

# A Digital Death Drive? Hubris and Learning in Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics

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**Abstract:** *This paper offers a critique of the fetishisation of 'the digital' in Western culture by bringing together Freudian and Marcusean psychoanalytic theory with Gregory Bateson's cybernetics. In particular, it correlates the cybernetic concepts of analog and digital information with the psychoanalytic conceptual pair of Eros and Thanatos. The psychoanalytic concept of the 'death drive' appears through the cybernetic lens as a fetishistic tendency towards freezing or regressing to lower levels of complexity and sensitivity of learning. With the help of Marcuse and Bateson, I understand the contemporary prevalence of a 'digital death drive' as an inhibition of learning in terms of the nature of the digital and its severing from the analog context. By contrast, by reading Marcuse's concept of Eros as having multiple logical levels (Eros<sub>1,2,3</sub>) in the cybernetic sense and by comparing these levels with Bateson's multiple logical levels of learning (Learning<sub>1,2,3</sub>), we come to see Marcusean 'erotic liberation' or 'revolutionary love' not as resulting from simple acts or statements of rebellion against repressive socio-political norms, but rather as being profound, lifelong learning processes, fraught with complexity and difficulty.*

**Keywords:** *analog, digital, cybernetics, Eros, Thanatos, psychoanalysis, trauma, death drive, hubris, learning*

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## 1. Introduction

It goes without saying that digital technologies are having an unprecedented influence on social and political life across the globe today. With the ‘internet of things’ we approach a point of convergence between ‘the media’ and every other kind of technology. However, the fact that terms such as the ‘digital,’ the ‘internet of things’ and ‘virtual reality’ apparently do *not* go without saying in the media today, and that on the contrary they are ubiquitous promotional metaphors, suggests a psychoanalytic symptom, or even a fetish in the classic sense (Freud, 1925/1989: 249-50). Arguably, the repetitive, quasi-magical use of these words points to something happening at deeper psychic levels, something that has not been entirely worked through – even something traumatic.

I believe this fixation runs much deeper than the technological developments of the last several decades. The un-worked-through discourse of the ‘digital’ today is the contemporary avatar of a much more ancient conflict involving the relation between language and experience that spans the human experience in its entirety – and which has made for particular difficulties in the history of western thought and psycho-social life. In some sense, however, this conflict is ‘coming to a head’ in the symptom of the digital fetish. In this paper I propose that the fetishization of the digital is a symptom of what Sigmund Freud (1920/1989: 618) and his interpreter Herbert Marcuse (1955: 22) called “the death instinct.”

The death drive, *Thanatos*, is presented in Freudian theory as the antagonist of the life drive *Eros*, which both Freud and Marcuse agree has in a sense been suppressed in the process of civilization, due to the requirements of civilization. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse (1955) disagreed with Freud’s pessimism regarding an alteration in the terms of this conflict, and argued that civilization could be radically transformed in an erotic direction, such that the force of *Thanatos* (expressed in wars, ruthless competitive acquisition, the glorification of righteous cruelty and careless indifference to risk, etc.) would be to some extent tamed or pacified by *Eros*.

For Marcuse this involved the problem of distinguishing between ‘basic’ and ‘surplus’ repression, a task whose complexity has arguably been underestimated by some who cite him without much attention to the details of the whole psychoanalytic theory of *Eros and Civilization*. It is in order to illuminate this complexity of the digital as a socially and psychically repressive process

that I am setting the Freudian-Marcusean psychoanalytic approach alongside the cybernetic psychology of Gregory Bateson. In this frame, the death drive, Thanatos, can be translated into cybernetic terms as the *inhibition of learning*. Eros, on the other hand, comes into view as a continuous process of learning on multiple logical levels. Cybernetics draws out explicitly the dimensions of learning that remain implicit in Marcuse's erotic reorientation of Freud. Marcusean theory in turn deepens cybernetics as a theory of multi-dimensional learning and emphasizes the dangers of a digital fetish that reduces learning to the acquisition of bits of knowledge, to competency and control.

## 2. 'Digital', 'Analog' and Wholeness in Cybernetic Systems

Referring etymologically to the *fingers*, those ancient instruments of counting and manipulation, the word 'digital' as it is widely used today means 'a black box in which digitization happens.' Digitization is seen as an electro-mechanical process that occurs inside the media and devices we label 'digital.' With help from the cybernetic scientist Gregory Bateson (1971), we can see how this fetishistic use of the term serves to conceal the profound significance of the digital to human culture in every age of technological development. Batesonian cybernetics specifies that *verbal language* is the primary experience of the digital: culture has always been an 'internet of minds.'<sup>2</sup> Digital computers are merely an extension (admittedly massive in scale) of our already-existing linguistic activity. Digital communication comes broken into discrete manipulable 'bits,' like words or numerals. It is characterized by the 'arbitrariness' of the sign as it was formalized by Ferdinand de Saussure's (2011) linguistic theory. The digital can be generally described in terms of *that form of communication that fragments the whole into parts*:

"A signal is digital if there is discontinuity between it and alternative signals from which it must be distinguished. Yes and no are examples of digital signals. In contrast, when a magnitude or quantity in the signal is used to represent a continuously variable quantity in the referent, the signal is said to be analogic." (Bateson, 1979: 227–8)

<sup>2</sup> Indian-Californian scientist Vilayanur Ramachandran offers a theory of an 'internet of minds' in relation to mirror neurons in the brain, and in particular the theory of an evolutionary burst of mirror neuron development that occurred in conjunction with the emergence of verbal language and complex tool use (see Ramachandran, 2009).

