

## **Gregory Bateson on the sense of the unity of science**

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*Abstract.* Anthropologist Gregory Bateson says that a sense of the fundamental unity of science was once achieved by successful specialist scientists expanding into borderline areas of research. I distinguish two ways in which this expansion can occur and note how one of these ways was, from Bateson's perspective, troublesome for social anthropology.

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*"If we are all one*

*Then why did you run?"*

Gregory Bateson vividly captures a period in which a sense of the unity of science emerged:

Scientific anthropology was born in an age when the older sciences had so far solved their domestic problems that they were beginning to extend their enquiries into the borderline areas which separate one science from another. The result of this extension has been a new sense of the fundamental unity of science and the world. But the effects upon anthropology have been disastrous. (1936: 28)

Is he referring to the 1920s? I take a sense here to be a feeling or a judgment: that all these different sciences are somehow one. I wish to identify two conditions in which this feeling can arise and consider why one condition, or set of conditions, is problematic for Bateson.

*One side expands.* There are some scientists who specialize in topic A and some scientists who specialize in topic C while in-between is topic B. Both groups of scientists have made huge progress in their specialist areas and then scientists from A expand into the borderline topic, topic B. They are sufficiently successful that scientists who specialize in topic C respect the new work in topic B and rely on some results. But scientists who specialize in topic C did not attempt to expand into B themselves. Although there is an increased sense of the unity of science from what happened, it is reasonable to worry that if they did attempt this they would not approach the problems of B in quite the same way.

*Both sides expand.* Given the material above, it is natural to think that what is better is if both sides expand. Or at least a stronger justification for a feeling of the unity of science is there if both sides expand and work cooperatively.

But the material from Bateson suggests a worry in this case too. In social anthropology at the time, the situation was that Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown were both influential and made heavy use of the term “function” in their theoretical frameworks, but they use it in different ways. For Malinowski, there are common human needs for individuals within a society and in different societies, but different societies have different systems of institutions to meet those needs. The role an institution plays in meeting a human need is its function. For A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the different institutions in a society form a structure and each contributes to maintaining that structure; and when he speaks of function, he is interested in that contribution. The difference between the two founding figures is the difference between “A renting agency functions to help provide shelter” and “A renting agency functions to maintain a social structure, of landlords, renters, banks, etc.” (See also Kuklick 2010: 438-439) The worry here is that scientists from different

research backgrounds can expand and appear to form a single approach when dealing with a borderline topic, especially to outsiders, but there is a question of whether this is a deceptive surface. The shared terminology masks ambiguities, Bateson's worry (1936: 27), and different background premises.<sup>1</sup>

## References

Bateson, G. 1936. *Naven*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Kuklick, H. 2010. Malinowski, Bronislaw. In A. Barnard and J. Spencer (eds.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Bateson does not spell out that this was the problem with expansion, or extension to use his word, for social anthropology, but that is my guess.