

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Politics and Economics - Part 4

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The Transformations of Capitalism and the Nation-State in the 20th Century

Politics, Deleuze and Guattari emphasized, is based on “experimentation, groping in the dark, injection, withdrawal, advances, retreats.” It basically deals with a form of struggle similar to that existing in science between “intuitionism,” “problematic conception of science,” “working in the undecidable and the fugitive,” on the one hand, and “axiomatics,” “theorematic conception of geometry,” “reordering that prevents decoded semiotic flows [...] from escaping in all directions,” on the other hand. In other words, emancipating politics must fight, with the same kind of intuitionistic and problematic tools, the “axiomatic of capitalism” (p. 461).

Capitalism can be indeed compared to normal science. As the latter, it is based on a certain number of “axioms” that “constitute the semiological form of Capital and that enter as component parts into assemblages of production, circulation, and consumption.”

The axioms of capitalism are obviously not theoretical propositions, or ideological formulas, but operative statements that constitute the semiological form of Capital and that enter as component parts into assemblages of production, circulation, and consumption. The axioms are primary statements, which do not derive from or depend upon another statement. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 461)

As normal science faced with “undecidable proposition,” “necessarily higher powers that it cannot master” and “lines of flight that are so frequent in mathematics” (p. 461), capitalism has frequently added new “axioms” to stabilize a naturally unstable system based on deterritorialization of territories and decoding of peoples. These axioms were the new forms of organization, or better yet, the new ways of flowing, that were implemented in the 20th century in order to adjust the capitalist system to a succession of gigantic challenges such as the Russian Revolution, the world depression, and WW2.

There is a tendency within capitalism continually to add more axioms. After the end of World War I, the joint influence of the world depression and the Russian Revolution forced capitalism to multiply its axioms, to invent new ones dealing with the working class, employment, union organization, social institutions, the role of the State, the foreign and domestic markets. Keynesian economics and the New Deal were axiom laboratories. Examples of the creation of new

axioms after the Second World War: the Marshall Plan, forms of assistance and lending, transformations in the monetary system. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 462)

But just like in science, these successive reorganizations of the system according new “axioms” or new fundamental rules have never been able to definitely stabilize it. Therefore, “nothing is played out in advance.”

It is the real characteristics of axiomatics that lead us to say that capitalism and present-day politics are an axiomatic in the literal sense. But it is precisely for this reason that nothing is played out in advance. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 461)

Social democracy was “defined by this tendency to add, invent axioms.” By multiplying “directing axioms,” it was a “manner” to “master the flows” of capitalism.

A very general pole of the State, “social democracy,” can be defined by this tendency to add, invent axioms in relation to spheres of investment and sources of profit: the question is not that of freedom and constraint, nor of centralism and decentralization, but of the manner in which one masters the flows. In this case, they are mastered by the multiplication of directing axioms. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 462)

But Deleuze and Guattari, based on the experiments made in the 1970s in Chile and Brazil, suggested to add a second pole. On the opposite side, there was “a tendency to withdraw, subtract axioms.” In analyzing this second tendency, they used confusingly the term “totalitarianism” for recent military dictatorships—while describing, rightly this time, fascist and Nazi States as equally “collapsing the domestic market and reducing the number of axioms,” but choosing autarky instead of promoting “the foreign sector” and appealing to “foreign sources of capital” as in more recent authoritarian regimes (pp. 462-463). Furthermore, they did not realize that the same kind of “subtracting” policy would soon be adopted by democratic countries such as the USA or the Western European countries. However, they partly identified the trend that would soon be called Neoliberalism and for which the Chilean and Brazilian experiments appear now to have been mere militarized precursors applied to developing countries.

