

# Intercultural perspectives of Gregory Bateson's way of thinking

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**Abstract.** This article proposes a reading of some constructs extrapolated from the boundless work of Gregory Bateson in an educational and markedly intercultural key. In the light of the “new” educational needs of children of a multicultural, liquid and interconnected society, a renewed ecological education aimed at citizenship is desirable. global. Bateson's teaching can represent an opportunity for reflection for those responsible for educational planning

**Keywords.** Intercultural – Education – Complexity – Gregory Bateson

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## Introduction

In the last ten years the Italian educational system has developed project resources and inclusive processes aimed at welcoming young migrants into the socio-cultural and educational fabric.

Today's migrations have the aspect of a growing “testing” in theoretical assumptions and constructs of a science of education deeply imbued with ethnocentrism and *emergentialism*<sup>1</sup>.

The reflection presented in this paper aims to reason at the intrinsic risk that one runs in separating events from their historical context and repositioning them in the world as a whole, that is, to reason in pedagogical terms using the words of one's own intellectual position, “adhering” them to the measures of far away places, with the support of partly “real” and partly “imaginary” examples concerning the societies of the migrants' origin welcomed into the school system of the host country, or an unknown periphery, in a sort of dangerous and humanitarian naive exoticism.

[...] pedagogy accuses a growing epistemological anorexia. Its accredited theories of education place the person at the centre of its reflection/design, but only of a person who lives in the western world. It is of a person who shows the following identifying marks: being white-male-rich-sated.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to translate this word into English: for example in “Vocabolario Treccani” it is to write: «Tendency to face every difficulty as an emergency situation, without correctly identifying the causes and preparing the appropriate remedies». According to the sensitivity of the author, it is correct to propose the following translation: intended as an attitude - typically *Italic* - to think of being able to solve structural problems by treating them as if they were always an emergency

Never have the theories of education, as we know them considered people of the other half of the Planet: black-female-poor-desperate (Frabboni, 2018, p. 23, in Cerrocchi, Dozza.)

Starting from this assumption of awareness and responsibility, in the following pages we want to think about the educational issues related to Italy as the host country of hundreds of young migrants (women and men) considering the idea of moving the centre of the world (Thiong'o, 1993) from an ecological and planetary point of view, following some suggestions dispersed in several places in the immense work of Gregory Bateson.

Bateson was not a pedagogist, nor did he marginally deal with “a different thing from psychology and different from sociology” which we define the science of education and training; nevertheless, all his work - unique, original and difficult - is permeated with an ethical and political commitment to the humanization of the creature.

In particular, an interpretative hypothesis of Bateson's work as a forerunner of intercultural studies is presented.

### 1. An intercultural reading of Bateson's work

Bateson's thought, or rather, meta-thought, concerns connections, ambiguities, strident cohabitations, ecological solidarity and the incessant search for links and evolutionary spaces aiming at overcoming the paralyzing Cartesian dualisms.

Although devoid of “Conscious Purpose”<sup>2</sup>, Bateson's thought appears to be perfectly in line with those intercultural competences that those who have educational responsibilities should have: solicited to exercises of disorientation and cognitive decentralization, we are called to enact our transcultural sensitivity and our ability to “stay” in the middle worlds.

By renouncing the ethnocentric and supremacist assumption of the colonizing West, Bateson breaks the barriers of a *modus operandi* imbued with a culture that reproduces power (a real one, acted in the colonies and a symbolic, cultural one) giving voice to the right to opacity (Glissant, 2007), that respectful detachment of non-understanding, he renounces the claim of wanting to understand and catalogue. In Bateson's choice one glimpses the revolutionary position according to which the explanation is not due, nor even necessary.

Sclavi (2003) proposes a suggestive definition of the field of research, experienced as a source of “generative displacement”, which refers to the concept of “exotopia” (Bachtin, 2000, in Sclavi 2003); exotopia is a continuous exercise of reflective practice, a cognitive, methodological and ethical positioning that concerns the researcher in their research practices: It implies the competences of the researcher to make the stories of others

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to discuss it: Gregory Bateson's reflections on the theme “Conscious Purpose” are deepened in the text “In search of the sacred”, which collects the interview granted on the occasion of the Dartington Seminar, published in *A sacred unity*. “[...] conscious finality quickly becomes destructive. “Purpose” is a very dangerous concept. Consciousness I don't know. I have been careful to speak of consciousness as little as possible. The problem with consciousness is that by its nature it is concentrated. [...] Consciousness will always be selective [...] Consciousness tends to concentrate, while notions such as the sacred and the beautiful always tend to seek amplitude, the whole. That's why I don't trust conscience as the main guide ». In *In search of the sacred*, p. 444.

resound within their findings without forgetting their own, trying to understand the other and preserving their own distinctive characteristics.

