

Learning the «language of connections». The value of art in the thinking of Gregory Bateson

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1. Introduction

The current tendency to subordinate education to the needs of society, in other words to produce a 'pragmatic' knowledge which is useful in the context of global capitalism, often risks sacrificing the most authentic task of thinking: that is, as the philosopher Žižek suggests, «not only to offer solutions to problems posed by society, but to reflect on the actual form those problems assume»¹. A reflection on the 'form' of the problems, instead, leads us to the affirmation of a 'Paideia of complexity' founded on the cognitive idea of interdependence and on the attention to the afferent contexts and relational dynamics. As Franco Cambi states, the paradigm of complexity is ingrained in today's society and resides in its knowledge and its conscience to such an extent that it permeates the existence of subjects in their single individuality as well as in articulated aggregations². Thus, in a complex framework the dominion of the technical-pragmatic knowledge appears to be insufficient because it is far removed from the actual nature of this framework (and as we shall soon see this concerns the social as well as the natural aspects of the living world). But above all its final aim and utilitarian objective is necessarily partial with regard to the concrete need for today's subject to exert a critical and conscious thinking which helps him or her to interpret the different aspects of 'what is real'.

The 'no man's land' in which we find ourselves is witnessing the end of an age which also requires pedagogical reflection to delineate new, more coherent paradigms that can respond to the challenges of the complex society. Just like other fields of knowledge, the pedagogical field is engaged in redefining its own telos to face the advance of a single thinking and of utilitarian pressures³. As Mariagrazia Contini claims, reflecting is not sufficient in this 'no

¹ S. Žižek, *Benvenuti in tempi interessanti*, trad. it., Milano, Ponte alle grazie, 2012, p.23.

² F. Cambi, *La complessità come paradigma formativo*, in Callari Galli M., Cambi F., Ceruti M., *Formare alla complessità. Prospettive dell'educazione nelle società globali*, Roma, Carocci, 2003.

³ M.Contini, S. Demozzi, M. Fabbri, A.Tolomelli, *Deontologia pedagogica. Riflessività e pratiche di resistenza*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2014.

man's land'; the pedagogical commitment should be inclined towards reflexivity, towards learning to know knowledge (meta-knowledge) in order to start «to produce thinking and to build knowledge in the spaces already inhabited by common sense and by prejudice», without corresponding to the canons of «hasty thinking» and the needs of simplification⁴.

2. *The theory of complexity in the thinking of Gregory Bateson*

In this regard, it is interesting to bring to these subject matters the reflections formulated by one of the greatest intellectuals of the last century – Gregory Bateson – who, by travelling through knowledges that are distant from one another, succeeded in elaborating a perspective to the thinking of complexity which might allow us to get a sense of direction regarding the challenges mentioned earlier. Bateson states that all societies are by their very nature complex: like every living system, society is organized in a series of interdependent relations which respond to logics that are anything but linear and nor are they governable. Ignoring the characteristics of complex systems – of human beings, of societies, of ecosystems, and making use of an increasingly powerful technology in order to respond to the logics of success and profit, is symptomatic of a rather dangerous shortsightedness whose consequences, at least in socio-cultural terms, are becoming increasingly evident.

«We are creatures of a civilization which, since the Renaissance, and perhaps since even earlier times, has nourished irrational principles, such as reductionism, the conceptual separation of body and mind and the conviction that the end justifies the means»⁵.

The premises for the thinking which have governed western society, above all the Cartesian dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, are 'obsolete' and evidently oriented to the predominance of a 'theory of action' which is frequently divorced from a reflection on the ideas from which it originated. Bateson argues that the actions which cause changes to the complex systems cannot be theorized a priori since they are active parts thereof while at the same time being a product there from. That is why great masters and great therapists eschew any attempt aimed at affecting the actions of others and seek rather to «set up the situations or contexts» in which certain changes can occur⁶. Bateson does not formulate any theories as to how it is possible to affect the contexts or, what is of interest to us, the situations of teaching-learning; and yet it is possible to trace back through his writings a presentation of

⁴ M. Contini, *L'impegno per una resistenza pedagogica: tra riflessività e deontologia*, in M. Contini, S. Demozzi, M. Fabbri, A. Tolomelli, *Deontologia pedagogica. Riflessività e pratiche di resistenza*, cit., p.27.

⁵ G. Bateson, *Una sacra unità. Altri passi verso un'ecologia della mente* (1991), Milano, Adelphi, tr.it. 1997, p.387.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.386.

several levels of learning which are linked and which point to the impossibility of reducing any pedagogical-didactic model to a single description⁷.

