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## Gregory Bateson and the Political

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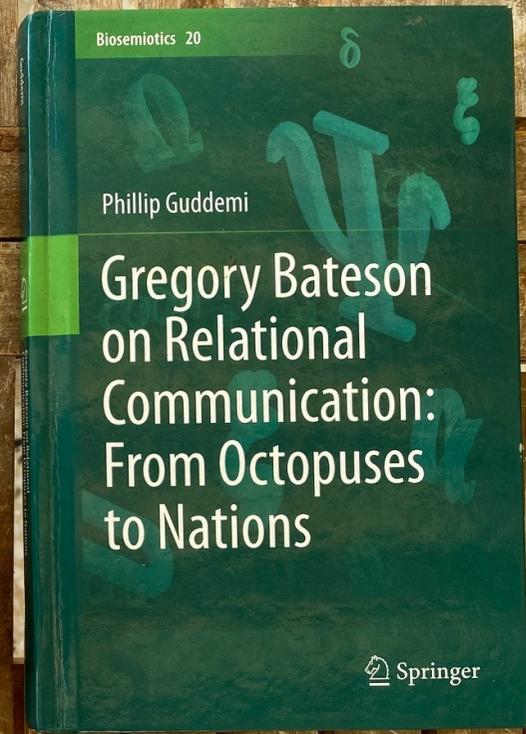
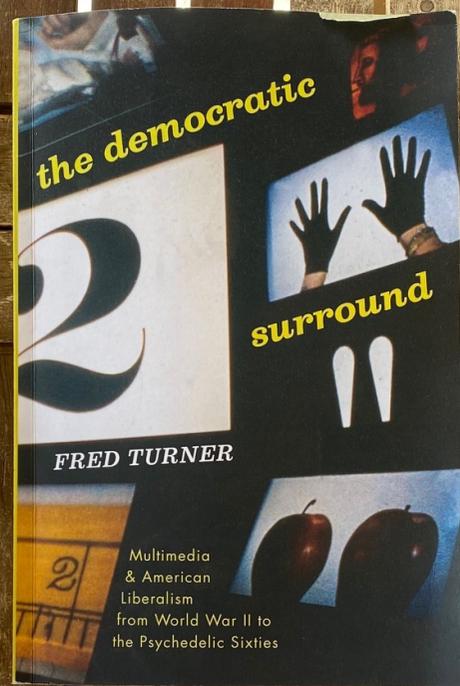
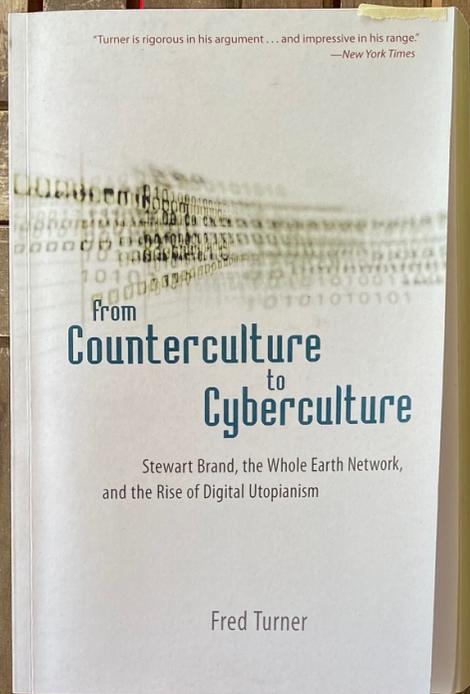
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# Gregory Bateson and the Political

**Jon Goodbun**  
**Phillip Guddemi**  
**Fred Turner**  
**Dulmini Perera**





## On the Possibility of an Ecological Dialogue

Jon Goodbun

Dr Jon Goodbun joins Making Futures School as part of the Resource Track. Jon has a background in architectural theory, design research and practice, which over the last two decades has focused ever more on environmental and ecological research and practice, and what this means for how we think about space. As an educator, he has helped set up two environmental architecture masters courses at the University of Westminster and the Royal College of Art. In this essay, he outlines concepts which might help us to use dialogue to give form to an environmental architecture pedagogy and practice, drawing on recent experiences with the Extinction Rebellion movement, which uses peaceful civil disobedience to protest the lack of governmental action against climate change.

