

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Being - part 3

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Living Individuals as Machines Endowed With Changing Territorialities

Let us turn now to the problem of individuation, which we remember had been addressed by Morin through the concept of machine. For Deleuze and Guattari, any existing concrete system appeared, from the ontological viewpoint, as a “machinic assemblage” of “intensive processes” that had to deal, on one side, with the actual strata and layers within which it had appeared and, on a second side, with the solicitations coming from the virtual “plane of consistency” or “body without organs” to which it remained connected. No existing body was fixed, everything that appeared to be steady was participating in contrary processes of expression and involvement, as well as stratification and de-stratification, that could never end. This was, we noticed, Deleuze and Guattari’s way to reinterpret the old *rhuthmic* Heraclitean motive: *panta rhei*

But this picture was, so to speak, taken from above, that is, from the general viewpoint of the stratification of the world between *virtual* and *actual*. A closer view was needed that would present it, this time, from the perspective of the *existing* systems themselves. This is why Deleuze and Guattari here developed a complementary concept that was meant to change focus.

They called “territoriality” the sphere of *existence* of “machinic assemblages” of “intensive processes” caught between *actual* strata and *virtual* plane of consistency. In this instance, “territoriality” was meant in a much larger sense than the ethological sense, which denotes the behavior of an animal belonging to a particular species to defend a certain area against conspecifics, and to which it is often abusively reduced by commentators who do not pay enough attention to the fact that Deleuze and Guattari used, in this instance unlike in Chapter 11, the term “territoriality” and not that of “territory.” It denoted the entire span in the limit of which a particular living system was extending its action, certainly into physical space, but also socially, and even, for human beings, artistically, philosophically, etc.

Observed first as population (then as individuals), existing living systems were thus the subjects of dynamics of encoding as well as decoding resulting from the interaction, that explained their forms, between the parastrata (the annexed or associated strata enveloping the code) and the genetic drift.

But observed for themselves (then as population), each of them occupied a “territoriality” in the “epistrata,” that is, a sphere of existence or action in the intermediary layers disposed around the evanescent and mobile core of the strata. This sphere of existence or action was naturally subjected, for its part, to “movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization,” comparable to loss and reconstitution of integration, which were, once again, going back and forth between the center and the periphery as “nomadic waves or flows.”

In short, “codes,” with their varying encoding and decoding dynamics, only determined forms, structures, or organization of living bodies, and that not without allowing the emergence of new forms. “Territories,” with their particular changing composition and limits, provided them with a specific sphere in which they lived, a kind of ecological niche enlarged into an ontological one.

Forms relate to codes and processes of coding and decoding in the parastrata; substances, being formed matters, relate to territorialities and movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization on the epistrata. In truth, the epistrata are just as inseparable from the movements that constitute them as the parastrata are from their processes. Nomadic waves or flows of deterritorialization go from the central layer to the periphery, then from the new center to the new periphery, falling back to the old center and launching forth to the new. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 53, same idea p. 41)

Considering now the relations between the “machinic assemblage,” its “territoriality,” and the “exterior milieu,” Deleuze and Guattari noticed that the richer the interior milieu of an organism, the *freer* its relations with the exterior (the stronger its deterritorialization), but also, conversely, that the more deterritorialized a body in its relation to the exterior, the *more intense* its interior organization (the stronger its reterritorialization).

The more interior milieu an organism has, assuring its autonomy and bringing it into a set of aleatory relations with the exterior, the more deterritorialized it is [on its own stratum]. [...] An organism that is deterritorialized in relation to the exterior necessarily reterritorializes on its interior milieu. A given presumed fragment of embryo is deterritorialized when it changes thresholds or gradients, but is assigned a new role by the new surroundings. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 53-54, my mod.)

In other words, contrary to appearances, deterritorialization was “a perfectly positive power” which could result from the intensification of the internal sphere, as well as lead to a reterritorialization and an increase in internal integration.