Sensory experience comes to us whole, ‘without outlines,’ without categories or discrete delimitation. But from an early age verbal language extends the fingers and hands in the sense that it facilitates the breaking of the world into discrete objects of contemplation.<sup>3</sup>

Verbal language has the peculiar quality not only of fragmenting the whole into parts, but also of counterfeiting and standing in for the wholeness of non-verbal experience. The digital cut, in other words, can conceal itself while making itself, by giving an apparently complete and seamless image of the whole of something. The word ‘something’ itself, the notion of a ‘whole thing’, is an example of this peculiar quality, as if there is some ‘thing’ that could be whole in itself, sufficient to itself and not in dynamic, internal, outline-less relation to the analog whole that exceeds it.

The way the digital cuts into the analog is exemplified in the contrast between a compact disc or mp3 recording and a magnetic tape or LP recording. The sound produced by the analog LP is a *direct transform* of vibrations in the needle. One can see (with a microscope) the waveform in the record groove that is quite literally the impression made by the sound of the music, passing through a needle, pulled across a wax template for the vinyl record. Analog audio-tape transfers sound vibration into magnetic variations on the tape surface in a similar fashion. However, with the advent of digitization, the pattern of magnetic differences on the tape or disc ceases to have any direct perceptible similarity to the sound, even under a microscope or via a magnetic image. As digital, it has become ‘arbitrary’ in something like Saussure’s sense – meaning that the data must pass through a series of algorithms to transform it back into meaningful sound.

It is important to be aware that, depending on the level of resolution of the digital sample, more or less information is inevitably lost in the process of digitization. Digitization, in other words, is a process of abstraction and simplification. In moving from the noisy, ultra-high resolution patterns of the analog to the grainier bit-rates of the digital, it is always necessary to specify a cutoff, which is determined by the finite capacity of the processor and the practical limits of time. Whether this cutoff matters to the human ear depends very much on a host of contextual factors. One such factor is commercialization –

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<sup>3</sup> The psychologist Daniel Stern reconstructs the experience of the prelinguistic and paralinguistic infant using an impressive synthesis of experimental observation and linguistic experimentation in his *Diary of a Baby* (Stern, 1990).

where the criterion of the *quality* of the sound of music may be obscured by ease of transmission-replication.

Digital communication can be vastly more efficient than analog – and this explains in large part the immense evolutionary ‘success’ of humans, whose linguistic extensions of experience permit an entirely new kind of adaptive process: culture. However, adaptive efficiency comes with a psychic cost, in the way it simplifies and cuts up the whole of experience. As we will see, the digital cutoff bears a very intimate relation with the Freudian notion of trauma (Freud, 1920/1989: 607), a kind of cut or wound that can numb our experience of the wound itself. The issue of abstraction for the purpose of transmission-replication-exchange (at the expense of ‘use’-value) is also notably related to Karl Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish (see Marx, 1990). Indeed the whole notion of the commodity is deeply dependent on the digital logic of discrete countable units. Alternatively, in a Heideggerian vein, being digitized nature becomes a ‘standing reserve’ (Heidegger, 1993) that can be exchanged and measured in identical units (whether it is in barrels or gigabytes). In Bateson’s (1971: 365) terms, Freud’s, Marx’s and Heidegger’s overlapping concerns can be summarized as the overextension or fetishizing of the digital and neglect of the analogical ways of thinking and communicating. Digital communication is not only profoundly useful; in fact in some sense that it defines ‘human nature.’ However, the digital *fetish* numbs us to the profound relation between body and machine, technology and nature. It obscures the relation because it locates ‘the digital’ simply in the machine and not *in relation to the linguistic processes of the nervous system*.

Of course, the digital fetish is a perfectly ‘natural’ potentiality of digital processes. Only a digital framework, after all, can produce the fiction of a ‘digital entity’ contained in the limits of a machine—*something* ‘whole,’ complete in itself, seamlessly self-contained. Gregory Bateson always insisted that, like any communicational phenomena, the digital exists as a relation and in a context, not as a simply located entity. For humans and all known mammals, this context is an analog one; the sinuous and noisy contexts of our experience and relationship cannot be digitized without loss. There is always a cutoff. *A trauma*.

Nonverbal gestures and signs are not ‘arbitrary’ like words, and their magnitude (the intensity of the expression) actually affects their meaning in a way that is not the same as or even comparable to words – for example as on the

printed page, surrounded by regularized-digitized white space. The word ‘big,’ displayed in the mostly digital context of a printed-displayed white page, is not bigger than the word ‘small.’ However, a face convulsed with emotion ‘speaks’ *with a greater magnitude* than one that politely indicates mild pity. The level of the analog is that of gestures and signs that in a sense are continuous with our whole comportment, our whole body-mind. In mammals particularly this is a level of what Bateson (1971: 370–2) calls ‘relationship’ (a term which he sometimes uses interchangeably with ‘relationships’ in the plural). This ‘relationship’ consists of the rich interplay of gesture, sound, touch and smell that encompasses mammalian social relations.<sup>4</sup> Among humans, this continuous interplay is usually unconscious. Human use of verbal language introduces a digital cut-off by way of a sub- or super-system; verbal language ‘samples’ the unspoken level of ‘relationship,’ and the set of ‘samples’ shapes the larger part of what we call ‘consciousness.’ Consciousness is a map of or abstraction from what is actually going on at the level of ‘relationship,’ always with a limited resolution.

