

# Schismogenesis and schismogenetic processes: Gregory Bateson reconsidered

- with a special view to the political dimensions of schismogenesis

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- 2) Schismogenesis in politics, some further observations/suggestions
- 3) How to overcome schismogenesis?
- 4) Communication, epistemology and schismogenesis: differentiation and undifferentiation

### Introduction

The main point that I wish to argue here is that Bateson's concept of schismogenesis is indeed a useful concept that uniquely relates to both social and personal pathologies. I will briefly introduce Bateson's notion of schismogenesis and even more briefly situate it with respect to Bateson's work and the larger context in which he developed this concept.

I will add three sets of observations:

First, that its application within the field of "politics" has been somewhat neglected; I will indicate some ways in which the concept is indeed useful for the analysis of politics/ political conflict.

Second, I will ask, with Bateson: how can schismogenesis be kept under control? I will argue that while Bateson did not really answer his question, his framework of thinking holds much of the answer: namely in his Platonic understanding of having a soul and mind (nous) in balance; with the environment, with fellow human beings, and with the "larger reality" for which Bateson used different words, but that included self, mind, nature, and the patterns that connect.

Third (but only if time permits), that Bateson's definitions of 'communication', 'epistemology' and 'schismogenesis' can perhaps be reconsidered – *with* rather than against Bateson's own ideas. This discussion centres on the role of differentiation as crucial to communication and schismogenesis. I will argue that schismogenesis is equally about un-differentiation; it can also be argued that schismogenesis is a process of negative reciprocity.

### Bateson and schismogenesis

Gregory Bateson introduced the concept of schismogenesis in a 1935 article in *Man*, "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis". It did not create much of an effect, apparently. Bateson then took up

the concept in his monograph on the Iatmul, *Naven*. In *Naven* (1936) Bateson identified schismogenesis as a crucial dynamic in Iatmul culture. This book, however, had a very limited audience; and as we have discussed elsewhere (Horvath and Thomassen 2008) the very publication of *Naven* was one further reason why Bateson never managed to establish himself as an academic figure within the field of anthropology. The one publication that *did* make the concept of schismogenesis at least *somewhat* known was the 1972 collection of articles published as *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, an edited book containing a reprint of the original 1935 article. That book has been sold out in several editions; some consider it a “classic”. Yet for the purpose of this panel, it might be worth just to restate very briefly Bateson’s main ideas relating to schismogenesis, and the context in which he developed this notion.

First, in terms of historical reflexivity, it is of some importance that Bateson introduced this term in the interwar period. There are several ‘layers’ of relevant contextualization, let me mention just three of them: First, there was Bateson’s personal life experiences, and a dramatic family story that he never really talked about, but that surely influenced him all his life. This story involved the public suicide of his brother, Martin, in 1922, leaving Gregory as the only surviving child (his oldest brother was killed in WW I when Bateson had just turned a teenager – and this developed into a true family trauma; Martin killed himself on the day of the older brother’s birthday, very surely as a kind of “statement” directed towards his father who he felt was pressuring him towards taking over the dead brother’s position and his career-promise as a scientist; this lot then fell upon Gregory – already named after Gregor Mendel -, mounting to an enormous pressure – the fact that Bateson kept “escaping” the official power structures within academia must surely be understood in this light also. Bateson wanted to escape the shadow of his father – and yet he could not leave behind his interest in zoology and biology, even when he tried). Second, there was, evidently, the unfolding drama of the inter-war period, the escalation toward World War II, the arms race, the rise of dictators in all of Europe, the madness of totalitarian regimes, the threat of violence and destruction lurking everywhere. This is a context that Bateson *does* invoke now and so often; Bateson was seeing schismogenetic processes all around him – I think we are very right in taking up this concept again today, but this also indicates that there is something deeply troubling about our times. Third, there was Bateson’s training as an anthropologist within the then dominant functional paradigms; I think that both Bateson’s own life experiences and the very real ethnographic encounter with the Iatmul forced him to move beyond and completely outside functionalism. He did so by trying to establish a new conceptual vocabulary, of which schismogenesis is but one example – but perhaps the most important one. Bateson, for example, saw how contradictions could in fact be part of communication systems; in formal functionalist logic, from Kant to Russell, categories are neat and clearly delimited. But ‘double binds’ are based on paradox, and double binds are real. And sometimes there is confusion about categories and members of categories. Our mental life simply cannot be comprehended with formal logic. And for Bateson the life of our mind was connected to the larger mind of nature and society - and things can go wrong at all levels. Bateson always said that it is our role, as anthropologists or psychiatrists or sociologists, to make sense of what people do and think. And that is the frightening thing about mental illnesses: they *do make sense*. A schismogenetic system ‘functions’, and it is ‘structured’, but it is not functional, and it is out of balance, and it may

