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Ordinary Trauma, Sudden Changeability, and the Bond Between Generations

Trauma ordinario, sudden changeability e legame fra le generazioni

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Abstract

The authors illustrate the ideas of the economy of flexibility and of the dysfunctional alteration of the economy of flexibility. They reflect on a social phenomenon of our time that entails the petrification of variables that should remain flexible and the liquefaction of variables that should enjoy stability and that instead change in a repeated and sudden manner, exposing the humans involved to a condition of ordinary trauma. They illustrate an adaptation to ordinary trauma that is spreading: sudden changeability, that is, the predisposition to sudden change. They describe sudden changeability in terms of a predisposition to the sudden creative overcoming of double-bind situations. Finally, they identify, in cultivating gratuitous manifestations of love, the possibility of contributing to avoiding the possible pathological outcomes of double-bind situations and of contributing to safeguarding the relationship between generations.

Riassunto

Gli autori illustrano le idee di economia della flessibilità e di alterazione disfunzionale dell'economia della flessibilità. Riflettono su un fenomeno sociale del nostro tempo che comporta la pietrificazione delle variabili che dovrebbero restare flessibili e la liquefazione delle variabili che dovrebbero godere di stabilità e che invece cambiano in maniera reiterata e repentina esponendo gli umani coinvolti a una condizione di trauma ordinario. Illustrano un adattamento al trauma ordinario che va diffondendosi: la sudden changeability, ovvero la predisposizione al cambiamento repentino. Descrivono la sudden changeability in termini di predisposizione al repentino superamento creativo di situazioni doppio vincolanti. Individuano, infine, nel coltivare manifestazioni gratuite d'amore la possibilità di contribuire a evitare i possibili esiti patologici delle situazioni doppio vincolanti e di contribuire alla salvaguardia della relazione fra le generazioni.

Keywords: Economy of flexibility; trauma; sudden changeability; double bind; transcontextual syndrome.

Parole chiave: Economia della flessibilità, trauma, sudden changeability, doppio vincolo, sindrome transcontestuale.

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The Economy of Flexibility

The *economy of flexibility* is a fundamental idea of the *ecology of mind*, the Batesonian epistemological matrix. Gregory Bateson has called “economy of flexibility” the process through which *a deeper and more lasting change is realised, which replaces a more superficial and reversible change*. Such a process allows the organism or the living system that realises it to free flexibility for further changes in the more superficial and reversible order of its own functioning (see Bateson, 1972, p. 399; see also Madonna, 2010, p. 235; 2022, pp. 22–25). This holds both when it is a matter of change of behaviour and when it is a matter of somatic change—consider, with regard to the latter case, the process of acclimatisation, often cited by Bateson (see 1972, pp. 398 ff.; 1991, p. 331; 1979, pp. 207 ff.). The economy of flexibility is, in fact, a mode of *functioning of adaptation*, that is, of change/learning, ubiquitously widespread in the world of the living. In this world, adaptation occurs through the stochastic process, that is, through the combination between the process of random production of the new and the process of selection of that which, among the new randomly produced, will survive (see Bateson, 1979, p. 303; see also Madonna, 2010, pp. 166–71; 2022, pp. 13–15). This combination of randomness and selection of randomness takes place according to an economic principle. The changes brought about by the stochastic process in fact impose a price, which is paid in terms of flexibility. Available flexibility is limited. The price that an organism pays in the different circumstances of adaptation is relative not only to the change that it must face, but also to the degree of flexibility that it possesses at that moment. Adaptive changes limit the possibilities of other adaptive changes, possibly required by further and different solicitations. The reason why living systems realise deeper and more lasting changes that replace more superficial and reversible changes lies in the necessity of having the most abundant flexibility possible at the more superficial and reversible level of investment. It is at this level, in fact, that it happens that one must face an emergency or must rapidly solve an unexpected problem. All living systems—or, to put it better, all ecologies, small and large, including macro-ecologies (see Madonna, De Martino, 2017) that include a vast human community—can be considered healthy when they are characterised by an *appropriate distribution of flexibility*. The latter implies not only that flexibility, in the more superficial and reversible order of investment, is as abundant as possible, but also that it is of “ready availability”: it must be possible to invest it, disinvest it, and reinvest it with great ease and rapidity. An appropriate distribution of flexibility further implies that, in the more profound and enduring order of investment, change is possible, provided that it is *gradual*, even in fundamental characteristics (cf. Bateson, 1972, p. 538 ff.).

