Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Society – Part 2

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Power as Converter Between Rigid Segments and Molecular Flows

Deleuze and Guattari introduced however in this very same section an interesting hypothesis which elaborated further a suggestion of Foucault concerning the "microphysics of power." The "power centers," including the central State power itself, were not limited to certain domains over which they simply ruled by monopolizing the "legitimate use of violence," to paraphrase Max Weber, but they actually effected "relative adaptations and conversions between the line [or the segments] and the flow," which required a real capacity to vary "rhythm and mode" of action. Power was in itself *rhuthmic*.

> Whenever we can identify a well-defined *segmented line,* we notice that it continues in another form, as a *quantum flow.* And in every instance, we can locate a "power center" at the border between the two, defined not by an absolute exercise of power within its domain but by the relative adaptations and conversions it effects between the line and the flow. [...] The task of making the segments correspond to the quanta, of adjusting the segments to the quanta, implies hit-and-miss changes in rhythm and mode rather than any omnipotence; and something always escapes. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 217)

Power centers were "exchangers, converters, oscillators" between segments and flows.

> Power centers function at the points where flows are converted into segments: they are exchangers, converters, oscillators. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 226)

The central banks, for example, regulate the exchange between the monetary segments, "real wages, net profit, management salaries, interest on assets, reserves, investments, etc." and "the flow of financing-money, which has not segments, but rather poles, singularities, and quanta" (p. 217).

> When we talk about banking power, concentrated most notably in the central banks, it is indeed a question of the relative power to regulate "as much as" possible the communication, conversion, and coadaptation of the two parts of the circuit. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 217)

Similarly, "the power of the Church" was associated both with "a certain administration of sin possessing strong segmentarity (the seven deadly sins), units of measure (how many times?), and rules of equivalence and atonement (confession, penance . . .)," and "what might be called the molecular flow of sinfulness" only based on "quanta" (p. 218). Deleuze and Guattari cited as well the State power which, as Foucault had demonstrated, partly developed from the conversion of "a flow of criminality" and "the molar line of a legal code and its divisions" (p. 218).

A few pages below, Deleuze and Guattari generalized this idea and developed it in a more systematical way. There was, "on the one hand," "an *abstract machine of overcoding*," which defined "a rigid segmentarity, a macrosegmentarity" linked to the State but not identical to it.

> There is on the one hand an *abstract machine of overcoding:* it defines a rigid segmentarity, a macrosegmentarity, because it produces or rather reproduces segments, opposing them two by two, making all the centers resonate, and laying out a divisible, homogeneous space striated in all directions. This kind of abstract machine is linked to the State apparatus. We do not, however, equate it with the State apparatus itself. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 223)

"On the other hand," there was "an abstract machine of mutation," based on "quantum flows," which operated "by decoding," "deterritorialization," and "lines of flight."

> On the other hand, at the other pole, there is an abstract machine of mutation, which operates by decoding and deterritorialization. It is what draws the lines of flight: it steers the quantum flows, assures the connection-creation of flows, and emits new quanta. It itself is in a state of flight, and erects war machines on its lines. If it constitutes another pole, it is because molar or rigid segments always seal, plug, block the lines of flight, whereas this machine is always making them flow, "between" the rigid segments and in another, submolecular, direction. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 223)

Those "machines" were the two abstract "poles" of society and power. But what we experienced and what social science and political philosophy had actually to account for was the realm that stretched between the two. In other words, sociologists should not separate the levels, like in the holistic and individualist approaches which both remained at an abstract height, but on the contrary concretely observe their constant interactions. As Deleuze often said borrowing from Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989), "one should start from the middle." Power was fundamentally linked with this middle and concrete realm. It both steered and resulted from the "entanglement of the lines."

> But between the two poles there is also a whole realm of properly molecular negotiation, translation, and transduction in which at times molar lines are already undermined by fissures and cracks, and at other times lines of flight are already drawn toward black holes, flow connections are already replaced by limitative conjunctions, and quanta emissions are already converted into center-points. All of this happens at the same time. […] *What is a center or focal point of power?* Answering this question will illustrate the entanglement of the lines. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 223-224)

From the abstract segmentary viewpoint, there were different kinds of power endowed with different capacities of action: the central State ruling the whole society and local powers ruling segments, which formed a kind of system, the State acting "as a resonance chamber for them all."