«We know very little about what makes certain teachers, certain political leaders, certain gardeners, certain psycho-therapists, certain animal trainers or certain aquarium keepers great. We vaguely state that these skills depend on art rather than science. Perhaps beneath this metaphor there lies a scientific truth»⁸.

The skills we can say so little about concern the abilities the subjects have to acquire new cognitive paradigms which enable us to trace maps and compose images in the dance that Sergio Manghi defines as «an incessant creative work which is permanently unfinished»⁹. Thus, the cognitive process itself becomes a tool for knowledge: about its own method of knowing, learning, hearing, teaching, communicating, etc.

3. *The «creative filter»: the language of arts is the language of life*

The skill that Dewey, Mezirow and Schon¹⁰ identified with the term ‘reflexivity’ is now considered necessary in several fields of knowledge as well as in different professional environments. In this connection, Mariagrazia Contini has made an interesting reflection identifying the founding characteristics of the reflexive professional approach as «the capacity to doubt» and «the strength of curiosity»: to question one’s own positions which are inevitably governed by cognitive and emotional egocentrism, to acknowledge the limits and not be satisfied with what appears but to look for more outside the framework, beyond the mirror¹¹.

Bateson himself, using different words, invites us to what he called «a double description» in order not to limit oneself to defining the subjects, the relations between subjects and the relations between the subjects and the world exclusively by using verbal language, which is reductive - because of its distinctly arbitrary component, it ‘cuts out’ everything that happens in translation: the map is not the territory, the name of the thing is not the thing, the word ‘cat’ does not ‘miaow’ or scratch. Between us and «the things as they are», says Bateson, there is always a creative filter.

«Human languages, in particular perhaps the western ones, have the peculiarity of unduly stressing the ‘separable things’. They underline not the ‘relations

⁷ G. Bateson, *Verso un’ecologia della mente* (1972), Milano, Adelphi, tr.it. 2000.

⁸ G. Bateson, *Una sacra unità. Altri passi verso un’ecologia della mente*, cit., pp.388-389.

⁹ S. Manghi, *Prefazione in La conoscenza ecologica. Attualità di Gregory Bateson*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2004.

¹⁰ Cfr. J. Dewey, *Come pensiamo: una riformulazione del rapporto tra il pensiero e l’educazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1973; J. Mezirow, *Apprendimento e trasformazione. Il significato dell’esperienza e il valore della riflessione nell’apprendimento degli adulti*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2003; D. A. Schön, *Il professionista riflessivo*, Bari, Dedalo, 1993.

¹¹ M. Contini, *L’impegno per una resistenza pedagogica: tra riflessività e deontologia*, cit.

between' but the terms of the relation: this underlining tends to make one forget that the word structure is reserved for relations»¹².

That is why in his writings, in his reports and in his lectures to students, Gregory Bateson always resorts to several levels of description, varying the codes and the channels of communication. He is renowned for proceeding 'on the level of stories' because of his conviction that even the simplest biological systems are narratives; he was obsessed with the language of poetry and of art, the elective fields of metaphor, a rhetorical figure which was congenial to him as it was coherent with the language of life.

«Metaphor is not only poetic mannerism, it is not good or bad logic but it is in fact the logic on which the biological world is built, it is the main characteristic and the organizational glue in this world of mental processes I have tried to delineate»¹³.

The language of living beings is a 'creatural' language in the sense that it involves a continuous process of interaction between subjects and contexts. The language of living beings or, to use Bateson's words, the language of mental processes (which concern all living beings), actually, is much more similar to a painting or to the quatrains of a poem: it proceeds through images, metaphors, analogies. We should accept that our mental system is much larger than our brain, just as our individual consciousness only represents a small part of it, the one we are most aware of and which consequently we confer a lot of power to: since this distinguishes us from the other living beings, therefore we consider it to be our better part.

«If you have the courage, even without much knowledge, to start observing the world through a biological epistemology, you will encounter concepts that biologists do not even see. You will encounter beauty and ugliness. These might be real components in the world you live in as living creatures»¹⁴.

For Bateson, the languages of art and poetry are very close to those of nature and life: they are the only ones capable of exemplifying the creativity of the mind; in fact, it is only in creativity that the mind is a whole (mind + body; knowledge + emotions; form + substance) free from dualisms and separations. Bateson gives us the example of the language used by mammals (non human) which is very similar to the one used by artists and by dreamers: the language of relations¹⁵. At the time of creativity, the living subjects succeed in approaching the instance of integration which, as Bateson states, is a close synonym of beauty. In fact, in nature reside the roots of symmetry and grace, even human ones.

¹² G. Bateson, *Una sacra unità. Altri passi verso un'ecologia della mente*, Adelphi, Milano, 1997, p. 192..