The dysfunctional alteration of the economy of flexibility

For the purposes of our discussion, aimed at reflecting on a phenomenon that is spreading in macro-ecologies that include vast human communities,

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sudden changeability (see below), we will focus, within the more superficial and reversible order of investment of flexibility, on *the behavioural elements of humans*, and, within the more profound and enduring order of investment of flexibility, on *the habits of human psychological process*, which represent fundamental, tendentially stable characteristics. Let us try to clarify what we mean by “habits of psychological process.” When, within the economy of flexibility, a relevant psychological event occurs, such as the generation of a deeper and more lasting change that replaces a more superficial and reversible change, that change must be considered simultaneously relevant in relation to all aspects of the psychological process: learning, thought, perception, emotion, action, memory, personality. The idea of “habits of psychological process” therefore refers to distinct but not separate aspects of one and the same change (see Madonna, Piccolo, 2023, pp. 173–77). The idea of “habits of psychological process” can be considered overlapping with the Batesonian idea of “habitual premises” and with the commonly used idea of “values.” Bateson taught us that a *dysfunctional alteration of the economy of flexibility* is generated in relation to ineffective attempts to influence undesirable habits of psychological process that spread in a given human community, such as, for example, the habit of driving under the influence of alcohol, the habit of corruption/extortion, or, more generally, the habit of delinquent behaviour. Attempts to influence undesirable habits of psychological functioning are carried out—by governors of various orders and, more generally, by social decision-makers of various orders—through specific and targeted measures, in terms of laws or regulations: “it is fairly easy to enact laws that specify the more episodic and superficial particulars of human behavior” (Bateson, 1972, p. 542). However, “recourse to law is certainly not the most suitable method for stabilizing the fundamental variables” (*ibid.*, p. 543). The attempts of governors and social decision-makers in general prove, in fact, ineffective. They prove ineffective because they tend to influence habits of psychological process in humans, that is, fundamental and tendentially stable aspects of their functioning, by using methods that could indeed be effective, but only for influencing behavioural elements in humans, that is, superficial and ephemeral aspects of their functioning. The methods to which we refer are those relating to the administration of punishments or rewards; that is, in other terms, those relating to the administration of negative or positive reinforcements (mostly negative: harsher penalties for an offence already existing, or the introduction into the penal code of a variant of an offence already existing, which nonetheless constitutes an autonomous type of offence with harsher penalties). Unfortunately, almost all governors and social decision-makers in general know little or nothing about the functioning of the economy of flexibility in living systems and do not have, for their interventions, tools that are different and alternative to the issuance of laws or regulations, which are specific and targeted measures. When faced with the failure of an attempt to influence undesirable habits of psychological process, they think that the law or regulation issued was not sufficiently well devised, they enact another law or another regulation, which will in turn meet with failure, and so on. Indeed: “Punishing the particular actions observed by the policeman does not suppress the perception of context that

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characterizes the class of actions of the criminal. One cannot make a person stop being a criminal (...) by punishing his actions” (Bateson, 1991, pp. 320 ff.). *The repeated failure of attempts to influence habits of psychological process and the consequent proliferation of laws and regulations generates a stiffening, that is, a pernicious lack of flexibility, in the more superficial and reversible order of investment of the latter*, precisely where, that is, there is a need to have abundant and readily available flexibility. In this condition, when faced with the need to deal with an emergency or to rapidly solve an unexpected problem, humans attempt an unusual adaptation: *they suddenly change habits of psychological process*. Since it is not possible to expend flexibility in the more superficial and reversible order, that of behavioural elements, they push themselves to expend it (and, under the pressure of urgencies and emergencies, to expend it abruptly) in the more profound and enduring order of investment of flexibility, that of habits of psychological process: *they form new habits of psychological process too rapidly and/or lose old habits of psychological process too rapidly*. Often, in these processes, what were values become disvalues and viceversa. In other terms, there occur, on the one hand, a sudden, widespread and dangerous generation of new rules and principles; on the other, a sudden, widespread and dangerous loosening of the tension towards the respect of old rules and principles. In this way the process of *inappropriate distribution of flexibility* is completed: to the *petrification* in the first order of commitment of flexibility there is added a *liquefaction* in the second order of commitment of flexibility. This does not happen when the possibility of expending flexibility in the more superficial and reversible order does not prove extremely difficult or impossible. When it remains possible for people, for example, to deal with an emergency or to solve a problem by formulating thoughts and enacting behaviours that interpret a norm in a flexible manner; or when it remains possible, to give another example, to deal with an emergency or to solve a problem by formulating thoughts and enacting behaviours considered improper and in contrast with one’s own values and one’s own ethical principles but continuing, nonetheless, to recognise them as one’s own, even while feeling at fault and guilty for having, exceptionally, violated them. In 1970 Bateson had already described in a very lucid manner the cultural temper, of petrification and liquefaction together, that we still live in: “In the last hundred years (...) the variables that ought to be flexible have been blocked, while those that ought to be relatively stable, and to change only slowly, have been made freer” (1972, p. 543). We can now say that the process described by Bateson has been going on for more than one hundred and fifty years and that it is worsening.