The call for environmental justice, and the recognition that the effects of environmental change will be played out through class, gender, race and neo-colonial structures, articulates an essential socialisation and politicisation of what is at stake in thinking through our responses to ecological crisis.

However, any demand for environmental justice must be accompanied by a certain mourning, as there will be – in a basic sense – no justice. There will be no reckoning, no making good. There are clear culprits – individuals, classes and corporations – responsible for the production of the uneven relations of scarcity and power which are absolutely structural to the operational behaviour of capitalism, and we should demand some kind of justice in navigating towards futures beyond this economic form. It is just that a simple restitution is generally impossible, for obvious reasons.

There is another scale of ecological thought which suggests that the very concept of environmental justice, the very idea of a reckoning, is not just ultimately impossible, but is itself an environmental problem. The ecological anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified an "epistemological error" that tends to permeate through systems in the manner of "an ecology of weeds". When goals are set by an instrumental conscious purpose based upon a necessarily partial viewpoint, and unmediated by a wider eco-systemic awareness, all kinds of pathologies play out. In his account, the various myths, stories, rituals, religious practices and the like found in non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies provided a kind of meta-aesthetic learning environment for thought, which was in some way formally isomorphic with the communicational relations within the ecosystems that were the environment for human action. These myths and rituals acted as a dampening force, regulating the exponential amplifying potential that unmediated conscious purpose and its power structures can have upon wider ecosystems. Under the fragmenting force of capitalist practices and divi-

sions of labour, many of these pre-capitalist meta-aesthetic structures were destroyed.

Today, law, in its modern separation from wider meta-aesthetic form, is limited in its ecological imaginary (it can think about environments, but not environmentally). This means that when we use it out-of-context, in for example simplistically "choosing sides" to shape apparently progressive socio-ecological priorities and goals, we risk unleashing new waves of unforeseen environmental violence and pathology. Complex ecological systems are, in their essential logos – their communicational structures and content – beyond good and evil, and we still don't really have the tools and concepts for managing our conscious purpose in this condition.

How then, do we proceed? The situation is not as completely hopeless as it may seem. Perhaps it is in observing the very relation between the demand for environmental justice and the mourning of its impossibility – within that double bind – that we can find the route to ecological wisdom, a route to a more aesthetic, what is in fact even, if carefully defined, a more sacred sense of ecological justice. This then, is not a lament about the pointlessness of struggle, but rather a call for multiple levels of activism and a new kind of environmental dialogue.

Recent ecocide law and environmental justice activism has had a significant engagement with at least the first half of this double-bind – the impossibility of any simple justice – and has developed an important and still evolving conception of a more systemic restorative or regenerative justice, typically developed through dialogue between all of the actors involved. This dialogue is perhaps key to evolving a new ecological language. The physicist David Bohm, in his later work on the possibility of a verb-based process language – the *rheomode* – and in his various engagements with non-western and indigenous forms of science – developed an understanding of dialogue as a conversational form grounded in active lis-

tening. Noting that "discussion" shares a common root to percussion and concussion, and indeed means to break things up for competitive analysis, the root meaning of "dialogue" – through (dia-) the logos – suggests, according to Bohm, a "stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us" and can facilitate a more collective wisdom beyond the fragmentation of argumentative discussion.

