

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Culture and Subjectivity - Part 1

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Based on our previous studies of Deleuze and Guattari's methodology, cosmo-ontology and theory of language, we can now turn to their theory of culture and subjectivity. The problem they faced was how to introduce a *rhuthmic* perspective into cultural studies, in other words, how to bring the concepts of flow and subject into a field almost entirely dominated by structuralist and anti-subjective perspectives. Deleuze and Guattari's proposal was based mainly on the concept of sign borrowed from the current semiotics of the time but transformed into a historical tool making it possible to differentiate between so-called "primitive" cultures, traditional and modern "state cultures," "nomadic" cultures, and ancient and modern "subjective cultures." It also developed the theory of subjectivity which had only been touched on superficially in the previous chapter. Development and limitation of subjectivity chiefly resulted from a particular regime of signs they called "postsignifying." Finally, Deleuze and Guattari reintroduced some ontological considerations which provided their theory of culture and subjectivity with an ontological foundation consistent with that described in Chapter 3. Although with some difficulty due to their distrust of language, culture were in turn included in their *rhuthmic* philosophy.

Historical Typology of the Regimes of Signs

In a way that was usual in the 1960s and 1970s, Deleuze and Guattari first characterized culture as mainly composed of "regimes of signs," that is, in their own words, "specific formalization[s] of expression" constituting "semiotic systems." But they rejected the common semiological approach—what they called "the signifying semiology"—in which these systems of signs were deciphered from and translated into language, that is reduced to a common and superior medium. Besides, contrary to a common presupposition in those times, semiotic systems could not be regarded as signifying wholes (that is as "languages"), first because like in languages, "expression" and "content" were both "inseparable and independent," and second, because they "pertain[ed] to assemblages that [were] not principally linguistic." In other words, as the statements were closely intertwined with the bodies, language with context, semiology had no specific subject and must be considered only as a limited part in a larger pragmatic perspective. As we can see, this critique extended into cultural studies the critique of linguistics exposed in the previous chapter

If we call the signifying semiotic system semiology, then semiology is only one regime of signs among others, and not the most important one. Hence the necessity of a return to pragmatics, in

which language never has universality in itself, self-sufficient formalization, a general semiology, or a metalanguage. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 111)

Deleuze and Guattari insisted that we should stop considering cultures and human productions as composed of signs endlessly referring to other signs (p. 112), because this presupposition only projected the formalist linguistic scheme onto culture, but also because it granted power to all those, whether priests or psychoanalysts, who claim to be able to interpret them when they only capitalize on the unremitting signifying action of language.

The interpretive priest, the seer, is one of the despot-god's bureaucrats. A new aspect of deception arises, the deception of the priest: interpretation is carried to infinity and never encounters anything to interpret that is not already itself an interpretation. The signified constantly reimparts signifier, recharges it or produces more of it. The form always comes from the signifier. The ultimate signified is therefore the signifier itself, in its redundancy or "excess." [...] The discovery of the psychoanalyst-priests (a discovery every kind of priest or seer made in their time) was that interpretation had to be subordinated to signifiante, to the point that the signifier would impart no signified without the signified reimpacting signifier in its turn. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 114)

As a matter of fact, although it mentioned the eternal "priest," this critique was principally aimed at Guattari's own master: Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who had generalized in psychoanalysis a kind of endless interpretative quest by the patient him- or herself, while the psychoanalyst remained silent.

Actually, there is no longer even any need to interpret, but that is because the best interpretation, the weightiest and most radical one, is an eminently significant silence. It is well known that although psychoanalysts have ceased to speak, they interpret even more, or better yet, fuel interpretation on the part of the subject, who jumps from one circle of hell to the next. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 114)

This critique of Lacan's conception of signifiante, as endless semiotic quest, explained Deleuze and Guattari's peculiar use of the term "signifier" which they often capitalized as "the Signifier." It was not as Saussure had suggested, or as in Benveniste's or Meschonnic's usage, the "acoustic image" combining with the "concept" into a sign, but actually the sign itself observed in its pragmatic function of signifying or "signifiante." This should be noted because it allowed a powerful critique of a certain kind of psychoanalysis, based on a structuralist conception of language, but, at the same time, entailed a damaging ignorance of the linguistic and especially poetic reflection on the role of sound in language.

