

**“The Noumena of History”:  
On the Status of Nomads Deleuze's Thought<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

The “Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine,” which appears as one of the final chapters (or plateaus) of *A Thousand Plateaus*, is one of the greatest chapters in Deleuze and Guattari’s joint work.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it is an extraordinary text in the history of political philosophy, one whose implications have yet to be fully mined—or even partially mined, for that matter.

The question posed in this paper explores only one aspect of the “Treatise on Nomadology”: What does Deleuze mean when he calls nomads “the noumena of history”? The term “noumena” refers, of course, to Kant, who contrasts noumena with phenomena. The term *phenomena* refers to that which appears in experience, whereas the term *noumena* refers to that which can be thought. The noumenal encompasses a far larger domain than the phenomenal. I can think the Idea of the World or Universe, or “the totality of what is,” for instance, even though the universe can never appear to me as a phenomenon. This is why Kant will say, famously, that the Idea of the World is a transcendent illusion: I can *think* it (as a noumenon), but I can never *know* it (as a phenomenon).

Deleuze is in effect assigning the same status to the Idea of a nomadology: it is a noumenon that can be thought, even though it does not appear as a phenomenon in history. Jacques Derrida would find a similar transcendental logic in his analysis of concepts such as the gift, hospitality, and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature (IAPL), 30 June-6 July 2008, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, on a panel entitled “Immanence as Landscape: Place, Expression, and Nomadic Philosophy, organized by Janell Watson and Felicity Colman, 3 July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 351-473.

forgiveness: their condition of possibility, as Derrida constantly says, is their very impossibility. Derrida and Deleuze do not develop the same transcendental logic, but it is revealing that both philosophers were appropriating and reworking Kant's Transcendental Dialectic and his theory of Ideas at roughly the same time. Why then does Deleuze essentially assign to the entirety of the *Nomadology* a status as a noumenal Idea (something that can be thought but which never actually appears—or at least rarely appears)?

## 2. The Genesis of the Nomadology Plateau

To answer this question, we need to first look at the genesis of the *Nomadology* within Deleuze and Guattari's work. In the recently published *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, which collects together the texts that Guattari submitted for the *Anti-Oedipus* project (texts which Deleuze substantially rewrote for the final version), there is a revealing journal entry from September 1972 in which Guattari writes, "Gilles is working like a madman on his nomads."<sup>3</sup> This note is revealing for two reasons.

First, it indicates that the plateau on the *Nomadology* was primarily the work of Deleuze. (Some scholars would say it is illegitimate to attempt to separate out Deleuze and Guattari's respective contributions to their jointly written work, but I do not agree this viewpoint. In their interviews, Deleuze and Guattari are themselves constantly pointing out who contributed what to their work, who came up with an idea first, and so on. At the same time, they admitted that they each understood the final formulation of a concept differently—for instance, they each seemed to have had completely different conceptions of the concept of the "body without organs." In other words, legitimate speculation on the genesis of a given concept does not necessarily clarify how the concept works.)

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<sup>3</sup> Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, ed. Stéphane Nadaud, trans. Kelina Gotman (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 397, where Guattari notes, in September 1972, that "Gilles is working like a madman on his nomads." For a parallel text, see J. M. G. LeClezio, "The Barbarian Dream," *The Mexican Dream; or, The Interrupted Thought of Amerindian Civilizations* [1988], trans. Tereas Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 117-160.

Second, and more importantly, it reveals that Deleuze was aware of the inadequacies of *Anti-Oedipus* even before it was published in March of 1972.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it now appears that the manuscript of *Anti-Oedipus* was barely in the hands of the editor (presumably Jerome Lindon) at Minuit, Deleuze's publisher than Deleuze was already at work on the *Nomadology* chapter, which was clearly meant to compensate for these inadequacies. So here's a first question: What were the inadequacies of the position developed in *Anti-Oedipus*?

