

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

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The concern for *individuation*, which had been at the heart of the previous chapters, gave way, in Chapter 12, to that of developing the *agency* of the singular or collective individuals. The latter, henceforth defined by both their “body,” “inner drive” and “territory,” should indeed be able to “act” as freely as possible. This new chapter was therefore intended to complete the vast *rhuthmic* “territoriology” presented previously with a no less *rhuthmic* theory of “deterritorialization” or “nomadology” based on the building of “war machines” capable of liberating the productive power of individuals and of opening up new avenues of thought. Of course, while “territoriology” mainly concerned nature, “nomadology” primarily concerned the social and political spheres as well as the technical and the philosophical.

War Machine as Challenge to the State

To begin this new chapter, Deleuze and Guattari exposed a theory of power which challenged the common philosophical and sociological theory attributing—and implicitly granting—to the State, as Max Weber (1864-1920) once suggested, “the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a territory.” Weber first distinguished illegitimate “power” ruling by force and legitimate “authority” accepted by those subjected to it. Then he distinguished three ideal types of the latter: charismatic “authority,” based on the personal charm or the strength of an individual personality; traditional “authority,” based on an established tradition or custom; legal or rational “authority,” based on an obedience to rule and office rather than to the officeholder. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari argued—without referring to Weber though—a third form of power should be added to power ruling by Force and power ruling thanks to its Authority—they did not make any distinction in this case—: the exterior and unpredictable “War Machine.”

They cited the French philologist, linguist, and religious studies scholar Georges Dumézil (1898-1986). From the most remote origin of Indo-European peoples, the “two heads” of political sovereignty or domination, “the despot and the legislator, the binder and the organizer,” have been “complementary” and alternating within the “State apparatus [1].”

Rex and flamen, raj and Brahman, Romulus and Numa, Varuna and Mitra, the despot and the legislator, the binder and the organizer. Undoubtedly, these two poles stand in opposition term by term [...] But their opposition is only relative; they function as a pair, in alternation, as though they expressed a division of the One or constituted in themselves a sovereign unity. [...] They are the principal elements of a State apparatus. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 351-352)

However, in both cases, war and violence were integrated into sovereignty, either by an army subjected to the common law or by law enforcement forces.

Either the State has at its disposal a violence that is not channeled through war—either it uses police officers and jailers in place of warriors, has no arms and no need of them, operates by immediate, magical capture, “seizes” and “binds,” preventing all combat—or, the State acquires an army, but in a way that presupposes a juridical integration of war and the organization of a military function. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 352)

But there was another type of power that interested more Deleuze and Guattari: that of the “war machine.” The latter was, according to them, “irreducible to the State apparatus,” it remained “outside its sovereignty and prior to its law.” In Weberian terms, it was not based on charismatic, traditional or legal authority, but neither was it established on pure force because it was not established at all. It was “in every respect [...] of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus.” It was the absolutely exterior Other of the State.

As for the war machine in itself, it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere. *Indra, the warrior god, is in opposition to Varuna no less than to Mitra.* [...] In every respect, the war machine is of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 352)

Indeed, as “Indra, the warrior god,” the war machine was the untamed anarchic part of power that constantly challenged established power from outside. It was the power of “pure and immeasurable multiplicity” bringing “*a furor* against all measure.” In short, it was a *rhuthmic* force violently disturbing the metrics of power.

Indra, the warrior god, is in opposition to Varuna no less than to Mitra. He can no more be reduced to one or the other than he can constitute a third of their kind. Rather, he is like a pure and immeasurable multiplicity, the pack, an irruption of the ephemeral and the power of metamorphosis. *He unties the bond just as he betrays the pact.* He brings *a furor* to bear against [all measure] [*contre la mesure*], a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public, a power (*puissance*) against sovereignty, a machine against the apparatus. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 352, my mod.)

This machine was directly plugged into the “*becoming*” itself, for instance the becoming-animal or -woman of the warrior, instead of distributing individuals and groups according to binary “states.”