Deterritorialization must be thought of as a perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (epistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 54)

In addition, deterritorialization was most often accompanied by “lines of flight” that allowed the

living being either “to regain its associated milieu when danger appear[ed]” in a milieu it was not familiar with, or “to lean on its interior milieus” in order to abandon its associated milieu if it was strongly affected or even destroyed, and find a new “territoriality” to live in, just as the primitive Fish, when the seas dried, “left its associated milieu to explore land” (p. 55).

Naturally, considering the metaphysical difference between *virtual* and *actual* that remained at the bottom of any phenomenon, one should differentiate between “relative” and “absolute deterritorialization, absolute line of flight, absolute drift” (p. 55).

In fact, what is primary is an absolute deterritorialization an absolute line of flight, however complex or multiple—that of the plane of consistency or body without organs (the Earth, the absolutely deterritorialized). This absolute deterritorialization becomes relative only after stratification occurs on that plane or body: It is the strata that are always residue, not the opposite. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 56)

“Relative deterritorialization” was limited because it happened within the actual stratified frame, the “*Ecumenon*,” while the “absolute deterritorialization” presented “the possibility” of a complete deterritorialization into the “*Planomenon*,” a term based on the previous one that was intended to remember the reader that there was always active, under the most consistent reality, a differential dynamics. Consequently, the “abstract machine,” which denoted the specificity of a certain strata, “(the abstract Animal, the abstract chemical Body, Energy in itself),” and which regulated in it the “relative deterritorialization” of the concrete machines, that is, the machinic assemblages or, more simply put, the living individuals, this abstract machine most often “remained prisoner to stratifications.” But, in case of absolute deterritorialization, there were possibilities of crossing the limits between strata, that is “piloting flows” in “the natural” as well as in “the artificial” and tracing a “diagram” on the plane of consistency itself. Yet, they did not explain here what they meant by “diagram.”

We may even say that the abstract machines that emit and combine particles have two very different modes of existence: the *Ecumenon* and the *Planomenon*. Either the abstract machines remain prisoner to stratifications, are enveloped in a certain specific stratum whose program or unity of composition they define (the abstract Animal, the abstract chemical Body, Energy in itself) and whose movements of relative deterritorialization they regulate, Or, on the contrary, the abstract machine cuts across all stratifications, develops alone and in its own right on the plane of consistency whose diagram it constitutes, the same machine at work in astrophysics and in microphysics, in the natural and in the artificial, piloting flows of absolute deterritorialization (in no sense, of course, is unformed matter chaos of any kind). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 56)

Most of the time, machinic assemblages remained within a certain stratum but there were cases in which they developed “cutting edges of deterritorialization oriented toward the absolute” (p. 57), for example the famous “becoming-animal” of human, or “becoming-woman” of man that was to be elaborated later in the book.

Once again, we may compare these views with Morin's. First, Deleuze and Guattari shared with him the concept of "machine," which, we remember, had been introduced in order to improve the common concepts of organism and system. Provided that the term was not meant any longer in the mechanical sense it had received in the 17th century theory of animal-machine, nor in the more recent cybernetic sense indexed on computers, but as in the latest biological theory, Morin pointed out, every physical or living being, "whose activity included work, transformation, and production," could be conceived "as a machine." Strikingly, the term "machine" would then denote, he suggested, a "complex sets or arrangements" combining "creation and production."

There was a difference, though, concerning the concept of individuation itself. Deleuze and Guattari looked at the individual either from the perspective of the flow of genetic codes in a certain population, or that of the fleeting territoriality or ontological niche in which it lived in relation with other individuals and other populations. Both perspective relied on giving primacy to multiplicity and becoming upon identity and constancy. Machinic assemblages had no united and persistent self. Instead, Morin, who in this instance remained more faithful to Spinoza and Leibniz than Deleuze and Guattari did, concentrated first on what he called the "self" [*le soi*] of the individual—which was nothing but a modern version of the essence of the "mode" or the "monad." He did not take into account the populations to which it belonged and among which it lived. Apart from the artificial ones, for him, machines were endowed with auto-generativity, in other words, with a way to produce, organize, reorganize, maintain, and even develop, at least for a certain period of time, their "self." Physical as well as living beings were machines producing "a certain form of equilibrium, a certain form of stability, a certain form of constancy," through a "recursive loop" integrating multiple and diverse loops (circulation of energy, food, air, hormones, food, nervous impulses, etc.). For living beings, this state was what Walter Bradford Cannon had named in 1926 "homeostasis."

