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# Network Review

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All proposed contributions should be sent to the Editor by email as a Word and/or PDF file.

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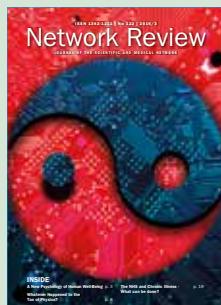
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This is the taijitu - a symbol in Taoism representing the wholeness of yin and yang. It is rendered here in circuit boards to symbolise the interface of Taoism and science.

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of the 2008 Obama campaign as another example of reprogramming communication networks.

In his conclusion, Castells rues the prevalence of political violence as a form of communication acting on our minds through images of death to instil fear and intimidation. In the US, the war on terror enabled the Patriot Act, and we are daily bombarded with images of violence perpetuating a culture of fear. In the recent US election, nine of the largest ten arms companies gave donations to the Clinton campaign, presumably in order to perpetuate business as usual with proxy wars and covert operations around the world. All this represents the continuing pursuit of narrow self-interest at the expense of the politics of the whole. Interestingly, the globalisation process itself is leading to a resurgence of nationalism, based as it is on the self-interest of corporations and their leaders.

Reading this book gives a vital insight into the nature of changing patterns of power and communication, and, more importantly into what we individually and collectively can do in order to shape a more positive future. The network itself is a metaphor of connectedness, which may enable the rising generation to think and act differently, maintaining a culture of freedom while coordinating for more general social and environmental improvement. And, in order for this to happen, the emotions of outrage and anger have to overcome fear in order to mobilise action for social change, which may well become self-sustaining through enthusiasm.

### Symmathesy as Mutual Learning

David Lorimer

### SMALL ARCS OF LARGER CIRCLES

Nora Bateson

Triarchy Press, 2016, 211 pp., £15, p/b  
– ISBN 978-1-909470-96-5

Readers of this Review will probably be most familiar with the work of Gregory Bateson, but may not be aware that his father William was professor of biology at Cambridge and coined the term genetics in 1906. Then only a few months ago, I reviewed Mary Catherine Bateson's book *Composing a Further Life* - now we have her half sister Nora, a filmmaker as well as an author, continuing the intergenerational family reflections on the pattern that connects, with a foreword by her

daughter. Interestingly, it turns out that the phrase 'the evolution is in the context' comes from William, even though it is often attributed to Gregory.

The book as a whole is a rich feast with poetry, short reflections and more extended pieces introducing the terms transcontextuality and symmathesy. It is a corrective to the excessive emphasis on individualism in the West: "I" carries the suggestion that I am somehow individual, independent, when interdependence is the law - even within our own bodies containing over 10 trillion organisms and without which we cannot live. Transcontextuality reminds us that an understanding of living organisms requires more than one context of study if we are to understand their vitality. Perception of the world of things makes them separate, which means that we can assign some form of agency. However, 'when the larger intertwined contexts are in focus, agency is diffused.' This turns out to be a crucial point, as Nora explains in an essay on leadership within the paradox of agency. For her, there is no such thing as an isolated individual and we consequently require a new understanding of leadership based on interdependency, since leadership itself is the product of many contexts. Whatever happens within a system is an expression of the patterns of that entire system, which means there is no blame and everyone is responsible. In my review of the book about Thomas Merton, I think he understands this point. In our current global situation, we can no longer afford to think in singular and linear terms, as solutions cannot come from such a narrow way of thinking.

One danger highlighted by Nora is that our vocabulary may change but our underlying patterns of thinking remain the same - it is easy to think mechanistically about systems or else stress the centrality of oneness when the essential insight is a process of uniting requiring relationality. We often think about the relationship between parts and wholes when we should be talking about holons and be wary of the exact meaning of these words - diagrams with boxes and arrows make things out of processes. Linear planning in a systems context is an abstract illusion as all the elements are constantly changing both in themselves and in relation to each

other. This is where mutual learning between and within living contexts comes in and is given the name symmathesy. I was so struck by this essay that I sourced it on the Internet and sent it to a number of friends.

Symmathesy is defined in two ways: first as 'an entity formed over time by contextual mutual learning through interaction' (this is what the International Futures Forum would call an integrity), and secondly the process of contextual mutual learning through interaction. In this sense, evolution emerges in interrelationality rather than being the outcome of arrangement and mechanistic function. To live is to learn in a mutual learning context that is inherently complex, and the idea of parts and wholes is misleading in co-evolving systems with multiple contexts. The essay helps readers to see that mutuality is primary rather than agency and individuality. In addition, words are a limited and abstract form of linear exposition that can make for a poverty of description.

Under implications and applications of symmathesy, perhaps education is the most important, but also intractable as it is within our current educational contexts that we learn to think the way we do, largely in linear, specialist and analytical terms. Understanding and interacting with complex living systems is necessary for our survival. As Nora comments, 'as it stands, our "knowledge" often prevents us seeing the interdependencies of our complex world, therefore we disrupt them – to the detriment of our well-being and that of the biosphere we live within.' (p. 190)

We need to become much more aware of how we are making sense of our world in terms of our underlying patterns of thought. When applied to institutions, they 'appear to be equally entwined in the self preserving holding pattern of dysfunction that stymies all attempts to instigate change, even for the survival of our species.' (p. 192) These institutions have their own ecology or totality of patterns of interrelationship that require 'contextual rehabilitation' so that the overarching discourse becomes one of interconnection, interdependency, and interaction through relationship. This point could not be more important as we are still operating within a mental silo of separate nation-states each pursuing their own interests. Whether we know it or not, we are in a mutual process of learning our way into the future where we will inevitably receive feedback on our efforts and hopefully enhance our capacity for creative and adaptive improvisation in the interests of the planet as a whole. This seminal book will give you a new relational lens on life.