Using verbal-digital language, cybernetics tells us that we cannot not cut off. Bateson emphasizes: we should not forget it! (1971: 426–39). Forgetting the cutoff leads very easily to a distortion of priorities and a steep loss of information quality in the name of a quantitative gain in replication-exchange. The flattening generated by quick summaries of complex relationships in simple words (‘justice,’ ‘crime,’ ‘God,’ ‘evil,’ ‘agency,’ ‘power,’ etc.) obscures the complex structures of relations characterizing all mammalian social contexts, and particularly human ones. The analog needs to be mapped as richly as is feasibly possible for the sake of ‘sane’ communication.

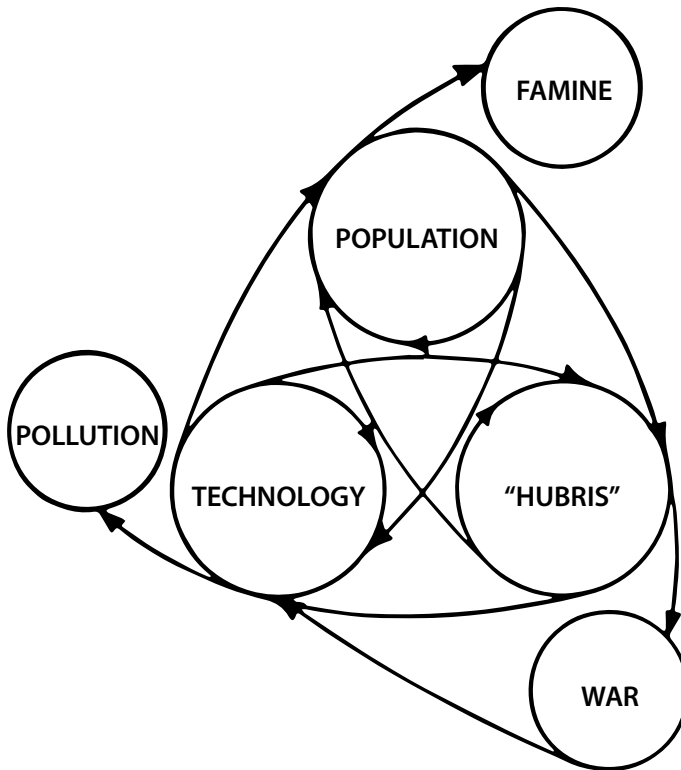
To sum up, according to cybernetic theory, digitization can be defined as the action of fragmentation, an inherent *part* of the human neural constitution, the part that deals in parts. Our perception of separate objects as such is made possible by our capacity to name them, and with this comes the human capacity for education and culture. All in all, the unique danger for humans is that our conscious linguistic activities, always reducing the complexity of relationship, might *radically uproot us* from the wholeness of the analog context. Human history is littered with cases of overconfidence in verbal formulations such as ‘the

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<sup>4</sup> Bateson suggested that insects might use digital rather than analog communication for “relationship”; but this in turn only highlights the profound intertwining between the undigitized motions of the skinned-furred body and mammalian social activity. See *Problems in Cetacean and Other Mammalian Communication* (Bateson, 1971: 364–378).

enemy of my enemy is my friend,' or 'you are either with us or with the enemy'. The fetish for the digital betrays an excessive confidence in the autonomous power of digital machines and also in the autonomous power of verbal logic in the brain – without perceiving at all the intrinsic relations between machine and verbal logic, and between logic, emotion, and the self-as-a-whole. A failure, in other words, to achieve wholeness.<sup>5</sup> This failure, radicalized and unaware of itself as such, is what Bateson called 'hubris.'

Figure 1: "The Dynamics of the Ecological Crisis" (Bateson, 1971: 491)



<sup>5</sup> Bateson clarifies his view of cybernetics as wholeness in *Beyond the Double-Bind*: "But note that the word 'cybernetics' has become seriously corrupted since it was put into circulation by Norbert Wiener. And Wiener himself is partly to blame for this corruption of the conception in that he associated 'cybernetics' with 'control.' I prefer to use the term 'cybernetic' to describe complete circuiting systems. For me, the system is man-and-environment; to introduce the notion of 'control' would draw a boundary between these two, to give a picture of man versus environment" (Bateson, 1978: 52–3).

### 3. Hubris: the 'Digital Death Drive'

'Hubris' is Bateson's label for the psychic structure that accounts for the contemporary digital fetish. In classical Aristotelian philosophy 'hubris' is a kind of problem internal to the individual, an "error of human frailty" (Aristotle, 1963: 238). Bateson generalizes the definition: 'hubris' is an overestimation of the capacity of the part to represent and/or control the whole. 'Hubris' is therefore equally the refusal to accept Alfred Korzybski's verbal mantra, 'whatever you say it is, it is not.'<sup>6</sup> 'Hubris' is the belief that the word or map contains *all* the detail of the territory, leading to what Korzybski called 'unsane' modes of human interaction, comprising ever-expanding territorial possessiveness, aggression and murder.

'Hubris' comprises both the voice of Authority – what Bateson refers to as the 'top dogs' or 'upper dogs' – and the voice of Challenge to Authority – which Bateson labels the 'underdogs' (Bateson, 1971: 426–7). It is Hitler when he is a young, psychically wounded artist, and the 'same' Hitler when he is standing astride Germany and presiding over the slaughter of millions. It is Marx in 1848, and Marx in October of 1961 at the site of the explosion of the 'Tsar Bomb' by the Soviet Union. It is the arrogance of corporate elites, but also the tendency to view public life as invested with a much greater sense of control and direction than actually exists. 'Hubris' always fatally 'misunderestimates' the stochasticity of the fine-grained flux of the analog. It is the persistence in believing, in the face of all experience, that 'the unknown unknowns' will finally be mastered. This is the substance of its repetition compulsion – a failure to accept the digital cutoff. This failure, unable to accept itself as such, issues forth in ever more simplistic, polarized and binary renderings of the social context that remain as tragic today as they were in ancient Athens.

