

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

Friday 16 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [State and Segmentarity](#)
- [Molecular Fascism vs. Hypercentralized Stalinist Totalitarianism](#)
- [Molecular Politics of Emancipation at the End of the 1970s](#)
- [Tribute to Tarde's Microsociology](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Naturally culture and subjectivity could not be separated from society and power . Chapter 9 was therefore devoted to a fairly elaborate social and political theory which questioned the dominant sociologies of the time, in particular Marxist and Durkheimian. The systemic notions advocated by them were close to the structuralist concepts widespread in cultural studies. Therefore, they had to be replaced by concepts more suited to the fundamentally flowing nature of society, social groups and individuals. In short, they had to become *rhuthmic*. Such a theoretical break would allow a much better appreciation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history, especially of the development of fascism, totalitarianism, as well Western-style regimes, but also a clearer vision of the possible political future.

## State and Segmentarity

Deleuze and Guattari opened the chapter by mimicking a very famous Aristotelian statement which was, in their time, considered a fundamental sociological truth: ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον - *ho ánthrôpos phúsei politikòn zôion* - Man is by nature a political/social animal (Pol. 1.1253a). Since in Aristotle's mind the *polis* - the city was superior to any of its member, this statement was used to justify a holistic conception of sociology, methodologically as much as politically and ethically speaking, which was equally championed by the two dominant schools of the time in France, the Durkheimian and the Marxist. In all respects, Society and State should have primacy over the individual.

Instead, Deleuze and Guattari's very first sentence declared that "Man is a segmentary animal." Society as a whole was not to be taken as a methodological as well as a political and ethical criterion. This so-called "whole" was actually entirely segmented.

We are segmented from all around and in every direction. [Man] is a segmentary animal. Segmentarity is inherent to all the strata composing us. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 208, my mod.)

What was presented by sociologists as beneficial, even by Marxists who yet took class divisions into account, was a bundle of segments and binary oppositions cutting the lives of individuals into pieces.

Dwelling, getting around, working, playing: life is spatially and socially segmented. The house is segmented according to its rooms' assigned purposes; streets, according to the order of the city; the factory, according to the nature of the work and operations performed in it. We are segmented in a *binary* fashion, following the great major dualist oppositions: social classes, but also men-women, adults-children, and so on. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 208)

Moreover, this segmentation was nothing other than the reverse of the centralization of power by the State. "The modern political system," with its "unified and unifying" power, implied "a constellation of juxtaposed, imbricated, ordered subsystems."

Not only does the State exercise power over the segments it sustains or permits to survive, but it possesses, and imposes, its own segmentarity. [...] There is no opposition between the central and the segmentary. The modern political system is a global whole, unified and unifying, but is so because it implies a constellation of juxtaposed, imbricated, ordered subsystems. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 210)

Deleuze and Guattari differentiated three types of segmentarity. The first was the division in "twos" like "classes and sexes." Individuals were partly determined by various binary systems of classification.

It is a particularity of modern societies, or rather State societies, to bring into their own duality machines that function as such, and proceed simultaneously by biunivocal relationships and successively by binarized choices. Classes and sexes come in twos. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 210)

The second kind of segmentarity was that of the "ever larger circles, ever wider disks or coronas, like [in] Joyce's "letter": my affairs, my neighborhood's affairs, my city's, my country's, the world's" (p. 209). Unfortunately, Deleuze and Guattari did not mention one of the predecessors of the interactionist American school they praised so much, Georg Simmel (1858-1918), who suggested a comparable idea in his 1908 text on "The Crossing of Social Circles" but whose conclusion was completely opposite. Whereas Simmel thought that Modernity had freed the individuals from the concentric circles to which they belonged and thus help them to participate in various circles that no longer overlapped, they claimed that the State had imposed its power by putting itself at the center of all social circles and by making them "resonate" according to its own tempo.

The central State is constituted not by the abolition of circular segmentarity but by a concentricity of distinct circles, or the organization of a resonance among centers. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 211)

The third kind of segmentarity was the division of the life course of the individuals in successive and separated segments. In a distant allusion to Foucault's work on prison, which had introduced the issue of the relation between the State power and the "metrification" of life (1975 - see above Chap. 2), they noticed that, while in primitive societies the time segments were heterogeneous and loosely joined, from the first Greek city-states they were subjected to measurement, homogenization and associated with each other according to a geometric model.

