

# **HOW CAN WE TRUST EACH OTHER?**

*Changing the Terms for Public Trust of People, Corporations and the State*

**Fifth International Workshop of Foundation 2020**

**Brioni Islands, Croatia**

**May 20-23, 2004**

**Celebrating the Centennial of Gregory Bateson (1904 – 1980)**

***What cybernetics offers for creating trust in  
leading, governing, and doing business***

Leaders and institutions create trust by quality administration which combines attention and care and trustworthiness. To be trusted they have to show consistency, sameness and continuity which generate outer predictability and inner certainty.

Social trust today is giving way to distrust. Trusted institutions are proving not to be trustworthy. If there is to be trust there has to be attention and care. And social hope depends upon trust. Reestablishing and sustaining trust calls for selecting and applying the ideas that offer promise and that turn out to do what they promise to do.

The designation of our Fifth International Workshop of Foundation 2020 as an international celebration of Gregory Bateson's centennial creates a meeting for discussing how cybernetic ideas might correct some of the attitudes that have led to the breakdown of trust for leaders, governments and businesses.

## **The workshop will be organized around three key conversations on the public trust.**

There will be a conversation of national presidents, which will be led by the President of Croatia, M. Stjepan Mesić, about the meaning of trust in governing a nation in today's world.

Miomir Žužul will moderate the second conversation which will be among foreign ministers who will discuss what trust means in the relationship between states.

The third conversation will be on the topic of the need for restoring trust in world business which will feature a distinguished panel of corporate leaders.

These conversations will be enlarged through small group discussions, breakout groups and other panels with additional leaders from government and business taking part. They will be joined by scientists and practitioners from several disciplines.

## **Exploring the Idea of Trust**

During the past fifty years many of Bateson's ideas have shaped global political, business and scientific discussions. Our Fifth International Workshop will explore some of these still promising ideas. And we also will consider a few of Bateson's promising ideas that have not yet caught on but which we believe will bring significant changes for the better when they are applied. Many of these ideas, in some way, touch on the concept of trust, and because trust emerges as a major concern with respect to both global and local institutions, we have selected trust as the organizing topic for our workshop.

## **Significant Historical Moments when Attitudes Changed**

Bateson's reflection on major events during the first half of the twentieth century let him to ask what were the significant historical moments when people's attitudes changed. That reflection led him to consider two such critical moments during the first half of the 20th century. He identified the Treaty of Versailles as having a disastrous effect upon attitudes and the development of cybernetics as having the potential for correcting them.

### **Treaty of Versailles**

The Versailles Treaty was deliberately designed to keep Germany from again becoming a threat to Europe. Bateson suggests that the replacement of Wilson's Fourteen Points by the treaty of Versailles is an instance in history of a major deception that led "to the total demoralization of German politics."

### **Cybernetics**

The other moment in the last century that created the potential for attitudes to change, as Bateson saw things, was the emergence of cybernetics. Bateson credited cybernetics with supplying a way to think about such basic things as what an attitude is, of patterns of interaction, communication, systems and ecology. (Bateson organized his body of ideas within the framework which he called the ecology of mind.)

Bateson draws on concepts coming from cybernetics to reflect on the consequences of Versailles, noting, for example, that from the demoralization of Germany, the Allies, too, became demoralized. This is why he called the Treaty of Versailles an attitudinal turning point.

### **Other Examples of the Breakdown of Trust**

The last half of the 20th century supplies other examples of this demoralization and the breakdown of trust within various nations and between nations. What are the important moments in our history when we have experienced changes in attitudes? Among other questions remaining to be answered by us are: What have we learned from these experiences that might help us restore trust within nations and between nations in this new century? When trust is broken within a state, how are we to go about talking with the representatives of other states? How can we build trust within and between states?

### **Patterns of Our Relationships**

First, Bateson pointed out that *we care about the patterns of our relationships*. We humans want to know where we "stand in love, hate, respect, dependency, trust" in relation to somebody else, a group, a company, or a nation state. "If we trust and find that that which we have trusted was untrustworthy; or if we distrust, and find that that which we distrusted was in fact trustworthy, we feel *bad*. The pain that human beings . . . can suffer from this type of error is extreme." This brings Bateson to define the significant moments in history as those points "when attitudes were changed. These are the moments when people are hurt because of their former 'values.'"

### **Attitudes**

Second, Bateson's take on cybernetics aids our understanding of attitudes. It also offers insight in understanding our responsibility for our own attitudes, and for changes in our attitudes, for my actions, and for acting to increase flexibility and choices.

Third, from Bateson comes an additional insight of the special responsibility of leaders for changing attitudes, and for the attitudes that emerge from their actions and policies.

Fourth, the Treaty of Versailles serves to remind us that governments and corporations (as well as groups and families) cannot operate in the long term on deception.

### **Democracy**

Fifth, when citizens are informed they can act, and they can take responsibility. If they lack trustworthy information, they cannot act. For citizens, employees and others to be informed, the rules that have become set, making people and systems rigid, have to be changed.

Sixth, democracy, according to Richard Rorty's useful description, is a new conception of what it is to be human. It does not yield to nonhuman authority and the only authority it recognized is freely achieved consensus among human beings. Through it a more evolved form of humanity will come into existence.

### **Flexibility**

Seventh, the survival of businesses in today's market demands corporate flexibility. Communication patterns within companies and between managers and employees also need flexibility. What cybernetic tools would Bateson suggest we use to ensure that our companies thrive in the global as well as the local market places?

### **Our Constructions**

Eighth, one of Bateson's key concepts was epistemology. He suggested that the epistemology proposed by cybernetics offered some useful tools for talking about our ways of knowing, thinking, and deciding. He also urged that "my" epistemology (knowing, thinking and deciding) is my responsibility. I am the one who thinks. My observations require someone who can see. I am that observer. I am part of what I observe; I am not separate from the observations which I make. I make them. Therefore, I am responsible for them as my constructions. There is nothing to hide behind.

Ninth, our institutions, companies and nation states (as well as our global organizations) are also our (human) constructions. They are always becoming what we humans make them. In turn, these bodies and systems also shape us, folding back to make us what we are. We make them, and they make us, and so on. This is a basic insight coming out of cybernetics.

### **The Wider System**

Tenth, we must be aware of the way systems are coupled and embedded within each other. If public communications undermine trust this will affect relationships within families, and vice versa. Human misperceptions of the environment lead to actions that damage the environment. Violence in the streets can resonate in the form of international violence. So our responsibility is never exclusively local.

### **Our Workshop**

Bateson proposed that cybernetics provides us with a tool for coming to understand what an attitude is, and one of the basic attitudes is trust. What have we learned about trust in running business enterprises and in running countries?

There are many different conceptualizations of trust. It has been defined differently at different times and in different parts of the world. Are there some simple analogies for trust that people every where might share?

This Workshop will provide the forum for raising basic questions about trust in corporate and global governance and in other areas that touch people's lives everyday.

Our Fifth Workshop provides a safe place for leaders to reflect together on where our thinking and our acting are leading us, and to think together about how we might change things for the better.

### **Invitation**

We are inviting you to an exploration and we believe the journey will be worth your taking the time to participate in our 5th workshop, which will take place May 20-23 2003, at Brioni Islands.

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See Gregory Bateson (2000). From Versailles to Cybernetics. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972)