¹³ Ibidem, p.192.

¹⁴ G. Bateson, *Una sacra unità. Altri passi verso un'ecologia della mente*, cit., p.460.

¹⁵ Cfr. G.Bateson, *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, cit.

4. *The language of connections: a pedagogical challenge*

Thus, for those of us who are engaged in education, what suggestions can we draw? It might be an approach to knowledge and to the processes of teaching-learning which is nourished by 'other languages' besides those of rationality, calculus, simplification. In other words, it is the need – we might even suggest it is a 'natural' need – to include the aesthetic languages (figurative art, dance, music, drama, cinema, literature, poetry...) in every educational process as 'the languages of connection'. Not because they are better; not because they will 'tame' the left hemisphere (by continuing to respond to the logic of separation); but because in this necessary reform of thinking which we mentioned at the beginning of this article, they lead to a knowledge 'through connections' which is more in line with how the living world moves and with its complexity¹⁶.

Art starts with the assumption that reality can only be grasped by means of a net which is inevitably full of holes; it does not re-propose life with the pretext of being its faithful mirror, but as being its mirror in the only possible way: with imprecision and unfaithfulness¹⁷. Thus, for Gregory Bateson art is the closest thing to the unit of survival, organism-in-its-environment; it is, in fact, capable of weaving, unraveling and weaving again the multiple visions of the world; those who use aesthetic languages are better prepared to encounter different interpretations, just as they are more familiar with the unexpected and with the fatigue of change.

Furthermore, an artistic process, whatever code it uses, is a process of 'co-creation': artists and artistic products are created simultaneously, there is no inside and outside, no before and after, but only a process. Even though the artist is the master of the technique, he/she is incapable of expressing it in words: the technique and the style are found in a 'deep layer' to which only the artist and the recipient have access during the artistic process. To those who asked her what she felt about her dancing, Isadora Duncan answered that if she could describe in words what she felt she wouldn't need to dance! Dance, for instance, is an independent language made up of gestures and movements which signify something (metaphor, in effect); its beauty and its grace originate in the movements of whoever is dancing and in the eyes of whoever is observing or, rather in the meeting of the two:

«It is not that art is the expression of the unconscious; rather, it concerns itself with the relation between levels of the mental process [...]. The artistic skill is a combining of many levels – unconscious, conscious and external – in asserting their combination»¹⁸.

¹⁶ Cfr. E. Morin, *La testa ben fatta. Riforma dell'insegnamento e riforma del pensiero*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2000.

¹⁷ M. Roberti, *Arte e grazia*, in AAVV, *Legami con Gregory Bateson*, Verona, Libreria editrice universitaria, 2006.

¹⁸ G. Bateson, *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, cit., p.504.

It is not important to concern oneself with what the work of art represents, with its contents or with its history: what matters concerns its style, its rhythm, its proceeding; what matters are the 'rules of transformation' contained in the aesthetic process, the form that 'frames' the message.

Thus, it is through the aesthetic experience that we learn to approach that sense – almost religious – of connection with the natural world and with other living beings. For Bateson, this sense is what is missing in contemporary society, in other words being able to take one's own rhythm to that of complex systems and of the 'structure which connects'¹⁹: to acknowledge how the parts are aesthetically placed with one another in a holistic unity which is synonymous with beauty. Art is analogical communication, expression of feelings and relations: art is pre-linguistic, a sort of primordial bond to life in its 'animal part' (endowed with a soul).

To transit the territories of aesthetics – which Bateson at times defined as 'sacred' – represents a real pedagogical challenge. Art itself represents a challenge: to experiment complex epistemological learnings, at the same time cognitive and emotional, whose aesthetic-religious languages assume the same dignity as the analytical-formal ones in tending towards the systemic wisdom and towards the aesthetics of being alive, of which Bateson was so fond²⁰.

«The 'sacred' is the whole and the pattern which connects. It is the representation of how the parts are aesthetically placed in a holistic order where holism, unity and beauty coincide. An immanent, not a transcendent holism. As Bateson said of his house with its view of the Pacific: 'I am not a deist, but I firmly believe that this ocean is alive: have I said something religious?」

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¹⁹ Cfr. S.Demozzi, *La struttura che connette. Gregory Bateson in educazione*, Pisa, ETS, 2011.

²⁰ Cfr. S.Manghi, *Trappole da sacrificio. Lo schizofrenico di Bateson e il capro espiatorio di Girard*, in P. Bertrando, M. Bianciardi (a cura di), *La natura sistemica dell'uomo. Attualità del pensiero di Gregory Bateson*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2009.

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