Ordinary trauma and sudden changeability

Bateson proposed an example, that of the acrobat balancing on the rope, very useful for the purposes of understanding the economy of flexibility and the dysfunctional alteration of the economy of flexibility. The acrobat continually invests, disinvests, and reinvests flexibility in order to realise superficial and reversible changes (relating to the position of parts of the body and of the axis of balance) and not be forced to realise, suddenly, by falling from the rope, a deeper

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change in a traumatic and painful manner. Naturally, sooner or later, he must be able to come down from the rope without harm, and he will be able to do so by coming down from it *gradually*. If, however, the acrobat is prevented from the superficial and reversible investment of flexibility, for example through the immobilisation of one or more joints with a cast, he will, despite himself, meet with trauma: “our acrobat is more and more limited in the movement of his arms, but he is given permission to fall off the rope” (*ibid.*, p. 542). In a cultural temper such as the one we live in, characterised by the petrification of the variables that should enjoy great and readily available flexibility and by the liquefaction of the variables that should enjoy great stability, one thus ends up living, in a *repeated* and *sudden* manner, the change of the variables that should enjoy great stability. It then happens to “fall often from the rope”; and it therefore happens that *trauma* becomes *ordinary*. In relation to this phenomenon, which began, as already recalled above, more than one hundred and fifty years ago, in more recent times an adaptation has been generated, and is spreading: *sudden changeability*, that is, the predisposition to sudden change. This has occurred in the lives of young people who, starting from the 1980s of the last century, have acquired an increasing cultural openness and an increasing familiarity with study, work, and life abroad. In the time of ordinary trauma, sudden changeability proves adaptive because it implies, on the one hand, learning to fall technically well from the rope, by developing *resilience to trauma*; on the other, learning to be cautious, to be hurt in the most superficial and ephemeral manner possible in the fall, by cultivating *harm reduction*. We can thus hypothesise the existence—so to speak—of an evolutionary line that goes from the acrobat to the stuntman, who cultivates a ready disposition to sudden change, that is, to the fall, that is, to trauma.

Sudden changeability as the creative overcoming of double-bind situations

Bateson taught us that a context does not exist independently of an observer who creates it and that “the context is created by whoever receives the message” (1979, p. 69). To create a context means to learn—within a relationship—rules for putting together information relating to events, places, living beings, one’s own actions and those of others. This structure of information, created by the receiver, gives meaning to what occurs within it. Without context, words and actions have no meaning, and “the meaning of a given type of action or sound changes as the *context* changes, and especially as the state of the relationship between A and B changes” (*ibid.*, p. 156). A subject who carries out a *contextual learning* (or “learning 2” or “deutero-learning”) makes this effort in order to understand the “rules of the game” and, in this way, to tend to maximise the positive reinforcements and to minimise the negative reinforcements received within the created context. If a subject has been right in understanding what the rules of the game were, his contextual learning will prove adaptive; if he has been wrong, his contextual learning will prove maladaptive. Moreover, the context may change, without the one who created it noticing it—or noticing it immediately—and an adaptive contextual learning may become maladaptive. From the second half of the 1950s of the last century onwards, Bateson often referred to situations

