

Deleuze

Reframed

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Introduction

What is a rhizome?

In literal terms, the word 'rhizome' refers to a plant stem that grows horizontally underground, sending out roots and shoots. Many grasses are rhizomatic, as are any number of common plants found in our diets, including asparagus, ginger and the potato. When Deleuze and Guattari used the term in their introductory chapter to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1980), however, they did so to describe a certain way of thinking.¹ The image of roots and shoots emerging from a horizontal stem encapsulated a manner of thinking that they favoured over the dominant thought process of Western philosophy. Dating back to the ancient Greeks Plato and Aristotle, this dominant Western model is causal, hierarchical, and structured by binaries (one/many, us/them, man/woman, etc.), and has been the dominant form of thinking in Western society for several thousand years.

Due to its emphasis on cause and effect and the creation of hierarchies, Deleuze and Guattari compared the dominant Western model of thinking to the tree. This image refers not only to the literal shape of a tree (the seed is the cause, the tree the effect), but also – for instance – to the genealogical lineage attributed to ancestry in the family tree. In a family tree there is an obvious causal relationship between a single point of origin (the father) and his offspring. Thus the image of the tree expresses how the dominant model of Western thinking creates a single version of the truth (one tree, seemingly living in isolation – or, if you like, one father and one family), from which the 'Other' is then defined – the

space around the tree, or that which is 'not tree'. This type of binary thinking has a long tradition and is still dominant today, although in the late nineteenth century the German philosopher Nietzsche (1844–1900) began to point the way toward another way of thinking. Greatly influenced by Nietzsche (Deleuze wrote *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in 1962), Deleuze developed the idea of the rhizome with co-writer Guattari.

Deleuze and Guattari did not establish rhizomatic thinking in opposition to the dominant Western model, however. It is not exactly a case of tree versus rhizome. Such a move would have recreated a binary opposition (in this case, between right and wrong ways of thinking), consistent with the dominant Western model of thought that Deleuze and Guattari were attempting to rethink. Rather, they felt that we should reconsider how we think. In a sense, the image of the rhizome was supposed to 'supplant', if you can forgive the pun, the image of the tree. Rather than an oppositional model of thought, Deleuze and Guattari attempted to show that the previous model did not provide the whole picture. This difference is perhaps easiest to understand if we consider the image of the tree in the context of a forest. In the forest there is no single truth, no singular cause and effect, no one 'true' tree. Rather, the forest is a single entity made up of numerous trees, or, numerous 'truths'. It is also impossible to posit one origin to a forest, and not simply because you cannot tell which tree came first. Any one tree is a product of an assemblage of water, sunlight and soil, without which there would be no trees at all, regardless of whether a seed exists or not. To consider a tree in isolation, then, is erroneous, because everything is in fact the product of an assemblage with various different elements, and is not simply attributable to one cause. Everything is, in this sense, rhizomatic, and to think in the manner of the tree is only to use one aspect of the rhizome.

For Deleuze and Guattari, when thinking we should not always reduce things to 'one thing and its Others', one true way of thinking

and its competitors, but, rather, consider that every thing always contains many truths. For this reason they attempted to discard the hierarchical image of thought of the tree as somewhat illusory, and replace it with the horizontal image of the rhizome. Instead of tree, rhizome. Instead of one, one as many. Not one and its multiple Others, but a singular multiplicity. Like a forest, then, for Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome 'has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills'.²

Some concrete examples can help us understand the broader ramifications of the rhizome and rhizomatic ways of thinking. Deleuze and Guattari used the rhizome to describe living entities (pack animals such as rats and wolves) but also geographical entities such as burrows, 'in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion and breakout'.³ In the case of pack animals, the moving masses continually form and re-form a single shape, a fluid entity that is at once one and many. This is a clear example of a rhizome – a herd of wild horses, a wheeling flock of birds, etc. The idea of the burrow, however, provides a more interesting angle from which to consider the rhizome. Consider the guerrilla war of attrition that the Vietnamese Vietcong fought against the overwhelmingly superior technology of the US military in the 1960s and early 1970s. As part and parcel of this struggle they utilised an elaborate tunnel system which enabled them to evade the US military's land and air forces, store and move arms and supplies, build up numbers for ambushes and surprise attacks, and quickly disappear again once overwhelmed. The rhizome as burrow, then, is a way of describing an underground political movement, both literally, as in this case, and figuratively. As a further, figurative example, underground protest movements are now also able to gather strength and support among geographically disparate members using the rhizomatic networks enabled by the Internet. The rhizome, then, has many applications, one of which is in the political realm.

Deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation

At this stage a note of warning is needed. Whenever we explore thought (or, indeed, anything else) rhizomatically, there is always a deep ambiguity involved. The rhizome has the potential to produce great change, or, to use a word that Deleuze deployed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, to *deterritorialise*. There is also a complementary movement that is always involved, however, a force that attempts to recreate stability and order, to *reterritorialise*. As a shifting pattern (be it the rapidly shifting flocking of birds or the slow spread of a forest), the rhizome is constantly creating a new 'line of flight' that enables it to deterritorialise. Along this line of flight it has the potential to move into (and onto) new territories. Lines of flight are created at the edge of the rhizomatic formation, where the multiplicity experiences an outside, and transforms and changes. At this border there is a double becoming that changes both the rhizome and that which it encounters (which is always, in fact, the edge of another rhizome). Deleuze and Guattari explain this process using the example of a wasp pollinating an orchid:

How could movements of deterritorialisation and processes of reterritorialisation not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorialises by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorialises on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialised, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorialises the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome.⁵

This example illustrates that with every deterritorialisation there is an accompanying reterritorialisation. The orchid ceases to be entirely orchid as it encounters the wasp. It deterritorialises (a process of becoming wasp), but, as its pollen is moved elsewhere by the wasp, the orchid is also reterritorialised. The opposite is also true for the wasp. As Deleuze and Guattari have it, '[A] becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp.

Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialisation of one term and the reterritorialisation of the other.⁶ As with all such encounters there is an assemblage created, and a double becoming between both aspects of the assemblage.

What this example does not immediately show, however, is the power imbalance that usually accompanies such encounters. For a clearer example of the ambiguities that surround de- and reterritorialisation it is worth considering humanity's most violent and influential form of de- and reterritorialisation: colonisation. When the 'New World' of the Americas was first officially 'discovered' by Europeans (not to mention Australia, New Zealand and so on), their coastlines were mapped by the first sailors. As these lands were gradually occupied by European settlers a colonial mapping of these lands also took place. These acts of mapping were at once a deterritorialisation of European identities – as they explored new territories outside Europe – and a reterritorialisation, as they began to settle new lands. This process of mapping contained a mutual process of becoming, as the colonisers adapted to their new lands, and the new lands to their colonisers. Through contact with a new land and its peoples the values and practices of these European cultures were deterritorialised, transformed, and ultimately reterritorialised in a new form. Similarly, the native peoples of these lands (and, indeed, the lands themselves) were deterritorialised and reterritorialised into new forms due to the appearance of these strangers.

The history of colonialism is one of unequal reterritorialisation, however, in which the dominant European cultures – for all that they did adapt on encountering new lands and new peoples – ultimately came to impose their culture upon the New World. It would be euphemistic to suggest that war, massacre, genocide, slavery, concentration camps, taxes, land clearances, disease and numerous other such abuses were simply 'reterritorialisations'. While a dominant colonial power will often change as its rhizome comes into contact with another, the other, weaker rhizome is

often absorbed, or forcefully reterritorialised by its culture. Thus, although the rhizome provides a new way of thinking, due to this imbalance in the process of mutual becoming-other that is de- and reterritorialisation, the rhizome should not necessarily be celebrated as the answer to all problems encountered when thinking in the manner of the tree.

Rhizomes in context

Finally, it is worth considering the context from which the idea of the rhizome emerged. In May 1968 there was an enormous popular uprising throughout France, beginning with a mass student strike in Paris, which was soon joined by workers all over the country. Not long after this, in 1972, Deleuze and Guattari wrote their first book together, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. *A Thousand Plateaus* was originally published as the sequel to *Anti-Oedipus*, and the idea of the rhizome is clearly a development of ideas found in this original text. *Anti-Oedipus* is a dense book that rails against psychoanalysis for attempting to 'cure' non-conforming desires by reducing them to the familial, Oedipal triangle of 'daddy-mummy-me'.⁷ Deleuze and Guattari consider psychoanalysts as modern-day priests,⁸ charged with placing the origin, or root, of all psychological issues in the bourgeois family home. Psychoanalysis, then, functions by perpetually imposing the image of thought of the tree. If you have a sexual 'problem', this is because you did not develop correctly as a child. You did not develop into a healthy tree because your roots were not given the proper nourishment as a sapling. In fact, in chapter 2 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari return to psychoanalysis to reiterate this point in relation to the idea of the rhizome, which they introduce in chapter 1.

In contrast to psychoanalysis, and perhaps as a consequence of experiencing the uprisings of 1968,⁹ Deleuze and Guattari felt that humanity had more chance of developing if it looked less at the family as origin, and more at the rhizomatic patterns of everyday

life in which we are interact with others. Humans are pack animals, and, although society structures our activities through institutions that are hierarchical (that function as trees), there is always the possibility of a rhizomatic grass-roots (!) revolution emerging from the interaction of people. For this reason they preferred schizoanalysis to psychoanalysis, a practice of finding ourselves by exploring our identities as pack animals – or, rather, as a pack of animals. Instead of seeing the unconscious as a dark and forbidding place in which desire is buried, for Deleuze and Guattari the unconscious is a place of underground passageways or rhizomatic burrows through which desire moves like a guerrilla fighter, ready to spring up when we least expect it.