He bears witness, above all, to other relations with women, with animals, because he sees all things in relations of *becoming*, rather than implementing binary distributions between “states”: a veritable becoming-animal of the warrior, a becoming-woman, which lies outside dualities of terms as well as correspondences between relations. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 352)

The members of war machines were generally despised by those of the State power. For instance, contemporary historians, “both bourgeois and Soviet” Deleuze and Guattari emphasized, followed this negative tradition and explained how Genghis Khan (c. 1155/ 1162-1227) “understood nothing”: “neither the phenomenon of the state nor that of the city” (p. 354, my mod.). Naturally, sometimes these machines merged with one of the two heads of the State power, or installed themselves in between them, making it more difficult to understand their originality (p. 254). Nevertheless, they had to be thought of as separate entities that remained entirely foreign to State power.

The State has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in the form of a military institution, one that will continually cause it problems. This explains the mistrust States have toward their military institutions, in that the military institution inherits an extrinsic war machine. (A Thousand Plateaus, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 355)

Is the War Machine Anterior to the State or External to It?

Deleuze and Guattari recalled Pierre Clastres’ (1934-1977) contribution to political anthropology. As one may know, based on his field work in South America, Clastres developed in the 1970s the idea that the State was not the natural outcome of the evolution of the so-called “primitive societies” into “civilized” ones (*Society Against the State - La Société contre l’État : Recherches d’anthropologie politique*, 1974). On the contrary, according to Clastres, ethnographic observation showed that primitive societies developed a number of strategies to avoid the emergence of a centralized power apparatus and tolerated only local chiefs with no power other than the one resulting from his “prestige”—the Weberian charismatic authority. Among these strategies, war was certainly the most significant because it helped to maintain “the dispersal and segmentarity of groups.”

Clastres describes the situation of the chief, who has no instituted weapon other than his prestige, no other means of persuasion, no other rule than his sense of the group’s desires. The chief is more like a leader or a star than a man of power and is always in danger of being disavowed, abandoned by his people. But Clastres goes further, identifying *war* in primitive societies as the surest mechanism directed against the formation of the State: war maintains the dispersal and segmentarity of groups, and the warrior himself is caught in a process of accumulating exploits leading him to solitude and a prestigious but powerless death. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 357)

In short, Clastres merely completed Hobbes’ perspective by reversing it. Not only the State was

against war but war was also against the State.

Clastres can thus invoke natural Law while reversing its principal proposition: just as Hobbes saw clearly that *the State was against war, so war is against the State*, and makes it impossible. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 357)

Deleuze and Guattari agreed with Clastres on opposing the Marxist and liberal explanations of the origin of the State. The latter did not emerge from the development of productive forces nor from the differentiation of political forces. On the contrary, the State made “the distinction between governors and governed”—and between classes—possible.

The State is explained neither by a development of productive forces nor by a differentiation of political forces. It is the State, on the contrary, that makes possible the undertaking of large-scale projects, the constitution of surpluses, and the organization of the corresponding public functions. The State is what makes the distinction between governors and governed possible. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 358-359)

But they criticized Clastres for remaining, in his own way, “an evolutionist” because he believed that the exteriority of the war machine was “a real independence,” that it was a kind of a real “state of nature.”

He [Clastres] tended to make primitive societies hypostases, self-sufficient entities (he insisted heavily on this point). He made their formal exteriority into a real independence. Thus he remained an evolutionist, and posited a state of nature. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 359)

Instead they advocated considering the war machine exteriority as a universal and formal character related to the very historical existence of the State.

Only this state of nature was, according to him, a fully social reality instead of a pure concept [...] We are compelled to say that there has always been a State, quite perfect, quite complete. The more discoveries archaeologists make, the more empires they uncover. The hypothesis of the *Urstaat* seems to be verified [...] the State itself has always been in a relation with an outside and is inconceivable independent of that relationship. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 359-360)

The formal concept of “war machine” could actually be embodied in various aggregates acting outside of the State sphere such as multi-national companies, religious and messianic formations, on a world level, or such as bands, margins, minorities, on a local level.

