

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Translated by Joel Agee

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Automobile and Railroad Nations

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Political systems differ primarily depending on whether they are subject to the patronage of freedom or of justice. A political system that upholds freedom as its supreme principle is comparable to a social order that grew out of the evolution of street traffic. In the beginning, this happy pedestrian society enjoyed unlimited freedom; everyone left his house whenever he wanted and wandered off wherever he wished; not even roads were needed, footpaths were sufficient; to bridge a stream, a tree was cut down, and where a river could not be forded, ropes were strung tightly from bank to bank. It was not until coaches were developed that roads and bridges became necessary, but agreement could still be reached by means of simple calls. Time flowed at a leisurely pace, multiple collisions were virtually unheard of. Then the railroad was invented, tracks traversed the land. Railroad owners were now in charge, regulating the times of departure and arrival, setting the fares. And then the automobile was invented, the symbol of freedom. It rattled up and down dusty roads, killing flocks of chickens; the farmers threw stones after it, but already the roads were being widened and paved and the chickens stopped crossing the road. Highways were built. The railroad degenerated into a poor man's substitute for a car and eventually went to ruin. Grass grew over the tracks, the last railroad baron hanged himself from a signal light, his monocle fell on a railroad tie and shattered. But automobile traffic was producing its own problems. The accident rate had risen to a frightening degree. The men running the Traffic Bureau, still a ramshackle barrack, were gradually forced to consider introducing some kind of traffic code, even though, as a result, freedom

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would be put in jeopardy. The still-youthful director of the Traffic Bureau earnestly argued that the ordinance requiring drivers to stay in the right lane and pass on the left was merely a voluntary agreement among free human beings, that it was merely a regulation, not a law, that it could just as well be reversed—driving on the left, passing on the right—that each person entering into this agreement was doing so for his or her own security, that it wasn't a moral and certainly not a religious program that might offend persons of a different faith, that a traffic accident didn't happen because one person's driving was evil and another one's good or both of their driving was evil, or because one person drove like a Christian and the other like a heathen, but because one or both of them had made a wrong turn, or because one or both of them had lost control of a vehicle. Nor, he continued, did the traffic code determine a traffic user's status except in purely quantitative terms. A driver had to be qualified to drive; that is, he had to be of a certain age and in possession of certain physical abilities; an infant and a blind person were intrinsically incapable of driving a car, but the character traits of any given individual were not at issue. Reasonable though his explanations were, the protests from all sectors of the freedom-loving population set off a political crisis. The Union of Nursing Mothers pointed out that driving a car was easier than walking, and the Lighthouse for the Blind argued that blind people, too, could steer a car if specially trained dogs were seated next to them. The traffic code was overturned by a plebiscite. Traffic accidents multiplied, whereupon two parties developed, one that consistently drove on the right side of the road, and another one that stubbornly drove on the left side. The left-side drivers were secretly enthusiastic about railroad trains, since these, too, drove on the left. The two parties collided in a thunderous head-on crash, a huge and bloody mess, all in all. Inevitably, the point of view that prevailed in the end was that freedom did not consist in being able to drive as one wished, but in being allowed to drive if one owned a car. The left-side drivers acquiesced, gritting their teeth. Freedom fell back upon ownership. He who owned the best and fastest car was now the freest of

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the free, and so everyone wanted to become freer. But a person to whom freedom means owning a car will tend continually to get into conflict with the traffic code. He will accept it intellectually, but emotionally he will reject it. A person who owns a car that can speed along at a hundred and sixty miles an hour cannot see why he shouldn't pass a car that can only make a hundred and twenty-five, and so he passes that car in a curve, and promptly meets with an onrushing truck. The man or woman at the steering wheel is an incalculable element in any system of traffic regulation. This person relishes his freedom, and finds perfect freedom only when he is in his car, his foot on the pedal, zooming away. The Traffic Bureau, relocated to an office at Traffic Police Headquarters, tried to tighten the traffic code by introducing the stop sign, a measure that succeeded only when drivers were informed that noncompliance would force the Bureau to augment the Traffic Police Corps, a measure they were eventually forced to take anyway, for despite the stop sign, the slaughter on the road was mounting to the count of tens of thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands of severely injured. Although everyone cursed the increasing number of ordinances, fines, and punishments, these were nevertheless accepted, since accidents were inevitably the other person's fault, and even when the punishments became more and more draconian and drivers guilty of the most flagrant traffic violations were sentenced to death (if they had survived on the road) by being flattened in their cars with metal compactors, the public at large still did not protest. Strangely, now that the quest for freedom entailed the danger of becoming a victim of the traffic police, the temptation to violate the traffic code grew, and the most dangerous traffic desperados were celebrated as heroes of freedom. The chasm between the traffic users and the Traffic Bureau and its police deepened. A plebiscite prevented the introduction of a forty miles per hour speed limit, even though the enormous increase of automobiles did not permit anyone to drive faster than twenty miles per hour. Traffic jams, once an exception, were now the rule. In addition, the smog occasionally stopped traffic altogether; dead men and women sat upright clutching their

