
Anti-Nomad

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Abstract

This brief text offers a critique of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of nomadism. It is shown that 'nomadism' functions as a compilation of unresolved contradictions, such as those of movement and rest, anarchy and order, numeric abstraction and concrete placement. I argue that, in the last instance, this concept bears allegiance to its etymological provenance from the Greek *nomos* and that it veers on the side of an economy, rather than an ecology, of being.

Keywords: nomadism, Deleuze, Guattari, Schmitt, *nomos*, Anthropocene

They are everywhere, passing through every place, turning every place into a point of passage on the way to nowhere. Thanks to them, the *everywhere* is indistinguishable from a nowhere, uprooted and indifferent. They are the nomads, the glorious figures of resistance to global capitalism, nationalism, parochialism, chauvinism and fascism, who are complicit with and surreptitiously serve the very ideologies they seem to oppose. Especially in the Anthropocene, when there is no more space unmarked by human activities that are imprinted directly onto the planet's geological strata, nomadism no longer points toward exteriority, its lines of flight hitting a dead end. 'Nomadic deterritorialisation' finally appears without any high-theory flourishes as a promise unfulfilled, breathing with disappointment, always already reterritorialised on the permanently striated totality the earth has become.

The conceptual problem with nomadism is that, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, it functions as dumping ground for

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unresolved antinomies – movement and rest, anarchy and order, numeric abstraction and concrete placement – thrown together in the absence of any mediations. Carl Schmitt used the alchemical term *complexio oppositorum*, ‘a complex of opposites’, to refer to the strategy of the Catholic Church that encompassed symbols of masculinity and femininity, leftist quasi-communist sentiments (such as those of Pope Francis) and right-wing authoritarianism, etc. without resolving the contradictions among them (Schmitt 1996: 7). While admirable in and of itself, the political *complexio* was a sly imperial tactic of foregoing mediation in favour of Catholicism as the higher third, capable of reuniting all oppositions under its universal umbrella. Nomadism plays a similar trick on us, and the only thing that changes is the name of *complexio oppositorum*, now dubbed ‘Univocal Being’: ‘equal being [that] is immediately present in everything, without mediation or intermediary, even though things reside unequally in this equal being’ (Deleuze 2004a: 47). In fact, things do not reside in it; they wander. Why? – Because ‘Univocal Being is at one and the same time nomadic distribution and crowned anarchy’ (Deleuze 2004a: 47) hence, a non-contradiction and a contradiction brought together, miraculously, in a non-contradictory fashion. That is the zero point of nomadic thought, the source of its energy, which, ostensibly committed to the proliferation of singularities, is in fact totalising.

In the Anthropocene, Univocal Being is the earth as such and as a whole. Not just the earth’s geological layers but the entire planet with all its elements and the atmosphere, both the substrata for and the marked products of human activity. As soon as the difference between earth and world collapses, the world grows worldless, and the earth – unliveable, uninhabitable, barren. Celebrated by Deleuze and Guattari, the desert invades in the shape of ‘[s]mooth or nomad space’, ‘gnawing away at the forest on one side [and], on the other side gaining ground on cultivated lands, affirming a noncommunicating force or a force of *divergence* like a “wedge” digging in’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 386). Indeed, the desert is the most accurate geographic representation of Univocal Being, spreading over the earth and inviting an immediate non-contradictory articulation of contradiction and non-contradiction. In a desert, nomads are ‘in a *local absolute*’ (382) (another instantiation of *complexio oppositorum*), at home in a homeless world, the world where homelessness is the rule rather than an exception both for humans and for innumerable nonhuman forms of life earmarked for extinction. At its peak, massive environmental pollution, which – when objectified in chemical residua – is transcribed into the marks defining

the Anthropocene, transforms the earth, water and air into deserts that border on abstraction. It creates and helps spread the blank pages of surreally ideal spaces more conducive to the idea of number than to geometrical patterns and shapes.