The outside appears simultaneously in two directions: huge worldwide machines branched out over the entire *ecumenon* at a given moment, which enjoy a large measure of autonomy in relation to the States (for example, commercial organization of the “multi-national” type, or industrial complexes, or even religious formations like Christianity, Islam, certain prophetic or messianic movements, etc.); but also the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 360)

Contrary to Clastres, one should consider the War Machine and the State as two sides of the same coin, two abstract principles coexisting and competing “*in a perpetual field of interaction.*”

It is in terms not of independence, but of coexistence and competition *in a perpetual field of interaction*, that we must conceive of exteriority and interiority, war machines of metamorphosis and State apparatuses of identity, bands and kingdoms, megamachines and empires. The same field circumscribes its interiority in States, but describes its exteriority in what escapes States or stands against States. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 360-361)

Minor Science as War Machine

War machines were not limited to trade, religion or the military. Since the most ancient times, parts of our artistic and intellectual cultures have been marked by the exteriority, energy and “revolutionary powers” of the war machine and therefore “capable of challenging the conquering State.”

Could it be that it is at the moment the war machine ceases to exist, conquered by the State, that it displays to the utmost its irreducibility, that it scatters into thinking, loving, dying, or creating machines that have at their disposal vital or revolutionary powers capable of challenging the conquering State? (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 356)

Kleist’s work was a literary example of this trend in Modernity but it had actually started much earlier in “epistemology” to form what Deleuze and Guattari called “minor science.”

PROPOSITION III. *The exteriority of the war machine is also attested to by epistemology, which intimates the existence and perpetuation of a “nomad” or “minor science.”* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 361)

Strikingly, the first example provided by Deleuze and Guattari was the Ancient *rhuthmic* physics recently brought to light by Michel Serres (1930-2019) in his book *Birth of Physics* (1977). They faithfully recalled its main features:

- its focusing on the “flows” making “consistency” possible;

1. First of all, it uses a hydraulic model, rather than being a theory of solids treating fluids as a special case; ancient atomism is inseparable from flows, and flux is reality itself, or consistency. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 361)

- the primacy of “becoming and heterogeneity” over “being and identical,” and the concept of “clinamen”;

2. The model in question is one of becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant. It is a “paradox” to make becoming itself a model, and no longer a secondary characteristic, a copy [...] The *clinamen*, as the minimum angle, has meaning only between a straight line and a curve, the curve and its tangent, and constitutes the original curvature of the movement of the atom. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 361)

- the gathering of “bands or packs of atoms” into “great vortical organizations”;

3. One no longer goes from the straight line to its parallels, in a lamellar or laminar flow, but from a curvilinear declination to the formation of spirals and vortices on an inclined plane: the greatest slope for the smallest angle. From *turba* to *turbo*: in other words, from bands or packs of atoms to the great vortical organizations. The model is a vortical one; it operates in an open space throughout which things-flows [*des choses-flux*] are distributed [*se distribuent* - active form in French], rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 361)

- the opposition between “a *smooth* (vectorial, projective, or topological) space and a *striated* (metric) space”;

It is the difference between a *smooth* (vectorial, projective, or topological) space and a *striated* (metric) space: in the first case “space is occupied without being counted,” and in the second case “space is counted in order to be occupied.” [a footnote explains that they borrowed these quotes from Pierre Boulez, *Penser la musique aujourd’hui*, 1963] (trans. Brian Massumi, 1987, pp. 361-362)

- and, finally, the primacy of “problems,” “accidents,” “events,” “affections,” over “theorems,” “essences,” “specific differences,” and “genus.”

