

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Politics and Economics - Part 5

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Towards a Rhuthmic Politics?

The last two sections of the chapter were devoted to a description of the politics that would best correspond to the political, social and economic *rhuthmic* conditions that had been analyzed previously. This politics was to be based on the concept of “minority.” “Ours is becoming the age of minorities,” Deleuze and Guattari declared as a preamble to their argument. The term, yet, was not referring to a quantitative qualification: a majority of “nonwhite” human beings could actually be constituted as a minority. The important point was that while the majority was “denumerable” and “axiomizable” by the welfare state, “the minority [was] defined as a nondenumerable set, however many elements it may have” and “nonaxiomizable,” that is to say as an ever flowing multiplicity (p. 470).

These new “decoded” and “flowing” population were supposed to replace the Proletariat and henceforth fulfill the emancipatory function that the latter could no longer assume. Deleuze and Guattari, as Antonio Negri (1933-) twenty year later, saw in this mutation “the conditions for a worldwide movement” against capitalism which did not spare either the “bureaucratic socialist” countries.

Whether it be the infinite set of the nonwhites of the periphery, or the restricted set of the Basques, Corsicans, etc., everywhere we look we see the conditions for a worldwide movement: the minorities recreate “nationalitarian” phenomena that the nation-states had been charged with controlling and quashing. The bureaucratic socialist sector is certainly not spared by these movements, and as Amalrik said, the dissidents are nothing, or serve only as pawns in international politics, if they are abstracted from the minorities working the USSR. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 470)

In the long run, these flowing minorities would “promote compositions that do not pass by way of the capitalist economy any more than they do the State-form.” In other words, they would be the growing basis of a worldwide revolution that would put an end to capitalism as well as to the State.

It matters little that the minorities are incapable of constituting viable States from the point of view of the axiomatic and the market, since in the long run they promote compositions that do not pass by way of the capitalist economy any more than they do the State-form. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 470)

Of course, any policy that would only grant rights to certain minorities by according, for instance, “a status to women, young people, erratic workers,” would only add “new axioms” to the same system. It would only translate minorities into “denumerable sets or subsets,” which could be considered as a part of the majority. According to Deleuze and Guattari, this would hardly change anything.

The response of the States, or of the axiomatic, may obviously be to accord the minorities regional or federal or statutory autonomy, in short, to add axioms. But this is not the problem: this operation consists only in translating the minorities into denumerable sets or subsets, which would enter as elements into the majority, which could be counted among the majority. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 470)

Instead, the majority should become itself a “minority,” that is to say, it should become perfectly fluent, multiple, with no exterior or inferior part against which it would constitute itself. Such a translation would actually concern the group as much as the individuals who compose it. By becoming him- or herself “a minority,” each individual could thus escape from his or her Self and become “everybody/everything.”

What is proper to the minority is to assert a power of the nondenumerable, even if that minority is composed of a single member. That is the formula for multiplicities. Minority as a universal figure, or becoming-everybody/everything (*devenir tout le monde*). Woman: we all have to become that, whether we are male or female. Non-white: we all have to become that, whether we are white, yellow, or black. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 470)

In this way, the minorities would not reconstitute States of their own, such as “an Amazon-State,” “a women’s State,” “a State of erratic workers,” or “a State of the ‘refusal.’” They would form a new worldwide war machine “whose aim [would be] neither the war of extermination nor the peace of generalized terror” but that would be able to definitely “smash capitalism” and “redefine socialism.”

It is hard to see what an Amazon-State would be, a women’s State, or a State of erratic workers, a State of the “refusal” [*un État du refus*]. If minorities do not constitute viable States culturally, politically, economically, it is because the State-form is not appropriate to them, nor the axiomatic of capital, nor the corresponding culture. [...] The minorities issue is instead that of smashing capitalism, of redefining socialism, of constituting a war machine capable of countering the world war machine by other means. [...] a war machine whose aim is neither the war of extermination nor the peace of generalized terror, but revolutionary movement (the connection of flows, the composition of nondenumerable aggregates, the becoming-minoritarian of everybody/everything). (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 472, my mod.)