The answer to the question, according to Deleuze himself, is oriented around the question of political *organization*. The first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* developed a non-historicized vision of universal history based on a typology of three basic social formations—primitive societies, States, and capitalism—all three of which enter into variations of coexistence and becoming. But the thesis that Deleuze proposes in the *Nomadology* is a radical one: the war-machine constitutes a separate social formation that is not only *distinct* from the State, but is in principle *external* to the State, even if it has historically tended to be appropriated by the State in the form of an army or a military institution. This is a fundamental inversion of traditional political philosophy, which usually asked the question: What is the best form or organization of the State? Is it democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, and so on?

Deleuze is asking the opposite question: Is there a type of social formation that is constituted in *opposition* to the State, but nonetheless has a positivity all its own, and is not simply an appeal to a state of nature *à la* Rousseau or a kind of revolutionary spontaneity. In effect, Deleuze is asking a question here that has rarely been asked in political philosophy. The question is not: What constitutes the best state (a traditional question of political philosophy), but rather: What social organization lies *outside* the state and is in its very nature *opposed* to the State. The “outside” of states cannot be reduced to “foreign policy,” that is, to relations among states themselves.

In his seminar of 7 March 1972—just as *Anti-Oedipus* was appearing in bookstores—Deleuze noted that *Anti-Oedipus* had bequeathed to its authors a new problem, which he formulated in the

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<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

following manner: “The problem one always comes up against is how to ensure that the movements of decoding, the movements of deterritorialization, are revolutionarily positive, but at the same time that they do not recreate artificial forms like perversion or the family, that is, that they do not create in their own way types of codes and territorialities.”<sup>5</sup>

Deleuze expanded on this problematic in an improvised discussion in Italy in 1973, following a talk he gave that was entitled “Five Propositions on Psychoanalysis”:<sup>6</sup>

Our problem (we are not completely stupid, we are not saying that this would be sufficient for a revolution) is as follows: given a system [namely, capitalism] that escapes in every direction and that, at the same time, continually prevents, represses, or blocks escape routes by every available means, what can we do so that the escapes may no longer be individual attempts or small communities, but instead truly constitute a revolutionary machine? And [this is a second issue] for what reason have revolutions gone badly? There is no revolution without a central, centralizing war-machine. You can’t brawl, and you don’t fight with your fists: there must be a war-machine that organizes and unites. But until now, there hasn’t existed in the revolutionary field a machine that didn’t reproduce something else: a state apparatus, the very institution of repression. Hence the problem of revolution: How can a war machine account for all the escapes that happen in the present system without crushing them, dismantling them, and without reproducing a state apparatus?....

Today, we’re looking for *the new mode of unification* [a revealing phrase: the war-machine is meant to be a “mode of unification”] in which, for example, the schizophrenic discourse, the intoxicated discourse, the perverted discourse, the homosexual discourse, all the marginal discourses can subsist, so that all these escapes and discourses can graft themselves onto a

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, Seminar of 7 March 1972. Deleuze’s seminars are available in French and English at “The Deleuze Seminars” project, [deleuze.cl.purdue.edu](http://deleuze.cl.purdue.edu).

<sup>6</sup> “Five Propositions on Psychoanalysis,” in Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands: and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 274-280.

war-machine that won't reproduce a State or Party apparatus. For that very reason, we no longer want to talk about schizoanalysis [as in *Anti-Oedipus*], because that would amount to protecting a particular type of escape, schizophrenic escape. What interests us is a sort of link that leads us back to the direct political problem, and the direct political problem for us is more or less this: until now, revolutionary parties have constituted themselves as *synthesizers of interests* rather than functioning as *analyzers of mass and individual desires*. Or else, what amounts to the same thing: revolutionary parties have constituted themselves as embryonic State apparatuses, instead of forming war-machines irreducible to such apparatuses.<sup>7</sup>

Deleuze here identifies two problems. First, what would be the conditions of a “revolutionary machine” that is irreducible to a State apparatus, and yet is collective and unified, and not merely individual or subjective? (The solution to this would be very different from Badiou's: subjective fidelity to an event is not enough). Second: Why do such revolutionary machines turn out so badly? In other words, what is it about the conditions of the revolutionary nomadic war machine that make it tend to destroy itself, that is, to follow a line of flight that either turns into a line of abolition or else allows itself to be appropriated by the State? (Deleuze and Guattari were writing in the aftermath of the events of May '68, when the movement of the students and workers quickly led to an even stronger restoration of the State, with its law and order.)