To give an account of the bewilderment experienced by Bateson himself, we refer to the compelling narrative contained in "The Last Conference" (A Sacred Unity, p. 455):

In T. S. Eliot's words, "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know that place for the first time." So, here I am in Britain where I started and from which I have been away almost continuously since 1927 when I was twenty-three. It was then that I started to go to New Guinea. I returned in 1929 from a study of headhunting people to the high table of St. John's College, Cambridge, and found myself very unhappy there. It seemed to me that the undoubtedly elegant exchange of intellectual embroidery which occurred at the high table was somehow emotionally dishonest, so I fled down into Somerset, where I wrote up my New Guinea material, submitted it for a Fellowship, got my Fellowship, and returned to New Guinea. On my second trip I learned a good deal about how New Guinea etiquette works, how beautifully it dovetails together. And when I returned again—returning again to the place from which I started—to the high table of St. John's College, Cambridge, I was fascinated and enchanted by the elegance of that system where again parts function together, fitting together with every detail "at home taking its place to support the others." And so on. "The easy commerce of the old and new." And soon. I turned to my neighbour at the high table and remarked on this beauty of functioning and it was, I assure you, not a critical but a loving comment, a delighted comment. He turned immediately to his neighbour on the other side and started a conversation about the weather.

Naven's pioneering work (1936-1942), for example, can be considered as a core for the genesis and development of fertile theories on intercultural. In Naven, a masterpiece of ethnography and anthropology, Bateson goes beyond the structural-functionalist approach, based on the 'holistic' assumption that ethnology means 'explaining', systematically describing a society, identifying its structures and related functions, and adopts a look that focuses on a small portion of society (the Naven ritual), on the interactive dynamics and the interweaving of emotions and ideas; Naven abandons the ethnocentric gaze that claims to 'explain' people as belonging to a culture and it is a study of the nature of explanation (Bianchi, 2019, op. cit.).

The book contains elements about Iatmul's life and culture and is not just an ethnographic study. [...] Rather, it is an attempt at synthesis, a study of the ways in which data can be fitted together; and the fitting of data is what I mean by «explanation» (Bateson, 1958, p. 264).

For this research he produced an extraordinarily extensive photographic documentation of the Naven ritual of the Iatmul people highlighting how the use of photography can prefigure the dialogic and recursive relationship between images and writing; the use of the written word alone represents a limit for Bateson, who feels the need to free himself from 'hermeneutical-empiric constraint' that forces him to take into account two antagonistic perspectives: on the one hand the empiricism of the English school within which he was formed, and on the other the epistemological and reflexive tension that has characterized his entire work» (Ricci, 2006, p. 15).

Naven represents an extraordinary innovation - in ethnography, in anthropology, in sociology - because it lays the foundations for a complex and intercultural view:

[...] At the most concrete level there is ethnographic data. More abstract is the tentative arranging of data to give various pictures of the culture, and what is even more abstract is the self-conscious discussion of procedures by which the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are put together. The final climax of the book is the discovery, described in the epilogue - and achieved only a few days before the book went to press - of what looks like a truism today: that ethos, eidos, sociology, economics, cultural structure, social structure, and all the rest of these words refer only to scientists' ways of putting the jigsaw puzzle together (Bateson, 1958, p. 264).

In the intercultural sphere, this profound awareness for the need of «double understanding» is amplified and becomes crucial: awareness of self-discovery in the light of the discovery of others, of life in general, and awareness of the responsibility that what we know also arises from what we are in our relationship with ourselves and in our relationships with others. The two forms of exploration that underpin knowledge - inward and outward<sup>3</sup> - are necessarily linked and represent more or less conscious continuous mediation.

