**Deleuzean Temporalities: Athens, Mytilene, and Hugh Thompson at My Lai**

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*MYTILENE AND MY LAI*

In Book Three of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides recounts the dramatic events of the revolt by the city of Mytilene against Athens, the siege, conquest, and occupation of the rebel city, and the debates that followed in the Athenian assembly over whether to punish the entire Mytilenean population with death, or only those responsible for the revolt. The assembly, infuriated by the rebellion, in a close vote initially ordered all male adult citizens in Mytilene killed and the city’s women and children sold into slavery. A trireme was sent across the Aegean to Mytilene to deliver the execution order, and a delegation of Mytileneans held in Athens, numbering one thousand, were killed on the spot. The next morning, a number of Athenian citizens, perhaps repenting at the cruelty of the extermination sentence, persuaded the assembly to convene a second time and reconsider the previous day’s decision. A number of speeches were delivered; Thucydides reconstructs two of these -- by Cleon in favor of carrying out the order, and by Diodotus in favor of clemency, albeit on *realpolitik* grounds. Diodotus’ speech swayed enough of the citizens present to reverse the earlier decision in another close vote. A second trireme was then dispatched to try to overtake the one sent the prior day, and hopefully reach Mytilene before the extermination order could be carried out. Thucydides relates with great narrative drama how the crew of the second trireme, motivated by a sense of pity for those about to be slaughtered, and fed extra rations paid for by Mytilenean sympathizers, just managed to arrive in the city as the extermination order was about to be read, sparing the lives of the population.

Fifty years ago this month, on the morning of March 16, 1968, Company C of the First Battalion of the 23rd (Americal) Division of the United States Army attacked a pro-Vietcong village in Quang Ngai province, South Vietnam, known as Son My or My Lai. Expecting to engage the battle-tested 48th NLF Vietcong Battalion, who Army intelligence had informed them had been sheltering there and were receiving aid and support from the village residents, but instead meeting with no active armed resistance, and finding no men of military age in the village, the soldiers of Charlie Company proceeded to destroy the village, and murdered virtually every civilian they could apprehend. The 504 civilians they killed that day included 50 who were infants three years old or younger, 69 between the ages of 4 and 7, and 91 between 8 and 12. Twenty-seven victims were in their seventies or eighties.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As the slaughter was underway, a US Army helicopter pilot named Hugh Thompson, accompanied by his crew Glen Andreotta and Larry Colburn, were flying towards the village, where they had been instructed to try to draw fire from Vietcong positions, which turned out not to exist. As they began an aerial reconnaissance of the village, they observed evidence of a wholesale massacre of unarmed civilians by American troops underway. Spotting a group of Vietnamese villagers running towards a shelter bunker as American soldiers chased them, Thompson and his crew intervened. Landing his helicopter, Thompson stepped out and approached the Americans, after ordering his gunner, Colburn, to shoot the American soldiers if they opened fire on Thompson or the Vietnamese civilians in the bunker. Thompson personally rescued the civilians in the bunker – two elderly men, an old woman, another woman, and five children – flying them to safety, and then returned to the hamlet several more times, as the massacre continued. Assisted by other combat helicopter crews, Thompson, Colburn, and Andreotta managed to save an additional number of wounded and terrorized Vietnamese civilians. After returning to base, Thompson described what he had seen and done to his chaplain, and beginning the next day tried to report the massacre up the chain of command to his superior officers.

The army refused to acknowledge the massacre, and immediately began taking steps to eliminate or cover up evidence of it and silence Thompson, a conspiracy that reached all the way to Richard Nixon’s White House. Over the next thirty years, Thompson suffered a difficult and trauma-plagued life. Beginning immediately after he reported the massacre, Thompson was ostracized, accused of mutiny, threatened with court martial, demoted, persecuted, and ordered on unusually dangerous missions (eventually resulting in a helicopter crash in which his back was broken, ending his military career), and hounded by the Army, the US Congress, and by unidentified persons who terrorized him and his family for decades. Nixon personally issued orders to have Thompson and his crew covertly discredited, even while those who had ordered, supervised, and participated in the massacre were popularly treated as heroes, and the entire chain of command that orchestrated the coverup went largely unpunished. It was only because of the independent decision by helicopter pilot and whistleblower Ronald Ridenhour to go on the record, and aggressive reporting by freelance journalist Seymour Hersh, that the story of My Lai became known at all. Twenty-two American soldiers were eventually charged with the murders, but only two officers, Lt. William Calley and Captain Ernest Medina. The enlisted men were acquitted, as was Medina; Calley was found guilty of involvement in the murder of 102 civilians but served only 3 ½ years under house arrest. Both were widely regarded as heroes upon their return to civilian life.