“The question of revolution,” Deleuze would later write in *Dialogues*, “has never been utopian spontaneity versus State organization. When we challenge the model of the State apparatus or the party organization which is modeled on the conquest of that apparatus, we do not, however, fall into the grotesque alternatives: either that of appealing to a state of nature, to a spontaneous dynamic, or that of becoming the self-styled lucid thinker of an impossible revolution, the very impossibility of which becomes a source of pleasure. The question has always been *organizational*, not

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<sup>7</sup> Discussion following “Five Propositions on Psychoanalysis,” in *Desert Islands*, 279-280, emphases added.

at all ideological: is an organization possible that is not modeled on the apparatus of the State, even to prefigure the State to come?”<sup>8</sup>

This then is the great innovation of *A Thousand Plateaus*: to have constructed the concept of the nomadic war machine as a separate type of social formation that cannot be reduced either to State armies or the ritualized warfare of primitive societies. One can find precursors to this thesis in Deleuze’s earlier works, notably in *Difference and Repetition*, where Deleuze had distinguished between two types of ontological distribution (the manner in which Being is distributed among beings): a sedentary distribution and a nomadic distribution.<sup>9</sup> Sedentary distribution finds its primarily social actualization in the State, with its mechanisms of overcoding, capture, integration, striation, and hierarchization; nomadic distribution finds its actualization in the war machine. *Anti-Oedipus* had already recognized that primitive societies had certain mechanisms that tended to ward off the formation of a State apparatus, including the mechanism of war. If Deleuze and Guattari felt the need to add the war machine to the typology of social formations developed in *Anti-Oedipus*, however, it was out of a recognition that war is not simply an aspect of primitive societies that tends to prevent the centralization of power in a State apparatus. The thesis of *A Thousand Plateaus* is much stronger: the war machine is itself a mode of a fully developed social formation that constitutes the “outside” of the State, and that initially found its concrete actualization in nomadism.

The phrase “nomadic war machine” is somewhat unfortunate, however, since it is a type of social formation that has no *necessary* relation to either nomads or war. It is a pure Idea—and this is my primary point—defined positively by a specific set of components that are spatio-geographic, organizational, and affective. It has a purely *external* relation to war and a historically *contingent* relation

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 145. The problem of the war machine had thus been posed but not resolved in *Anti-Oedipus*. One can indeed find references to the war-machine in *Anti-Oedipus*, but only in passing, and only insofar as it was already appropriated by the State apparatus. See, for instance, the reference to the religious-military organization of Moses in *Anti-Oedipus* (193), as an instance of a State-form, which is taken up again in *A Thousand Plateaus* (417), under the rubric of the war machine. *Anti-Oedipus* also contains a discussion of the nomadic hunter, who follows the flows (148).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 36-37, 309n6.

to nomads. For this reason, Paul Patton has suggested that nomadic war machines might simply be called *metamorphosis machines* since, as Deleuze insists, “the war-machine’s form of exteriority is such that it exists only in its own metamorphoses.”<sup>10</sup> The war machine is a social assemblage that is constructed directly on a line of flight, that is, on relations of exteriority. It is itself a movement of decoding, of deterritorialization, which is why it tends to disappear and abolish itself, or be appropriated by the State.

Finally, it seems likely that Deleuze and Guattari were attempting to identify the kind of social formation that would correspond to “activity” and “affirmation” in the Nietzschean sense. In Nietzschean terms, the State is a *reactive* formation, whereas the nomadic war-machine is an *active* formation, it is the collective formation that corresponds to the status of the Overman and is capable of following the movement and metamorphoses of a line of flight.