Yet—and here he got closer again to Deleuze and Guattari—at each cycle some innovation could occur, therefore the final state of each loop was not simply the return to the initial state; each time, a slight difference was introduced. The machine had the capacity to regenerate itself, to constantly reorganize itself, and to fight against entropy. In short, every machine tended to a "stationary, constant, regulated, homeostatic" state which, paradoxically, was "not stable" and which was driven by an inner self-reproductive power, its particular "*poiesis*" power inscribed in "the play of solidarities and antagonisms."

Moreover, Morin was not indifferent to the "ecological" aspect of individuation. No individual was completely independent from its milieu. Most machines, particularly living beings, were "open systems" involving matter/energy exchanges with the outside. They could "never stop being open, nowhere escape flux." The existence of these machines, Morin emphasized, was caught "in an extreme ecological dependence and in a generalized opening." Therefore, in addition to the internal *poiesis* power implemented through internal loops, the persistence of the self depended as well from a regulation of the exchanges with the outside, which were performed through creative looping that involved both the internal functioning of the machine and that of its environment. Thus, while Deleuze and Guattari defined living individuals as "machinic assemblages" endowed with fleeting "territorialities" delimited by their "activity," Morin described them as "complex sets or arrangements" developing a "praxis" or a "set of activities which effect transformations, productions, performances" involving both interior and exterior, and which ensured its persistence.

As we see, the two views were very close, the main difference being Morin's emphasis on a persistent self and Deleuze and Guattari's clear rejection of any principle of identity through time.

This becomes obvious when one looks at the dynamics involved. While the latter concentrated on “territorialization” and “deterritorialization” movements for themselves, the former considered “disorganization” and “reorganization” only as much as they ensured the production-of-self in an environment that was both nourishing and destructive. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari insisted on the “ethical-political” dimension of “machinic assemblages,” their interior *intensity*, the *freedom* they could enjoy in respect of the exterior, and their unexpected *possibilities of escape*, while Morin reactualized the “existential” and Lucretian concept of *equilibrium by disequilibrium*: how a living being could continue being itself despite its own interior dynamic nature and the challenges and environmental changes it necessarily encounters during its life? Contrary to Morin whose perspective remained essentially descriptive and probably due to their Nietzschean perspective, they did not hesitate to introduce the issue of will to power into biology. Finally, while Deleuze and Guattari imagined the possibility of crossing the various strata, through “absolute deterritorialization movements,” such as “becoming-animal” of humans or “becoming-woman” of men, Morin stayed attached to a more traditional concept of identity.

The System of the Strata

Based on the theory of evolution and the theory of individuation presented above, Deleuze and Guattari then described what they called the “system of strata,” that is to say a purely materialist vision of cosmic history which shared a few points with that of Morin but which, overall, diverged from it.

First they reiterated their opposition to Teilhard de Chardin which they shared with Morin. As already mentioned before, there had been no progress in the history of the cosmos and the successive constitution of the strata. It could not be said that one strata was “less organized than another.” The different figures of content and expression were “not stages” or “ascended degrees of perfection” (p. 69).

It is difficult to elucidate the system of the strata without seeming to introduce a kind of cosmic or even spiritual evolution from one to the other, as if they were arranged in stages and ascended degrees of perfection. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 69)

However, in order to challenge this spiritual view, Deleuze and Guattari emphasized the “mechanical” aspect of all of cosmic history, an argument that ran counter to Morin’s perspective on an increasing complexity of the world. There was “no biosphere or noosphere,” they contended, “but everywhere the same Mechanosphere” (p. 69). The formation of the different strata only implied successive changes in the double articulation of expression and content, which were the only “real” categories.