There is a rich theoretical link between Bateson's cybernetic-holistic-general-semantic concept of 'hubris' and Freud's concept of the death drive, the obstinate and aggressive antagonist of the life-drive, Eros, destructive to the self as well as others, expressed as a "compulsion to repeat" (Freud, 1920/1989: 604).

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<sup>6</sup> Korzybski and his associated general semantics movement deeply influenced Gregory Bateson. "Science never proves anything," and "The Map is not the Territory" are the first two lessons that "every schoolboy should know," according to the first section of Bateson's *magnum opus*, *Mind and Nature* (Bateson, 1979: 27–31). To help correct for the sometimes-low resolution of that particular digital form we call North American English, Korzybski would apply a set of subscript numerals (1...*n*, *n* meaning 'wherever we stop counting') to any given term. I am employing this device here to help envision a simultaneity of the psychoanalytic and cybernetic visions (Eros<sub>1,2,3</sub> and Learning<sub>1,2,3</sub>).



In the present cultural conjuncture, a prevalent form of the compulsion is to repeat the label 'digital' with ever-higher amplitude and ever-lower resolution.<sup>7</sup> The prevalent digital fetish is not only a symptom of trauma in the individual psyche, as both Freud and Herbert Marcuse surmised (Freud, 1929/1989; Marcuse, 1955), but it is also operating at the level of human civilization generally. I want to suggest that looking at the problem through the Batesonian-cybernetic and the Freudian-psychoanalytic lenses simultaneously has the virtue that Bateson attributed to binocular vision (1979: 69–70). The duplication of an information receptor (an eye for example) at a slight distance, seeing 'the same object' from only a slightly different position, results in not only additional or redundant information, but also a multiplicative and qualitative increase: the perception of depth.

The task of this kind of back-and-forth translation between the Freudian death drive and Bateson's digital 'hubris' is challenging because Freud and Bateson developed their psychological theories in fundamentally different scientific-practical contexts. Cybernetics tends to model whole systems in which every part is explicitly-simultaneously influencing every other part. The separation of the system into parts appears as a *digital-linguistic abstraction* that cybernetics makes explicit as part of its process-thinking, distinct from and related to the analog context. The complex distinction *and* link between the part and the whole is sustained in cybernetics monistically, by way of mathematical notation and terminology, which in particular has to do with the organization of parts and wholes in sets, patterns, etc. Freud, for his part, presents a quasi-mythic dualistic system whose elements, as 'eternal antagonists,' are separate and inseparable at the same time. It is as if, we might say, Freud fuses or con-fuses the digital and the analog where cybernetics distinguishes them; or equally, that Freud begins from a perspective of analogical wholeness where cybernetics, due to the analytical nature of its language, risk minimizing or even missing the traumatic quality of its own way of thinking.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the deep intuitive insight in Freud's images of the mythic antagonism between Eros and Thanatos, drawn equally from folklore, literature and his patients' character structures, often brings him very close to cybernetic notions of positive and negative feedback, of self-amplifying and self-

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<sup>7</sup> As T. W. Adorno (2005: 65) wrote, "Always speak of it, never think of it".

<sup>8</sup> In *The Cybernetic Brain*, Andrew Pickering (2010) writes, "One can almost say that everyone can have their own history of cybernetics".

correcting systems. This is especially evident in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in his treatment of Breuer's notions of "freely mobile" and "bound or tonic" cathexis (Freud, 1920/1989: 611), which clearly resemble positive and negative feedback respectively. A nascent notion of homeostasis is implied in Freud's discovery that the life instincts are "conservative in the same sense as other instincts in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are peculiarly resistant to external influences" (Freud, 1920/1989: 615). Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious clearly anticipated and influenced Bateson, who in 1967 declared that, "people are self-corrective systems. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of a kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception" (Bateson, 1971: 429).

According to Freud's final hypothesis, as expressed in *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 1929/1989), the telluric duel of Eros and Thanatos traps humans in an irresolvable double-bind. Unrestricted Eros threatens social bonds, because it constantly induces fresh claims and desires, destabilizing fixed relationships and character features. Thanatos appears from the beginning as a craving for stillness and order and the cessation of tensions. But Thanatos unchecked would be a desire to return to the womb and ultimately to regress behind life itself, to become inorganic (Marcuse, 1955: 25). By the very same token, the root of all social bonds is ultimately libidinal, and it is Eros that makes it possible for humans to "combine organic substances into ever larger unities" (Freud, 1920/1989: 616). The action of Thanatos in the interest of the social order has the simultaneous effect of weakening it, just as the expansion of erotic relations can also produce their disintegration. The death drive's forces of aggression help form the ego, but they also form the very entity (superego) that most threatens the stability of the ego. The superego emerges as "animal righteousness," (Bell & Horowitz, 2016: 74), compulsive rage at the perceived impurity of the other.

'To repress or not to repress' is Freud's translation of the Shakespearean double-bind, 'to be or not to be.' Freud remained pessimistic and ambivalent about this dilemma in 1929, as the ideas and actions that would lead to an attempted 'Final Solution' to the 'Jewish problem' in Europe began to materialize. Repressive controls are unavoidable corollaries of the maintenance of normal

social ties, controls whose traumatic intensity Freud found that many people were unable to sustain individually, and which could lead to explosive violence socially and politically, in a kind of blowback or ‘revolt of nature’ (Horkheimer, 1947). Freud’s interpreter Herbert Marcuse summarizes: “The work of repression pertains to the death instinct as well as the life instinct. Normally, their fusion is a healthy one, but the sustained severity of the superego constantly threatens this healthy balance” (Marcuse, 1955: 53).