### 3. Two Components of the War Machine

I turn now to a second question: If the nomadic war machine cannot be defined by either nomads or war, how then does Deleuze define it? The “Treatise on Nomadology” defines the concept of the war machine primarily in terms of four component elements: (1) a geometrical or spatio-geographic element (smooth space, as opposed the striated space of the State), (2) an arithmetic or algebraic element (number or numerical organization, as opposed to the State’s apparatus of capture), (3) an epistemological element (a hydraulic versus a hylomorphic model of science, or a problematic versus axiomatic model of mathematics), and (4) an affective or technological element (weapons versus tools, which why Deleuze analyzes the importance of metallurgy for nomads). I will briefly concentrate on the first two of these elements, since they are, for our purposes, the determining aspects of the *exterior* nature of the war machine in relation to the State, and its status as a noumenal Idea (though I do not want to underestimate the importance of the other two components).

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 360. See Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000), 100.

1. *First Component (Geometrical): Smooth Space.* The first component is geometrical—the famous notion of “smooth space.” The war machine can be distinguished from the State-form by the manner in which it occupies space-time: one of the fundamental tasks of the State is to *striate* the space over which it reigns, whereas the war machine can be defined by the way in which it creates and occupies a *smooth* space. (Deleuze and Guattari devote an entire chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, entitled “The Smooth and the Striated,” to an analysis of the role these two concepts play in various modern disciplines—technology, music, mathematics, physics, art).<sup>11</sup> The striated space of the State is marked by walls, partitions, enclosures, roads between enclosures, and so forth, which constitute so many processes of capture by which the State controls numerous types of flows: the flow of populations, the flows of commodities or commerce, the flows of money or capital. Paul Virilio has argued that the primary problem of the State—of its “police”—is the management of the public ways, the control of speed, the regulation of the circulation of people, animals, and goods. “The gates of the city, its levies and duties, are barriers, filters against the fluidity of the masses, against the penetration of power by migratory packs.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, if Deleuze and Guattari argue that Karl Wittfogel’s general thesis on the importance of large-scale waterworks for an empire remains valid, it is because the State needs to subordinate hydraulic force to conduits, pipes, and embankments, which prevent turbulence and constrain movement to go from one point to another, subordinating the turbulence of fluids to solid grids.<sup>13</sup>

In smooth space, on the contrary, one distributes oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one’s crossings. The nomad occupies a smooth space (desert, steppe, ice) in which people and animals are distributed in an open space that is indefinite and non-communicating, as opposed to sedentary space, which parcels out a closed space, assigning each person a share (property, pasture), and regulating the communication between these shares. The early

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, plateau 14, “1440: The Smooth and the Striated,” 474-500.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), 12-13. See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 386.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957). See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 363.



Greeks saw an alternative between the city or *polis*, which was ruled by laws, and the outskirts as the place of the *nomos*—the backcountry, the mountainside, the vague expanse around a city, where animals were distributed without parceling up the space itself.<sup>14</sup> To fill up a space, to distribute things in a non-delimited and unpartitioned space, is very different operation from parceling out space itself.

This is why Deleuze argues that it is false to define the nomad by movement. Toynbee was correct to say that *nomads are those who do not move*, who cling to a smooth space upon which they remain immobile.<sup>15</sup> What does he mean by this seemingly anti-intuitive claim? In his *Study of History*, Toynbee had argued that, in response to the problem of the desiccation of the steppes (the encroaching of the desert) after the last Ice Age, a bifurcation was produced in history: the inhabitants could either *migrate*, following their prey as they shifted with the climactic alterations, which led to the Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations; or else they could remain in the steppes as *nomads*, but fundamentally alter their mode of existence. If migrants “change their habitat so as not to change their habits,” one might say that the nomads fundamentally *changed their habits so as not to change their habitat*. Whereas the Egyptians and Sumerians responded via the domestication of plants (agriculture), the nomads responded via the domestication of animals (stock-breeders and shepherds).<sup>16</sup> The nomad attached itself, not to the land, but rather to other animals, such as the horse or the camel. In Deleuze’s terminology, the nomad entered into a *becoming-animal*. “The essence of the achievement,” Toynbee writes, “is the mastery, by a human being, of some non-human animal’s prowess.” The nomads were those who would rather risk death than move.