Thompson lived out his years suffering from PTSD, relentless nightmares about the massacre, and repeated threats against his life, and targeted by acts of vandalism, harassment, and other forms of intimidation, leading to broken marriages, substance abuse problems, and an early death. Only in the last years of his life was his historically almost unparalleled act even recognized. Even today, for most Americans able to recall those times, the names of the authors and perpetrators of the mass murder are more likely to be remembered, and indeed even recalled as heroes or sacrificial scapegoats, than those of Hugh Thompson, Glen Androetti, and Larry Colburn.

How can political theorists and social scientists make sense of, interpret, account for, or even adequately describe radically contingent and unanticipable yet pivotal events like the decision of the Athenian assembly to reverse the Mytilene decision or the singular, virtually unparalleled heroism of Hugh Thompson? Such events are usually simply ignored, or explained away as the products of idiosyncratic individual psychological traits or group collective action dynamics, or disregarded as one-off anomalies inaccessible to statistical modeling or formal theory. Modern political theory and political psychology are at a loss even to adequately describe, much less account for what consciousness, choice, decision making, and action *are*, or solve the vexing problem of scaling between the individual and collective levels of these. And yet it is not infrequently on such acts and events that the historical and political interpretations and meanings of events turn, and that the trajectories of entire societies, and the fates of numberless human beings whose lives are fortuitously sacrificed or spared in the course of founding and maintaining empires, but whose stories are often lost to history, are decided. How, then, can the historical roles and destinies of the peoples of My Lai and Mytilene, which depended entirely on decisive but apparently undecidable, unanticipable, unreconstructible interventions by an individual or collective subject into the tragic unfolding of a decisive historical moment be made sense of theoretically or philosophically as an *event*? Must we remain suspended between the hopelessly inadequate conceptualizations of individual and group subjectivity that underpin modern social science and political theory; the retrospectively constructed causal chains of necessity and inevitability asserted by historicist accounts of the past; or merely descriptive historical narratives unsuited for theorizing the complex dynamics of the flows of forces that generate, constitute, shape, condition, and actualize such events? How can the actions of the Athenian demos debating the fate of Mytilene, and of Hugh Thompson and his crew at My Lai, be made sense of theoretically and philosophically, perhaps in a way that can intellectually facilitate other such ruptures in the unfolding historical continuity and momentum of historical time?