involve a gradual loss of value and beauty, and it is potentially very destructive. Such systems, however, for Bateson were real enough – and he wanted to understand them, in order to overcome them. This, in a most general sense, would be Bateson’s framework for talking about “social pathologies” (not a word he used, of course).

I would add one observation here: it is quite significant that Bateson was jointly inspired by a series of disciplines and experiences. His birth date does not place him in the group of reflexive thinkers identified by Szak. However, he does belong to a group of thinkers who somehow had encounters or experiences with both psychology/psychiatry, natural science and the social sciences, and who somehow sought to bring those encounters together, although *not* in the form of any new “discipline-formation” but rather connected to an attempt to develop a new “approach” or “way of thinking”. This group of thinkers would include among others Nietzsche, Jaspers, Foucault, to some extent Voegelin or even Elias. Such thinkers also felt it necessary to try and develop something like a ‘meta-theory’ of cognition, consciousness, or epistemology, philosophy of history or “symbol theory” – and they struggled with this, immense as such a task is, as they struggled with the question, indirectly at least, of what makes up a pathology or “deformation” within a “healthy” type of consciousness or epistemology or symbolization. Bateson, however, and in stark contrast to these names, remained very unhistorical – he became, during World War II deeply engaged in cybernetics. Cybernetics and ethnography are synchronic studies of communication and epistemology. Bateson was wide-ranging, and he maintained his father’s interest in evolution and change, but he was not much into history. And yet, Bateson was influenced, somehow (and more than that is difficult to say), by Plato.

In terms of definitions, Bateson said that schismogenesis is

*A process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals*

(Naven, p. 175).

While paying much attention to gender relations in the ethnographic analysis, Bateson also indicated how schismogenetic processes could be at work in other spheres, e.g. within the personality, in culture contacts, and in politics. Right from the outset Bateson was moving the application of the concept beyond any specific cultural context. Put differently, for Bateson schismogenesis could become part of any ‘communication system’ or ‘communication relationship’ where individuals or groups interact. And we interact all the time! The behavior of person X affects person Y, and the reaction of person Y to person X’s behavior will then affect person X’s behavior, which in turn will effect person Y, and so on. We often talk about such processes as a ‘vicious circle’. Bateson’s theory is indeed about such circles. It is part of such circles that the ‘system’ is somehow ‘functioning’ although it keeps producing undesirable effects for everyone involved. Schismogenesis, in other words, can easily – almost unavoidably! - lead to extremities and therefore to pathological states.

Bateson gave several ‘sketchy’ suggestions as to where and how schismogenesis could come into play – and in a way he never really followed through with any single of them, but left it to others to

elaborate upon them. It is certainly a concept that cuts across the social, political and human sciences, including psychiatry and psychology (and Bateson was here certainly inspired by certain developments in American interwar anthropology which tried to tie ‘culture’ to ‘personality’, such as Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*; an overall interest he shared with Margaret Mead – although he would “abandon” such debates and confrontations with mainstream anthropology). In *Naven* he identified 4 main areas of application:

- 1) In intimate relations between pairs of individuals. Bateson here had in mind what happens within a marriage. (funnily enough, he married Margaret Mead the same year as the publication of *Naven*, in 1936; he married three times in his life. Margaret Mead, as is well-known, did fieldwork very close – walking distance - to Bateson, among the Arapesh, further down the Sepik river)
- 2) In the progressive maladjustment of neurotic and prepsychotic individuals. Bateson had no experience in psychiatry, but he was clearly very interested in psychiatry already then. Bateson’s suggestions here have had considerable effects on the understanding and treatment of personality disorders. He is widely read and used by psychiatrists still today, and his theory of schizophrenia is a ‘classic’. Importantly, Bateson was here suggesting that the schismogenetic process can unfold *within* a personality; e.g. that the single person is itself some kind of ‘communication system’ which can lose its balance. The ‘schizoid’ loses the capability to adjust himself to reality; this therefore also involves the communication between the self and the external world. Bateson would later develop this idea and link it to the notion of ‘frames’. In order to deal with the world we need frames; otherwise we can’t cope with information, and we go crazy. The frame is the message about the message.
- 3) In culture contact. This was the field to which Bateson applied the term in his 1935 article; in fact, Bateson’s 1935 article was sparked by a ‘memorandum on the study of acculturation’ by Redfield, Herskovits and Linton which was sent to Bateson – acculturation was a key concept then in American anthropology, how different groups affect and adapt to each other, in ‘culture contact’. It was also one of Bateson’s original research questions as he went out to do fieldwork in New Guinea. This had been Haddon’s (his Professor) suggestion to the young Bateson: namely to focus on the effects of the presence of Europeans on the local populations (and vice versa).
- 4) In politics. Quite obviously, international rivalries can be considered forms of symmetric schismogenesis. Bateson would restate that view on the context of the cold war oppositional logic that unfolded after 1945. Bateson mentioned “class wars” as types of complementary schismogenesis, without however specifying exactly what he meant, here or elsewhere. But Bateson also indicates that in politics schismogenesis is arguably at work in many other ways, it may for example, says Bateson, be worthwhile “to observe to what extent in their policies politicians are reacting to the reactions of their opponents, and to what extent they are paying attention to the conditions which they are supposedly trying to adjust” (Bateson 1958 [1936], 186-187).

Bateson also usefully distinguished between complementary and symmetrical schismogenesis. In the former, two ‘opposite’ types of behavior reinforce each other in ‘opposite directions’: assertive versus submissive behavior between two persons or two groups is the oft-quoted example here. In the latter, the ‘same’ behavior will lead to more of the ‘same’ by the other individual or group - a repetitive system of escalating competition: boasting leading to more boasting is the example invoked by Bateson himself (p. 177). Symmetrical relationships are those in which the two parties are equals, competitors, such as in sports or wars. Complementary relationships feature an unequal balance, such as dominance-submission (parent-child), or exhibitionism-spectatorship (performer-audience).

### **Schismogenesis in politics, some further observations/suggestions**

Bateson was of course not suggesting that this list was exhaustive. One can easily argue – and correctly in my view – that schismogenesis can take place in all sorts of social, cultural and political fields. Schismogenesis is of course present in intellectual history: there are plenty of examples of how two schools or approaches develop rival positions and keep emphasizing their difference to the other school, driving both positions into absurdities and losing contact to the reality they were supposed to explain. Schisms between “materialism” and “idealism” for example or between Realism and Idealism, or between “objective science” and “critical theory”, etc etc. We can observe schismogenesis between various social groups, such as meat eaters and vegans; or “eat-anything” versus a whole plethora of groups who take position against “normal eating”, becoming more and more radical: fruities or fruitarians, or non-boilers (or, things can only be boiled up until 41 degree Celsius, as one growing group is now saying). This schism between “health freaks” and “normal eaters” where both camps become increasingly extremist in their consumption choices – this is particularly visible in the US; in the Western world (and Japan) we now have on the one hand a growing number of people who cannot stop eating, together with a growing number of people who cannot get themselves to eat at all. It is interesting how in many historical cases two such diametrically opposed “self/world-relations” erupt, and at the same time: one group engages uncritically with consumption and ‘hedonism’ (Dionysius), arguing that there is nothing really valuable or ‘real’ beyond the pursuit of the pleasure principle; the other group renounces the material world altogether. In that sense the academic disputes between realists/materialists and idealists is nothing but a cognitive sublimation of a deeper, social tendency towards developing pathological relations toward the world in critical moments. Bateson’s framework would suggest that we have to treat these pathologies as part of a larger communication system that flows through the social body and involves our self-self relations.