There is not much to say about the center of signifiante, or the Signifier in person, because it is a pure abstraction no less than a pure principle; in other words, it is nothing. Lack or excess, it hardly matters. It comes to the same thing to say that the sign refers to other signs ad infinitum and that the infinite set of all signs refers to a supreme signifier. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 114-115)

This particular association of neurosis, endless signifi-ance, infinite interpretation, power and economic relations, determined what they called the “signifying regime of the sign [*le régime signifiant du signe*].” This regime was, so to speak, represented by “a supreme signifier presenting itself as both lack and excess (the despotic signifier, the limit of the system’s deterritorialization),” whether God, like in the Tradition, or the Sign System itself, like in Modernity. It blocked any “line of flight” and implemented in the end “universal deception” (p. 117).

Borrowing from René Girard (1923-2015) yet without naming him, Deleuze and Guattari asserted that a common way, “in the signifying regime,” to treat the “entropy,” “everything that resisted signifying signs,” “that eluded the referral from sign to sign,” “in other words [that incarnated] an absolute deterritorialization,” was to sacrifice a scapegoat and to expel another one “into the desert wilderness.”

The rite, the becoming-animal of the scapegoat clearly illustrates this: a first expiatory animal is sacrificed, but a second is driven away, sent out into the desert wilderness. In the signifying regime, the scapegoat represents a new form of increasing entropy in the system of signs: it is charged with everything that was “bad” in a given period, that is, everything that resisted signifying signs, everything that eluded the referral from sign to sign through the different circles; it also assumes everything that was unable to recharge the signifier at its center and carries off everything that spills beyond the outermost circle. Finally, and especially, it incarnates that line of flight the signifying regime cannot tolerate, in other words, an absolute deterritorialization; the regime must block a line of this kind or define it in an entirely negative fashion precisely because it exceeds the degree of deterritorialization of the signifying sign, however high it may be. The line of flight is like a tangent to the circles of signifi-ance and the center of the signifier. It is under a curse. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 116)

However, this modern semiotic regime was not, they noted, historically the first, nor was it universal. There had been a few other types of “signifi-ance,” that is, of ways of signifying, interpreting and implementing power relations, of which it was possible to make a historical typology, even if they later recognized that those types were most of the time “mixed” (p. 119).

The first was the “so-called primitive, *presignifying semiotic*.” Although “primitive” people used language like modern people, their way to interpret signs was fundamentally different. It entailed “no elimination of forms of content through abstraction of the signified.” On the contrary, by “prevent[ing] any power takeover by the signifier,” it fostered “a pluralism or polyvocality of forms of expression” that allowed “forms of corporeality, gesturality, rhythm, dance, and rite [to] coexist heterogeneously with the vocal form.” Instead of a “signifying circularity,” it thus implemented a “segmentary but plurilinear” semiotic (p. 117).

A variety of forms and substances of expression intersect and form relays. It is a segmentary but plurilinear, multidimensional semiotic that wards off any kind of signifying circularity. Segmentarity is the law of the lineages. Here, the sign owes its degree of relative deterritorialization not to a perpetual referral to other signs but rather to a confrontation between the territorialities and compared segments from which each sign is extracted (the camp,

the bush, the moving of the camp). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 117)

This particular “regime of signs” reproduced, on the semiotic level, the rejection by the “so-called primitives” of any future State power described by Pierre Clastres (1934-1977), who, just like Guattari, had also fought in the early 1970s against the domination of the structuralist paradigm and severely criticized his own master: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) (Clastres, 1972, 1974).

It should not be thought that a semiotic of this kind functions by ignorance, repression, or foreclosure of the signifier. On the contrary, it is animated by a keen presentiment of what is to come. It does not need to understand it to fight against it. It is wholly destined by its very segmentarity and polyvocality to avert the already-present threat: universalizing abstraction, erection of the signifier, circularity of statements, and their correlates, the State apparatus, the instatement of the despot, the priestly caste, the scapegoat, etc. Every time they eat a dead man, they can say: one more the State won’t get. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 118)

Another “regime of signs” was “the *countersignifying* semiotic” typical, according to Deleuze and Guattari, of the “animal-raising nomads.” This semiotic proceeded this time “less by segmentarity than by arithmetic and numeration.” Socially speaking, this kind of semiotic was not aimed at *avoiding in advance* the rise of a dominating semiotic and a state power through its segmentarity and heterogeneity; it was *fighting* both of them, *from the outside*, through its specific logic of “arrangement,” “distribution,” “accumulation.”