#### 4. Wholeness – the Hidden Trend in Marcuse

In *Eros and Civilization* Herbert Marcuse (1955) claimed to have found a ‘hidden trend’ in Freud. Marcuse found grounds for a distinction between basic and surplus repression that would permit the loosening of certain civilized restrictions deemed *surplus* to the basic requirements of responsibility and survival:

“...while any form of the reality principle demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts, the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce *additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we denote as *surplus repression*. For example, the modifications and deflections of instinctual energy necessitated by the perpetuation of the monogamic-patriarchal family, or by a hierarchical division of labour, or by public control over the individual’s private existence are instances of surplus-repression pertaining to the institutions of a *particular reality principle*. They are added to the basic (phylogenetic) restrictions of the instincts which mark the development of man from the human animal to the *animal sapiens*. The power to restrain and guide instinctual drives, to make biological necessities into individual needs and desires, increases rather than reduces gratification: the “mediatization” of nature, the breaking of its compulsion, is the human form of the pleasure principle.” (Marcuse, 1955: 37)

The utopian dimension of Marcuse’s theory is a direct corollary of the basic-surplus distinction: our experience of the double-bind of repression is that of a particular historical era; it is not necessarily a universal human experience.

What appears necessary for civilization today might be discarded tomorrow as surplus. Controls on erotic activity, e.g., the rigidity of the institution of marriage, family structure, norms of public behaviour, etc. might all be greatly relaxed in a future social context where the energies of the death instinct called up for sustaining surplus repression have cooled off. In Batesonian terms, we could say that Marcuse is theorizing a release from the digital fetish, and his 'great refusal' (see Marcuse, 1964: 255–7) of repression can be interpreted as a refusal to accept the 'hubris' embedded in actually-existing social institutions. Basic repression would then be the result of a trauma made humanly necessary by the inevitable digital cutoff. Surplus repression, which is not at all humanly necessary, *results from the forgetting of that trauma* and a spiraling feedback loop of ever-steeper losses of resolution in communication of all kinds.

However, what might seem to be an elegant or convenient solution to the Freudian double-bind – distinguishing the basic from the surplus and discarding the latter – is subtended by Marcuse's complex meditation on the relation between Eros and Thanatos. Having extended the Marxist concept of surplus value into the psychic-instinctual realm, Marcuse does not seem satisfied. Rather, in Marcuse as in Freud, "The ultimate relation between Eros and Thanatos remains obscure" (Marcuse, 1955: 27).

The complexity of Marcuse's investigation in *Eros and Civilization* seems at times undermined by apparently simple binary formulations: "Domination differs from the rational exercise of authority" (Marcuse, 1955: 36). This and a general spirit that might be summarized as 'let Eros prevail,' overemphasized and under-thought, can obscure the importance of some of Marcuse's more ambiguous philosophical ruminations. Marcuse's exasperated attention to the complex paradoxes generated by the Eros-Thanatos binary can be cut off in the interest of building solidarity for the 'progressive' side. If one reduces Marcuse's meaning to a slogan such as 'be realistic and demand the impossible,' he can be easily assimilated to such tragic and spectacular figures as Guy Debord and Slavoj Žižek, brand names for viral symbolic-insurrectionary violence that explodes throughout 'social media' today.<sup>9</sup> On the global-celebrity academic

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<sup>9</sup> The atmosphere of simmering rage that one often finds in 'social' media brings to mind Freud's pessimism: "And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers, eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?" (Gay, 1989: 772).

stage, Marcuse is reduced to a footnote in the ongoing history of the insurrection of the underdogs.

But perhaps this simplification should not surprise us. After all, Marcuse's theoretical solution to the double-bind of surplus repression only places us in another double-bind. The civilized psyche is a product of surplus repression. This means that the death instinct colours its whole experience, along with its judgment and its relations with others. How, if one's life has been 'damaged' (Adorno, 2005), can one be sure that a given mode of conduct judged to be surplus-repressive, really is surplus? Marcuse makes it 'clear as mud': "[I]n the history of civilization, basic repression and surplus-repression have been inextricably intertwined" (Marcuse, 1955: 38). Marcuse's extended meditation on this problem, which includes his warnings about the repressive desublimation – i.e., what appears sexually liberatory might actually serve the forces of surplus repression – seem to cut against any easy sloganizing of Marcuse's theory of political resistance. A resolution to the conceptual tension this generates in relation to his affirmative invocation of Eros remains a hidden trend in *Eros and Civilization*.

It should be clear that the point of bringing Marcusean theory into conversation with cybernetics is not to refute Marcuse's (or Freud's) privileging of Eros over Thanatos. On the contrary, I think Bateson implicitly affirms Freudo-Marcusean Eros in cybernetic terms, conceptualized as a process of *learning* operating simultaneously on multiple verbal and nonverbal levels. Cybernetics does not refute or radically exclude the Eros-Thanatos binary as a map, but rather sets up another way of seeing the organism alongside psychoanalysis, where we begin with a unified monistic structure of inner relations, nota duel or mythic antagonism. Let us see what depth can be generated with a binocular view of the Freudo-Marcusean notion of instinctual liberation and a cybernetic concept of learning.