However, I here would like to draw our attention towards politics. Bateson ends his short passages on politics by saying that “It may be that when the processes of schismogenesis have been studied in other and simpler fields, the conclusions from this study may prove applicable in politics”. This was however one of many questions that Bateson did not really come back to – and this quite simply because he would leave the discipline of anthropology (at least in a classical sense), and move towards cybernetics and ethology. I would like to say just a bit more here.

- Much of international politics can be understood as schismogenetic, leading continuously to escalation of conflict at both the local and global levels. International politics since 9/11 is a classical case of a schismogenetic process, leading to more and more violence and more and more extremity. To put it very simply – and risking here to provoke a political debate which probably lies outside the parameters of this conference – the bombs thrown by the US-led coalition in Afghanistan and then Iraq has systematically only produced more violence and terror, and increased the magnitude of a problem it was meant to resolve. However – and as IR scholar Ottar Brox indicates in his application of Bateson – the curious thing is that while many, if not most, people know that the bombing is not effective, a majority may at the same time keep supporting military aggression as necessary. “This means that the lack of demonstrable effects will not modify US behavior, but rather lead to the conclusion that more bombs may be needed. Which in turn will lead to further escalation of terrorism. And so on...” (Brox 1986: 20).

This was written in 1986.

- Another example is a more classical arms-race between states or state systems (blocs). While this phenomenon can be ‘explained’ by realist theory as a necessary device for self-protection, leading to the ‘security dilemma’, I think Bateson’s framing is in fact more useful: it again indicates a ‘meaningful system of communication’, that ‘makes sense’; but rather than accepting, as Realists do, that this is in fact a rational and functional system, Bateson’s framing allows us to understand how it is BOTH a ‘functioning’ system and a deeply anti-functional one. Arms races are expensive for states and people: we spend a lot of resources on useless ‘goods’, and at the same time it leads to more and more insecurity for everyone involved. The breakdown happens with major wars, after which another arms race starts, sooner or later. The final breakdown may involve the annihilation of the earth. We have to break the Realists’/Liberalists’ monopoly to speak about this madness.
- Political conflict between ethnic/national groups: here again, ‘small differences’ in stead of being mediated are made bigger and bigger as the two adversaries mimic each other and reproduce the worst aspect of the other; political conflicts like the Israeli/Palestine situation have strong elements of both symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis.
- Feuds or vendettas, much studied by anthropologists and historians.
- Also, and in continuation, all sorts of local conflict: like hunters versus anti-hunter protectionist groups; farmers versus nature protectionists. One such case has recently been analysed by Kieran, where the case study showed exactly how the ‘opponents’ mimic each other in schismogenetic communication, almost forgetting about the real source of disagreement.

- It can also be argued that national party politics increasingly follow schismogenetic patterns. In analyzing the mimetic power struggles between “Left” and “Right” it is just as meaningful today as it was in 1936 to “to observe to what extent in their policies politicians are reacting to the reactions of their opponents, and to what extent they are paying attention to the conditions which they are supposedly trying to adjust” (Bateson 1958 [1936], 186-187). Those of us who have followed the development of the Italian “bi-polar” system since 1994 will almost smile here; and to some extent this has been a replay of the Communist/Christian Democrat bipolar order that turned Italy into what so many social historians have called a “split” or “divided” country. But the farcical development of Left against Right in all of Europe can certainly be analyzed as pathological communication.
- Another type of complementary schismogenesis that Bateson actually does indicate himself (but which he himself would never study) is the relationship that develops between political leaders (dictators) on the one hand and his officials and people on the other. Bateson calls this relationship ‘psychopathic’: the megalomaniac or paranoid forces of the single person forces others to respond to his condition, and so is automatically pushed to more and more maladjustment (p. 186). This is arguably an understudied problem area, the kind of pathological links that are created between political leaders and their followers; this problem area pertains to the intersection of communication, psychology and political science, and Agnese Horvath has in this context introduced the concept of the trickster (ref to Agnes’ paper/talk)
- As Lorcan argues, a schism between two religious groups, as happened in the Irish context, can easily develop into a schismogenetic process whereby the 2 groups continuously exaggerate their differences; making ‘mediation’ increasingly impossible. In fact, this case study is a classical ‘genesis of a schism’ which takes place under particularly liminal conditions, and the schism is then stamped unto the wider population - also due to the role played by political/religious leaders who thrive on the schism itself. Schismogenesis implies that potentially viable compromises are kept off the agenda. In a larger perspective, European history is of course marked by a series of church schisms; and this again is a question that was recently taken up in a workshop on European integration by Arpad Szakolczai. Here the question becomes a political one: how to heal and overcome such schisms, rather than continuously creating new ones (because schisms are contagious!). Bateson’s approach would once again suggest that such a political process cannot be disentangled from the question of personal health or ‘intactness’; or, as Arpad has suggested, European integration is indeed linked to the idea of being an ‘integrated’ person; so to ‘integrity’.
- Moreover, and finally, schismogenetic processes are currently unfolding within broader or more ‘popular’ forms of position-taking toward political/moral questions (such as immigration). Contemporary European societies are heavily marked by an unfolding