For if it is true that there is always a real distinction constitutive of double articulation, a reciprocal presupposition of content and expression, then what varies from one stratum to another is the nature of this real distinction, and the nature and respective positions of the terms distinguished. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 57)

In the physical and chemical strata, content was molecular and expression molar. The passage from

molecular content (with its form and substance) to molar expression (with its own form and substance) was brought about by “resonance between two independent orders” or mere translation of the molecular organization into the macrophysical level. The crystal, for instance, was “the macroscopic expression of a microscopic structure”; the crystalline form expressed “certain atomic or molecular characteristics of the constituent chemical categories” (p. 57).

The molecular content of that system has its own form corresponding to the distribution of elemental masses and the action of one molecule upon another; similarly, expression has a form manifesting the statistical aggregate and state of equilibrium existing on the macroscopic level. Expression is like an “operation of amplifying structuration carrying the active properties of the originally microphysical discontinuity to the macrophysical level.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 57 - no ref. provided for the quote)

Due to its particular form of expression, the physical-chemical stratum could generate parastrata (beyond its limits) and epistrata (inside of its limits) only by a process of “*induction*” limited to “the its exterior surface.” A crystal displayed this process in its pure state, since its form expanded in all directions, but always “as a function of the surface layer of the substance.” This explained, Deleuze and Guattari assessed, why this kind of structure was “incapable of formally reproducing and expressing itself.” Its “index of territoriality” was much too high and its “deterritorializable part” much too limited.

It is the crystal’s subjugation to three-dimensionality, in other words its index of territoriality, that makes the structure incapable of formally reproducing and expressing itself; only the accessible surface can reproduce itself, since it is the only deterritorializable part. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 60)

By contrast, in the organic stratum, the very nature of the distinction between expression and content changed. Whereas expression was only manifesting the “molecular content in all directions and in every dimension” (around the seed in a crystal), it became “independent in its own right” by creating “lines” of development based on nucleic sequences (in the wake of the DNA in a living cell).

In a preceding discussion, expression was dependent upon the expressed molecular content in all directions and in every dimension and had independence only to the extent that it appealed to a higher order of magnitude and to exterior forces [...]. *Now, however, expression becomes independent in its own right, in other words, autonomous.* Before, the coding of a stratum was coextensive with that stratum; on the organic stratum, on the other hand, it takes place on an autonomous and independent line that detaches as much as possible from the second and third dimensions. Expression ceases to be voluminous or superficial, becoming linear, unidimensional (even in its segmentarity). The essential thing is *the linearity of the nucleic sequence.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 59)

The emergence of life involved a drastic reduction of expression from a spheric to a linear form, simultaneously with a noticeably increased independence from the molecular content.

In short, what is specific to the organic stratum is *this alignment of expression, this exhaustion or detachment of a line of expression*, this reduction of form and substance of expression to a unidimensional line, guaranteeing their reciprocal independence from content without having to account for orders of magnitude. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 59)

By contrast with the previous stratum, the organic stratum allowed “the detachment of a pure line of expression,” which made it possible for the organism to attain “a much higher threshold of deterritorialization.” This new form of expression gave it “a mechanism of reproduction covering all the details of its complex spatial structure,” and enabled it “to put all of its interior layers ‘topologically in contact’ with the exterior” through the living membrane (p. 60). Therefore, the development of the stratum into epistrata and parastrata occurred not through a simple process of “induction” but through multiple processes of “*transduction*,” that accounted, according to Deleuze and Guattari,

for the amplification of the resonance between the molecular and the molar, independently of order of magnitude; for the functional efficacy of the interior substances, independently of distance; and for the possibility of a proliferation and even interlacing of forms, independently of codes (surplus values of code or phenomena of trans-coding or aparallel evolution). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 60)

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