## 5. Eros<sub>1,2,3</sub> and Learning<sub>1,2,3</sub>

To make more explicit what is hidden in Marcuse, I am employing subscript numerals (<sub>1...n</sub>) as my application of a *linguistic device* developed by Alfred Korzybski in *Science and Sanity* (1948), which he called the index. I am using this device to account for the fact that the Freudian term "Eros", as Marcuse uses it in *Eros and Civilization*, is very much *multiordinal*. To say a word is

'multiordinal' is to say that it refers to different logical levels in an ascending 'nesting' scale of wholeness. For example, point is different from line, line is different from surface, and surface is different from cube, etc. but nevertheless point, line and surface are all contained in the higher-dimensional wholeness of the cube. Freudo-Marcusean 'Eros' similarly refers at once to a pulsating flux of partial drives demanding gratification, as well as to the integrating forces that bind the Ego, and yet further to a kind of generalized energy of cohesion in the organism and (at a higher level of abstraction) among organisms.

Unbound primary Eros<sub>1</sub> is a violently unpredictable flux, almost indistinguishable in many manifestations from Freud's infamous 'oral aggression,' the desire to consume the loved object. However, Eros<sub>1</sub> also refers to the primary experience of continuity of being with the mother and is at the root of all social bonds. Eros<sub>1</sub> seems to be dominated by what Bateson might call positive or regenerative feedback loops that shatter the stable operation of homeostasis.<sup>10</sup> Eros<sub>1</sub> is, as it were, a steam engine lacking a 'governor' in the properly cybernetic sense of control-through-responsiveness. It corresponds to the experience of the human baby who intermittently explodes in hallucinatory traumatic screams and dissolves in blissful oneness with the mother, and who is otherwise unable to 'fend for himself' until a relatively advanced age (relative to other mammals). Eros<sub>1</sub>, the level of fragmentary and partial drives, can be immensely destructive if it produces a conflict within the whole that contains it. The human infant requires a maternal or parental agency outside of it as its 'governor.'

In this fragmentary, incoherent form, Freud and Marcuse would say that Eros can *become* Thanatos. In a Korzybskian-Batesonian framework, speaking multiordinally, we can designate the fragmentary partial drives as Eros<sub>1</sub>. Eros<sub>2</sub> would be of a *higher logical order*, a structure that binds together the partial drives – or more precisely, that *is* those drives, in a higher-order structure – and in this way makes the human being capable of responsibility to others. This can be described in psychoanalytic terms as 'repressive' in the sense that it represents a stage of greater self-control that evolves out of conflicts at the level of Eros<sub>1</sub>, involving crucial 'altruistic' experiences of failure, self-sacrifice, etc. With such a multiordinal map of the psyche we gain a *sense of depth*: we can sense why for

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<sup>10</sup> See "Cultural Contact and Schismogenesis" for Bateson's account of how positive feedback cycles within and between individuals disrupt psychic and social stability (Bateson, 1971: 61–72).

Marcuse Agape (responsible, self-sacrificing, divine love) need not be seen as the opposite of Eros. Rather it 'is' Eros *organized at a higher logical level*:

“...nothing in the nature of Eros justifies the notion that the “extension” of the impulse is confined to the corporeal sphere. If the antagonistic separation of the physical from the spiritual part of the organism is itself the historical result of repression, the overcoming of this antagonism would open the spiritual sphere to the impulse. The aesthetic idea of a sensuous reason suggests such a tendency. It is essentially different from sublimation in so far as the spiritual sphere becomes the “direct” object of Eros and remains a libidinal object: there is change neither in energy nor in aim. The notion that Eros and Agape may after all be one and the same – not that Eros is Agape but that Agape is Eros – may sound strange after almost two thousand years of theology.” (Marcuse, 1955: 210)

Not only does Marcuse reject the tradition of *replacing* Eros with Agape; he goes further, to the point of suggesting that Eros at the higher levels *is Agape*, that its wholeness is marked by an erotic as well as empathic (and traumatic) encounter with suffering, whether in the other or in the self – with Thanatos. The ambiguity and mystery of these formulations can be reduced, or seen freshly, if we imagine Marcuse as wanting to replace the traditional notion of moralizing Agape afflicting Eros with guilt, with a notion of Eros as a structural process operating simultaneously at differing logical levels.

Eros<sub>1</sub>, a bundle of partial drives incapable of sustained empathy with others and lacking a character structure, corresponds to the Freudian *id* and to primary process. Eros<sub>2</sub> corresponds to ‘normal’ character development, the erection of a structure of controls that Freud recognized as repression of Oedipal ambivalence, the development of secondary out of primary process, feelings of guilt and self-worth etc. Marcuse is not advocating the ‘liberation’ of Eros<sub>1</sub> as against the controls and responsiveness characteristic of Eros<sub>2</sub>. Rather, to put it in cybernetic terms, Marcuse aims to achieve Eros<sub>3</sub>. Eros<sub>3</sub> would reform and bind the energies of socialization in a yet-higher-order structure. Eros<sub>3</sub> would feature deepening awareness of the multiordinal structure of Eros<sub>(1,2,3)</sub> as well as of the double-binds encountered at the level of Eros<sub>2</sub> in a socially fragmentary context. Discourses of ‘self-worth’ would be supplanted by notions of self as a constellation of learning experiences.