The opposite tendency is no less a part of capitalism: the tendency to withdraw, subtract axioms. One falls back on a very small number of axioms regulating the dominant flows, while the other flows are given a derivative, consequential status. [...] The “totalitarianism” pole of the State incarnates this tendency to restrict the number of axioms, and operates by the exclusive promotion of the foreign sector: the appeal to foreign sources of capital, the rise of industries aimed at the exportation of foodstuffs or raw materials, the collapse of the domestic market. The totalitarian State is not a maximum State but rather, following Virilio’s formulation, the *minimum State of anarcho-capitalism* (cf. Chile). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 462)

Consequently, any real anticapitalist policy had to fight both against the power of “a worldwide labor bureaucracy or technocracy” and against all “totalitarian reductions.” While the latter would drastically reduce the living conditions of the population, the former would subordinate the “local struggles” and the “living flows” to “centers of control and decision making” and finally limit itself to simple social democratic reforms of capitalism. A real transformation required, Deleuze and Guattari claimed, that “local struggles directly target national and international axioms”—a vague program that was as simple to explain as it was difficult to implement.

The resulting danger of a worldwide labor bureaucracy or technocracy taking charge of these problems can be warded off only to the extent that local struggles directly target national and international axioms, at the precise point of their insertion in the field of immanence (the potential of the rural world in this respect). There is always a fundamental difference between living flows and the axioms that subordinate them to centers of control and decision making, that make a given segment correspond to them, which measure their quanta. But the pressure of the living flows, and of the problems they pose and impose, must be exerted inside the axiomatic, as much in order to fight the totalitarian reductions as to anticipate and precipitate the additions, to orient them and prevent their technocratic perversion. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 464)

Then, Deleuze and Guattari sketched an analytical description of the contemporary capitalist system. In principle, they noticed, “all States are isomorphic” since they are only “domains of realization of capital according to a single external world market” (p. 464, my mod.). But they are actually differentiated through three main “bipolarities.”

The first, “applying to the States located at the center,” concerned “the addition or subtraction” of axioms, which amounted principally, according to Deleuze and Guattari, to the specific distribution of “the domestic and foreign markets.” Both choices grounded the difference between authoritarian and democratic capitalist States (p. 464). “A second, West-East, bipolarity ha[d] been imposed on the States of the center, that of the capitalist States and the bureaucratic socialist States”—which Deleuze and Guattari again refused to call “totalitarian” (p. 464). Finally, the third fundamental bipolarity was that of “the center and the periphery (North-South).” In this last case, they joined Fernand Braudel and Samir Amin “in saying that the axioms of the periphery differ from those of the center.” The Third World, they emphasized, constituted for the “central capitalism” a “periphery” where “it locate[d] a large part of its most modern industries” and from which it also received some capital (p. 465).

Naturally, all three polarities intersected and could degenerate into war. “The classical conflicts among the States of the center (as well as peripheral colonization) have been joined, or rather replaced, by two great conflicting lines, between West and East and North and South; these lines intersect and together cover everything.” (p. 466)

This description corresponded quite well to the geopolitical situation of the time. But this was not the case with the analysis that followed. Based on the concept of “war machine” elaborated in the previous chapter, Deleuze and Guattari developed a rather dubious theory. According to them, due to the accumulation of constant capital, “war [had become] increasingly a war of materiel” led by “war machine[s] now incarnated in the complexes” (p. 466). As a result, the war machines, hitherto

appropriated by States, had become autonomous, had joined together and had applied to peace “a now total, unlimited kind of war” (p. 467). In other words, peace had been transformed into a permanent war waged by parts of a “single” monstrous “war machine” inheriting its aims from fascism and now dominating all States.

The Fascists were only child precursors, and the absolute peace of survival succeeded where total war had failed. The Third World War was already upon us. The war machine reigned over the entire axiomatic like the power of the continuum that surrounded the “world -economy,” and it put all the parts of the universe in contact. The world became a smooth space again (sea, air, atmosphere), over which reigned a single war machine, even when it opposed its own parts. Wars had become a part of peace. More than that, the States no longer appropriated the war machine; they reconstituted a war machine of which they themselves were only the parts. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 467)

To support this fantastic claim, Deleuze and Guattari cited one of the worst essayists of the period, Paul Virilio (1932-2018), who spent his entire career predicting a “total collapse,” a “general accident,” or an “approaching end of humanity,” without ever applying his theory to his own philosophical collapse or to the fast approaching end of his kind of apocalyptic thought. Even if we did not notice it, peace was not, he claimed, peaceful any longer. It was “organized insecurity or molecularized, distributed, programmed catastrophe,” a kind of renewed fascism in molecular form. Forty years have passed now during which the definitive collapse of humanity has not happened and very few have regretted enjoying such a lousy peace, while many human beings would certainly have preferred it to the many real wars in which they have been drawn during this period.

