

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

Monday 12 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Nature and Origin of the \(...\)](#)
- [Earliest Forms of State \(...\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

The theory of the State and economics presented in Chapter 13 was in turn strictly correlated with the theory of agency, power and war machine that had just been introduced in the preceding chapter. It was the exact counterpart, this time seen from the political and economic context, of the *rhuthmic* approach of politics advocated previously. It suggested a kind of *rhuthmic* description of the negative as well as positive conditions under which any *rhuthmic* emancipatory politics was to be realized.

To fuel their discussion, Deleuze and Guattari mobilized a wide array of thinkers ranging from Marx and Engels to Childe, Dumézil and Braudel, while introducing more recent evidence drawn from a large body of prehistoric, archaeological, ethnographic and historical studies.

## Nature and Origin of the State -Virtual Power and Real Megamachine

Deleuze and Guattari first turned back to Dumézil's analysis of the composition of the State in two poles and an exterior "non-entity": "the fearsome magician-emperor, operating by capture, bonds, knots, and nets, and the jurist-priest-king, proceeding by treaties, pacts, contracts (the couples Varuna-Mitra, Odin-Tyr, Wotan-Tiwaz, Uranus-Zeus, Romulus-Numa . . .), with the addition of "the war function [...] exterior to political sovereignty and [...] equally distinct from both its poles (Indra or Thor or Tullus Hostilius. . .)" (p. 424). This structuralist view was certainly illuminating, they noted, but it was still limited in some ways. In fact, the war machine could not be deemed completely "exterior" to the State because both kinds of king were always "mixed up in affairs of war," and because both were either "encast[ing]" or "appropriat[ing]" the war machine for the State apparatus" (p. 425).

They suggested therefore to examine "a tempting three-part hypothesis" taking into account an interaction between poles. The war machine would be "'between' the two poles of political sovereignty" and would assure "the passage from one pole to the other." They noted, with references to Dumézil and the Belgian historian Marcel Detienne (1935-2019) that "it is indeed in that order, 1-2-3, that things seem to present themselves in myth and history" (p. 426). However, this hypothesis, which would consider the war machine as central factor in the functioning of the

State, was still unsatisfactory because it presupposed in fact the pre-existence of the State itself (p. 427).

Since structural descriptions favored by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century academics were not entirely adequate, Deleuze and Guattari turned to 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers who were used to explain social phenomena by their history. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), for instance, suggested that the State had emerged according to three intertwined historical factors: “exogenous factors, tied to war,” “endogenous factors, thought to engender private property, money,” and “the formation of “public functions.” But, Deleuze and Guattari objected that this kind of explanation was “always tautological.” Each factor involved presupposed the existence of the very phenomenon it was supposed to explain. (p. 427)

All three of these theses are found in Engels, in relation to a conception of the diversity of the roads to Domination. But they beg the question. War produces the State only if at least one of the two parts is a preexistent State; and the organization of war is a State factor only if that organization is a part of the State. Either the State has no war machine (and has policemen and jailers before having soldiers), or else it has one, but in the form of a military institution or public function. Similarly, private property presupposes State public property, it slips through its net; and money presupposes taxation. It is even more difficult to see how public functions could have existed before the State they imply. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 427)

Thus, everything happened as if the State had come “into the world fully formed [...] in a single stroke.” To describe this mysterious *Urstaat* or original State, Deleuze and Guattari first cited Karl Marx (1818-1883) but also—as Morin, this should be underlined—the American historian, sociologist, and philosopher of technology Lewis Mumford (1895-1990). The State would have been erected upon the primitive agricultural communities and their lineal-territorial structures by “overcoding” them and by concentrating the property, the surplus and the stocks. As Mumford suggested, it would have constituted “the first megamachine.”