On the question of the desert, though their value judgements diverge, we find an uncanny resonance between Deleuze and Guattari, on the one hand, and Martin Heidegger, on the other. The former write:

The nomads are there, on the land, wherever there forms a smooth space that gnaws, and tends to grow, in all directions. The nomads inhabit these places; they remain in them, and they themselves make them grow, for it has been established that the nomads make the desert no less than they are made by it. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 382)

Heidegger observes:

History teaches us that nomads have not only been made nomadic by the desolation of wastelands and steppes, but they have also often left wastelands behind them where they found fruitful and cultivated land' (Heidegger 2013: 55).

The nomads who leave wastelands behind them and make deserts grow are not this or that group of marginal populations, following an escape route from sedentary lifestyle; they are all of us at our environmentally irresponsible worst. They (we) remain faithful to the historical-ontological notion of the human, the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, who lives on the earth as though it were already a desert (the 'green desert' of the Amazonian rainforest, as the Brazilian dictatorship coded it in the middle of the last century, or the blue desert of the ocean) and, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, facilitates the actual *desertification of the world*. This human, revelling in the feeling that he or she has no determinate place in the midst of beings, passes on the face of the earth as a hurricane, unattached to any specific shape, structure or form of being. He or she obeys the law of the 'nomadic absolute, as a local integration moving from part to part and constituting smooth space in an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction. [...] It is the absolute of passage, which in nomad art merges with its manifestation' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 494). Each place, if not the placeness of place, is a way station, a drive-through, *that through which* one passes in one's peregrinations and, in passing, empties it, vacates and evacuates it, on the way to another, equally abused locale. The succession of points of passage is far from infinite, however; there comes a time when the whole is fashioned in

conformity with Univocal Being, ontically reflected in the reality (in lieu of a mere possibility) of a total desert. During the latest stages in this process, the *anthropos* of the twenty-first century begins to dream of interstellar nomadism that, moving from planet to depleted planet, would constitute a smooth nomadic space of cosmic proportions. In a word, an intergalactic desert.

If the physical spread of the desert matches a strange imperialism of the nomad, that is due to the substance and the subject immediately expressing each other and the Univocal Being they participate in. Whereas the romantic view of nomadism Deleuze and Guattari encourage is that of propertyless, unencumbered, fluid existence, its actual subject-effect is militaristic, obsessed with conquest (not of things in space but of space per se, wherein nomads will be distributed), and radially escalating. It is not by chance that the talk of the nomadic 'war machine' is so rampant in *A Thousand Plateaus*: the nomad fights against the static, the sedentary, but also the delimited, the circumscribed, the moderate or moderated, cathected desire, fitted to the size of its object. A quote from Nietzsche's 1889 letter to Jacob Burckhardt – 'I am every name in history' – is the rallying cry of nomadic imperialism, 'a perpetual migration of the intensities designated by proper names' (Deleuze 2004b: 257), of the subject that 'spreads itself out along the entire circumference of the circle, the center of which has been abandoned by the ego' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 21). What Deleuze and Guattari ignore is that the absent centre wins hands down over a present and clearly identifiable one; that, in a totality, the centre is equally expressed in every part and emblazoned on the circumference (the centre is never at the centre, or, at least, not only there); that, lacking a permanent address, X is everywhere because it is nowhere; and that a desert-subject, in its spread along the circumference of the totality, carries a greater destructive force than a filled-out and filling subject of a fixed dwelling. Isn't that, also, the predicament of the Anthropocene, where the *anthropos* is featured *in absentia*, as the lost and unsuccessfully mourned centre, whose impact, for all that, does not cease to be devastating?