complementary schismogenesis produced by the extremities of cultural relativism/political correctness on the one hand versus cultural essentialism/political violence on the other hand, positions that feed off each other in a clearly pathological way. One can hardly say *anything*; and yet, one can increasingly say almost *any-thing*. This, perhaps more than class-based or ideology-based politics is dominating the political debates; and pushing both segments into absurdities. As always in schismogenetic systems, this means that we lose sight of the real issues and problems.

### How to overcome schismogenesis?

Clearly the effects of schismogenesis can be disastrous. Bateson himself suggests that researchers look into methods that one or both parties may employ to stop a schismogenesis before it reaches its destructive stage (divorce or nuclear war).

In the chapter (XIII) where Bateson introduced the concept of schismogenesis, he also sought to identify how schismogenesis could be controlled, at both the personal and societal level. The control of schismogenesis will never be easy, as the 'balance' or 'harmony' in any communication system (marriages or superpower politics) can easily be lost. The problem is that schismogenetic features can and do persist, and can even, as Bateson argued for the Iatmul, be 'stamped' onto a whole culture and its 'values'. In schismogenesis, communication does take place, but in a 'positive feedback' logic: types of behavior or words that are meant to modify intolerable behavior instead *stimulate* this behavior and thus produce more of it, leading to escalation. In Naven Bateson briefly discusses such a development of schismogenesis, and the various 'states' it can take before final breakdown. He does so mostly with reference to mental disorders or communication between pairs in intimate relationships.

So how does one get out of a 'vicious' cycle then? Bateson indicates 8 factors that can control schismogenesis; I won't go through them but rather make some overall statements.

Bateson's contribution to this question was also to suggest that certain concrete **ritual** behaviors either inhibited or stimulated a schismogenic relationship in its various forms. In Naven, Bateson tied this idea to the notion of ethos. However, I don't think Bateson ever gave us a fuller or satisfactory answer here, and he in a sense abandoned some of his own initial questions pertaining to social anthropology.

Bateson also said that an admixture of complementary and symmetrical forms could stabilize a relation, lessening the extremes of schismogenic intensity; but as he came to see that the context of behavior itself evolved and that "contextual structures themselves could be messages", his attention turned from the quantification of schismogenic behavior to the idea of "end-linkage". As he grew to adopt a pluralistic, dynamic, and holistic vision of reality, Bateson started to imagine cultural systems at a higher level of abstraction than previously; national character itself could rely on a manipulation of the codes of complementary and symmetrical tension, with stability being achieved by negative feedback factors within the behavioral systems. Such end-linkage involved shared metaphors,

abductions and role playing, and even errors in communication and final paradoxes, all of which could serve to stabilize a culture and flatten out the “exponential curve” of hostilities.

*[Here, section on a holistic view of nature and mind, balance – Plato etc. Still to be written]*