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Chapter 13 aimed to supplement the *rhuthmic* theories of individuation, agency and power

presented in the preceding chapters with an appropriate theory of the State and economics. It thus provided a remarkable *rhuthmic* description of the historical conditions under which any *rhuthmic* emancipatory politics was to be realized.

1. In order to assess as accurately as possible the current situation, Deleuze and Guattari painstakingly reconstructed a four-stage universal political and economic history, each stage providing the necessary historical material for an elaborate conceptual discussion.

1.1 The first stage encompassed the historical emergence of the earliest “imperial States” in Egypt, the Middle East, India and China, which, by suddenly associating into a kind of “megamachine” three basic “capture apparatuses,” Land, Labor and Money, put an end, at least locally, to the primitive *rhuthmic* nomadism. This abrupt replacement called for a reflection on the State’s universal—or para-historical—character. Remarkably, they concluded that “*there have been States always and everywhere.*” Even before its first emergence, the State had—and still has in so-called “primitive” societies—a virtual existence that triggered as many oppositions as attractions.

1.2 Deleuze and Guattari then presented the subsequent transformations of the archaic State into “royal State” and “city-State,” due to the significant growth of “decoded groups” and the uncontrolled expansion of new “decoded flows” generated by the development of long-distance trade, especially in the Mediterranean. This second stage allowed the re-elaboration of the concept of “megamachine” into a set of “machinic processes” interacting with the “decoded groups and flows” stimulated by the first developments of the capitalist system.

1.3 In the third part of their essay, Deleuze and Guattari described the passage from these intermediate forms of State to the modern “nation-State” in relation to the accelerating development of capitalist flows. This late form appeared, at first, as a mere implementation of the general capitalist fluent order, but, Deleuze and Guattari insisted, it constituted also a very powerful way of giving society a certain consistency, which involved simultaneously “subjection” and “subjectification” of the singular and collective individuals. Although—according to them—it did not grant individuals more freedom than previous systems, the nation-State was not an outright ideological reflection of the economic base, as mainstream Marxists claimed; it had a consistency of its own which involved the subject through partial reterritorializations on homeland, national language and the people. Furthermore, the larger capitalist system to which it was subjected was not homogeneous. It was divided into a central zone, in which value was accumulated, and peripheries, in which raw materials as well as surplus labor were extracted, a division which made the nation-States utterly unequal to each other.

1.4 The last part of the chapter was devoted to the successive transformations of capitalism throughout the 20th century, its progressive “axiomatization,” in other words its partial regulation from the 1930s to the 1970s within the framework of the nation-State, as well as the prodromes of its coming “deaxiomatization” or deregulation in Chile and Brazil in the 1970s. Although they sometimes indulged in regrettable exaggerations, especially regarding world governance, the picture of the situation at the end of the 1970s painted by Deleuze and Guattari was fairly accurate. On the geopolitical level, they rightly listed the main divides between authoritarian and democratic capitalist States of the center, between Eastern and Western hemispheres, and between Northern centers and Southern peripheries. On the social level, they were also remarkably aware of transformations that had just started as the relocation of Northern industries in the South, the

specialization of the North in post-industrial activities, the development of new pockets of poverty in the North, the dissociation of the rhythms of work, some becoming more and more “intensive,” others more and more “erratic and floating.”

2. As we can see, the historical part of Deleuze and Guattari’s argument was grounded on a very large and detailed documentation. Let us now examine the main political conclusions which were drawn from this description.

2.1 The already venerable Social Democracy and the nascent Neoliberalism were presented as two social and political systems which both had to be overcome in the future.

2.2 Due to what they considered the symmetrical logics of “addition” and “subtraction of axioms,” anticapitalist activism had to fight simultaneously on two fronts: against the power of “a worldwide labor bureaucracy or technocracy,” and against what they called the “totalitarian reductions” of capitalism.

2.3 Capitalism, for its part, had already transformed into a dominating system which had subjected the tiniest elements of life by penetrating deep down into the individual’s bodies. Consistently with this mutation, but this time on the global scale, the war machines had emancipated themselves from the States and had formed de facto a unique nuclear war machine covering the entire globe and imposing its “peace of Terror or Survival.”