We would say that each segment is underscored, rectified, and homogenized in its own right, but also in relation to the others. Not only does each have its own unit of measure, but there is an equivalence and translatability between units. [...] With the Greek city-state and Cleisthenes' reform, a homogeneous and isotopic space appears that overcodes the lineal segments, at the same time as distinct focal points begin to resonate in a center acting as their common denominator. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 211-212)

However, in order to avoid the pitfall of a simplistic evolutionism, Deleuze and Guattari pointed out that the various kinds of segmentarity, "one supple and primitive, the other modern and rigidified," were not opposed but in fact were "inseparable, overlapped or were entangled" in every human society and even in every individual (p. 213).

There is indeed a distinction between the two, but they are inseparable, they overlap, they are entangled. Primitive societies have nuclei of rigidity or arborification that as much anticipate the State as ward it off. Conversely, our societies are still suffused by a supple fabric without which their rigid segments would not hold. Supple segmentarity cannot be restricted to primitive peoples. It is not the vestige of the savage within us but a perfectly contemporary function, inseparable from the other. Every society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously: one molar, the other *molecular*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 213)

This was a way to reject both individualist and holistic methodologies and politics in sociology and anthropology, and to replace them with a fully interactionist model. Both observation levels were necessary to understand society.

If they are distinct, it is because they do not have the same terms or the same relations or the same nature or even the same type of multiplicity. If they are inseparable, it is because they coexist and cross over into each other. The configurations differ, for example, between the primitives and us, but the two segmentarities are always in presupposition. In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 213)

For example, Deleuze and Guattari suggested, the notions of "class" and "mass" should be both taken into account, the first one on a "molar" basis, the second one on a "molecular" basis.

If we consider the great binary aggregates, such as the sexes or classes, it is evident that they also cross over into molecular assemblages of a different nature, and that there is a double reciprocal dependency between them. [...] social classes imply “masses” that do not have the same kind of movement, distribution, or objectives and do not wage the same kind of struggle. Attempts to distinguish mass from class effectively tend toward this limit: *the notion of mass is a molecular notion* operating according to a type of segmentation irreducible to the molar segmentarity of class. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 213)

## **Molecular Fascism vs. Hypercentralized Stalinist Totalitarianism**

“Fascism,” in particular, could not be reduced to the extreme centralization of State power and “molar” class aggregates, common to totalitarian States. It was truly a “mass” movement, it was based on a “proliferation of molecular focuses” which involved the deepest experience of individuals.

We would even say that fascism implies a molecular regime that is distinct both from molar segments and their centralization. Doubtless, fascism invented the concept of the totalitarian State, but there is no reason to define fascism by a concept of its own devising: there are totalitarian States, of the Stalinist or military dictatorship type, that are not fascist. The concept of the totalitarian State applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization. But fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, *before* beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 214)

Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) had already pointed out in the 1930s, against the usual Marxist interpretation based on class struggle, the emotional content of fascism. Likewise, Deleuze and Guattari criticized its “economic and political definitions” which did not capture the most fundamental reasons of its powerful development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead—it is worth noticing—they favorably cited Jean-Pierre Faye’s (1925-) studies on “totalitarian language” (1972 and 1974), although unfortunately without going into details. Indeed, language studies as Faye’s could have helped them by bridging their *rhuthmic* theory of “molecular focuses” with a *rhuthmic* theory of the activity of language (for a concrete example of such kind of approach, see my study of Klemperer’s famous book *LTI*, 2016, Chap. 11).

The insufficiency of economic and political definitions of fascism does not simply imply a need to tack on vague, so-called ideological determinations. We prefer to follow Faye’s inquiry into the precise formation of Nazi statements, which are just as much in evidence in politics and economics as in the most absurd of conversations. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 231)

Since it developed a “more fluid” centralization and involved a “molecular or micropolitical power,” fascism had been much more dangerous for Western powers than Stalinist totalitarianism, which

only presented, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a kind of monstrous version of the modern segmentary and centralized State.

The segmentarity and centralization of the [Stalinist totalitarianism] was more classical and less fluid. What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 215)

The argument was actually not limited to international affairs, it also aimed at internal political issues. Because of its molecular specificity, fascism could actually develop in every part of contemporary societies, even, Deleuze and Guattari added, in “left-wing organizations.” As a matter of fact, in the 1970s, this criticism was routinely addressed by leftist radicals against the French Communist Party and its union satellites. For example, members of the PCF or the CGT were often accused of fighting against fascism only at the state or labor levels, but of maintaining at the same time a “fascist” relationship with their wives or their children.

[Left-wing ] organizations [*de gauche*] will not be the last to secrete microfascisms. It’s too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 215, my mod.)