The point I think one has to make is that the only “real solution” is to have a healthy relation in one’s self-world relations; a balance. And that the answer therefore resides in Bateson’s relational epistemology. In stead of seeing a tree as composed of a trunk, branches and leaves, we could see a tree as made up of relations, a pattern, that which connects, that ties the leaf to the branch, a deep ecology communication that turns the leaves green, yellow and red, and lets it fall exactly the right moment, being connected to the ground, the wind, the entropy turning the leaf into mould, the larger communication system which involves other trees, the climate, the biosphere, a communication system we are all part of and which makes life both possible and meaningful. For both Plato and Bateson this means that the recognition of beauty is foundational for epistemology, not an aesthetic optional. This focus on connections and patterns is in Plato often invoked by the weaving metaphor; and it is opposed by the “separatists”, those which take things apart rather than seeing the Whole, or the One. This can all easily be seen as esoteric and wishful thinking, and Bateson was of course not taken very seriously by mainstream social scientists here; but according to Bateson, it is not such an epistemology that is “strange”, it is the modern one which is simply derailed (and mainstream social science was according to Bateson in itself part of this derailment, nothing less). I don’t think he really studied this derailment though, rather just alluded to it in a strongly intuitive way.

Another point is that schismogenesis in so many ways is quite simply a process of negative reciprocity (as in stealing, boasting, war-fare). But this then indicates that the only really efficient way to work against schismogenesis is to install a cycle of positive reciprocity via gift-giving. It is somewhat strange that Bateson does not argue along such lines (does he? Not directly at least; but:)

It is also clear that love has a role to play here. In fact, the 8<sup>th</sup> and last “factor” working against schismogenesis is, more or less, Love. Love is an inverse progressive change between partners in a communication system. Instead of leading to mutual hostility, the inverse process leads rather in the direction of mutual love, something that can happen between groups and between individuals. And “on theoretical grounds, we must expect that if the course of true love ever ran smooth, it would follow an exponential curve” (p. 197).

### **Communication, epistemology and schismogenesis: differentiation and undifferentiation**

*[This remains to be written, refers to argument by Horvath and Thomassen, 2008]*

Bateson understood schismogenesis as a progressive differentiation between groups or individuals. This is perhaps perplexing, because the notion of ‘differentiation’ is often used to invoke a ‘healthy’ and ‘positive’ development within societies and also historically; that is how Voegelin uses the word – much of his analysis focuses on the role of schisms and the development of still more

sectarianism, a dissolution of order; for Voegelin, indeed, ‘decivilization’ equals ‘undifferentiation’. That means that we have to distinguish (analytically as historically) between differentiation and schisms, which Bateson arguably does not do.

Bateson defined information as “a difference that makes a difference”, which by now has become a textbook definition. The notion of difference was also central to his definition of epistemology:

So I will define Epistemology as the science that studies the process of knowing – the interaction of the capacity to respond to differences, on the one hand, with the material world in which those differences somehow originate, on the other. We are concerned then with an *interface* between Pleroma and Creatura (Bateson, 2005: 20).

This linking of the natural world, imbued with an order of its own, with the human process of knowing – our capacity to respond to differences – is exactly the point where Bateson beautifully meets Plato, and arguably his most important contribution to establish another epistemology of life and of science. Following Bateson’s own definition, however, there are instances where information and, in particular, its reception is built on the exact contrary of difference: copying or *miming*, instead of differentiation, and a lack of the very capacity to differentiate. It was this very problematic aspect of communication that Bateson was getting at, although he did not have the right language for it. Bateson continuously tried to indicate that communication processes run parallel in societies and nature, and build on shared premises. However, while Bateson may be right in a general way, the schismogenetic processes that get out of control seem to be of a distinctively human character: dolphins and bees don’t do it, at least not in the same reflexive way. Hence, the claim can be made that schismogenetic processes, dramatic and sudden as they are, are carried forward by figures who thrive when the boundaries necessary for indicating difference evaporate, and become standardised as nothingness is circulated, making the very act of recognition increasingly impossible.

Bateson’s main concept, the one he applied in all the field of enquiry, was schismogenesis, and what tied together all his diverse interests was his claim to study systems of communication and the exchange of information. However, the type of communication that happens in schismogenesis is not one that Bateson could ever have approached with cybernetics (although he tried), and cannot even be described with its language, as it does not pertain to formal logic, but to processes following from human experiences in liminality, interpreted and led forward by human beings. Schismogenesis is not simply based on information and its circulation, but on the destruction and perversion of a special kind of knowledge, a rupture of the sacred chain, between man and nature, and between man and man. And yet such a perversion can be stamped onto a society. And in a way, beyond an all-too easy wandering into cybernetics and general communication theory, this is what Bateson always said on beauty.

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