2.4 Since activists could not count to fight against such false enemies and such gigantic powers on the traditional trade union organizations and the parties representing the working class, they had to resort to the new “decoded” and “flowing” populations which were the first victims of the most recent fluidization of capitalism, what they called the “minorities,” viz. the flowing aggregates of dominated and exploited individuals. In short, a system which had once again reinforced its dynamic and fluid logic had to be fought by challengers who would have a perfectly similar fluid, non-centralized and diffuse nature, although Deleuze and Guattari also evoked the necessity of a separate body acting as minoritarian but specialized war machine.

2.5 Of course, a similar transformation had to be accomplished simultaneously at the individual level. For collective emancipation to be successful, each had to abandon their rigidified Self and transform it into a perfectly fluid identity that would not resort to class, gender, race or nationality, but would dissolve into the flow of society and the world.

2.6 Instead of seeking new rights and statuses by entering the State system, the new activism had to constitute itself into a “new worldwide war machine” which, in case of a possible victory, would remain flowing and avoid to freeze again into State structures.

2.7 In short, elaborating further the conclusions reached in their “Treatise on Nomadology,” Deleuze and Guattari seemed to draw the outlines of a fully *rhuthmic* politics adapted to the latest *rhuthmic* transformations of the nation-State and capitalism.

3. Although this program was based on a remarkably detailed historical analysis, while exhibiting a high degree of consistency, one cannot help but ask a few simple questions.

3.1 First of all, was it really possible, historically speaking, to put the old Social Democracy and the emerging Neoliberalism on the same level? Wasn't Neoliberalism theorized by the Mont Pelerin Society and economists such as Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992), Milton Friedman (1912-2006), and James M. Buchanan (1919-2013), then implemented by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), Helmut Kohl (1930-2017) and chair of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan (1926-), precisely against Social Democracy and Welfare State?

3.2 Strategically as well as philosophically speaking, could they be considered as symmetrical dangers? Weren't the rules produced and implemented by "the labor bureaucracy or technocracy" much less dangerous than those of the free market? Weren't "rights and statuses" less pernicious for the "flows and multiplicities" than the wild fluidization entailed by Neoliberalism? Conversely, shouldn't the "flows and multiplicities" referred to by Deleuze and Guattari be sufficiently consistent to imply "rights and statuses"? Why contrast them in such a simplistic way as if they implied two opposing and exclusive strategies?

3.3 Furthermore, wasn't the image of capitalism as a global system dominating the tiniest aspects of life and ruled de facto by a single war machine quite exaggerated? So far, the new forms of control have not completely hampered the development of new freedoms, and the militarized war machines, which indeed cover the entire globe, have not taken control of the States which have mainly remained under civilian rule.

3.4 Symmetrically, was the sociological analysis on which Deleuze and Guattari based their political strategy adequate? In fact, the last forty years have shown that the populations which have been, so to speak, "decoded" and "molecularized" by the new form of capitalism, have rarely been able to organize themselves and really influence the political choices that have been made over the last decades. Although horizontal forms of mobilization made possible in particular through the Internet and social networks have been thriving, no notable improvement or change in the system has ever resulted from the mobilization of "decoded" populations or of what Deleuze and Guattari called "minorities"—which should not be confused with what is commonly called minority and which is based on sharing a common trait reproved by the majority. We have not witnessed an explosion of "revolutionary, popular, minority, mutant machines." Moreover, the few revolutions that have arisen from the bottom of society, like in some Arab countries in the 2010s, have nowhere succeeded in changing the State nor the capitalist order.

3.5 Likewise, one wonders if the anthropological analysis on which Deleuze and Guattari based their political strategy was sufficient? Although they insisted against mainstream Marxists for doubling the analysis of the processes of "subjection" with an analysis of the "subjectification" by which individuals constituted their Selves through a variety of emotional attachments to the Homeland, the Nation, the Class or the Language, they refused to grant the Subject any positivity. As already pointed out in the preceding chapter, they ignored the possibility of subjectivation and agency provided by the activity of language itself. The Subject was only a part of the Self, therefore it had to be destroyed and replaced by a vague and rather mystical becoming-everybody-and-everything, as if there was no possibility of subjectivation from the flows themselves.