A numerical sign that is not produced by something outside the system of marking it institutes, which marks a mobile and plural distribution, which itself determines functions and relations, which arrives at arrangements rather than totals, distributions rather than collections, which operates more by breaks, transitions, migration, and accumulation than by combining units—a sign of this kind would appear to belong to the semiotic of a nomad war machine directed against the State apparatus. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 118)

This kind of semiotic was born, Deleuze and Guattari claimed, in the “military system specific to the great nomads of the steppes, from the Hyksos to the Mongols.” But it had also been developed by the Hebrews during their migration out of Egypt and before their settlement in the Promised Land.

The role of Numbers in the Bible is not unrelated to the nomads, since Moses got the idea from his father-in-law, Jethro the Kenite: he used it as an organizational principle for the march and migration, and applied it himself to the military domain. In this countersignifying regime, the imperial despotic line of flight is replaced by a line of abolition that turns back against the great empires, cuts across them and destroys them, or else conquers them and integrates with them to form a mixed semiotic. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 118)

Postsignifying Regime of Signs

Finally, Deleuze and Guattari considered “a fourth regime of signs, the *postsignifying* regime” also opposed to the dominating signifying regime but “defined by a unique procedure, that of ‘subjectification [*subjectivation*].’” This regime was particularly significant since it accounted for the history of subjectivity in the West.

In order to introduce this new type of semiotic, they first gave, as an example, a particular type of “nonhallucinatory delusions in which mental integrity is retained without ‘intellectual diminishment,’” as it had been identified for the first time by French psychiatrists in the early 20th century. Whereas “the paranoid-interpretive ideal regime of signifiante” was based on obsessive ideas and organized by “radiating circles expanding by circular irradiation in all directions,” this “passional, postsignifying subjective regime” was based, for its part, on “emotion,” “action,” “sector limitation,” “linear series of proceedings.” While the “paranoid, despotic regime of signs” was clearly related, as its delirious face, to the most common “signifying regime,” the “passional or subjective, postsignifying regime” was opening unexpected and positive “lines of flight.”

We will contrast a paranoid-interpretive ideal regime of signifiante with a passional, postsignifying subjective regime. The first regime is defined by an insidious onset and a hidden center bearing witness to endogenous forces organized around an idea; by the development of a network stretching across an amorphous continuum, a gliding atmosphere into which the slightest incident may be carried; by an organization of radiating circles expanding by circular irradiation in all directions [...] The second regime, on the contrary, is defined by a decisive external occurrence, by a relation with the outside that is expressed more as an emotion than an idea, and more as effort or action than imagination [...]; by a limited constellation operating in a single sector; by a “postulate” or “concise formula” serving as the point of departure for a linear series or proceeding that runs its course, at which point a new proceeding begins. In short, it operates *by the linear and temporal succession of finite proceedings, rather than by the simultaneity of circles in unlimited expansion.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 120)

However, this semiotic regime was not limited to the 20th century. One of its earliest forms slowly emerged when the Hebrews and later the Jews stopped sacrificing and expelling scapegoats in order to restore the signifying regime in its full integrity, and blamed themselves for the evil existing in their society. This change resulted in the tyrannical and paranoid God being replaced with a fleeing Divine Principle: God as an absolute line of flight. Instead of integrating into the sole signifying semiotic whole supporting the State power, a “packet of signs” became to signify on its own, or better yet, to allude to something far beyond all meaning.

What happens in the second regime, by comparison with the signifying regime as we have already defined it? In the first place, *a sign or packet of signs detaches from the irradiating circular network* and sets to work on its own account, starts running a straight line, as though swept into a narrow, open passage. Already the signifying system drew a line of flight or deterritorialization exceeding the specific index of its deterritorialized signs, but the system gave that line a negative value and sent the scapegoat fleeing down it. Here, it seems that the line receives a positive sign, as though it were effectively occupied and followed by a people who find in it their reason for

being or destiny. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 121)

This explanation at first recalled Girard's analysis of the shift from scapegoat sacrifices to the Christian way of containing social violence by showing that the scapegoat is entirely innocent but, unlike Girard, Deleuze and Guattari believed that such a moral shift had already occurred in the Jewish world, a few centuries before Jesus, who was not the first to take the blame on him. Moreover, it was not, above all, a question of containing violence, supposed to be a natural condition of man, but a question of semiotics: how to account for humans' life and world? Was a complete signifying system possible or was there always unknown, unexpected, and unaccomplished elements that escaped the system? Both reasons explain why Deleuze and Guattari insisted on the "prophets" who had been instrumental in this radical semiotic change. Instead of "universal deception," Cain, Moses, Jonas or Jesus introduced the "universal betrayal" against the social group as well as against God Himself.