We are always brought back to the idea of a State that comes into the world fully formed and rises up in a single stroke, the unconditioned *Urstaat*. [...] Following the Marxist description: a State apparatus is erected upon the primitive agricultural communities, which already have lineal-territorial codes; *but it overcodes* them, submitting them to the power of a despotic emperor, the sole and transcendent public-property owner, the master of the surplus or the stock, the organizer of large-scale works (surplus labor), the source of public functions and bureaucracy. This is the *paradigm* of the bond, the knot. Such is the regime of signs of the State: overcoding, or the Signifier. It is a system of *machinic enslavement*: the first “megamachine” in the strict sense, to use Mumford’s term. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 427-428)

Without completely rejecting this model, which they reused here and there in the chapter, Deleuze and Guattari noticed that “the origin of these Neolithic States is still being pushed back in time.” Therefore, “when the existence of near-Paleolithic empires is conjectured [...] the qualitative problem changes” (p. 428). In favor of this interesting argument, they unfortunately cited the work on the *Earliest Civilizations in the Near East* (1965) by the highly contested English archaeologist James Mellaart (1925-2012) and some studies by the American-Canadian journalist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006). Both were supposed to have shown that the State in fact preexisted to “agriculture,

animal raising and metallurgy,” that the town “created the country,” in other words, that Marx was completely wrong when he explained the emergence of the State by a change in “forces and mode of production.” On the contrary, it was the State that “made production a ‘mode.’”

It is no longer the stock that presupposes a potential surplus, but the other way around. It is no longer the State that presupposes advanced agricultural communities and developed forces of production. On the contrary, the State is established directly in a milieu of hunter-gatherers having no prior agriculture or metallurgy, and it is the State that creates agriculture, animal raising, and metallurgy; it does so first on its own soil, then imposes them upon the surrounding world. It is not the country that progressively creates the town but the town that creates the country. It is not the State that presupposes a mode of production; quite the opposite, it is the State that makes production a “mode.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 428-429)

Actually, Marxists were not the only target of Deleuze and Guattari. Whether founded on economic, ethnological, or ecological grounds, any evolutionary explanation was incorrect. In fact, all these explanations contradicted each other.

Economic evolutionism is an impossibility; even a ramified evolution, “gatherers—hunters—animal breeders—farmers-industrialists,” is hardly believable. An evolutionary ethnology is no better: “nomads—seminomads—sedentaries.” Nor an ecological evolutionism: “dispersed autarky of local groups—villages and small towns—cities—States.” All we need to do is combine these abstract evolutions to make all of evolutionism crumble; for example, it is the city that creates agriculture, without going through small towns. To take another example, the nomads do not precede the sedentaries; rather, nomadism is a movement, a becoming that affects sedentaries, just as sedentarization is a stoppage that settles the nomads. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 430)

From this elaborate discussion, Deleuze and Guattari concluded that even before the construction of the first megamachines in the Middle East and Asia, “*there have been States always and everywhere*” (p. 429), thereby meaning—while correcting Clastres—that even in “primitive societies” in which the State seemed nonexistent, it was *virtually* present, already at work and ready to emerge. It was universal, yet both tendencies “to work in the direction of the State” and to ward off its coming “[had coexisted], in perpetual interaction.”

In primitive societies there are as many tendencies that “seek” the State, as many vectors working in the direction of the State, as there are movements within the State or outside it that tend to stray from it or guard themselves against it, or else to stimulate its evolution, or else already to abolish it: everything coexists, in perpetual interaction. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 430)

# **Earliest Forms of State - Threshold of Consistency, Imperial State and City-State**

This kind of ontological perspective required naturally to abandon any simplistic schema of causal relation. As Morin, Deleuze and Guattari argued that the latest science had introduced the idea of “reverse causalities” but, contrary to him, they did not mean by that a loop tying the chain going from the cause to the consequence to a secondary but equally powerful chain from the consequence back to the cause. In a riskier way, they suggested that there more broadly existed an “action of the future on the present, or of present on the past,” which were already “potentially” or “virtually” included in the past. [1]

It is true that the human sciences, with their materialist, evolutionary, and even dialectical schemas, lag behind the richness and complexity of causal relations in physics, or even in biology. Physics and biology present us with reverse causalities that are *without finality* but testify nonetheless to an action of the future on the present, or of the present on the past, for example, the convergent wave and the anticipated potential, which imply an inversion of time. More than breaks or zigzags, it is these reverse causalities that shatter evolution. *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 431)

According to them, this was clearly the case for “the Neolithic or even Paleolithic State” which “was already acting before it appeared, as the actual limit these primitive societies warded off.”