*GILLES DELEUZE’S ONTOLOGY OF BEING AND IDENTITY*

Gilles Deleuze’s ontology and philosophy of time suggest one approach to this problem of the ontology of decision making subjects and the historical temporality within which they act. Deleuze’s project is intended as a challenge both to the essentialist, onto-theological strain within western metaphysics, and the dialectical “state history” of Hegel and his followers, as well as more immediately to the “ontologies of lack” associated with certain trends within French structuralism and post-structuralism, and with more recent radical democratic pluralists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Rather than understanding being and identity, including political identity, as constituted either through passive or active identification with preexisting affiliations, allegiances, and alliances, or through opposition to or antagonism with an other that it lacks, Deleuze’s ontology is instead one of affirmation, excess, and abundance, and of the continual creation or generation of difference and the new through temporal morphogenesis. In Deleuze’s philosophy, being is an emergent effect of *disjunctive syntheses* – the continual proliferation of difference and the ongoing productive disruption of existing, settled identities and forms of being through immanent relations of agonism and pluralization, virtual and actualized processes of differentiation, and the production of conscious experience through what Deleuze, drawing on Foucault, calls “subjectivization” -- that continually create and animate new things, concepts, subjects, and modes of being into existence, including new and ever-changing forms of political subjectivity and identity, political sociality and collectivity, and political action.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Modern political theory is torn between an obsessive focus on the thematization of individual political subjectivity, identity and agency, on the one hand, and an ambitious project of schematizing the social and political structures that enable and constrain political action, on the other. Deleuze’s project is in important ways more philosophically radical, treating as it does political identity, subjectivity, and agency instead as the always unstable, provisional, transient, and superficial or epiphenomenal surface effects – a kind of optical illusion or hologram[[3]](#footnote-3) -- of ongoing ontogenic processes of differentiation and repetition. Deleuze’s ontology of being does not deny the reality of constituted political identity, or the significance or importance of the everyday “macropolitical” political struggles that arise out of contests among “molar” individual and collective subjects constituted by and organized around opposed or antagonistic political identities. But he insists on exploring how those identities and subjects are contracted and constituted in time through incorporeal, “molecular,” “micropolitical” actions, events, and transformations that are usually bracketed or ignored by even radical political and social theory, but which operate at the level of the “virtual,” “actualizing” -- prefiguring and producing -- events like the Athenian assembly’s decision at Mytilene or Hugh Thompson’s actions at My Lai.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Whereas contemporary political theory and political science aspire to model politics as consisting largely of socially and politically constrained and determined relations among essentialized or constructed politicized identities, Deleuze, by contrast, conceives of political identity as an ephemeral and self-transforming after-effect of the continual duplication or replication of identities through always-imperfect morphogenic processes of copying or repetition that enable the folding of those identities into territorializing political resonance machines and other molarizing, macropolitical structures and processes. For Deleuze, political identity and political action can neither be grounded in transcendent, categorical, determinate political essences, nor be adequately understood in terms of political ontologies of lack or enmity – i.e. of constructed affiliations formed in opposition to designated others -- either. It follows that not only do essential, fixed political identities not actually exist other than as the illusory, transient, and ephemeral effects of virtual morphogenesis, but, that each ‘repetition’ of a political identity – each patriotic citizen, each gathering of an assembly, each soldier in a battle[[5]](#footnote-5) -- is constituted by processes that generate multiple, proliferating, divergent, and fractal lines and modes of difference within that same identity. Neither appearances, resemblances, common histories or ancestral affiliations, convergent interests, nor any other set of common characteristics or features can thus be counted on to fully stabilize and ground political identity, or to account for political actions and events.

For Deleuze, beings are defined *relationally* – by their potential capacities to affect other beings, which they *express* as identity. A being expressing a molar identity (as and Athenian citizen, for instance, or a US Army officer) is thus in reality a provisional multiplicity of potential relations continually in a process of *becoming*, which, in an always tentative and transient self-coordination, affects other beings as a force, contributing to *their* *becoming* and to the general becoming of the world. These relations are determinate potentialities – and as such they are neither arbitrarily or randomly distributed among beings, nor are they ever fully or completely actualized in any one being. They are also reciprocal, recursive, and fractal (nonlinear), and the identities of the beings they ephemerally constitute or ‘actualize’ are thus always to some extent undecided, incomplete, and partially available for modification and transformation by exposure to other beings and relations to which they are potentially attuned. Actualized beings, whether a person or a body politic, are for Deleuze always, in their affects and potentially open relations with other bodies, whether a person or a body politic, *larval.* Like stem cells, their identities are not entirely ontologically open-ended or infinitely malleable, but are always capable of *becoming*, always carrying the capacity for metamorphosis and transformation – for re-actualization or counter-actualization -- because contained within them are multiple unexpressed potentials for being affected by new and different relations with other beings they might be exposed to or engage with (*Difference and Repetition*, pp. 118ff). The most important question for Deleuze is thus always how being actualizes or self-organizes bodies through becoming, and what forms of becoming remain available to those bodies, and under what conditions: “What is a body capable of, what can a body become?”