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steering wheels, and only the happy circumstance that everyone had one or more cars—at least a Cadillac or a Rolls-Royce, a Mercedes and a Porsche, or an Opel Monza and an Opel Rekord, or just a VW or just an Impala, but one of the really old models, and so on—this alone could make up for the fact that pretty soon a driving permit was obtainable only on certain days, which were determined by the final digit on one's license plate. In the beginning it was once every ten days, then every ten weeks, then every ten months, and then never again. Traffic jams were now no longer the rule but a permanent condition. The interminable honking had died down. Only the howling of fire engines and police cars continued. They couldn't budge, and amid the packed rows of queued-up cars among towering automobile graveyards, survivors had set up house in their wrecked cars and had even planted little garden plots next to the clogged highways. These gardens, however, were endangered by the newest cars (now finally equipped with catalytic converters), which were steadily advancing as they were pushed forth from the fully automated factories, despite the fact that no one was buying them. For years, Parliament had been convening in an underground garage. In the center, inside a Rolls-Royce, sat the head of the Traffic Bureau, surrounded by the members of Parliament, officially called Traffic Users Representatives, each of them in a vintage automobile. There were three parties: one that was categorically opposed to any kind of traffic regulation whatsoever, a second one that was stubbornly trying to propose a speed limit of at least fifty miles per hour, sixty-five on the highways, and a third party, the smallest one, assembled in a minibus, the Pedestrians' Party, which was suspected of sympathizing with the railroad party that ran the government in the neighboring country, an utterly incomprehensible rumor, since pedestrian ways were not only tabooed in the neighboring country but also forbidden. But in reality, Parliament, which signaled its approval with blinking lights and its protest with tooting horns, had long since lost its influence; state power had long since passed to the head of the Traffic Bureau; the blinkings and tootings of Parliament were completely ineffectual. But the power of the head of the Traffic Bureau was illusory

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also. In reality, power rested with the Bureau itself, which gradually became the supreme authority for the entire country—not just for the traffic police, but also for the fire department, emergency hospitals, highway churches (including a highway mosque), rest stops, traffic education services in maternity wards, daycare centers, bordellos, erotica outlets, saunas, retirement homes, primary and secondary schools, high schools, and universities. The number of Traffic Bureau officials assumed an astronomical magnitude. The various functions and jurisdictions were so densely intertwined that no one had any idea who was actually in charge; even so, the Bureau somehow managed to govern itself. It was impossible to tell, for example, whether it was the Traffic Bureau or one of its subordinate departments, the Ministry of Defense, that arranged to have the overgrown railroad tracks cleared and restored. On the one hand, the civil service apparatus had to be flexible; on the other hand, freedom, though it was no longer practicable, had at least to be defended. Now the Ministry of Defense could count on the automobile plants, which would have been rendered useless by the saturated market had they not begun to produce cross-country vehicles and armored cars, which were not restricted to the street system. The Army, therefore, was well equipped, but the heavy nuclear rockets could only be transported by rail, since the roads were congested. Thus, suitable railroads were needed by the Traffic Bureau, for the transportation of civil servants, and for the transportation of the Army's nuclear bombs, and these railroads had to be imported from the railroad nation—and not just railroads, but also gasoline. The two rival nations complemented each other magnificently. The railroad nation built railroads, had gasoline and did not produce tanks, while the automobile nation had a tank industry but no railroads and no gasoline. Its garages alongside the highways were useless, but at the border of the railroad nation, tanks could be exchanged for gasoline and railroad cars according to an exact code that guaranteed to both armies at all times precisely the same number of tanks and railroad cars and the same amount of gasoline: a balance of terror. Thus, both nations reached a political dead end. They

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were supported by nothing but slogans. Only the Traffic Bureau and the General Railroad Management sustained them in a kind of pseudo-existence. Their antagonism was purely ideological.