It is to Paul Virilio’s credit to have emphasized these five rigorous points: that the war machine finds its new object in the absolute peace of terror or deterrence; that it performs a technoscientific “capitalization”; that this war machine is terrifying not as a function of a possible war that it promises us, as by blackmail, but, on the contrary, as a function of the real, very special kind of peace it promotes and has already installed; that this war machine no longer needs a qualified enemy but, in conformity with the requirements of an axiomatic, operates against the “unspecified enemy,” domestic or foreign (an individual, group, class, people, event, world); that there arose from this a new conception of security as materialized war, as organized insecurity or molecularized, distributed, programmed catastrophe. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 467)

Fortunately, Deleuze and Guattari did not stop at such absurdities. They also subtly noticed the beginning of international and social transformations that were to become central in the following period.

First, they were clearly aware of the great shift from “the West-East axis” to a “North-South, center-periphery axis” that became fundamental in the 1990s especially after the collapse of the USSR (p. 468).

They also perceived the beginning of the huge movement whereby capitalism tried to evade the

rules of the Northern welfare state by relocating industries in the developing South. They suggested quite convincingly that this movement was the continuation and amplification of the age-old dialectic trend by which the center, be it an archaic empire or a central axiomatic, always stimulates flows that “tend to escape to the periphery” and destabilize it.

The more the archaic empire overcoded the flows, the more it stimulated decoded flows that turned back against it and forced it to change. The more the decoded flows enter into a central axiomatic, the more they tend to escape to the periphery, to present problems that the axiomatic is incapable of resolving or controlling (even by adding special axioms for the periphery). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 468)

They noted that the center reserved for itself “the so-called postindustrial activities (automation, electronics, information technologies, the conquest of space, overarmament, etc.)” while a large part of the Northern population was “abandoned to erratic work (subcontracting, temporary work, or work in the underground economy), and their official subsistence [...] assured only by State allocations and wages subject to interruption.”

The more the worldwide axiomatic installs high industry and highly industrialized agriculture at the periphery, provisionally reserving for the center so-called postindustrial activities (automation, electronics, information technologies, the conquest of space, overarmament, etc.), the more it installs peripheral zones of underdevelopment inside the center, internal Third Worlds, internal Souths. “Masses” of the population are abandoned to erratic work (subcontracting, temporary work, or work in the underground economy), and their official subsistence is assured only by State allocations and wages subject to interruption. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 469)

They detected the rise of the social problems in the Northern countries in which pockets of “Third World” tended to develop due to the relocation of industries in the developing countries of the South and the general “decoding” of the North.

The States of the center deal not only with the Third World, each of them has not only an external Third World, but there are internal Third Worlds that rise up within them and work them from the inside. It could even be said in certain respects that the periphery and the center exchange determinations: a deterritorialization of the center, a decoding of the center in relation to national and territorial aggregates, cause the peripheral formations to become true centers of investment, while the central formations peripheralize. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 468)

Finally, they realized that the “classical subjection” of the worker was being replaced, at least in the North, by a new “machinic enslavement” composed, on the one hand, of “intensive surplus labor” and, on the other hand, of an “extensive labor that has become erratic and floating.” Forty years later, we now see how true and premonitory this vision was.

These phenomena confirm the difference between the new machinic enslavement and classical subjection. For subjection remained centered on labor and involved a bipolar organization, property-labor, bourgeoisie-proletariat. In enslavement and the central dominance of constant capital, on the other hand, labor seems to have splintered in two directions: intensive surplus labor that no longer even takes the route of labor, and extensive labor that has become erratic and floating. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 469)

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