This is very different from the system of rigging or deception animating the face of the signifier, the interpretation of the seer and the displacements of the subject. It is the regime of betrayal, universal betrayal, in which the true man never ceases to betray God just as God betrays man, with the wrath of God defining the new positivity. [...] Jesus universalizes the system of betrayal: he betrays the God of the Jews, he betrays the Jews, he is betrayed by God ("Why hast thou forsaken me?" [Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34—Trans.]), he is betrayed by Judas, the true man. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 123)

By so doing, the prophets gave the subject a new value. Since he or she was fundamentally a traitor, he or she was "in reprieve" but was simultaneously assured of benefiting from God's "alliance" or "covenant."

The Jewish God invented the reprieve, existence in reprieve, *indefinite postponement*. But He also invented the positivity of alliance, or the covenant, as the new relation with the deity, since the subject remains alive. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 123)

This emphasis on the prophets and the consequence of their preaching was partly reminiscent of Max Weber's (1864-1920) famous late research on the sociology of religion. Since the point is important to correctly assess Deleuze and Guattari's contribution, we must go here into details. After his first study of the relation between the Protestant ethics and the modern capitalist system, published in the 1900s, Weber broadened his perspective by considering both ancient and non-Western religions. In this research, particularly in *Ancient Judaism* (1917-1919) and in *The Sociology of Religion* (1922), Weber claimed that the "prophets" triggered a powerful movement of "disenchantment of the world," that is, the collapse of the age-old magical world to the benefit of the new religious world based on a rationalized worldview, the development of a body of specialists, and a subjective unification of the lived sphere, which had remained until then chaotic and little organized.

The "priest," Weber noticed, had initially no part in this shift, because he was a specialist in a

traditional order and generally received a salary to fulfill his function, which bound him body and soul to the tradition. He only intervened after the break with magic had already occurred, as main architect of the systematization and dissemination of the worldview. The “lawmaker,” the “ethics professor,” the “reformer” and the “mystagogue” also did not offer a message powerful enough to break the magical order. Actually only the “prophet” was really able to fracture the traditional magical system by asserting the existence of a radical dualism between the principles of salvation and the world, by opposing the social illegitimacy of his speech with an individual legitimacy transcendent to the social group, finally, by proposing an integration of individual life on a systematic and long-term level.

In fact, the socio-semiotic work of the prophet could be carried out in two different ways. Either by asking for obedience to an ethical duty, as in the case of the “ethical prophets”, whose examples were characteristic of the Middle East (Zoroaster, Muhammad), or by showing others by his personal example the path to salvation, like the “exemplary prophets” from India or China. However, whatever its form, the particularity of prophetic activity was always to affirm a dualism radically separating the world and beyond, a dualism which made it possible to initiate both a challenge to the social order and a subjectively integrative work.

To the prophet, both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning. To this meaning the conduct of mankind must be oriented if it is to bring salvation, for only in relation with this meaning does life obtain a unified and significant pattern. (M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1922, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, 1963, p. 59)

Naturally, Weber noted that once the prophetic discourse was uttered, because of its political, social and subjective consequences, it was rapidly submitted to a process of systematization and reintegration into the political and social order by the specialists of the “Sacred,” the priests. Consequently, a great “struggle between them” started, that was “one of the very important components of religious evolution.”