If the premise of the automobile nation was freedom, that of the railroad nation was justice, its doctrine being that only the railroad is just. Everyone must keep to the scheduled departures and arrivals, thus upholding the resolutions of the Railroad Management, without which there would be no railroad, for the railroad is the result of a revolution: indeed, it was the advent of the railroad that started the Industrial Age. The railroad system depends on tracks. Unlike the automobile system, it requires planning. The automobile is nothing but a reactionary development of the carriage, but the railroad is something fundamentally new. It cannot be bought, everyone can use it, it doesn't need steering, it is steered by tracks. It cannot be driven by its users; it does away with the inhumane division into licensed and unlicensed drivers, and establishes the humane division into passengers and railroad personnel. A steam-powered train needs only three functionaries: the conductor, the stoker, and the engineer; an electric train needs only two. This ratio is nothing short of ideal, for a train transports hundreds of passengers, while a car holds five or six at the most. Also, the Traffic Bureau's lack of organization and the abusive tactics of their police are well known; it is self-evident that a tight organization of railroad workers, gatemen, switchmen, signalmen, stationmasters and central stationmasters provides a security that bears no relationship to the insecurity of the road. Such was the ethos of the railroad nation. But of course this doctrine did not win the hearts and minds of the people right away. The neighboring nation with the freedom warranted by the automobile seemed at first to have the better argument. A Traffic Bureau was founded, roads were built, cars were introduced and even constructed. But the country's enormous expanse favored the railroad. The locomotive began to gain ground in its race with the automobile. Privately at first, and

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subject to the Traffic Bureau's jurisdiction. Travelers were assigned to different classes, depending on their material means—first class for the government, second class for the rich, third class for the middle class, and fourth class for the proletariat. Even so, the private railroad system didn't work. The schedules were too complicated, people missed their connections, one landowner would ask for a special time of departure, another would demand a different one. But a schedule has to be dependable. In order for the schedule to be dependable, the organization in charge of making the schedule dependable has to be dependable. Making the organization dependable is the task of the General Railroad Management. If the latter is to be dependable, it must be infallible, omnipotent. The Traffic Bureau, an indecisive institution to begin with, was unable to prevent the General Railroad Management from fomenting a revolution with the help of the railroad workers. The Traffic Bureau was overthrown. The head of the Traffic Bureau fled to the neighboring country, and the General Director of Railroads assumed power. Private automobile traffic, pedestrianism, coaches, and cars were prohibited, every street was covered with tracks, and the country's industry was converted to the production of trains. In the name of justice, the classless railroad was introduced, and everyone had to travel fourth class. Not everyone, of course. After all, the General Railroad Management had to use the train once in a while: you can't have management without inspections. It wasn't an easy problem to solve. The "Railroads for All" principle was sacrosanct; on the other hand, the General Railroad Management could not be expected to travel together with the people, for its task was to manage the people's railroad, not to mingle with the people. Fortunately there were still a few railroad cars, dating back to the days of the old Traffic Bureau, that were of a suitable class for the General Railroad Management. Thus, since the General Railroad Management consisted of the General Director of Railroads, the General Vice Director of Railroads and seven Railroad Directors as well as seven Railroad Director Trainees, it was possible to equip every train with a first-class car, a first-class sleeping car, and a first-

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class dining car for the General Director of Railroads; a first-class conference car for the General Railroad Management; a first-class car with a second-class sleeping car and a second-class dining car for the General Vice Director of Railroads; and in addition seven second-class cars plus two second-class sleeping cars for the seven Railroad Directors, as well as a second-class car with a third-class dining car for the Railroad Director Trainees, to which were added a third-class car and a fourth-class dining car for the railroad engineers. Since the locomotives were incapable of pulling more than twenty cars, there wouldn't have been any cars for the people, but since the General Director of Railroads absolutely never, and the General Vice Director of Railroads practically never, and the Railroad Directors almost never, and only one Railroad Director Trainee occasionally, even if rarely, rode in a train, it was possible to attach two or even three additional cars, all of them fourth-class cars whose benches had been removed. They were so heavily booked that it would have been impossible to sit. And so everyone stood pressed belly to belly, backside to backside, backside to belly, without having any choice in the matter, since no one was able to move. But because justice demanded that every municipality must be accessible by train, the railroad net had to be constantly expanded. This, however, made it impossible to acquire tanks, which, as we know, were so urgently needed for the defense of the country; and there were other problems, too, which the national plan had never foreseen since they were inherent in the plan itself. The passengers of the two or three overcrowded fourth-class cars at the end of the trains had a tendency to wonder why there had to be twenty usually empty railroad cars rolling ahead of them. When the crowding got excessive, they would move into the roomier cars. Once a passenger had even been seen in the first class car of the General Vice Director of Railroads. The General Management was forced to call in the secret police, for the conductors proved to be all but powerless. The impertinent passengers were arrested, the prisons and labor camps began to fill up, taking some of the pressure off the railroads. It was in the cities that the principle of justice was most