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<sup>14</sup> Deleuze draws on Emmanuel Laroche, *Histoire de la racine “nem” en grec ancien* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1949). See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 557n51.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 132 ff. See *Dialogues*, 37-38, and *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381. For a penetrating (and definitive) analysis of Deleuze’s use of Toynbee on this question, see Christian Kerslake’s recent, “Becoming against History: Deleuze, Toynbee and Vitalist Historiography,” *Parrhesia*, 4, 2008, 17-48.

<sup>16</sup> Jared Diamond famously called the adoption of agriculture “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” in *Discover* (May 1987), 64-66, since it restricted the diet (hunter gatherers had a much more diverse diet), increased the risk of starvation if crops failed, and led to the spread of parasites and infectious diseases (since the development of agriculture ran parallel to more crowded conditions), and tended to encourage class divisions (between workers and elites)..

2. *Second Component (Arithmetic): The Numbering Number.* The second component of the concept of the war machine is the arithmetic component of number, which unfortunately has received far less discussion than the geometric component of smooth space. The war machine not only implies the constitution of a smooth space, Deleuze argues, but also entails a *numerical organization of people?* This numerical organization must be distinguished from the way primitive societies organize people in terms of lineages (clans or tribes), or the way in which archaic States organize people in terms of hierarchies (castes), or capitalism organizes people in terms of classes (proletariat and capitalist).

This is a difficult topic and a provocative claim, for there is an understandable tendency to criticize numerical organization, denouncing it as a military or even concentration camp principle in which people are treated as mere “numbers.” But as Deleuze writes, “treating people like numbers is not necessarily worse than treating people like trees to prune or geometrical figures to shape and model.”<sup>17</sup> When the State appropriates the war machine, it necessarily appropriates this rather peculiar principle of numerical organization, dividing its army into decimal groupings of tens, hundreds, and thousands (units, battalions, platoons, companies, divisions). What is at issue for Deleuze is the *specificity* of the numerical organization of people: Why is it connected to the nomadic mode of existence and the war machine function? And how is it distinct from both lineal codes and State overcoding?

If the specificity of numerical organization is difficult to isolate, it is because arithmetic (number) has always played a decisive role in the State apparatus. Number is the means through which the State is able to striate space, to calculate, control, and measure space. In the State, number was applied to primary matter or raw materials, to the secondary matter of produced commodities, and perhaps most importantly, to the ultimate matter of the human population. (This is the origin of what Michel Foucault termed “bio-politics,” that is, the social calculus at the basis of political economy, demography, and the organization of work, which is often based on *statistical* analysis.) In

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 390.

the State, number “has always served to gain mastery over matter, to control its variations and movements, in other words, to submit them to the spatiotemporal framework of the State.”<sup>18</sup>

What happens in the nomadic system, by contrast, is that the numerical principle assumes an *autonomy* of its own: rather than utilizing number as a means of measuring up a divided up space, number now takes on an independence in relation to space, and becomes, as it were, an autonomous subject: *it is number itself that becomes the mobile occupant of a smooth space*, which is occupied by the number without being counted or measured. A nomadic war machine, in short, is an autonomous numerical organization that is distributed and displaced over a smooth space that it occupies without dividing. This numerical principle is that gives the war machine its extraordinary mobility: it is an arithmetized social body that glides across a smooth space, swooping down upon sedentary States like a flash from the outside. It is also what constitutes its particular form of power, and on this score, Deleuze frequently quotes two passages from Nietzsche and Kafka that describe the war machine from the viewpoint of the State. Nietzsche: “They come like fate, without reason, consideration, or pretext; they appear as lightning appears, too terrible, too sudden, too convincing, too ‘different’ even to be hated.” Kafka: “In some way that is incomprehensible they have pushed right into the capital; at any rate, here they are; it seems that every morning there are more of them.... Impossible to converse with them. They don’t know our language.... Even their horses are meat eaters!”<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. The Noumenal Status of the Nomads