The religious problem-complex of prophets and priests is the womb from which nonsacerdotal philosophy emanated, wherever it developed. Subsequently, nonsacerdotal philosophy was bound to take issue with the antecedent thought of the religious functionaries; and the struggle between them provided one of the very important components of religious evolution. (M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1922, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, 1963, p. 59)

This brief reminder shows just how close Deleuze and Guattari were to Weber, even though they didn’t seem to know it. Just like him, they differentiated between an initial world dominated by magic, which they called “the presignifying regime of signs,” and a new world dominated by religion whose definition was the subject of a struggle between, on the one hand, priests and state who imposed a “signifying semiotic regime,” and on the other hand, prophets, who initiated a entirely novel “postsignifying semiotic regime.” Moreover, they endorsed most of Weber’s description of the character of the prophet himself, although their analysis was much less developed, although they introduced psychological considerations where Weber limited himself to exterior descriptions of the self, and although they did not mention any non-Western cases. Basically, the picture was similar.

Prophets have produced a new description of God as indescribable, or better yet, unspeakable, an “absolute line of flight” escaping any signifying semiotics, making the individual a “traitor” to his group and even to his faith, that is, releasing him from his traditional solidarities, and finally helping him to systematize his existence on an authoritarian basis by the certitude to be part of an “alliance” or a “covenant” with God. Under the guises of semiotics and psychology, we recognize the main features of Weber’s analysis.

However, Deleuze and Guattari made suggestive remarks concerning the transformation of the discourse by prophetic practice, a subject which had not been addressed by Weber. Unlike priests or seers, the prophets no longer “interpreted” the signs to know if the sacrifice had been accepted, or if God was displeased or pleased by humans’ deeds, but they “anticipate[d] and detect[ed] the powers of the future.” Discourse was aimed at acting instead of seeing or imagining.

Unlike the seer, the prophet interprets nothing: *his delusion is active rather than ideational or imaginative* [il a un délire d’action plus que d’idée ou d’imagination], his relation to God is passional and authoritative rather than despotic and signifying; he anticipates and detects the powers (*puissances*) of the future rather than applying past and present powers (*pouvoirs*). (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 124)

Furthermore, without mentioning the anthropologist and Jesuit priest Marcel Jousse (1886-1961), they cited the title of one of his books that had been recently published, posthumously, *La Manducation de la parole* (1975)—an allusion which unfortunately disappeared in the English translation. This is worth noting, though, since by using the obsolete word “*manducation*,” Jousse described the prophetic language as something that was forcefully inserted by God into the body from outside instead of being freely launched towards the exterior, but also as something that would go into the body through a mastication and ingestion process performed by the mouth. Unfortunately, Deleuze and Guattari did not capitalize on this remark which remained isolated. I will return to this subject in the chapters devoted to Meschonnic.

The prophet is always being forced by God, literally violated by him, much more than inspired by him. The prophet is not a priest. The prophet does not know how to talk, God puts the words in his mouth [*lui enfonce les paroles dans la bouche*]: word-ingestion [*manducation de la parole*], a new form of semiophagy. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 124)

This “passional or subjective *postsignifying* regime of the sign” was naturally not the only one applied by the the Hebrews and later the Jews, who also used the *countersignifying* semiotic inherited from their past nomadic life, and developed their own authoritarian royal *signifying* semiotic as soon as David (around 1000 BCE) and Solomon (970-931 BCE).

There is a Jewish specificity, immediately affirmed in a semiotic system. This semiotic, however, is no less mixed than any other. On the one hand, it is intimately related to the *countersignifying* regime of the nomads (the Hebrews had a nomadic past, a continuing relationship with the nomadic numerical organization that inspired them, and their own particular becoming-nomad;

their line of deterritorialization owed much to the military line of nomadic destruction). On the other hand, it has an essential relation to the signifying semiotic itself, for which the Hebrews and their God would always be nostalgic: reestablish an imperial society and integrate with it, enthrone a king like everybody else (Samuel), rebuild a temple that would finally be solid (David and Solomon, Zachariah), erect the spiral of the Tower of Babel and find the face of God again; not just bring the wandering to a halt, but overcome the diaspora, which itself exists only as a function of an ideal regathering. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 122-123)

It was not limited either to a particular people or a particular period. It could deploy as well, in Modern Times, in “pathological, literary, romantic, or entirely mundane” practices.

We are not saying that a people invents this regime of signs, only that at a given moment a people effectuates the assemblage that assures the relative dominance of that regime under certain historical conditions (and that regime, that dominance, that assemblage may be assured under other conditions, for example, pathological, literary, romantic, or entirely mundane). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 121)

[*Next chapter*](#)