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difficult to enforce, since one of its fundamental tenets was that there was an inherent injustice in walking. Walking to work, to the supermarket, to the theater, or to the movies took longer for some than for others; therefore the use of streetcars was made obligatory, the idea being that this was the only way to overcome injustice. The ultimate effect of this thesis was that, while there wasn't a street without a streetcar, the streetcars had to stop at every door, which made them extremely slow, so that taking a streetcar took much longer than walking, especially as the streets before long were so full of streetcars that city people were forced to walk, not next to the streetcars, which was strictly forbidden, but inside the streetcars from one car to the next. Justice put the whole country to a halt, for after a while all railroad traffic had to be suspended; since the country was producing nothing but railroad cars and streetcars, the railroad lines, too, were soon crammed full of trains that were standing around motionless, puffing steam, so that people were forced to walk from train to train. But since no one was allowed to walk alongside the trains or through the twenty cars of the General Railroad Management, people walked on the roofs of the railroad cars, sometimes for hours, until they would reach a train that could actually run for a few miles. Thus, eventually people stopped traveling altogether. The country came to depend on illegal trade, on farmers who smuggled groceries in wheelbarrows to the black market, which was only accessible by an arduous trek along the roofs of the trains or by working one's way through the overcrowded streetcars. The theaters and movie theaters remained empty: they were too inaccessible. On television one could see trains racing across wide plains, through winding tunnels and over viaducts, and cheerfully dining workers in the dining cars. These images were interrupted by traffic reports about accidents on the streets of the neighboring country. But in reality, a turning point had long since been reached. A General Railroad Management that wants to maintain control of a country must be capable of locomotion; a motionless army of railroad officials is powerless. At first they drove around in the cross-country vehicles they had bought from the automobile nation; they certainly had

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enough gasoline. Then special roads were built for the General Railroad Management, strictly off-limits to the general population. The first luxury limousines appeared, then more and more chauffeured limos, a development that led to the first summit meeting, motivated less by political necessity than by a kind of political nostalgia. The General Director of Railroads longed to ride in a train again, and the head of the Traffic Bureau longed for a drive in a car, and because the tracks of the railroad nation were crammed full of trains and the roads of the automobile nation were stuffed full of cars, the General Director of Railroads and the head of the Traffic Bureau agreed to a trade of privileges that would permit the latter to drive a car in the railroad country for a week and the former to ride in a train in the automobile country, also for a week. They both met at the border, exchanged a few polite words; then the General Director of Railroads rode in a train in the automobile country and the head of the Traffic Bureau drove a car in the railroad country, and when they met again, the General Director of Railroads playfully called the head of the Traffic Bureau a General Director of Railroads and the head of the Traffic Bureau adroitly returned the compliment by calling the General Manager of Railroads a Traffic Bureau Director. The railroad and automobile rides were repeated, pretty soon the General Vice Director of Railroads and the Vice Director of the Traffic Bureau participated, and then the Railroad Director and the office managers of the Traffic Bureau, followed by further civil servants. Eventually half the Railroad officials resided in the automobile country, while half the Traffic Bureau officials lived in the railroad country; furthermore, the railroad lines needed by both countries for the transportation of nuclear bombs were connected, whereupon each country kept its bombs in the other's territory, thus maintaining the balance of terror. Gradually the population, too, got attuned to the new way of thinking. While there were mounting demands for a return to the purely automobile-related or the original railroad-oriented way of thinking, a strangely lackadaisical mood befell the two countries. In the railroad country, black market dealers rented third-class and even second-class cars,

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someone even succeeded in opening a first-class dining car restaurant, while among the automobile graveyards in the automobile country the first horse-drawn trams were beginning to flourish. Freedom and justice are complementary concepts; freedom is no more feasible without justice than justice is possible without freedom.