The processes through which the world of experience, including political experience and action, is actualized by these immanent relations and unexpressed potentials of being operate through disjunctive syntheses that produce bodies and other beings and create a world that is different in form and expression from those constitutive relations and potentials. Thus, for Deleuze, political identity and action cannot be adequately understood or theorized in their own terms. The production of the genuinely new and novel within the virtual dimension that Deleuze calls the plane of consistency proceeds through lines with a different status from those of the plane of organization and segmentarity -- the domain of actual social and political life. Since the domain of these relations and potentials is normally hidden from everyday experience and reflection, they do not “resemble” the actualized beings they generate or create. This does not mean that these relations and forces are any less “real” than their actualizations, but only that the virtual events that fold and unfold on the plane of consistency are not available for representation, categorization, or direct analysis, and are thus – unlike the actualized subjects, objects, and other beings of the world we experience directly -- inaccessible to the methods of natural or social science, even though they immanently constitute the world of actualized beings, experience, phenomena, and sense, along with the behaviors that those sciences aspire to describe, classify, and model. Taken together, these relations and potentials comprise the aspect or domain or dimension of reality that Deleuze refers to as the ‘virtual’ (a term which should be understood as meaning “having productive or creative power” rather than as “being merely potential, possible, or not fully real.”)[[6]](#footnote-6) This multiplicity of potentialities of becoming is what complicates the attribution of causality or authorship to events, and what makes history both *constrained* and *determinate*, but *undecided in advance*, but it is also what makes possible unanticipable historical acts and events such as the interventions of the Athenian assembly or Hugh Thompson.

DELEUZE’S PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

Understanding the historical significance of an event like Mytilene or My Lai and how such events are actualized in history in Deleuzian terms requires a brief explanation of Deleuze’s philosophy of time and history.[[7]](#footnote-7) For Deleuze, time and temporality are not linear, homogeneous, and uniform, but multiple and complex, with each thing or subject, and the world as a whole, participating in distinctive, sometimes intersecting and sometimes divergent and conflicting, temporalities in which it is continually undergoing multiple corporeal and incorporeal transformations in response to the folding together of the relations and forces that are continually constituting and reconstituting it. This is the complex and chaotic temporality of *becoming*. This understanding of temporality-as-becoming is contrasted with what Deleuze calls “State History.” Deleuze sometimes refers to his own approach to history as “nomadology,” in which historical events and personages are conceived as a coexistence of becomings, which Jay Lampert describes as a deterritorializing “overflow of codes and alliances …, contingencies, ruptures, collectivities, retrospections, bifurcations, and lines of flight …, differences without origin …, neoarchaism and ex-futurism …, rhythms and refrains …, a ‘historical rhizome’” (Lampert, 7). In this understanding of history-as-becoming, historical events do not have singular, responsible authors or specific efficient causes -- a historical event “brings together supple flows and rigid segments without having a ‘power center’ to regulate the flows” (Lampert 7) – and their meanings can always be affected by subsequent events in a kind of retrospective causality. (ATP 430ff).

Such an approach is contrasted both with the social scientific search for identifiable linear, sequential causes and effects, as well as with the approach of what Deleuze calls “state historians,” like Hegel, for whom history imposes itself on becoming by translating the rhizomic co-existence of becomings into a fixed, constructed historicist narrative of mere “succession.” Such historicist approaches to history read events teleologically, by retroactively fixing authoritative meanings on historical events through ‘conjunctive syntheses’ (“This is what that meant”), and treat events “as if they were entirely determined by prior causes unaffected either by chance or by subsequent events.” (Lampert 7)[[8]](#footnote-8). Deleuze sees this kind of history as a “reactive force” that “paranoiacally keeps itself from engaging with the living past.” (Lampert 7) Deleuze’s history-as-nomadology, by contrast, works from within the plane of becoming to theorize historical time as a dynamic co-existence, rather than as a causal sequence or succession of segmented, individuated events or phenomena with fixed meanings within an integrated historical narrative. This co-existence is not merely an effect of a certain way of writing or *interpreting* history, but is an aspect of the ontological structure of becoming itself. “[C]oexistence is a feature of events themselves, and not merely a feature of the way we remember events” (Lampert 7). By dispensing with the conventional statist history framework, and focusing on the virtual processes that give rise to temporality and the experience of causal succession, events like My Lai or Mytilene come to be understood as both internally multiple and complex, and rhizomically implicated in multiple other events. Because every event is multiple, a cause can be re-imagined not as a unique proximate condition, but as a communication across various series of events. A different, *molecular* level of non-linear, relational becoming is disclosed, enabling a re-imagination of history as capable of comprehending such “quasi-historical phenomena” as “events, memories, retroactive interpretations, dates and causes, precursors and themes, series and sequences and destinies and continuities and breakdowns, not to mention the actual occurrences that have shaped the geo-social world” (Lampert, 1).