A version of Bohmian dialogue has been adopted as the organisational form of the Extinction Rebellion movement, and furthermore has been presented as an anarcho-autonomist alternative to both representational and plebiscite democratic forms. As a practice which can bring together the multiple voices through which environments articulate themselves, dialogue does have a meta-aesthetic potential. There are a series of concepts which might help us to use dialogue to elaborate an environmental architecture pedagogy and practice. Bateson developed research methods of "double-description" and "metalogues", arguing that perceiving the patterns which connect living systems – essential for not breaking those relations – requires working with multiple views of the world. This method has been extended in recent years by radical anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn, through various multi-perspectivist approaches. Such methods typically draw upon Bateson's and C. S. Peirce's conception of abductive reasoning, a method which constructs a semiotic structure out of orders of relations-between-relations, and can be worked on, through Bateson's famous abductive provocation: "What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster, the orchid to the primrose, both of them to me, and me to you?"

This abductive challenge demands an aesthetic reasoning. It can only be approached through a perception of scales of relations. Clearly, aesthetics – often seen as a distraction from environmental concerns, does not mean a design style or anything like that in the sense used above, but rather the study of structures of feeling and perception: How do we perceive or feel alienated from (which in fact is the same thing), the patterns and processes which connect all living and mental systems? Aesthetics – which is "in" both subject and object as perception and form, is always an ecological aesthetic. Can we find an abductive reasoning in the pattern which connects the need to demand environmental justice, and the recognition of its impossibility? Can we really perceive the form of the scales of our environmental crisis? The futures of our more-than-purposeful environmental dialogues depend upon it.



Floating University, Berlin.

## "There isn't one GREEN new DEAL"

JON GOODBUN discusses the deals, dialogues and semiotics required for a SUSTAINABLE planetary future

Making Futures

In 2019 you wrote a text on "Ecological Dialogues" for the Making Futures school in Berlin. We thought that it would be interesting to revisit that text two years later...a lot has happened!

It seems to me that many of the themes of that text have been amplified in the past year. The emotional curve of the year has been intense. We have seen terrible environmental events – over three billion beings burnt alive in Australia, and an acceleration of the burning of the Amazon. We've seen the increasing collapse of the Greenland ice sheets and warming of polar regions, and the thawing of the Siberian permafrost. Both of these are happening at rates exceeding our previous worst case scenarios, and both are initiating new positive – i.e. amplifying – feedback loops. The list goes on and on.

At the same time many of the causes for hope have suffered serious setbacks. In the UK we had the defeat of Jeremy Corbyn's

leadership of the Labour Party in late-2019. In the USA, Bernie Sanders' supporters built an amazing grassroots campaign which was too much for the Democrat party establishment to countenance. Both Corbyn and Sanders had embraced the Green New Deal (GND) project and, with their defeats, it had seemed like the GND momentum would also wane. This has not been the case, but there really have been times over the past year when the situation has felt completely hopeless.

Then of course there has been the coronavirus pandemic. Epidemiological researchers have long warned us that the speed and scale of land use changes across the planet – driven by capitalist development and resource extraction – mean that new interfaces between previously disconnected ecosystems are being created, at the same time as the bio-complexity within those same systems is collapsing. These conditions are opening up new vectors for the transmission of diseases.

In the "Ecological Dialogues" text, I noted that environmental crises will always play out through class, patriarchal and colonial structures, a fact that couldn't have been made more visible than by the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and the uneven distribution of the disease that it causes: Covid-19. In terms of their environmental architectures, the virus and the disease are two separate questions actually, one to do with managing the spread of the virus, and the other dealing with the effects of the disease that the virus causes. The spread of the virus reveals the differential flows of connectivity and exclusion around the planet, and managing the spread of it has introduced a new series of spatial conditions and behaviours. But the uneven impact of the disease reveals a very different set of environmental architectures. We now see clearly that poverty, bad housing, poor working conditions, high stress and high environmental pollution levels are effectively



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the social systems from which it emanates,  
and to explore new forms of action

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'what is lacking is a *Theory of Action* within large complex systems, where the active agent is himself a part of and a product of the system' [his italics]