> Each molar segment has one or more centers. […] But there is no contradiction between the segmentary parts and the centralized apparatus. […] this is because the common central point is not where all the other points melt together, but instead acts as a point of resonance on the horizon, behind all the other points. The State is not a point taking all the others upon itself, but a resonance chamber for them all. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 224)

However, since from the opposite abstract viewpoint of the quantum flows, the same State and local powers did not stop fleeing, collapsing, and changing into new powers, one should actually focus on their concrete existence in between.

As a matter of fact, from the intermediate and interactionist viewpoint, every power existed "only as diffuse, dispersed, geared down, miniaturized, perpetually displaced." It was Foucault's specific contribution to have, for the first time, drawn our attention to the political importance of micro-powers and disciplines but also to their fundamental instability.

> Each power center is also molecular and exercises its power on a micrological fabric in which it exists only as diffuse, dispersed, geared down, miniaturized, perpetually displaced, acting by fine segmentation, working in detail and in the details of detail. Foucault's analysis of "disciplines" or micropowers (school, army, factory, hospital, etc.) testifies to these "focuses of instability" where groupings and accumulations confront each other, but also confront breakaways and escapes, and where inversions occur. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 224)

Power was not something constant and well established. "It continually sw[ung] between the two" abstract poles and this fundamentally dynamic or *rhuthmic* aspect explained why it was as efficient as fragile.

> Every power center has this microtexture. […] the texture lies between the line of overcoding with rigid segments and the ultimate quantum line. It continually swings between the two, now channeling the quantum line back into the segmented line, now causing flows and quanta to escape from the segmented line. This is the third aspect of power centers, or their limit. For the

> only purpose these centers have is to translate as best they can flow quanta into line segments (only segments are totalizable, in one way or another). But this is both the principle of their power and the basis of their impotence. Far from being opposites, power and impotence complement and reinforce each other. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 225)

Consequently, every power had a zone over which it ruled directly (the public central bank for instance), a zone in which it only exist as micro-powers (the private relations between banks and borrowers), and a zone of impotence in which the flows of desire, belief, money, or individuals escape his grip (the desiring flow of money).

> The same could be said of every central power. Every central power has three aspects or zones: (1) its zone of power, relating to the segments of a solid rigid line; (2) its zone of indiscernibility, relating to its diffusion throughout a microphysical fabric; (3) its zone of impotence, relating to the flows and quanta it can only convert without being able to control or define. [...] Returning to the example of money, the first zone is represented by the public central banks; the second by the "indefinite series of private relations between banks and borrowers"; the third by the desiring flow of money, whose quanta are defined by the mass of economic transactions. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 226-227)

Schizoanalysis of Society and Power

Deleuze and Guattari called "schizoanalysis" or "pragmatics" the analysis of society and power according to the *rhuthmic* perspective they had just presented. It was, they emphasized, a strictly objective study of the relations between the "state apparatus," "the molecular fabric," and "the abstract machine of mutation, flows, and quanta." None of these three lines was "bad" or "good" in itself; each had to be assessed according to its specific "dangers."

> The first zone of the power center is always defined by the State apparatus, which is the assemblage that effectuates the abstract machine of molar overcoding; the second is defined in the molecular fabric immersing this assemblage; the third by the abstract machine of mutation, flows, and quanta. We cannot say that one of these three lines is bad and another good, by nature and necessarily. The study of the dangers of each line is the object of pragmatics or schizoanalysis, to the extent that it undertakes not to represent, interpret, or symbolize, but only to make maps and draw lines, marking their mixtures as well as their distinctions. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 227)

The first danger pertained to the segmentation of society and of the state apparatus that depends on it. We are afraid of losing our place in the social system and, in the event of a problem, we gladly "reterritorialize on anything available."