## **Molecular Politics of Emancipation at the End of the 1970s**

From this premises, Deleuze and Guattari concluded that the world, at the ultimate end of the 1970s, was both centralized around strong State powers and entirely molecularized in “mass individuals.” In other words, it was on the verge of a new kind of fascism, which this time would spread around the world.

The stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations, and elementary apparatuses. When the machine becomes planetary or cosmic, there is an increasing tendency for assemblages to miniaturize, to become micro-assemblages. Following André Gorz’s [1923-2007] formula, the only remaining element of work left under world capitalism is the molecular, or molecularized, individual, in other words, the “mass” individual. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 215, my mod.)

They claimed that the welfare state, which had been developed in a number of countries since World War II, was actually correlated with “a whole micro-management of petty fears, a permanent molecular insecurity.” The “macropolitics of society” implied a “micropolitics of insecurity.”

The administration of a great organized molar security has as its correlate a whole micro-management of petty fears, a permanent molecular insecurity, to the point that the motto of

domestic policymakers might be: a macropolitics of society by and for a micropolitics of insecurity. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 215-216)

Because of this historical and social situation, no emancipatory politics was to start, Deleuze and Guattari insisted, from the so-called “contradictions,” as in Marxism, which were only “molar” forms whose overthrow resulted only in new “molar powers” like in the USSR and its satellites, but from the “molecular” bottom, that is from the individuals and the minoritarian groups which developed real “molecular lines of flight.” As the May 1968 movement had shown, “the youth, women, the mad” were the new forces that were going to shape the future, not the labor movement nor the traditional leftist parties.

It is wrongly said (in Marxism in particular) that a society is defined by its contradictions. That is true only on the larger scale of things. From the viewpoint of micropolitics, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular. There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine: things that are attributed to a “change in values,” the youth, women, the mad, etc. May 1968 in France was molecular, making what led up to it all the more imperceptible from the viewpoint of macropolitics. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 216)

“The youth, women, the mad” were the only politically innovating sections of society and their molecular “escapes and movements” would soon change the “molar organizations,” without which, Deleuze and Guattari recognized yet, they “would be nothing.”

A molecular flow was escaping, minuscule at first, then swelling, without, however, ceasing to be unassignable. The reverse, however, is also true: molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 216-217)

## **Tribute to Tarde’s Microsociology**

In order to theoretically ground this *rhuthmic* view of society, Deleuze and Guattari paid a warm tribute to the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), whose work “had been quashed by Durkheim and his school” (p. 218). While Durkheim was interested, they noticed, in “collective representations, which are generally binary, resonant, and overcoded,” Tarde focused instead on “the infinitesimal: the little *imitations, oppositions, and inventions*” by the individuals (p. 219) which joined and finally formed “flows,” “waves” or “fluxes.”

A microimitation does seem to occur between two individuals. But at the same time, and at a deeper level, it has to do not with an individual but with a flow or a wave. *Imitation is the propagation of a flow; opposition is binarization, the making binary of flows; invention is a conjugation or connection of different flows.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi,

1987, p. 219)

This was exactly the kind of sociology they needed: a microsociology of infinitesimal quanta of “belief and desire” constituting groups and society, instead of a sociology based on “representations” and aiming at the definition of social segments.

Representations already define large-scale aggregates, or determine segments on a line; beliefs and desires, on the other hand, are flows marked by quanta, flows that are created, exhausted, or transformed, added to one another, subtracted or combined. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 219)

Everything in Tarde’s sociology rested on a *rhuthmic* perspective which could not but please Deleuze and Guattari. There were no substantial groups rigidified by collective representations and values, as Marxist or Durkheimian sociologists claimed, but only fluid groups constituted by a constant exchange of infinitesimal quanta of belief and desire.

What, according to Tarde, is a flow? It is belief or desire (the two aspects of every assemblage); a flow is always of belief and of desire. Beliefs and desires are the basis of every society, because they are flows and as such are “quantifiable”; they are veritable social Quantities, whereas sensations are qualitative and representations are simple resultants. Infinitesimal imitation, opposition, and invention are therefore like flow quanta marking a propagation, binarization, or conjugation of beliefs and desires. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 219)

Strikingly, however, this view of Tarde’s sociology ignored his keen interest in language activity, conversation and the press, which were yet, in his opinion, the main means of transmitting desires and beliefs, and of forming “audiences” (*des publics*). As we can see, their insufficiency concerning Tarde was closely linked to that they had regarding Benveniste. Once again the *rhuthmic* physical paradigm was cut off from the resources of the *rhuthmic* poetic paradigm (for a full analysis of Tarde’s remarkable *rhuthmic* contribution, see Michon 2016).

[Next chapter](#)