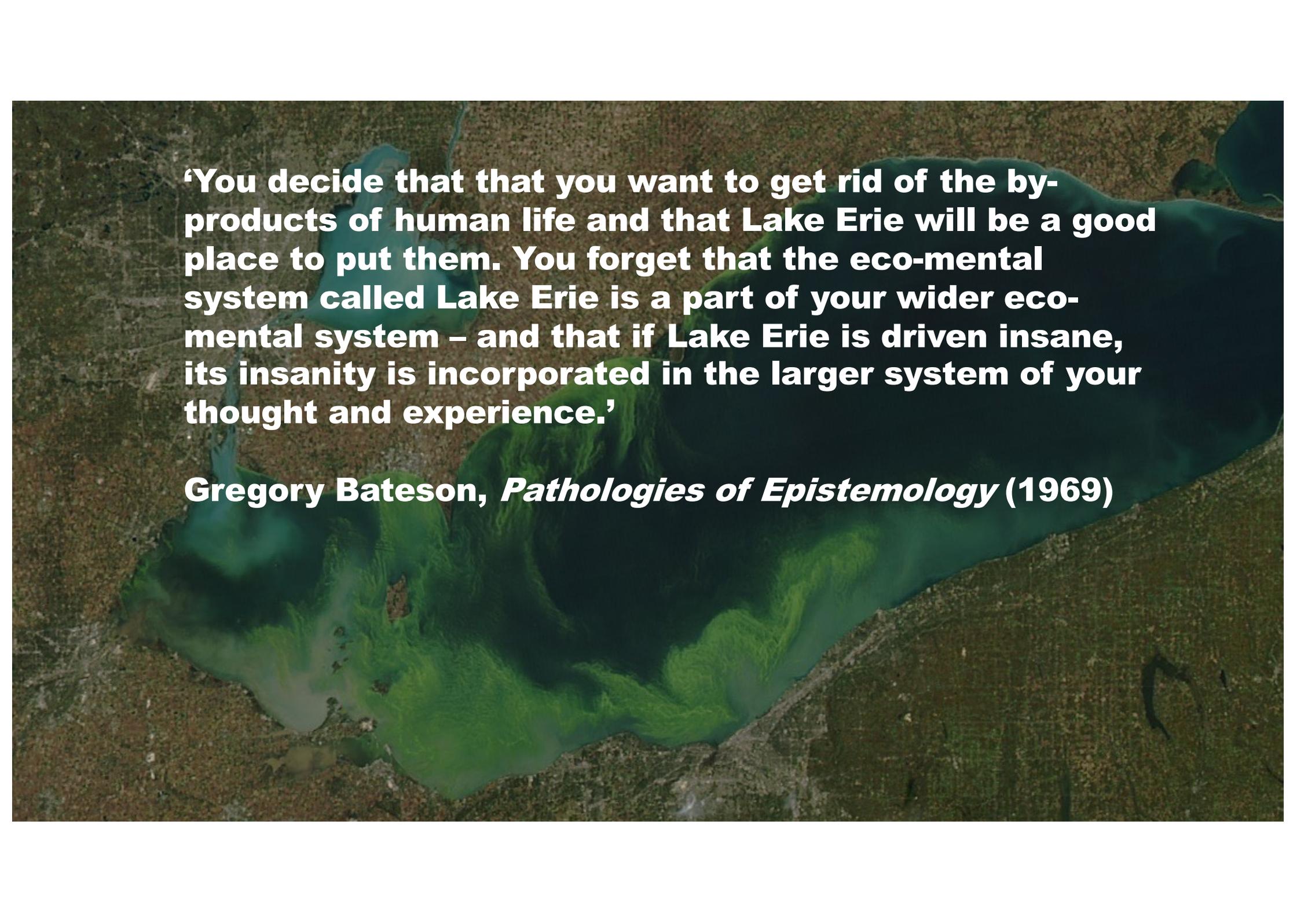
Gregory Bateson, *The Moral and Aesthetic Structure of Human Adaptation*, 1968/9

'Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inwards to include the whole communicational system within the body - the autonomic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious process. What I am saying expands the mind outwards. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate...'