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that have the characteristic of pushing, or even forcing, an individual to attempt a higher order of learning. These are the situations that he defined as *double bind*—or akin to double-bind situations (see 2007, p. 987). In such situations, a subject who has carried out a contextual learning, and has therefore understood the rules of the game that operate in that context, may encounter punishments, frustrations, or in any case disadvantages of some kind as a consequence of carrying out that contextual learning, of understanding those rules of the game. In the case of young people who adapt to studying, working, and living abroad, how do they end up finding themselves in a double-bind situation? And how do they come out of it by realising a new and higher order of learning? On the occasion of the first move abroad—for example, from Italy to Spain—a young person faces the necessity of dealing with changes of various kinds. Initially, he expends flexibility in the more superficial and reversible order of investment, that of behavioural elements, in order to deal with emergencies or to solve unexpected problems. As time passes, he expends flexibility in the more profound and enduring order of investment, that of habits of psychological process, in order to free up flexibility that can be available where it is most needed: in the more superficial and reversible order of investment. He becomes accustomed to speaking a new language daily, to new climatic conditions, to new models of interaction with professors or with employers, and so on: he carries out contextual learnings, he understands the rules of the game of the contexts that he gradually creates. On the occasion of the second move—for example, from Spain to Germany—he has confidence in the contextual learnings carried out in Spain, but, in some of the contexts created, he encounters punishments, frustrations, or in any case disadvantages of some kind. He perhaps expected differences between Italy and an undifferentiated “abroad,” but not between Spain and Germany. Some contexts have therefore changed without him becoming aware of it. He suffers, proceeds by trial and error, and finally carries out new contextual learnings, which prove adaptive. On the occasion of the third move—for example, from Germany to Poland—he encounters an experience similar to the one lived on the occasion of the second move. And so on, from one move to the next, each time suffering and facing the necessity and the effort of carrying out new contextual learnings, until he generates, in his ecology of ideas, sudden changeability, that is, the predisposition to sudden change (see above); until, in other terms, he learns to creatively solve the double-bind situations in which he has found himself by carrying out a new and higher order of learning. He realises the existence of a broader *context of contexts*—that is, of the class of contexts created in succession—characterised by its own and more abstract rule of the game: what is of higher order is a context in which he is asked to be ready to enact, in each new context, different or new behavioural modules. That young person carries out *meta-contextual* learnings, which entail crossing the boundary that distinguished the first context—and each of the subsequent contexts—from the higher-order context. We can thus consider sudden changeability as *the predisposition to rapid meta-contextual learnings that allow the creative transcontextual overcoming of double-bind situations*. Bateson defined as *transcontextual syndromes* both the creative processes of resolution of double-

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bind situations and the attempts at resolution that fail, meet with outcomes of a pathological type, and can lead to serious pathologies (see Bateson, 1972, pp. 322 ff.; 1979, p. 161; see also Madonna, 2010, pp. 97–110).

Safeguarding the relationship between generations

A human being who lives a double-bind situation experiences an acute sense of suffering and discomfort due to the fact of *finding himself in the condition of being wrong about the rules that give meaning to an important relationship with another human being* (cf. Bateson, 1972, p. 323). In a condition of this kind, the possibility of a rupture of the relationship is nested. However, the error relating to the context, which, insofar as it is maladaptive, induces suffering and discomfort, is bearable and can be faced creatively as long as the contextual level at stake is not that of the important relationship with another human being. In other terms, in order for the transcontextual syndrome being traversed not to meet with outcomes of a pathological type, there is a need for the important relationship with the other human being to be safeguarded. When the transcontextual syndrome leads creatively to a meta-contextual learning, the safeguarded relationship becomes the *context of the context of the context* (see *ibid.*), that is, the metameta-context, which is not put into crisis and remains stable. Anchoring to this third contextual order represents the stability that allows the change related to meta-contextual learning. For this anchoring to be possible, for the important relationship with the other human being to be safeguarded over time, it is necessary that the latter communicate to the human being who lives the suffering and discomfort related to the double-bind situation that, despite the frustrations to which he has exposed him, he continues to care for him. How does a human being communicate to another human being that, despite the frustrations to which he exposes him, he continues to love him? In other terms, and more generally, how does a human being cultivate the safeguarding of an important relationship? He does so by granting “unearned rewards” (cf. *ibid.*), that is, not granted in relation to behaviours of the other that he considers desirable. It is therefore not an educational strategy, it is not a matter of positive reinforcements, but of *gratuitous manifestations of love*: the smile, the kiss, the embrace addressed to a loved person simply because one loves them. The gratuitous manifestations of love experienced by children within the framework of important relationships with other human beings—for example, the adults who take care of them—contribute to generating the possibility of developing and maintaining over time trust in those human beings. They also contribute, more generally, to generating those children’s capacity, once they have become adults, to nurture trust in the human beings who belong to the generations that preceded theirs. Finally, perhaps, in the long times of social evolution and on the macro-ecological level, they contribute to generating and safeguarding the possibility of a healthy relationship between generations.

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