

“The ways we respond to problems are often part of the problem”

“We often become that which we strenuously resist”

With the concept of rhizomes in mind, discuss how these statements about the irony of action and activism inform sacred activism.

There is a talk of degrowth, of deceleration, that we live beyond our possibilities, that it is urgent to cut emissions that dangerously damage the environment and, in short, that vital raw materials are beginning to be lacking¹. But nobody tells us that in order to do it we must decrease an ego that is proud and selfish by nature.

How do you tame the tiger, the dragon, that crazy one of the house that we all carry inside, that small self that has a fragmented and multiple view of the world as it separates the subject that knows and the object that is known by classifying the world into categories that separate and draw boundaries where there is only unity; a way of vision incapable of unifying the different orders in which the cosmos dances, in which we are, we move and we exist in?

The media has yet to tell us that in order to realize a true ecology of containment, a change of outlook is needed, which can only be done by changing the disposition of the spirit, getting rid of technical and reductive thinking and returning to the order of values and priorities. Changing the intellectual skin, promoting another way of looking and leaving the logical prejudices of modernity; because the way in which we conceive the world shapes the way in which we relate to it. Or citing Jeff Carreira: ‘... [it] is not me describing the reality I see, it is me creating that possibility as I write. The reality is not there and then I describe it. Whatever reality is it is co-emerging with our description of it; it can’t be separated’ (Carreira 2016: 16).

The traditional way of activism has been putting the focus on you, the singularity of a person, in the figure of a hero. ‘What if you are larger than what you think you are?’ asked Bayo Akomolafe in class before presenting the figure of the rhizome to tell us a different story of being agents of action, a different anthology for activism; which will later offer a definition of Sacred Activism.

The rhizome, which is different from a root, presents the particularity of having a central multiplicity. It has no centre; therefore it cannot make reference to a prior unity. This figure embodies difference in itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The concept of ‘the rhizome’ was developed by Deleuze and Guattari and it has had high repercussions in shifting discussions in academia, specifically in the postmodernism school of thought. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* the authors present the principal characteristic of a rhizome as:

¹ See for example the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment report issued in March 2005.

... unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible to neither the One or the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five etc. It is not a multiple derived from the one, or to which one is added ($n+1$). It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the one is always subtracted ($n-1$).

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21)

If we use this figure in the way we think, then thoughts become a process, interrelated; therefore, we become becomings. Deleuze called this 'rehabilitating thoughts' and examples of such can be the phenomena of a flower and a bee in their business of pollination, someone eating an apple, you using the phone, or the phone using you. In these examples we can see the blurred separation between the object and the subject; it becomes a single relational phenomenon in itself.

Religious traditions would say that God lives through everything, but as Jeff Carreira expresses: this can bring 'the mystery and magic into existence without needing to go back to a god centered dualism that keeps us separate' (Carreira 2016: 12), where reality is emerging in an act of complete collaboration. 'That possibility of something becoming 'real' is writing itself into existence through me AND it is writing me/Jeff into existence by me writing it into existence' (Carreira 2016: 16). Therefore, our articulations create realities and these –our articulations– simultaneously are originated in a source beyond our comprehension. 'That larger or higher being is calling things into reality, perhaps aspects of itself, through our articulation without us even knowing this part that we are playing' (Carreira 2016: 18).

By Deleuze and Guattari applying this figure to our thinking, we can overcome the hierarchical and binarized kind of thoughts for more emergent ones, those containing multiple multiplicities without an essential stable core. Under this new look, connection and heterogeneity take over the subject/object limits and the hierarchical lining process of chronological causality.

When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. These lines, or ligaments, should not be confused with lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions... Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21)

How does this image influence a different anthology of activism? By embracing the idea that 'solutions are not inherently superior to problems, that confusion is just as generative' (Akomolafe np).

This image enables the connection of 'any point to any other point' through ever-going construction processes. The non-closed nature of the system means it is not reducible to 'the One or the multiple', and its importance does not lie in the units alone but in 'directions in motion' and a configuration that give rise to an emergent series of readings in every situation. It is inherent to an emergent space to 'change in nature' with 'neither beginning nor end, but always a middle'. It is a 'map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21), yet as Baudrillard states in *Simulation and Simulacra*, it is "the cartographer's mad project of the ideal coextensivity of map and territory' (Baudrillard 1994: 2).

Under this mechanism then, activism or Sacred Activism would be to realize the others in the equation, to appreciate the complexities in it, perhaps even the no understanding of the equation or the situation. Under a sacred activism we would approach something not to see what is within but, for example, what is in between. Integrating this idea, what is absent becomes important, as it is also present. Just like a rhizomatic system and like Bayo poetically would express 'to see what is between, not in or out, makes us forever unfinished, yet to come, in movement...'. Thus, embracing the ability to stay comfortably in the trouble, 'there will never be a final explanation but to learn to sit in the trouble' Bayo said. What is momentarily unclear in a given situation may later make perfect sense, or perfect nonsense, where non-sense is also seen as relevant to the construction of a context when explored in a pointed manner.

