (to prioritize) their flowering. The panorama resolved, the equidistances defined, perhaps is it time to return to a "degeneralisa-tion" no less necessary? Not to an excessive renewal of specificities, but to a total freedom (dreamed-of) of their relationships, even worn down to chaos by their confrontations?.[13] In otherwords, it is a modernity that is dealing the singularity of each element, without any will for hierarchy as a domination process.

We have to remember ourselves that, once the war finished, mutual assistance didn't survive or carry over to the reorganization of a more or less classic state with its own infrastructure. Collaborative systems found du-ring the decolonizing process were reduced to nothing, to let places enter into a very hierarchical system, top down, very similar to the pre-existing one put in place by the European colonizer.

This construction of another modernity was seen both as the end of

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13. "Le travail occidental de «généralisation» a, pendant des siècles, introduit à l'équivalence des divers temps communautaires et tenté d'ordonner (de hiérarchiser) leur floraison. Le panorama résolu et les équidistances définies, peut-être y a-t-il lieu de revenir à une «dégénéralisation» non moins nécessaire? Non pas à une outrance renouvelée des spécificités, mais à une liberté totale (rêvée) de leurs rapports, frayée au chaos même de leurs affrontements."Glissant1990, 75.

imperialism and as a possibility to reconstruct another postcolonial society. Unfortunately, this modernity based on a collaborative system existed only during war time.

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