Similarly, in the present context, it is not adequate to say that the Neolithic or even Paleolithic State, once it appeared, reacted back on the surrounding world of the hunter-gatherers; it was already acting before it appeared, as the actual limit these primitive societies warded off, or as the point toward which they converged but could not reach without self-destructing. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 431)

The emergence of the State in the open air therefore depended on a “threshold” in the variation of the balance between the forces anticipating “the formation of a central power” and those which prevented it.

There exist collective mechanisms that simultaneously ward off and anticipate the formation of a central power. The appearance of a central power is thus a function of *a threshold or degree* beyond which what is anticipated takes on consistency or fails to, and what is conjured away ceases to be so and arrives. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 431-432)

This threshold could naturally vary depending on whether one looked at large States or simple Towns, which were two related phenomena but despite everything independent. Egypt and Sumer were two clearly opposite examples of these possible transformations. Another example of this opposition was the network of towns which emerged in the Mediterranean world “with the Pelasgians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians,” and which “created an urban fabric distinct from

the imperial organisms of the Orient" (p. 432).

The "urban revolution" and the "state revolution" may coincide but do not meld. In both cases, there is a central power, but it does not assume the same figure. Certain authors have made a distinction between the palatial or imperial system (temple-palace), and the urban, town system. In both cases there is a town, but in one case the town is an outgrowth of the palace or temple, and in the other case the palace, the temple, is a concretion of the town. In one case, the town par excellence is the capital, and in the other it is the metropolis. Sumer already attests to a town solution, as opposed to the imperial solution of Egypt. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 432)

The "threshold of consistency" differed between city-State and imperial State in several respects. The city-State, which existed only "as function of circulation, and of circuits," depended on "a phenomenon of *transconsistency*" of the "*network*" to which it belonged. However, for the city-state the threshold was paradoxically at the same time one "of deterritorialization" because whatever the material involved, goods, ideas or values, "it must be deterritorialized enough to enter the network, to submit to the polarization, to follow the circuit of urban and road recoding." The maximum deterritorialization appeared "in the tendency of maritime and commercial towns to separate off from the backcountry, from the countryside (Athens, Carthage, Venice)." Due to these peculiar conditions, in ancient city-States the power was both locally centralized but remotely limited by the influence of all other towns of the circuit which "enter[ed] in counterpoint along horizontal lines." So, this was no chance that these city-States invented "the idea of the *magistrature*, which is very different from the State civil-service sector (*fonctionnariat*)." (pp. 432-433)

By contrast, imperial States resulted from "a phenomenon of *intraconsistency*." Instead of emerging as one element or one point in a network of counterpoints, imperial States gathered together heterogeneous entities. They made "points of [very diverse natures], geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particularities" *resonate* together. They operated by "stratification" and formed "vertical, hierarchized aggregate[s]." Consequently, contrary to city-States, they necessarily cut off the relations between elements. Or course, compared with primitive societies they involved a kind of "derritorialization" but it was "the result of the territory itself being taken as an object, as a material to stratify, to make resonate." Thus the central power of the imperial State was "hierarchical, and constitute[d] a civil-service sector; the center [was] not in the middle (*au milieu*), but on top, because the only way it [could] recombine what it isolate[d] [was] through subordination." (p. 433, my mod.)

Naturally, imperial States and city-States interacted. An imperial State could include and subordinate many towns, especially when it was able to enforce its "monopoly over foreign trade." And, conversely, some towns could break free from their subordination when the imperial State released its monopoly or when its own *overcoding* "provoked *decoded* flows." Good examples of this phenomenon were to be found in "the ancient Aegean world or the Western world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," in which many towns took full advantage of "intense decoding" processes to become full city-States. (p. 434)

[Next chapter](#)

---

## Footnotes

[1] Strikingly, this metaphysical position echoed that of Theodor W. Adorno, who for his part declared: “True dialectics is an effort to see the new in the old and not just the old in the new.” (*Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, 1956, p. 47) We will find a similar stand in Meschonnic’s *Critique du rythme*.