

Why Gregory Bateson Matters - Ted Gioia - Los Angeles Review of Books

Gregory Bateson seems to be having a kind of revival these days. After reaching a sort of peak in the 60s and 70s working with, and having considerable influence on, such counterculture and psychonaut figures as Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg, John Lilly and William Irwin Thompson, he gained a new audience (principally due to his theories of schizophrenia) through the psychological and philosophical writing of admirers like R.D. Laing, René Girard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. And lately, his name and reference to his best-known work, *Steps toward an Ecology of Mind*, seem to pop up frequently in a range of public discourses about our current psycho-social turbulence, as in the recent Los Angeles Review of Books article by Ted Gioia linked here.

Like most of these recent notices, Gioia's positive article does not mention that Bateson's work with liberal and counterculture worthies had its own schizophrenic side in that it was often funded by decidedly illiberal sources, including dark money to work on "weaponized anthropology" for the OSS and MK Ultra-related work for the CIA (which latter is what put him in touch with Kesey). Some of this dialectic is discussed here:

<https://postflaviana.org/gregory-bateson-and-the-counter-culture/>

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"Bateson's 1972 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* arrived at the tail end of a tumultuous period when almost every aspect of society had been scrutinized and reevaluated. In fact, I consider this thick book of 38 essays, written over the course of three decades, as the summation of that disruptive era. . . .

In Bateson's classic example [of the Double Bind], a mother is emotionally distant from a child but forces the youngster to take the blame for the breakdown in intimacy. The child now faces a double bind: speaking the truth will get the mother angry and lead to denials and even greater separation, while accepting the lie turns the youngster into the enemy who is now assigned responsibility for the underlying rupture and all its attendant problems."

- Ted Gioia

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/why-gregory-bateson-matters/>