It should be stressed that for Deleuze, history and time are not *indeterminate* – there are relations that have constraining and limiting, as well as deterritorializing and counter-actualizing effects. But these relations are non-linear – they are, rather, fractal, chaotic, and complex – which means that events like My Lai or the Mytilenean revolt and the Athenian response, and actions like Hugh Thompson’s intervention or the Athenian assembly’s second vote, are *undecidable in advance*. At the same time, however, “it is necessary to demonstrate that what does not yet exist is already in action, in a different form than that of its existence.” (ATP 431) In Deleuze’s terms, a historical event “has not so much a cause as a ‘quasi-cause,’” by which Deleuze means a series of “non-causal correspondences forming a system of echoes, or reprises and resonances, a system of signs, in short, an expressive quasi-causality” (Lampert, 7). State/ist history, by contrast, produces the individuation (“the overcoding and identification with a transcendent historical model”) of historical figures and personages, and thereby “stabilizes subjectivities,” repressing and constraining the possibility of unanticipated lines of becoming or revolutionary eruptions animated or inspired by novel reinterpretations of the effects of the roles played by historical figures, or reimaginings of the importance, significance, and meaning of historical events. For Deleuze, by contrast, it is in reality the virtual multiplicity of relayed and resonating quasi-causes, not the actualized fixed identities, stabilized molar structures, or identifiable causal sequences of conventional historiography that makes possible political events and actions within history like those of the Athenian assembly’s or Hugh Thompson.

In Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s co-authored books *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, historically significant personages -- Deleuze’s most prominent example is Joan of Arc -- are conceptualized not as individuated persons, but as *singularities* (‘*noms de l'histoire’*) that congeal or concentrate zones of historically irruptive forces, and with whom later subjects identify or fold their own identities in as they make history themselves. Collective personages, like the Athenian assembly, might be considered similarly, as personifications of historical singularities, such that a state like Athens could be seen as a *nom de l’histoire* playing a historical role, rather than, as in realist state theory, as a “black box” driven like a billiard ball by necessities of power politics. For Deleuze, a *nom de l'histoire,* like Joan of Arc or “Athens” or “Mytilene” or Pericles or “Munich” or “Hiroshima” or Hugh Thompson or Lt. Calley or “My Lai,” should also be understood as an *effect* with potentially far-reaching and unforeseen implications, (as we might refer to the “Brando effect” in acting or, more recently, the Harvey Weinstein effect or the Trump effect or the Parkland effect). These *noms de l'histoire* are always multiple and commingled, circulating through time and available to influence events as “a subject’s passage back through historical personae.”

*The Three Syntheses of Time*

Deleuze’s account of the primordial structure of time is intended to reveal how the everyday experience of sequential, linear time depends on a more primordial ontological temporality. Deleuze characterizes this temporality in terms of the ongoing actualization of the virtual, which occurs within three “syntheses of time” that, although independent, overlap and co-exist. Roughly, the first synthesis is the ordinary habitual time (Chronos) of the present experienced as a moment moving between past and future, and the second synthesis (Aion) is the past understood both as memory and as the embedded, stored, co-existing warehouse of still dynamic relations and forces out of which the present emerges. It is in the third synthesis of time -- of time open to the future in which subjects act under uncertainty and contingency, making deterritorializing choices that attach to *lines of flight* -- that Deleuze’s account of historically significant action and the creative possibilities of being arise. It is in this third synthesis of time, a time that is as in Hamlet’s phrase “out of joint” (DR 111), that novelty, creation, and action take place.

In this third synthesis of time, individual subjectivity is disjointed and discontinuous -- a multiplicity of past and future selves coexisting in the unconscious as well as the conscious, present self. Among these selves are the latent or repressed infant or childhood self whose traumas haunt the adult subject, the conscious self of the ego, and the adult selves that model the ego ideals that the self has passed through. The conscious subject seeks to impose its narcissistic chronology of self-development on these multiple selves, but the unconscious, lacking a sense of sequential, linear time, understands these selves as simultaneously coexistent, each having its own temporality that resonates with other temporalities, and resistant to being synchronized and molarized by the ego into a single subjectivity with a single integral identity. It is the virtual coexistence of these multiple, diverse selves resonating with one another across relays of “incompossible” virtual pasts and undefined presents and futures that predisposes the subject, who experiences time within the first two syntheses as chronological and linear, to be nevertheless open to the future, to the available potentialities for change, transformation, and becoming.