The delegates of Univocal Being, the nomads care for and about nothing. Negatively put, they have neither time nor places nor particular beings entrusted to their care; positively stated, they *do* care for and about nothing, the nothing itself, imagined as an unmarked space and ahistorical time that are theirs ('The nomadic trajectory [...] *distributes people (or animals) in an open space*, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating'; 'It is true that the nomads have no history [...]') (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 380, 393)). Their attitude is, therefore,

profoundly anti-ecological, not in the vague sense of a fetishised ecology as the interconnectedness of everything and everyone but in the literal sense of the *logos* of the *oikos*, the articulation of a dwelling. The nomads reject dwelling, with its connotations of sedentary continuity, and veer on the side of dispersion and disarticulation, which makes them at the same time anti-*logic* and anti-*oikic*. So, in the stand-off between ecology and economy, Deleuze (still before his collaboration with Guattari) sides with economy minus the *oikos*, that is, with the *nomos*, the law of distribution valid for itinerant groups:

Then there is a completely other distribution which must be called nomadic, a nomad *nomos*, without property, enclosure or measure. Here, there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute *themselves* in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits. (Deleuze 2004a: 45–6)

The very etymology of *nomad* goes back to the verb, from which *nomos* too is derived, namely *nemein*, to ‘divide’, ‘distribute’ or ‘allot’ – typically, lands for pasture. Instead of grazing in a fenced-in, appropriated field, the animals that accompany the nomads roam in the open, from one water source to another, from one oasis to another. If they are numerous, nomadic groups of humans and flocks or herds of animals deplete the resources of a place they have passed through only to inflict the same devastation on another place along their errant itineraries. They distribute themselves opportunistically, moving there where food is plentiful, and do not care, together with others, for the prospects of the same place, which would have been assigned to them according to a different law of distribution. The mechanics of nomadism are those that operate the desiring-machines in *Anti-Oedipus*: the nomads eat and shit, devour what they see in front of them, drop waste behind, and move away. Devoid of measure and historical perspective, without the possibility to assess the damage inflicted on the environment, their opportunism dons the mask of innocent violence, the heedlessness of life, of the id, or of desire to anything that would hem in their free expression (Freud’s term for such limits was *the reality principle*).

The nomad *nomos* befits the Anthropocene, the open expanse of a closed totality of the earth marked by the by-products of human activity, so much so that this marking reverts to an unmarked territory, too sterile and inhospitable to life to be inhabited. The Anthropocene is the result of a perverse fantasy that subjected the earth to total manipulation and limitless exploitation, while remaining oblivious to the ecological reality principle. It is what happens when desire flows unimpeded or

uncathected, when, in its indefiniteness and noncommunicability, it schizophrenically circulates over the surface of the planet, which it does not see as other to itself. Its body without organs is a nearly dead body, almost a corpse, an earth no longer alien but wholly fashioned by the whims of autistic desire. Roaming on the planetary corpse without organs, we wander on ourselves, on our collective polluted bodies intermingled with the rest (and with the rests) of organic and inorganic worlds. Although, ostensibly, the nomadic lines of flight strive toward exteriority, the nomad *nomos* has no outside, in part because it has no inside either, and in part because, like capitalism, it is not mindful of physical constraints to growth.

The materiality of this destructive desire coincides (immediately, in keeping with the structure of the nomadic *complexio oppositorum*) with the ideality of numbers, the numeric construction of reality. Deleuze and Guattari are quite frank about the arithmetical dimension of the *nomos* they favour:

The *nomos* is fundamentally numerical, arithmetic. When Greek geometrism is contrasted with Indo-Arab arithmetic, it becomes clear that the latter implies a *nomos* opposable to the *logos*: not that the nomads 'do' arithmetic or algebra, but because arithmetic and algebra arise in a strongly nomad influenced world. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 388)

And again:

The specificity of the nomadic system remains the subordination of land to numbers that are displaced and deployed, and of taxation to relations internal to those numbers' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 394).