3.6 Last but not least, wasn't their theory of State too limited to be able to grasp its complexity? As the Subject was erroneously confused with the Self, the State was debatably considered as a super-Self needing consequently to be wiped out and replaced by a rather obscure fluid and mobile political entity they called a "minoritarian war machine," which was supposed to act beneficially for the individuals by itself and without any command center. However, this program implied obviously two rather debatable presuppositions: first, that no State could ever be respectful of flows and even become itself, so to speak, flowing; two, that the war machine would fare much better in allowing the individual to flow as they choose, or in Barthes's words, to find their idiorhythms.

3.7 In the absence of sufficient answers to these questions, there was a great risk of confusion between what we would suggest to call "the tensive fluidization" envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari and "the dispersive fluidization" already initiated by the Neoliberalism. As a matter of fact, capitalism quickly integrated in the 1980s and 1990s the very notions of "speed," "movement," "innovation" and "generalized war" Deleuze and Guattari had advocated. It even succeeded, at least for a certain period of time, in limiting the power of the States over the economy through the globalization of production and consumption, tax heavens, and privatization of public services. Similarly, under its pressing demand for constant innovation, science renounced the ideal of an all-encompassing and homogenizing knowledge developing under the umbrella of the State and began to multiply its approaches. The rhizome became a buzzword in Silicon Valley. As a result, science fragmented into ever narrower fields of study and ever smaller specialties which were supposed to communicate through "interdisciplinary" research programs but which were in fact only capable of defending their territory or their ecological niche in the surrounding chaos—not to mention that this vast scientific shift has been accompanied by the privatization of universities and research centers, and of the systematic introduction of competitions for research funds even within public institutions. How then to demystify and oppose these dramatic transformations only with the hyper-fluidizing tools proposed by Deleuze and Guattari?

3.8 It is therefore of no surprise that such limitations and ambiguities have been eventually magnified by the theories inspired by *A Thousand Plateaus*, which not only have been unable to really criticize these mutations but have sometimes favored them. This was, for instance, explicitly the case of Michael Hardt (1960-) and Antonio Negri (1933-) in their bestselling books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). Logically but no less debatably, Hardt and Negri blessed globalization and its corrosive effects as it was supposed to weaken the States, shake the hegemony of normal Science, and this time prepare for a Global Revolution based on rhizomatic knowledge, local communities and decentralized social movements. Yet, twenty years later, we can only see that the expected "Revolution of the Multitude" has not happened, that capitalism has not collapsed and that the States have not disappeared. On the other hand, public welfare policies and public systems have been severely destabilized and science has exploded into a myriad of perspectives which shed a poor light on the contemporary world.

4. Whatever point one entered it, Deleuze and Guattari's political program was, *rhuthmologically* speaking, as rich and inspiring as it was fragile and insufficiently elaborated. On the one hand, they were among the very first thinkers to face the fluidization that would soon radically transform the world and establish the new order of the century that was about to begin, but on the other hand, but on the other hand, the analytical tools they provided were far from adequate. This entanglement of innovations and limits should not discourage us, though, from using what can be used. In fact, compared to the previous rhythmological contributions that we have studied so far, that of Deleuze and Guattari was, at least with regard to politics and economics, by far the most advanced and

elaborate. Descriptively, no such detailed study of history, sociology, economics and political theory had ever been made before; likewise, from a theoretical point of view, no reflection on the concepts necessary to face the rapid transformations of societies, states and economies during the last decades of the 20th century had ever been carried out in such depth. Unlike Lefebvre, they did not limit themselves to advocating a cyclical standard against modern metrics. Unlike Foucault, they did not entirely rule out Marxist contributions which, when duly amended, appeared to be very useful in capturing the fluid nature of capitalism. Unlike Barthes and Serres, they did not focus on a small group of friends, although they would certainly have approved of Barthes' idiorrhythmic standard—had they known about it. The questions that we must now address therefore concern the best way to boost the innovations and to overcome the limits of Deleuze and Guattari's political contribution. Let us see what we can find in their theory of art.

[*Next chapter*](#)