It is within the third synthesis that the events of the actualizing world occur and unfold, and in which they are experienced as having meaning or significance that may not become actualized within the temporal order anticipated by the chronological time of the first and second syntheses. Deleuze’s third synthesis here is in some ways similar to the way that Lacan describes the ontological insecurity of the subject as arising partly from its inability to fully experience itself as present, and instead always anticipating its own self-constitution in terms of the future anterior (what I *will have been* once this present is past). But Deleuze is less concerned than Lacan is about the ways that the subject’s resulting object-identifications generate pathologies as the subject seeks to establish and stabilize its identity as fixed and secure. Instead, Deleuze’s ontology of abundance and affirmation draws our attention to the multiple potentialities, within the emergent future of the third synthesis, for new affiliations, new affective relations, new lines of flight that the multiplicity of disjointed, out-of-synch temporalities of the actualized subject make possible. Deleuze recognizes that for these potentialities to be actualized, they must be experienced as events unfolding within the chronological time of the first two syntheses. But as historical events, they must at the same time be released both from the constraints of linear determination by the completed past out of which the present is continually emerging, and from any teleological or ontological predetermination of the meaning and thus the necessary course of those events. In Lampert’s words, “genuine novelty paradoxically requires that all events already co-exist in the form of an unbound system. That is why the future is the eternal return, in that every event qua future throws the dice of the past and affirms whatever line of continuation communicates its excess. As soon as one series of co-existences passes over into another, a new series already exists” (Lampert 8; See also Widder chapter 2, Bogue, and Due for useful discussions of Deleuze’s concept of time and temporality).

Deleuze’s three syntheses of time frame temporality such that neither the decision of the Athenian assembly regarding Mytilene nor Hugh Thompson’s intervention in the My Lai massacre can be fully understood either as the direct effects of discrete, sequential, linear causes, nor as the willed action of an individual or group subject guided by rational calculation, or compelled by the demands and duties of an essentialized identity, but can nevertheless be theorized in terms of Deleuze’s ontology of becoming. Rather than seeking the explanation for these events in an objective causal chain, or in the fixed, constitutive identity of the Athenian demos or Hugh Thompson, both events are better understood as novel, singular actualizations of multiple potentialities, opportunities for new relations, and deterritorializing lines of flight coexisting within the virtual complex of disjointed, out-of-synch temporalities available for synthesis through molecular, micropolitical interventions, with relayed, leveraged macropolitical multiplier effects. Describing such events, Deleuze and Guattari write “It is as if a line of flight, perhaps only a tiny trickle to begin with, leaked between the segments, escaping their centralization, eluding their totalization. The profound movements stirring in a society present themselves in this fashion, even if they are necessarily ‘represented’ as a confrontation between molar segments” (ATP 216). The Athenian assembly and Hugh Thompson are thus are better understood as engaged in what Deleuze refers to as the kind of ‘micropolitical’ interventions that are often dismissed by political theorists and social scientists as merely ethical or personal or aesthetic acts, lacking genuinely political status or significance, but which for Deleuze are the very real vectors along which societies and polities emerge and come to be defined: “From the viewpoint of micropolitics, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular. There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine…” (ATP 216. See also Dialogues II 135-6). In pursuing their novel lines of flight, neither the Athenian demos nor Hugh Thompson were consciously seeking macropolitical effects, such as a revolutionary reconstitution of authority, a redistribution of power, or the stabilization or transformation of an ontopolitical identity. But given the world-historical situations, the political and ethical complexities, the very substantial personal and group stakes, and the enormous political hazards implicated in and entangled with each of these events, neither can their actions be reduced to or explained away as the products of mere emotional pathos or humanitarian sentiment.