This tripartite structure of Eros<sub>(1,2,3)</sub> can be provisionally mapped onto Bateson's theory of levels of *learning* (Bateson, 1971: 279–308).<sup>11</sup> **Learning<sub>1</sub>** is then the acquisition of bits or fragments of information (corresponding approximately in humans to Freud's 'primary orality', Eros<sub>1</sub>). Most, if not all, living beings appear capable of this form of learning. **Learning<sub>2</sub>**, which Bateson also called 'deutero-learning', is *learning how to learn bits of information by organizing them in sets*. This development is routinely accomplished by most 'higher' animals and by humans after the age of about three, and indeed is ingrained in us as a set of self-correcting, relatively static features of the kind Freud called 'character' (1908/1989: 293–7):

"It is said that Mr. Jones is dependent, hostile, fey, finicky, anxious, exhibitionistic, narcissistic, passive, competitive, energetic, bold, cowardly, fatalistic, humorous, playful, canny, optimistic, perfectionist, careless, careful, casual, etc. In light of what has already been said, the reader will be able to assign all these adjectives to their appropriate logical type. All are descriptive of (possible) results of Learning<sub>2</sub>..." (Bateson, 1971: 297–8)

'Character' formations are stereotyped and self-correcting habits of which we are mostly unaware, because they form the context of how we 'learn to learn.' 'Character' formations are inevitably at work in humans in every instance of the operation of conscious purpose. This corresponds to the level of the Ego and of Eros<sub>2</sub>.

What would correspond to Marcuse's distinction between basic and surplus repression in Bateson would consist not in acquiring a piece of information about the nature of politics (Learning<sub>1</sub>). Nor would it consist in acquiring a new way of acquiring pieces of information about social and political life (Learning<sub>2</sub>), the level where a great deal of 'ideological critique' comes to rest. It would require learning new patterns of learning to learn, or **Learning<sub>3</sub>**. Learning<sub>3</sub> is an *order of magnitude* more complex than Learning<sub>2</sub>, an exponential and not additive expansion, which would be experienced as a continuous dynamism in a new dimension whose existence could not be inferred from the contents of Learning<sub>2</sub>. Bateson said that a normal human adult would encounter Learn-

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<sup>11</sup> We might, for example, provisionally ignore the difference between 'love' and learning. After all, Bateson defines learning as change, and love continually changes us – if it does not change us in each moment it is more than likely bound at the level of character or a partial drive (Eros<sub>1</sub> or Eros<sub>2</sub>). For more on Bateson's theory of levels of learning see "The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication" (Bateson, 1971: 279–308).



ing<sub>3</sub> as an event of supersession of life's difficulties, a 'conversion experience', an overall opening of the self beyond the ego's conscious purposes that Bateson called 'the larger system.'<sup>12</sup> This would in turn involve a profound *analog-digital integration*, a quantum leap forward in the capacity of language and consciousness to map social experience richly, without forgetting the traumatic cut digital language applies.

In practical terms, looking at Marcuse's basic-surplus repression distinction through a Batesonian lens, we may have a clearer sense of why it is not sufficient merely to transmit or receive the 'correct' political information, from the 'correct' wing of the spectrum, as if one wing holds a monopoly on repressiveness or responsibility. What is needed is a *fundamental flexibilization of ways of learning to learn*, a flexibilization that shatters the narrow fixation of a few behaviour patterns (avaricious acquisition, neurotic co-dependence, limitless self-evaluation, self-justification and vilification of the hated other, etc.). We need to transcend the narrow fixation on the acquisition of information and control where 'the digital' (inside or outside our skin) is fetishized as the whole of learning. We need to shake loose this digital fetish that operates *as* the commodities as much as it operates among them, and this requires a fundamental and dynamic epistemological shift connecting the level of self to the level of the larger system, encompassing self-in-society and in turn society in the whole biosphere.

## 6. Learning<sub>4</sub> and the Political Problem of Wholeness

But this is to point to what we might call Eros<sub>4</sub>, corresponding to what Bateson labeled as Learning<sub>4</sub> which, as he conjectured very briefly, might be achieved at the level of the evolution of an entire population or the biosphere *in toto* (Bateson, 1971: 293). It seems plausible enough to compare what Bateson means by Learning<sub>4</sub> (i.e. a fundamental transformation of terrestrial mind and nature via the overcoming of 'hubris') with what Marcuse means by 'revolution,' which he explicitly articulates in terms of the *liberation of nature from*

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<sup>12</sup> Bateson describes *Alcoholics Anonymous* as an organization aimed at helping its members to undergo the difficult process of Learning<sub>3</sub> as the only effective way to transcend addiction patterns. The first step is admitting I have a problem and that I cannot solve it, that I must appeal to a Higher Power than my own judgment for aid. A shattering of fixed patterns of Learning<sub>2</sub> can result in psychic breakdown, a reversion to Eros<sub>1</sub> in Freudian terms; hopefully it may activate higher order learning patterns such that multiple patterns of Learning<sub>2</sub> can be noted and compared in the self. The unicity of the self is both abandoned and consummated as the Wholeness of Self-in-contact-with-Higher-Power (Bateson, 1971: 309–337).

*domination*. And yet Bateson explicitly distanced himself from the Marxist identification with class schismogenesis and certainly never endorsed any idea of ‘revolution.’ We have seen that the Freudo-Marcusean theory of instinctual liberation bears many implicit similarities to the Batesonian theory of learning, and that the surplus repressive double-bind (‘how can I eliminate surplus repression from within a surplus repressive context?’) can be traversed, if not undone, by approaching the entire psychic structure in terms of multiordinal levels of organization (Eros<sub>1,2,3</sub>). We thereby move from a quasi-mythic binary system (Eros v. Thanatos) to a monistic multiordinal system typical of cybernetics.