4. Finally, the model is problematic, rather than theorematic: figures are considered only from the

viewpoint of the *affections* that befall them: sections, ablations, adjunctions, projections. One does not go by specific differences from a genus to its species, or by deduction from a stable essence to the properties deriving from it, but rather from a problem to the accidents that condition and resolve it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 362)

In this sense, Archimedes' *Problemata* were the scientific expression of a war machine, they were even "the war machine itself," and therefore a kind of introduction to "nomad science" which challenged "the royal or imperial sciences."

This Archimedean science, or this conception of science, is bound up in an essential way with the war machine: the *problemata* are the war machine itself and are inseparable from inclined planes, passages to the limit, vortices, and projections. It would seem that the war machine is projected into an abstract knowledge formally different from the one that doubles the State apparatus. It would seem that a whole nomad science develops eccentrically, one that is very different from the royal or imperial sciences. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 362)

Unfortunately this form of science had been "continually 'barred,' inhibited, or banned by the demands and conditions of State science" which had retained "only what it can appropriate."

This nomad science is continually "barred," inhibited, or banned by the demands and conditions of State science. Archimedes, vanquished by the Roman State, becomes a symbol. The fact is that the two kinds of science have different modes of formalization, and State science continually imposes its form of sovereignty on the inventions of nomad science. State science retains of nomad science only what it can appropriate; it turns the rest into a set of strictly limited formulas without any real scientific status, or else simply represses and bans it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 362)

Deleuze and Guattari cited "descriptive and projective geometry" "differential calculus," and "the hydraulic model" (p. 363) as nomad modern forms of science repressed or minimized by State science.

Minor Science and Rhythm

Remarkably, Deleuze and Guattari reintroduced the question of "rhythm" here, although in a way that was far from clear—as if they had a feeling of its importance but not the means to use it correctly.

Hydraulic forces, they noticed—apparently using the latter as a metaphor for nomad science—have been most of the time channeled and transformed into "laminar layers" by the State through "conduits, pipes, embankments, which prevent turbulence," whereas "the hydraulic model of nomad science and war machine," on the contrary, implied a distribution "by turbulence across a smooth space" by a movement "that holds space and simultaneously affects all of its points."

The State needs to subordinate hydraulic force to conduits, pipes, embankments, which prevent turbulence, which constrain movement to go from one point to another, and space itself to be striated and measured, which makes the fluid depend on the solid, and flows proceed by parallel, laminar layers. The hydraulic model of nomad science and [] war machine, on the other hand, consists in being distributed by turbulence across a smooth space, in producing a movement that holds space and simultaneously affects all of its points, instead of being held by space in a local movement from one specified point to another. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 363, my mod.)

Consequently, from the Greek, the sea as a smooth space seems to have been “a specific problem of the war machine.” Without paying attention to the historical distance between subjects, Deleuze and Guattari cited to support their claim Paul Virilio’s analysis of the British “*fleet in being*,” whose task was precisely to “occupy an open space with a vortical movement that can rise up at any point.” In other words, the atomist vortical model reconstructed by Serres was not only adequate to but also probably directly related with the domination of smooth spaces such as the ocean and the sea. It was an integral part of a war machine and was by itself a war machine.

The sea as a smooth space is a specific problem of the war machine. As Virilio shows, it is at sea that the problem of the *fleet in being* is posed, in other words, the task of occupying an open space with a vortical movement that can rise up at any point. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 363)

From this somewhat far-fetched argument, abusing metaphors, but defensible, Deleuze and Guattari jumped however without warning to the question of rhythm.

In this respect [sic], the recent studies on rhythm, on the origin of that notion, do not seem entirely convincing. For we are told that [*On nous dit que*] rhythm has nothing to do with the movement of waves [*avec le mouvement des flots*] but rather that it designates “form” in general, and more specifically the form of a “measured, cadenced” movement. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 363)

This statement implicitly recognized that Benveniste had approached the question in relation to Ancient atomism without, however, bothering to mention his name and fairly present his contribution. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari used an indefinite pronoun to refer to him, *on nous dit que...*, which in French sounded a bit offensive and symbolically obliterated the opponent.