For Deleuze, such micropolitical lines of flight are genuinely political, even though they are not consciously directed at macropolitical outcomes, nor grounded in and arising from a determinate identity or any essential characteristics of the agent. There was nothing about the nature or identity of the Athenian demos that led it to reverse its decision and spare Mytilene that did not exist the prior day, when it voted to annihilate the rebel city and all its inhabitants. And there was nothing particularly salient about Hugh Thompson’s character or identity – *who he was* -- on the morning of March 16, 1968 that distinguished him in any identifiable way from the scores of soldiers in Charlie Company who took part in the massacre or the Army officers who conspired to cover it up. In the poignant words of Pham Thi Nhanh, who survived the My Lai massacre and later met Thompson and thanked him for saving her life, “Why were so many villagers killed that day and why was Thompson different from the rest of the Americans?” For Deleuze, the prior biographical or historical factors that operated within the first two syntheses of time to constitute the plane of consistency out of which the Athenian assembly’s decision and Thompson’s intervention emerged are neither epistemologically recoverable nor causally explanatory. (Indeed, the focus on such factors reinforces an obsession with either individual responsibility or identity politics that Deleuze plausibly suggests leads to deep ontological *ressentiment*, and to a dangerously productivist, molarizing, territorializing politics of identity formation, scapegoating, and the criminalization of deviance, while encouraging micro-fascistic formations -- as has been so evident throughout Europe and the United States in recent years). In his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze argues that to become oneself – the self that one is capable of becoming -- must not mean submitting to the endless, circular formation and repetition of existing identities and affiliations within linear time, or to the obsessive drive to conform to the determinate expectations associated with those identities and affiliations, but rather their *overcoming* through the affirmation of becoming, understood as ongoing, agonistic confrontation with elements of those identities themselves. It is this existential project that Deleuze, following Nietzsche, regards as genuinely ethical, in the sense of the affirmation of an *ethos* worthy of being affirmed.

The lines of flight pursued by the Athenian demos and Hugh Thompson are exemplary instances of affirmative becoming operating through the excessive, overflowing deterritorializing potentialities opened up within the third synthesis of time. For Deleuze it is out of such micropolitical becomings that macropolitical political change and transformation may emerge in time, as in Gabriel Tarde’s insistence that in order to locate the onset of the French Revolution, “what one needs to know is which peasants, in which areas of the south of France, first stopped greeting the local landowners.” Such acts, Deleuze argues, again following Nietzsche, are not so much the result of a conscious political, or even ethical or moral, choice as of a line of flight from the ontological grounding of identity, experienced as kind of *ethical desire,* a desire that is always partially folded in and in competition with other desires within the same subject. Such competition is always evident at the macropolitical level of public debate, negotiation, and group decisionmaking. But for Deleuze it is also characteristic of the ontological structure of individual political subjects. In individual subjects, molecular ethical desire is often experienced as schizoid – as one among several conflicting impulses, or perhaps as the calls or voices of alternative, agonistic internal others or even personified molecular micro-selves competing for the subject’s attention. In contrast to the modern, Cartesian-Kantian regulative ideal of the disciplined, rational subject, for Deleuze it is this multiplicity of desires and of internal “selves” that both disjoint the subject and make action possible: “Underneath the self which acts are little selves which contemplate and which render possible both the action and the active subject. We speak of our ‘self’ only in virtue of these thousands of little witnesses which contemplate within us: it is always a third party who says ‘me’.” This internal disunity is no less true of the individual political actor as it is more obviously of the politically mobilized community. Such an understanding of the political *ethos* as a productive, disjunctive synthesis of multiple internal voices and potentialities operating through the acting subject is illustrated by the narratives of the Athenian demos debating the fate of Mytilene (in, among others the speeches of Cleon and Diodotus, whose clashing views on the animating sentiments and ethical responsibilities of the citizens of an imperial democracy Thucydides reconstructs) and of Hugh Thompson, a dedicated career Army officer, veteran combat pilot, and patriot who, torn between the conflicting voices of his commanders, his fellow soldiers, his crew, and the civilian villagers of My Lai begging for their lives, at a certain moment recognized that many of the victims being murdered were the same age as his own infant son.

To understand how micropolitics is shaped and informed by the lines of flight that are actualized in the third synthesis of time is to begin to loosen the grasp both of the conventional individual-level rational actor understanding of politics as the outcome of the aggregate decisions of fully formed, rational, individualized subjects, and of the realist view of politics as struggles over power and resources among interest groups, organizations, states, or other molar collective actors, and to concentrate instead on the virtual, molecular, micropolitical forces and desires that actualize politically significant events. While such micropolitical acts will not necessarily nucleate or crystallize or precipitate macro-level phase shifts or molar transformations within the actualized world of the macropolitical (changes in government or regime, revolution, the emergence or disappearance of civilizations, and so forth), the potential proliferation and multiplication of their effects cannot be predicted or delimited, in advance, either (ATP 431).