The difference between Freudo-Marcusean theory and Bateson’s is not erased. A relation has been established without eliminating the difference, which is necessary to maintain the depth for the binocular vision of Bateson’s metaphor.<sup>13</sup> For just as Marcuse’s text may be vulnerable to a reduction to insurrectionary romanticism, misguided acts of provocation, interminable vindictive self-righteous blame, etc., cybernetics is vulnerable to what the radical Leftist group Tiqqun call ‘the cybernetic hypothesis.’ Tiqqun remark incisively on the socio-political significance that Bateson’s theory has had in practice:

“Under the influence of Gregory Bateson, the Von Neumann of the social sciences, and of the American sociological tradition, obsessed by the question of deviance... socio-cybernetics was aimed, as a priority, towards studying *the individual as feedback locus*, that is, as a “self-disciplined personality.” Bateson became the *social editor in chief* of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was involved in the origins of the “family therapy” movement, as well as those of the “sales techniques training” movement developed at Palo Alto. Since the cybernetic hypothesis as a whole calls for a radically new physical structuring of the subject, whether individual or collective, its aim is to hollow it out. It disqualifies as a myth individual inwardness/internal dialogue, and with it all 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology, including psychoanalysis.... Each person was to become a *fleshless envelope*, the best possible conductor of social communication, the locus of an infinite feedback loop which is made *to have no nodes*. The cybernetization process

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<sup>13</sup> There is in fact another possible approach that I do not have time to cover in this paper, namely treating Freud’s confrontation of Eros and Thanatos, as a lived experience of a mythic archetype, in the therapeutic relation, as itself a formation of Eros<sub>3</sub>, albeit one whose *necessarily social dimension* was expressed in more tragic and ambiguous terms than in Marcuse, for example in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

thus completes the “process of civilization,” to where bodies and their emotions are abstracted within the system of symbols.” (Tiqqun, 2001: Section III, para. 1)

Bateson’s relational theory of the psyche, for example, as interpreted and practised by some family therapists, has dissolved from Learning<sub>3</sub> (patients and communities learning dynamically about the way ‘mental’ illness is learned in social contexts) back into Learning<sub>2</sub> (moral judgments of families – see particularly Bateson, 1978: 231ff). This in turn may have helped clear the field for that simplest and most invasive of technological psychic controls, the pharmaceutical-commodity form (Learning<sub>0</sub>). This inertia, it might be argued, resulted from Bateson’s failure or refusal to articulate clearly a *specifically socio-political* distance between his notions and those of traditional morality, civilized values, etc.<sup>14</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson has questioned her father’s refusal to commit himself to political action, which she conjectures may have derived from war trauma:

“I believe that Gregory’s rejection of political action came out of his World War II experiences, when politics were directed toward the defeat of an enemy, and Gregory’s own role in psychological warfare involved the deliberate corruption of communication. Thus, I see him rejecting an action program that, by defining purposes and particularly the purpose of victory, would embrace a deliberate blindness. We have, however, in our heritage from the Greeks, side by side with the idea that politics are about domination and power over the other, the idea that politics are about conversation – that the process benefits from disagreement and difference.” (Bateson, 1991: 320)

On the other hand, to describe contemporary global politics as a ‘conversation’ seems rather optimistic – at least more so than it may have seemed in 1991. In this ‘damaged life’ (Adorno, 2005) the ‘spiritual’ or ‘internal’ dimensions of the struggle may sometimes be more important or all that is possible in a given time and place. Contrasting Batesonian psychology with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Gad Horowitz notes that in Bateson’s work hubris remains a ‘systemic-ecological-epistemological-cognitive’ issue and that Bateson does not directly confront the “inevitable traumatic incursion of language into Being” (Horowitz, 2016).

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<sup>14</sup> This failure or refusal arguably places Bateson close to the pessimistic position of Freud, though he does not occlude the social dimension of the ego as much as Freud’s quasi-mythic language can do or be made to do.

What do we see when we look simultaneously through cybernetic and psychoanalytic lenses? That ‘partial’ Eros (Eros<sub>1</sub> and Eros<sub>2</sub>) can be destructive as well constructive to wholeness. That a ‘correct’ course to ‘liberation’ cannot be given in its entirety, complete and whole, in any non-contradictory language. Perhaps it must begin and end with questions rather than answers:

“Perhaps there is no single vision that everyone should agree on; perhaps the essential wisdom will be woven through the discourse of diverse communities. Perhaps I am right only by virtue of being contradicted, but whoever drowns out my words, for whatever reason, is surely wrong. . . . The central achievement of political action and education may be the broadening of political agendas, the acceptance of new patterns of relevance.” (Bateson, 1991: 320)

Then again, cybernetics reminds us that information can be most easily corrupted by the addition of more and more information, ultimately resulting in insignificant noise. Too much noise impedes the articulation of the higher dimensions of relevance.<sup>15</sup> So it would be ‘surely wrong’ to allow Marcuse’s chilling last words in *Eros and Civilization* to be swallowed up in a cybernetic sea. They are truer than ever today:

“Theology and philosophy today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate – they betray the promise of utopia. In contrast, a philosophy that does not work as the handmaiden of repression responds to the fact of death with the Great Refusal – the refusal of Orpheus the liberator. Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational – painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. . . . But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression.” (Marcuse, 1955: 236–7)

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson’s response to Klaus Krippendorff’s pessimism about political communication, recorded as part of her introductory lecture for “Cybernetics in the Future” the 2014 conference of the American Society for Cybernetics, Washington D.C. (M. C. Bateson, 2014), illuminates the issue of ‘cutting through the noise’ of global political discourse (Krippendorff’s comment occurs at 1:02:40 in the video, Bateson’s reply follows).

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