This brief discussion of the geometric and arithmetic aspects of the war machine bring us back, finally, to the “noumenal” status of the concept. Why does the nomadic war machine function primarily as a noumenal Idea for Deleuze, rather than a phenomenal reality. On this score, Deleuze poses two question whose responses point to the noumenal status of the nomads.

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 389.

<sup>19</sup> The first quotation is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), Essay II, § 17, 86. The second is from Franz Kafka, “An Old Manuscript,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glazer (New York: Schocken, 1983), 416. Both are cited in Deleuze’s “Nomadic Thought,” in *Desert Islands*, 256.

First: Is war the “object” of the war machine? Deleuze’s first response is: No. If the war machine is the invention of the nomad, it is because the war machine is the constitutive element of smooth space, the occupation of this space, displacement within this space, and the corresponding composition of people within this smooth space (numerical rather than lineal or overcoded). This *nomos* (and not war) is the only positive object of the war machine. Its aim is to make the desert, the steppe, grow, and not to depopulate it. But the second response is: Yes. For if war necessarily results, it is because this war machine, moving across a smooth space, necessarily collides with sedentary States and cities, as forces (of striation) that oppose its positive object (the occupation of a smooth space). It is only at this point that the war machine becomes war, takes as its enemy the State and the city, and adopts as its objective their annihilation. *War is therefore not the primary or positive object of the war machine, but a second-order, supplementary, synthetic, and negative object.* Or rather, the war machine is as it were the inevitable outgrowth of nomadic organization. The campaigns of Atilla, Genghis Khan, and Moses all illustrate this progressive progression from the positive object to the negative object, which is frequently grasped in a kind of progressive revelation marked by a certain fear and dread, by a hesitation that often proves fatal.

The adventure of the Israelite Exodus presented in the Pentateuch is a paradigmatic example. The Israelites leave the imperial Egyptian State behind and launch into the desert of Sinai, where Moses begins by forming a war machine that does not have war for its object. He then realizes, in stages, that war is the necessary supplement of that machine, because it encounters the cities and States of the “Promised Land.” He must send ahead spies, and finally must take things to extremes—a war of annihilation. Moses and the Jewish people shrink before the revelation of this supplement, fearing that they are not strong enough, so Yahweh destroys this reticent generation (the forty years wandering), and assigns to Joshua the task of waging war. Later, after the conquest, the establishment of a State and a king (Saul) will be seen as a betrayal of this nomadic machine, and a reversion to the type of imperial social formations found in the neighboring empires, including the Egyptian empire they had left behind (I Samuel 8).

Second, this is why the real question is not the question of war, but rather the question of the relations between the war machine and the State apparatus. For just as war is not the object of the war machine, neither is war the positive object of States. Quite the contrary, most archaic States do not seem to have had a war machine, their domination being based on other agencies, such as police or prison. It is likely that one of the reasons for the mysterious annihilation of many States throughout history was the sudden intervention of an extrinsic war machine that counterattacked and destroyed them. What is at issue here is precisely the *coexistence* of these two social formations, which raises specific problems in both directions. “One of the biggest questions from the point of view of universal history is: How will the State *appropriate* the war machine?”<sup>20</sup> For when the State appropriates the war machine in the form of an army, the latter changes its nature and function: the war machine again takes war as its object, but now as its primary and “analytic” object; war then becomes subordinated to the political aims of the State, and is directed not only against other States, but back against the nomads themselves, who are destroyed and forgotten.