During the last years of his life, fully three decades after My Lai, Hugh Thompson was gradually publically redeemed. He was invited to speak at colleges and military academies, including West Point and Annapolis. He and his crew were eventually awarded the Soldier's Medal, the Army's highest combat award not involving direct contact with the enemy, and he was welcomed as a hero by the survivors of the massacre at a peace ceremony in the village of My Lai in 1998 that became the topic of dedicated episodes of *Frontline* and *60 Minutes*. This year, the Kronos Quartet produced a powerful, widely acclaimed opera about Thompson’s heroism and personal tragedy to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the My Lai massacre.[[9]](#footnote-9) Neither Thompson nor his surviving crew member, Larry Colburn, however, ever became politically active in the conventional sense. Even following their public rehabilitation from their thirty year ostracism and persecution, both retained a belief in the essentially heroic character of military service, and dedicated themselves to speaking publically about the moral horror they had witnessed and interrupted, holding out the hope that eventually their example might inspire reform in the ethics training of US military officers, which to a certain extent it has, with effects on the rules of conduct expected of officers, and perhaps even on the now increasingly fluid and unsettled norms surrounding the command authority of the civilian leadership and obedience to illegal orders, that can be neither casually dismissed nor fully envisioned at this point. As Deleuze and Guattari observed, “Undoubtedly, nothing is more outmoded than the man of war … And yet men of war reappear with many ambiguities: they are all those who know the uselessness of violence but who are adjacent to a war machine to be recreated, one of active, revolutionary counterattacks…. They are the new figures of a transhistorical assemblage (neither historical nor eternal, but untimely)”[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. The fullest history of the massacre and its aftermath is now Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Deleuze’s philosophy has influenced a growing number of contemporary political theorists, including but not limited to Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, William Connolly, Diana Coole, Mick Dillon, Jairus Victor Grove, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Brian Massumi, Todd May, Paul Patton, John Protevi, Julian Reid, Nicholas Tampio, Simon Tormey. Although there is no substitute for reading Deleuze’s texts themselves, his innovative concepts and vocabulary can be daunting on first encounter, and secondary commentaries can be helpful. For political theorists, some good places to start are Widder, Connolly, Protevi, Patton, Brian Massumi, Event and Semblance: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts, Peter Lenco. Other lucid, accessible accounts of Deleuze’s ontology can be found in Protevi, Due, Bogue, Adkins, Lampert, Delanda, FINISH [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I concur with Nathan Widder’s position on this – see his *Political Theory after Deleuze*, pp. 58-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most political theorists who have drawn on Deleuze have chosen as case studies relatively inchoate, rhizomic, “molecular” political developments like the alter-globalization movement or the kinds of global forces that Hardt and Negri have explored in their joint works, all of which readily lend themselves to a Deleuzian approach. In this paper I am seeking to extend the use of Deleuze’s concepts to more fully actualized, molarized political subjects and events. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 100-1. See Bogue, *Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 69-70 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dialogues II, pp. 148-52. The process of the actualization of the virtual is one that Deleuze never adequately explicated, and thus even among his best readers, there is quite a range of interpretation of this important aspect of his thought. Compare, for example, Widder 37-41; Protevi, *Political Affect*, Part 1; and Delanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deleuze’s philosophy of time and history is developed in *The Logic of Sense* (hereafter LS), *Difference and Repetition* (DR), and *A Thousand Plateaus* (co-authored with Felix Guattari). The standard overview is now Jay Lampert’s *Deleuze and Guattari’s Philosophy of History*. Other valuable commentaries can be found in Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Philosophy of Time*, Widder, *Reflections on Time and Politics, and Francois Zourabichvili, Deleuze: A Philosophy of the Event*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a lucid and compelling account of the limitations of such historicist approaches to political time, which concludes with a tentative endorsement of a Deleuzian approach to temporality, see Hutchings, *Time and World Politics.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thompson’s story is told with great poignancy in Trent Angers, *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: the Hugh Thompson Story* (Lafayette, LA: Acadian House Publishing, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ATP, p. 403 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)