> Our security, the great molar organization that sustains us, the arborescences we cling to, the

> binary machines that give us a well-defined status, the resonances we enter into, the system of overcoding that dominates us—we desire all that. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 227)

The second danger concerned the "molecular fabric" which could generate its own problems by stiffening what had to remain flexible and in motion. Once convinced of the necessity to "desegmentize" oneself, one could become a "new knight" with a "mission" and restore, at the micro level, the rigidity that was supposed to be overcome at the macro level. Then, "one deterritorializes" but only "to invent all kinds of marginal reterritorializations even worse than the others."

> Everything now appears supple, with holes in fullness, nebulas in forms, and flutter in lines. Everything has the clarity of the microscope. We think we have understood everything, and draw conclusions. We are the new knights; we even have a mission. A microphysics of the migrant has replaced the macrogeometry of the sedentary. But this suppleness and clarity do not only present dangers, they are themselves a danger. First, supple segmentarity runs the risk of reproducing in miniature the affections, the affectations, of the rigid: the family is replaced by a community, conjugality by a regime of exchange and migration; worse, micro-Oedipuses crop up, microfascisms lay down the law, the mother feels obliged to titillate her child, the father becomes a mommy. [...] One deterritorializes, massifies, but only in order to knot and annul the mass movements and movements of deterritorialization, to invent all kinds of marginal reterritorializations even worse than the others. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 228)

The third danger concerned the hardening of the power which operates as a converter between the two previous lines. When it manages to mount them alternatively, all is well, but if, for various reasons, it becomes impotent, it can indeed turn to violence and totalitarianism.

> It is precisely its impotence that makes power so dangerous. The man of power will always want to stop the lines of flight, and to this end to trap and stabilize the mutation machine in the overcoding machine. But he can do so only by creating a void, in other words, by first stabilizing the overcoding machine itself by containing it within the local assemblage charged with effectuating it, in short, by giving the assemblage the dimensions of the machine. This is what takes place in the artificial conditions of totalitarianism or the "closed vessel." (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 228)

The fourth danger was linked with "the lines of flight themselves." Although they certainly were the only means of "mutation and creation" in the "very fabric of social reality," they involved the danger not only of being reterritorialized but, more seriously, "instead of connecting with other lines," of bringing "despair," "destruction," "abolition," and "death," as in the genocides and mass killings of the 20th century.

> We may well have presented these lines as a sort of mutation or creation drawn not only in the imagination but also in the very fabric of social reality; we may well have attributed to them the

> movement of the arrow and the speed of an absolute—but it would be oversimplifying to believe that the only risk they fear and confront is allowing themselves to be recaptured in the end, letting themselves be sealed in, tied up, reknotted, reterritorialized. They themselves emanate a strange despair, like an odor of death and immolation, a state of war from which one returns broken: they have their own dangers distinct from the ones previously discussed. […] This, precisely, is the fourth danger: the line of flight crossing the wall, getting out of the black holes, but instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, *turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 228)

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In Chapter 9, Deleuze and Guattari discussed mainly the contribution of two disciplines: sociology and political theory. Although they did not address directly the issue of rhythm, their suggestions can certainly be compared with previous rhythmanalyses. But let us first recapitulate our findings.

1.1 Deleuze and Guattari's first noticeable success was the dynamiting of the concept of society as systemic whole, which was advocated by both the Marxist and Durkheimian sociologies dominant at the time, without indulging either in the possessive individualism which was to rise again in the 1980s. Instead, they emphasized the segmentation of society into classes, sexes, circles, and of individual lives into temporal sections. Society as a whole was both a theoretical fiction and a false value, which resulted in most questionable regimes, whether—according to them—in the "socialist countries" of the Eastern bloc or in the "liberal countries" of the Western hemisphere. Likewise, the individual, as a whole, was also a fantasy that had supported capitalism from its very beginnings and which now supported the emergence of ultraliberal and authoritarian states like in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina or Chile.