As Karen Barad expresses in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, in a given situation where we may feel called to act, 'There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly' (Barad 2007: X). This, as mentioned before, embraces a total difference in the ways being an actor of action or an agent of change has been seen under the umbrella of activism. This new outlook allows us to act without the tight expectation of a precise outcome, assumptions or other binarized perceptions that often make us resistant to the given situation; it rather adopts a participatory and holistic way of seeing the world beyond instrumental thinking where every phenomenon appears as a constant emergent collective knowledge creation that upends the primacy of solutions and embraces shared multiplicities.

For that change of intellectual skin, for that reduction of speed, what is really necessary is to de-pollute the soul. Purify our gaze through a path of interiority. True reforms do not start outside oneself while fighting against those in front of us. The real reforms consist of a radical change of outlook and mentality.

Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff of the Proteus Initiative² defend a 'delicate activism' as a 'radical approach to change', 'a delicate activism is truly radical in that it is aware of itself, and understands that its way of seeing is the change it wants to see' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 1). Their work started from realizing that a big number of activist projects or attempts at working with change get caught on their own assumptions ending not only in failing to create change, but in perpetuating the forces they were attempting to modify. Not seeing further than our own insinuations and assumption that 'we can change the world by acting on it' seems to 'heralds a paradoxical and ironic twist' that Kaplan and Davidoff expressed as: 'there is something strangely conservative at the heart of almost all approaches to change' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 4). Then the question for them becomes: 'how to walk that terrain differently' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 4).

This fact has also been pointed out by the Gestalt psychology giving it the name of 'the paradoxical theory of change', or 'the more you try to change a behaviour, the more it stays the same' (Beisser 1970). It has also been pointed out and criticized from a variety of approaches, for instance, by the questions raised from the appreciation of the complexities of social change as something 'messy and largely unexpected', this is known as 'conservatism of transformation', which explains the fixed and unchanging nature of our notions of social good under ethical foundationalism views, 'which are also emergent and co-produced' (Akomolafe 2017: np).

What Kaplan and Davidoff offer under the title of 'delicate activism' is a re-approach to what it means to be an actor of change, trying to overcome 'an activism that emphasises action to the diminution of reflection, that rewards outer effect and ignores inner awareness, that focuses on the other but occludes the self, that extols results (almost as commodities) without sufficient regard for the process of getting there' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 1).

Since we are part of the system we are trying to change or resist, perhaps our resistance is what perpetuates the failure to change a situation. Therefore, what a delicate activism or sacred activism attempts to do is to resituate the 'agency –the power to act–' as something 'always diffracted', and specially 'not human-centred' (Akomolafe 2017).

Likewise with the metaphor of the rhizome, this new approach would deeply situate us in any situation with a different way of being participants rather than observers with a vantage point of exteriority. The dominant practices of activism have not yet questioned the primacy of the 'result-based management' figure of setting objectives, strategies, elaborated plans, and in short, looking for the shortcuts that brings quantifiable results (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 6). But if we think about Deleuze and Guattari's image of 'rehabilitating thoughts' as a rhizomatic system, 'these assumptions that underlie the path of management contradict the notions of complexity and emergence that have come to be recognised as central aspects of social process' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 6).

² The Proteus Initiative is a platform that works with social and environment change and activism bringing together different phenomenological methodologies inspired by JW von Goethe. More information available in: <http://www.proteusinitiative.org>

In fact, citing Goethe's concept of 'delicate empiricism', which 'makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory' (Miller 1995: 307), and which have been the inspiration of Kaplan and Davidoff on developing a phenomenological approach to social change, it goes beyond the separation 'between subject and object, between the perceiver and that which is perceived, between the actor and the action, or that which is acted upon' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 2). This, as the image of the rhizomatic thought, presents difference in itself, a different way of simply being, rather than acting, in the world.

We have to rediscover that enlarged, purified and renewed outlook; which is the Eye of the heart and which makes us see things as "God" would see them. That view is one that surpasses the immediate vision, the horizontal vision; it is at the same time symbolic, poetic, and shares with the child a certain gift of innocence. That view helps to understand that a mountain, a river, a forest, are something more than a conglomerate of minerals, a body of water, trunks of trees, and tells us about our personal ascension, the cosmic evolution, and the inner sanctuary.

All of nature is there to teach us who we are. That is her pedagogical importance. It is up to us to know how to capture her messages, decipher her keys, remember her lessons; and to listen to them more closely, decide once and for all to install ourselves in her bosom, leading to a complete turn in our lives or even a change towards a more modest destination. But what we wouldn't do to hear the dust remind us that we are stardust too; or listen to the wind telling us that we are only a breath –*pneuma*–, but that *Pneuma* means Spirit.

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The website of The Proteus Initiative: <http://www.proteusinitiative.org>