I am always mumbling about what I call “natural history” and that without natural history all knowledge is dead or dull or pious. And now, it begins to look as if the natural history of that oak tree is the natural history of ourselves. Or at least as if there were a macrocosmic natural history with which all the little natural histories are so conformable that understanding a little one gives a hint for understanding the big one (Bateson, 1991, p. 227).

## **2. The necessary awareness of a double understanding urges the overcoming of the subject/object, mind/nature dualism.**

[...] Perhaps all exploration of the world of ideas is only a searching for a rediscovery, and perhaps it is such rediscovery of the latent that defines us as “human,” “conscious,” and “twice born” (Bateson, 1991, p. 224).

[...] but in this way the word «objective» disappears in silence; at the same time the word «subjective», which usually confines «me» inside my skin, also disappears. I think the most important change is the reduction of the objective. The world is no longer «out there», as it seemed to be before [...]. Between these two extremes [solipsism and its opposite] there is an area where we are partly carried by the winds of reality and partly we are artists who, based on internal and external events, create a composition (Bateson, 1991, pp. 347-348).

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship between internal and external is central in the concept of ‘migratory trauma’, relative to the notion of ‘cultural envelope’ proposed by R. M. Moro [1994-2002]: Moro helps us to understand that if there is a lack of coherence-connection between internalized culture and external culture, the individual lives immersed in a highly stressful situation. With the expression ‘internal culture’ we mean the framework of reference internalized by an individual in his/her development process; with ‘external culture’, on the other hand, we mean the culture of the group to which he belongs. Between internal culture and external culture there is a process of continuous exchange and mutual reflection, which allows the person to keep his or her internal frame of reference alive and elastic, thanks to the so-called ‘cultural envelope’, a sort of psychic skin that allows an individual to feel in tune with his or her world of reference. Cfr. Bianchi, 2019 op.cit.

Even in the pages of the text written with his daughter Mary Catherine Angel's fear (1989), Bateson seems to lay the foundations of an <intercultural> thought - an interlocutory, complex, democratic, ethical and never ethnocentric thought -, deepening the theme of the comparative study of anthropological and epistemological subjects. He writes on the subject (1989, p. 23)

As anthropologists we study the ethics of every population and go on from there to study comparative ethics. We try to see the particularities of local ethics of each tribe against a background of our knowledge of ethics in other systems. Similarly it is possible, and begins to be fashionable, to study the epistemology of every population, the structures of knowing and the pathways of computation. From this kind of study it is natural to go on to compare the epistemology implicit in one cultural system with that in other systems.

### **3. Pattern which connects: an intercultural lens to educate for change**

As "intercultural storytellers" (Sclavi, 2003), we living creatures are led to chase a thought of conjunctions, encounters, excesses and, therefore, the ecology of the mind is presented as a theoretical-epistemological plot of great inspiration and profound evocative value: intercultural filter par excellence is, therefore, the Batesonian idea of 'structure that connects'.

The Creature (i.e. all the elements of the biological and social sphere, among which, of course, those included in the pronoun 'we') is based on a deep structure that connects all its components. To make the concept of connecting structure understandable, Bateson used to ask

What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the back-ward schizo phrenic in another? I want to tell you why I have been a biologist all my life, what it is that I have been trying to study. What thoughts can I share regarding the total biological world in which we live and have our being? How is it put together? (Bateson, 1979, p. 22).

According to Bateson, examining single thoughts by separating them and organizing knowledge on a traditional pattern of distinction between disciplines is anti-ecological, and is also inconsistent with the <normal> functioning of mental processes.

### **4. Education for a new world: towards the idea of terrestrial citizenship**

In "last lecture", Bateson engages reflections from the late 1920s when trips to unknown and distant lands helped him to deconstruct forms, practices and models of dichotomous, Cartesian, old and ethnocentric thinking.

He writes (1991, p. 308):

[...] Today we are in an epoch in which the very deep things of which we were happily unconscious are now rumbling with change. I think it is time for you Britons, and for my friends in America for the whole Western world and perhaps for the Oriental world to pay attention to

that rumbling. We have to become conscious of those things of which we were previously happily and for our own good, unaware.

So I return today to the place from which I started with a determination to know the place for the first time or to help you know it. Especially I want to offer you the thinking, which I've done since 1927. There are two pieces of this thinking which I want to offer you. Both of them have to do with the problems of education in the wider sense of that word.