1.2 By contrast, they advocated a truly *rhuthmic* perspective, based on Tarde's sociology. Sociological entities as individuals, groups, society and powers were not constituted by "representations" and articulated according "segments," "trees," or "systems," nor by substantive beings. They resulted from endless flows of "infinitesimal quanta" of "desires and beliefs" and had, therefore, a supple and dynamic structure.

1.3 In addition, they suggested an elaborate theory of power adapted to this *rhuthmic* structure of society. Since "it continually sw[ung] between the two" abstract poles of "rigid segmentation" and "molecular flows," power was not constant nor well established. It was itself endowed with a fundamentally *rhuthmic* nature which made it as efficient as fragile. Consequently, every power had a zone over which it directly "ruled," a zone in which it only existed as "micro-powers," and a zone of "impotence" in which the flows of desires and beliefs escaped him.

2.1 This social and political theory allowed Deleuze and Guattari to oppose, yet without naming her, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) who claimed that the concept of "totalitarianism" could equally apply to Fascist, Nazi, and Communist regimes. Instead, they differentiated between "molecular fascism," which included the Fascist as well as the Nazi regimes, and "hypercentralized Stalinist

totalitarianism." While the latter was clearly the enemy of any individual freedom, it was just, so they claimed, a monstrous version of the liberal State of the West. Instead, the former, which naturally was also a centralized police State, penetrated down deep to the finer levels of the molecular flows of society.

2.2 In this sense, fascism was not limited to the Fascist and Nazi regimes and permeated as well contemporary Western societies, even in left-wing organizations and parties. Everywhere, it was based on a powerful perversion of the flow of desires and beliefs which turned against themselves to the benefit of a very few rulers.

2.3 Based on their Tardean *rhuthmic* perspective on society and power, and the conclusions they drew from the history of the 20th century, Deleuze and Guattari offered a very pessimistic diagnosis concerning the world at the end of the 1970s. It was both hypercentralized around powerful State powers and fully molecularized into "mass individuals." The welfare state itself, which had developed in a number of countries from World War II, implied "a whole micro-management of petty fears, a permanent molecular insecurity." In short, fascism was ready to spread around the world.

2.4 The only forces which could really oppose this trend and improve modern societies were "the youth, women, and the mad," that is to say "minorities" who were still capable, in this centralized and massified world, of creating, inventing, and drawing real "lines of flight."

3.1 While this line of arguments shed a strong light on the peculiarity of fascism compared to other totalitarian regimes, the subargument putting Western and Stalinist totalitarian states on the same line was much more questionable. The events of 1989 showed indeed, only a few years later, that the peoples of the Soviet sphere could no longer stand the totalitarian regimes which had been imposed on them and preferred Western-style states. Obviously, "segmentarity" and "centralization" did not appear to them to be the same in these regimes as in the regimes to which they had been subjected for decades.

3.2 Likewise, the application of the political category of fascism to contemporary societies was not without raising some difficulties. While targeting unmistakably existing problems, it involved a questionable extension to everyday life of the concept, which came to mean anything that had something to do with traditional discipline and inequalities. But one wonders if male chauvinism and authoritarian education, which had already existed for centuries, could legitimately be called "fascist."

3.3 After forty years of neoliberalism and globalization, we now know how exaggerate and dangerous Deleuze and Guattari's criticisms against the "welfare state" were, when the latter was precisely violently attacked by governments like those of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan or Helmut Kohl, and the so-called "mass individuals" stripped little by little from their social rights and transformed into simples atoms, exchangeable on and disposable by the world market. In both cases, one is obliged to recognize, the philosophers were far behind the movement of history they observed with already obsolete categories. They completely missed the new dominant forces that would soon emerge into full light in the 1980s.

3.4 This blind spot was probably due to a lack of critique concerning the new paradigm that was to impose itself during the 1980s as one of the main alternatives to the structuralist and systemist paradigms: methodological and axiological individualism. In fact, there is not much in *A Thousand Plateaus* regarding this new theoretical and ideological trend and it is quite unfortunate that Deleuze and Guattari did not elaborate on the difference between their kind of molecular individualism and the fast reemerging possessive individualism that would soon thrive in social and political sciences. Both, as a matter of fact, referred to the desiring nature of human individuals and it would have been helpful to make the difference between the two more explicit. This would have perhaps helped to avoid the confusions which eventually resulted from this lack of critique and explanation.