Gregory Bateson, *Form, Substance and Difference*, 1970

'Ecology currently has two faces to it: the face which is called bioenergetics - the economics of energy and materials within a coral reef, a redwood forest, or a city - and second, an economics of information, of entropy, negentropy, etc. These two do not fit together well precisely because the units are differentially bounded in the two sorts of ecology. In bioenergetics it is natural and appropriate to think of units bounded at the cell membrane or the skin; or of units of conspecific individuals. These boundaries are then the frontiers at which measurements can be made to determine the additive/subtractive budget of energy for the given unit. In contrast, informational and entropic ecology deals with the budgeting of pathways and of probability. The resulting budgets are fractionating (not subtractive). The boundaries must enclose, not cut, the relevant pathways.'

Gregory Bateson, *Form, Substance and Difference*, 1970

An aerial photograph of a large body of water, likely Lake Erie, showing a significant green algal bloom. The water is a deep blue-green color, and the surrounding land is a mix of brown and green. The text is overlaid on the image.

**‘You decide that that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system – and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.’**

**Gregory Bateson, *Pathologies of Epistemology* (1969)**

'The scientist as such has no revolutionary potential; he is the first integrated agent of integration, a refuge for bad conscience, and the forced destroyer of his own creativity. Let us consider the more striking [than André Grosz] example of a *carrière à l'américaine*, with abrupt mutations, just as we imagine such a career to be: Gregory Bateson begins by fleeing the civilized world, by becoming an ethnologist and following the primitive codes and the savage flows; then he turns in the direction of flows that are more and more decoded, those of schizophrenia, from which he extracts an interesting psychoanalytic theory; then, still in search of a beyond, of another wall to break through, he turns to dolphins, to the language of dolphins, to flows that are even stranger and more deterritorialized. But where does the dolphin flux end, if not with the basic research projects of the American army, which brings us back to the preparations for war and to the absorption of surplus value'

Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1972

## Gregory Bateson 1904-1980

- 1904** Born Cambridgeshire to William and Beatrice Bateson
- 1920s** BA Biology, then Anthropology from St Johns College, Cambridge  
works in New Guinea with Iatmul on Sepik River
- 1930s** meets Margaret Mead, works in New Guinea and Bali
- 1936** Book: *Naven* (on New Guinea) **SCHISMOGENESIS, DEUTEROLEARNING**  
works with Mead on 'democratic surround' and anti-fascist activities
- 1940s** MOMA (with Siegfried Kracauer), and the OSS (as 'propagandist')  
Macy Conferences on Cybernetics
- 1942** Book: *Balinese Character* (with M Mead)
- 1950s** Palo Alto working on schizophrenia (Bateson Group) **DOUBLE BIND**
- 1952** Book: *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (w J Ruesch)
- 1960s** Dolphin and Octopus communication (Hawaii)
- 1967** Dialectics of Liberation Congress **THE THREE ECOLOGIES**
- 1968** Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation (Wenner-Gren conference)
- 1969** The Moral and Aesthetic Structure of Human Adaptation (Wenner-Gren conference)
- 1970s** UCSC and Esalen **AN ECOLOGY OF MIND**
- 1972** Book: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*
- 1979** Book: *Mind and Nature: a necessary unity*
- 1987** Book: *Angels Fear: towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (with MCB)



'As an adolescent, I had berated my father for his cynically stated reluctance to become involved, his sense that the universities and the political and economic structures of the world were irremediably steeped in folly. Now, in the emerging ecological crisis, he had decided to care again, so this would be our first collaboration in commitment as well.'

Mary Catherine Bateson, *Our Own Metaphor*, 1972

'[there was] no small contribution from Marx actually. Karl Marx made a considerable contribution to the thinking I was offering you earlier. He was one of the earliest scientists who got the idea of interacting systems and the exponential phenomena of such systems.'

Gregory Bateson, *recording of Q+A at Dialectics of Liberation Congress, Roundhouse London, 1967*

# END SLIDE

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