Besides showing inappropriate condescension, this treatment of Benveniste’s valuable contribution was both biased and flawed. First, Deleuze and Guattari attributed to Benveniste the very Platonic view which he had so delicately and cleverly deconstructed. By the most bizarre inversion, Benveniste was believed to have endorsed the metrical sense and rejected the atomist sense of rhythm (see Michon, 2018a). Second, the explicit link that was set between “domination of smooth spaces” by the “vortical movements” of a “war machine,” “movement of waves” and “rhythm” made the whole issue utterly confused and Deleuze and Guattari’s claim startlingly inconsistent. In fact,

waves were—and still are—an iconic example of natural *oscillation* and *repetition*. From the second half of the 19th century, the term has been rapidly equated with rhythm in various natural sciences under what can be called a large “Spread of Metron” (see Michon, 2019). Therefore, by advocating the concept of wave, which was naively supposed to be on the side of the flow, against Benveniste’s innovative account of *rhuthmos* wrongly accused of remaining within the metric paradigm, Deleuze and Guattari were shooting themselves in the foot. They reintroduced metrics whereas Benveniste had precisely provided the means to overcome any Platonic concept of rhythm.

To make their case even worse, Deleuze and Guattari dismissed in a footnote, this time explicitly, Benveniste’s article, “The Notion of Rhythm in Its Linguistic Expression” in *Problems in General Linguistics* (1951-1966). The latter was deemed “ambiguous” because “it invoke[d] Democritus and atomism without dealing with the hydraulic question,” and “because it treat[ed] rhythm as a “secondary specialization” of the form of the body.”

This text, often considered decisive, seems ambiguous to us because it invokes Democritus and atomism without dealing with the hydraulic question, and because it treats rhythm as a “secondary specialization” of the form of the body. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, n. 25, p. 554)

The first argument only uncritically repeated Serres’ historical confusion between Archimedes’ and Lucretius’ views on the one hand, and that of Democritus on the other—between “whirl” and “*rhuthmos*.” The second ignored that Benveniste did not stop his analysis at the uses in which *rhuthmos* was taken as a specific synonymous of “shape” or “form,” but that he also commented on the very structure of the term and introduced the extraordinary idea that *rhuthmos* may have meant, before Plato, in addition with the concept of “impermanent shape,” that of “way or manner of flowing” (*rhein* + *-thmos*) (for more details, see Michon, 2018a and 2019).

Philologically speaking, these gross errors were probably due to a lack of precise and perhaps direct knowledge of Benveniste’s work and certainly to the unfortunate reliance they placed in Serres’ erroneous account. Philosophically speaking, they were once again most likely the result of the minor status given to language activity in Deleuze and Guattari’s own pragmatic worldview in which energies and forces constituted the most elementary ontological entities that composed the world.

In any case, they blocked Deleuze and Guattari’s access to powerful conceptual means that could have been used most beneficially for their own purpose and led them to describe finally the non-metric rhythm, the “rhythm without measure” they praised, as “*la fluxion d’un flux* – the flowing of a flow,” that is to say by recuperating in extremis the notion of “manner of flowing” which Benveniste had precisely brought to light, yet without recognizing their debt, nor the concept of *rhuthmos* itself, nor the fundamental relation between this notion and the language flow largely documented by Benveniste in his later work.

There is indeed such a thing as measured, cadenced rhythm, relating to the coursing of a river between its banks or to the form of a striated space; but there is also a rhythm without measure, which relates to [the flowing of a flow] [*la fluxion d’un flux*], in other words, to the manner [*la*

façon] in which a fluid occupies a smooth space. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 364, my mod.)

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Footnotes

[1] Deleuze and Guattari did not limit themselves to Indo-Europeans and provided, further on, other evidence of this dualistic distribution of sovereignty taken from the Chinese and the Bantu (p. 353).