3.5 Now regarding the forces likely to change the world, Deleuze and Guattari were certainly right about the PCF and its union satellites which were obviously far behind the creativity of society, but they did not envision the protective role, which they have, ironically, endorsed during the following period marked by a rapid and devastating expansion of neoliberalism. Furthermore, they mistakenly imagined that the alternative forces they favored would bring substantial improvement to Western societies by merely injecting new concerns about movement into segments and by fluidifying their rigid organizations. First, their list, strangely, did not take into account the "workers," whose general strike launched on May 13, had greatly contributed to the success of the 1968 movement. Second, the following decades clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of these alternative forces in the face of the generalization of neoliberalism, in which they participated, more or less willingly, as for example when the legitimate needs of women, gay, lesbian and children for emancipation were turned into new commodities and consumption patterns, or when they were repeatedly used by governments in the 2000s and 2010s as smokescreen to avoid improving labor relations and tackling economic inequalities as well as pressing environmental problems.

4.1 Let us compare now Deleuze and Guattari's *schizoanalysis* with the *rhythmanalyses* that we have encountered previously. The reader may recall that Lefebvre, as well as Foucault and Barthes as a matter of fact, already criticized, on the methodological level, both the formalism and abstraction of structuralism, and the reduction by mainstream Marxism of cultural, social and political issues to sheer economics. By contrast, all advocated new concerns for "everyday life," "micro-powers," and "idiorrhythms," that is to say for various aspects of the domain extending between the "forces and relations of production" and the "institutional, political and ideological superstructure." In addition, on the axiological level, Lefebvre as well as Foucault and Barthes, also strongly condemned the "metrification" of life and advocated its emancipation from its "mechanical linearization," "disciplinary repetition," or "strict regulation."As we saw, this was also Morin's opinion although he did not explicitly set up a rhythmanalytical critique of modern societies. On both levels, Deleuze and Guattari were therefore quite close to their predecessors: methodologically, they opposed any dualist approach of society and power, and asked to start "from the middle"; axiologically, they rejected what they called the "segmentation" of life, the division of lived experience into strictly regulated sections.

4.2 On the other hand, they were much more critical of Marxism than Lefebvre, who clearly placed rhythmanalysis in what he thought could be a renewed Marxist paradigm, and they would certainly have criticized the so-called "cyclical-natural" alternative to modern "linear" rhythms, had they been aware of it. The fact of the matter is that they totally ignored Lefebvre's work as well as Barthes' first lecture course at the Collège de France, which were not cited a single time in the whole book.

4.3 Moreover, it is also true that the “schizoanalytical dangers” they listed at the end of the chapter seemed to relate to the rhythmic issue in a rather loose way. The “reterritorializations” induced by the fear to lose one’s place in the social segmentary system, the all too common “rigidification” of one’s free movement, the “hardening” of the State facing its own impotence, and the great risk for the lines of flight and the mutation endeavors to turn to “abolition” and “death,” apparently had only distant links with the question of rhythm as it had been worked out so far. The only direct link concerned the “third kind of segmentarity,” i.e. the division of the life course of individuals in separate segments.

4.4 Nonetheless, these “dangers” make more rhythmanalytical sense if we consider them in the light of a social and political theory describing fundamentally flowing individuals, groups, and societies instead of structural or systemic entities. In fact, all pointed to a specific way for the social and historical movement to stall: the stopping, the stiffening, the hardening, or the outright collapse of motion. In this sense, we can say that Deleuze and Guattari’s *schizoanalysis* resumed with some basic concerns of Lefebvre-style *rhythmanalysis*, while suggesting entirely new paths to extract it from its metric frame and develop it into a real *rhuthmanalysis* capable of assessing the quality of a particular becoming, its dangers as well as its potentials. As we have seen, this new critical theory was not without limits but it was certainly a progress compared to the simplistic perspective resting on binary criteria sketched out by Lefebvre.

Next chapter