So Bateson takes turns in purely educational matters and he does it with the usual farsightedness, with a thought for the future, projecting his dense reflections into theories for ethical and political actions that can equip the citizens of liquid or postmodern society (Bauman, 2008)

There are two hinges on which he wishes to reason: the Cartesian dichotomy between the mind and body and the pitfalls of rough and mechanical language. In the first question he writes:

I regard all that as lunatic extrapolation from a Cartesian position in which I simply do not believe.

It seems to me important for our notions of responsibility and our notions of what a human begins, that we accept very firmly that body and mind are one. (ibid., p. 309)

Then he proposes to reflect on an epistemological question and declares the need to use isomorphic language to speak of living beings; a living and coherent language to name people and relations between people and, again, warns «do not count the things that are in relation, but the relations; not the terms of the relation, but the relations; Bateson writes:

But everyday language hides the truth that the development of those eyes in that location or that nose located between them is a relational matter. It is brought about by internal exchange of news about the organization as it develops and news of the relations between the parts of that organization [...] Let me put it this way. If I ask you how many fingers you have, you will probably answer, "Five." That I believe to be an incorrect answer, the correct answer, I believe, is, "Gregory you are asking a question wrongly." In the processes of human growth, there is surely no word which means finger, and no word which means five. There might be a word for "branches," a command of some sort identifying the contingencies of branches. If that is so, then the right question would be: How many relations between pairs of fingers do you have? And the correct answer, of course, is four. The relation between one and two, the relation between two and three, between three and four, four and five. (It is unlikely, I think, that the relation between number four and five back up the relation between one and two but its conceivable.) You should be counting not the things, which are related, but the relationships; not the related, but the relationships. How many branches did it take to make a hand? Not how many fingers were a result of those branches (ibid. p. 310)

Bateson urges us to broaden our gaze beyond boundaries and circumscribed perimeters, accompanying us towards an ecological framework and suggests that we «look beyond» the contexts that shape our daily life; this is the essential foundation for being in the middle world, between people who inhabit other languages and other thoughts.

On the other hand, as Cambi (2003) writes, «The paradigm (or meta-paradigma?) of complexity lies today within society, within knowledge, within consciences. Precisely for

this reason, it is also and above all one might say a pedagogical paradigm: of the formation of the ego, of its mind, but also of current culture and society».

In this regard, Manghi (2004) helps us to meet the ecology of Bateson's mind, an encounter that asks the reader not only to understand by analysis, but above all by meditation. In this era of ours, which we call the planetary era, we are in fact increasing the need to practice meditation, which is:

[...] action upon oneself. On the relationship between ourselves and the others with whom we share the world we live in. Where what is at stake is never only the knowledge of the world, but always also, as a reflection, the knowledge of our own knowledge (Manghi, 2004, p. XI).

Here, there is an invitation to confront ourselves with languages no longer shaped through the oppositional dualism between mind and matter and between organism and environment, but operating through the relationship and shared construction: we are all and always active builders of knowledge, even when we are unaware of it, and we give life to significant contexts of which «beauty and ugliness [...] real components of the world in which you live as living creatures» are part.

In other words, I am suggesting to you, first, that language is very deceiving, and, second, that if you begin even without much knowledge to adventure into what it would be like to look at the world with a biological epistemology, you will come into contact with concepts which the biologists don't look at at all. You will meet with beauty and ugliness. «These may be real components in the world that you as a living creature live in (Bateson, 1991, p. 311).

To educate to cross borders - whatever that means - is to educate to a new humanism (Morin, 2015) that prepares for global citizenship, based on an ecological and ethical vision: in an interconnected and fluid world, we are all called to co-construct an educating community: in this way we are all responsible, as Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson (1987, pp. 272-273) suggest:

[...] how should one interpret the responsibility of those who deal with living systems, the vast and heterogeneous crowd of enthusiastic and cynical, generous and greedy people? All of them, individually or collectively, have the responsibility for a dream, which is then the way to ask the question: «What is a man, who knows living systems and act on them, and what are these systems, which can be known? The answers to this twofold enigma must be constructed by weaving together mathematics, natural history, aesthetics and even the joy of living and loving: all contribute to giving shape to that dream.

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