Our world where everything is calculable and rankable is rooted in the nomadic economy bereft of an *oikos*. When no value, worth, measure or good is immanent in a valued place or a singular context of being, a numeric framework is indifferently superimposed on what (or who) is to be assessed. Nomads opt for *nomos* instead of *logos*, the dictatorship of numbers instead of an ontological articulation grounded on a lived experience of dwelling. We, the nomads that we are, count and account for elements of the world by resorting to a generalised bureaucratic procedure that uproots the counted from the backgrounds of their existence and plots them onto a uniform numeric grid. With regard to the mass extinction of species, now underway, such counting and accounting have already begun and DNA databanks are being created in the hopes of, one day, reconstituting the lost species based on their preserved genetic blueprints that have definitively replaced the Platonic Ideas. Another sign of a lapse into sheer ideality, this way of dealing with

the environmental crisis is wholly consistent with the nomadic *nomos* that subordinates the 'land', as well as whatever or whomever it still supports and sustains, to numbers.

Deleuze and Guattari, or their followers, would certainly object that bureaucracy is a mode of administration characteristic of despotic rule and anathema to the nomadic war machine, claimed by the state apparatus (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 420). Even so, the *complexio* with its brutal force of direct coincidence does not spare this opposition:

[the] nomad and his war-machine stand opposite the despot and his administrative machine [...]; and yet they are so interrelated or interdependent that the despot will set himself the problem of integrating, internalizing the nomadic war-machine, while the nomad attempts to invent an administration for his conquered empire. (Deleuze 2004b: 259)

A permanent revolution is as impossible as a perpetual conservation of the status quo, and, therefore, nomadic and despotic extremes meet in the uneasy middle of self-revolutionising capitalism, militaristic administration and belligerent bureaucracy. The number performs a trick, does a number on us, and – *voilà!* – the nomad is now a hit-and-run investment banker, gambling on ultra-short-term returns, and spending more time in aeroplanes and at airports than on the *terra firma* of the outdated and surpassed *logos*.

Concerning the stand-off of the nomad and the despot, the question is, 'Against whom does the nomadic machine wage its war?' In the 1960s and 1970s, the answer was unambiguous: the enemy was the state and state-form. Like Schmitt just before them (see Schmitt 2004), Deleuze and Guattari were enamoured of the image of a combative partisan, the guerrilla fighter who, against all odds, took a clandestine battle to the regular army. Today, with state sovereignty significantly eroded, notably in economic matters, the true enemies are the bodies (without organs) of transnational corporations, themselves nomadic, highly mobile, ready to move their assets to offshores or to outsource labour elsewhere. There is no palpable difference between the nomad and the despot; the only meaningful, albeit more and more hopeless and foredoomed, opposition to a deracinated world emanates from rootedness, attachment to a place, the art of dwelling . . . ¹

And that is where Deleuze and Guattari take advantage of *complexio oppositorum* most brazenly, converting the nomad into a partisan of the sedentary. Nomads, according to them, journey in place (i.e., in the same place), and, therefore:

We can say of the nomads, following Toynbee's suggestion: *they do not move*. They are nomads by dint of not moving, not migrating [...]. Voyage in place: that is the name of all intensities, even if they also develop in extension. To think is to voyage [...]. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 482)

The victory of idealism is assured thanks to intensive, rather than extensive, nomadism that unfolds in thought ('To think is to voyage') and that draws lines of flight indistinguishable from the dreamy pathways of escapism. Despite its fancies, not even intensive voyaging can evade the ecological reality principle; it presupposes that the place, from which the nomad does not move, is still in place, but that is not at all certain in the Anthropocene. To cope with the rise of a worldless, largely uninhabitable world, the last thing we need is more nomadism, whether extensive or intensive. What is required is the exact opposite, missing from the nomadic outlook and uncontainable in its *complexio oppositorum*: the responsibility and care for places. Or, at any rate, for whatever remains of them.

Note

1. Furthermore, it is absurd to wage war against climate change or rage against the Anthropocene, seeing that these phenomena are neither suitable objects for militaristic discourses and practices nor loci of power, but the accumulated and depersonalised effects of the human domination of nature.

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