Conversely, the nomads faced the question (consider the conquests of Atilla, or Genghis Khan, or Alexander the Great): What to do with the lands that have been crossed and conquered? Return them to the desert, to the steppe, to open pastureland? Or let a State apparatus survive that is capable of exploiting them directly, but at the risk of letting the war machine be appropriated by that apparatus?<sup>21</sup>

In fact, Deleuze argues that the defeat of the nomads was complete, and history is one with the triumph of State. “If there is no history from the point of view of the nomads, to the point where

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<sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 418.

<sup>21</sup> The adventure of Genghis Khan, for Deleuze and Guattari, illustrates each of these problems: first, there was the composition of a war machine on the steppes; second, its contact with external States (the Chinese emperor), and subsequent war; then, there came the famous *Pax Mongoliana*, in which Genghis Khan and his followers were able to sustain the war machine for a long time by partially integrating themselves into the conquered empires, while at the same time maintaining a smooth space on the steppes to which the imperial centers were subordinated; finally, there came Tamerlane, who turned the war machine back against the nomads, but in doing so erected a State apparatus that was heavy and unproductive, since it existed only as the empty form of appropriation of that machine. See René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 417-419; and *A Thousand Plateaus*, 418-419.

they are the ‘noumena’ or unknowables of history, it is because they are inseparable from an enterprise of abolition that made the nomadic empires dissipate themselves, at the same time that the war machine either destroyed itself, or else passed into the service of the State.”<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche had already noted the dissolution that is synthesized with the war-machine: “History shows: the strong races decimate one another: through war, thirst for power, adventurousness; the strong affects: wastefulness—(strength is no longer hoarded, spiritual disturbance arises through excessive tension); their existence is costly; in brief—they ruin one another; periods of profound exhaustion and torpor supervene: all great ages are *paid for*—The strong are subsequently weaker, more devoid of will, more absurd than the weak average.”<sup>23</sup> This is why history tends to dismiss the nomads: history is written from the point of view of the State and tends to be written *as* a succession of States.

What then does it mean to say that the nomads are the “noumena” of history? Perhaps inevitably, Deleuze and Guattari compare their concept of the war machine with that of Karl Clausewitz. Clausewitz’s famous formula, “war is the continuation of politics by other means” is derived from a complex theoretical and practical set of ideas which are closely related to each other: (1) there is a pure concept of war as an absolute, unconditioned war (to eliminate the enemy), an Idea that is never given in experience; (2) what is given in experience are real wars subordinated to State aims, which condition the realization of the pure Idea in experience, and which are better or worse “conductors” in relation to absolute war; (3) real wars therefore oscillate between two poles: the war of annihilation, which tends to approach the unconditioned concept through an ascent to extremes (escalation toward total war), and the limited war, which effects a descent toward limiting conditions (de-escalation toward mere “armed observation”).

Deleuze and Guattari accept Clausewitz’s distinction between absolute war as a pure Idea and real wars but argue that it must be reformulated according to different criteria. The pure Idea, they argue, is not that of the abstract elimination of the adversary, but that of a war machine that does not

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<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), §864, 462-463.

have war as its object but maintains only a supplementary or synthetic relation with war. The nomadic war machine, with its own objects, space (smooth space), and composition (numerical composition), is the content adequate to this pure Idea. But Deleuze and Guattari add, as an immediate consequence of this, that it is therefore the nomads who remain an abstraction (“a pure nomad does not exist”).<sup>24</sup> This is not only because elements of nomadism always enter into de facto mixes with other elements (migration, itinerancy, the State, etc.), which act back upon the war machine from the start. For even in the purity of its concept, the nomad war machine necessarily effectuates its relation with war as a supplement, which is developed in opposition to the State form; but it cannot effectuate this supplementary object without the State, in turn, finding the means the appropriate the war machine, making war its direct object and turning it back against the nomads. Thus the integration of the nomad into the State is a vector traversing nomadism from the start, from the very first act of war against the State. We once again are brought back to the typological aspect of Deleuze and Guattari’s political theory: it is a matter of creating pure concepts of types of social formations (*agencements*) that necessarily enter into various synthetic relations of coexistence and becoming.

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 148.