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Mind the Gap:
Flexibility, Epistemology and the Rhetoric of New Work

Thomas Hylland Eriksen[1]

This article explores Bateson's definition of flexibility as "uncommitted potential for change", relating it to contemporary issues and scientific controversies and thereby showing the huge, largely untapped potential of the concept. The main empirical example is the "new economy", where the term flexibility is used aggressively to advertise its virtues. However, it is argued, flexible work tends to render the worker more flexible in relation to space, but less flexible regarding time. This illustrates another point in Bateson's analysis of flexibility, namely that flexibility gained in one domain tends to reduce flexibility in another. The ensuing problems are familiar enough – fragmentation, alienation, stress – but poorly understood, and Bateson's flexibility concept makes it possible, in fact, to deal with the unintentional side-effects of "new work" as a kind of environmental problem.

Flexibility is to specialization as entropy is to negentropy. (Steps to an Ecology of Mind, p. 505)

The term flexibility has become a major catchword in the *new economy*. Flexible work and flexible organization, moreover, are marked, and marketed, as good innovations. They connote openness to change and a willingness to do things differently as opposed to the rigid formality associated with the *old economy*, and seem to entail a great degree of freedom and choice on the part of the employee. Creativity is good; routine is bad.

However, there is also another story to be told about flexibility. As has been argued by Castells (1996), Sennett (1998), Bauman (2000) and many other contemporary social theorists, the restructuring of capitalism entails a new kind of relationship between persons and their work. In many cases, the employee may no longer be expected to be on time, but s/he should at least be online. The term flexibility is often used to describe this new situation. Jobs are flexible in the sense that they are unstable and uncertain, few employees hold the same jobs for many years, the content of jobs can be changed almost overnight, and the boundaries between work and leisure are negotiable and chronically fuzzy. In his book about the psychological consequences of the new, unstable work regimes, Sennett (1998) argues, moreover, that flexible work leads to a fragmentation of the person. His informants typically complain about the lack of linear narrative in their lives; they move from task to task, from job to job and in some cases from house to house, without ever feeling that what they do has cumulative results and can be fitted into an over-arching, linear narrative about their lives.

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1. University of Oslo/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Email: g.t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no

I propose to do two things: To present the theoretical concept of *flexibility* as it was originally sketched by Gregory Bateson and show its untapped analytic potential, and to discuss whether or not *the new flexibility* in the working place can be said to increase flexibility in a theoretical sense.

As an analytical term, flexibility is rarely used in the social sciences, and most anthropologists are, if anything at all, likely to associate it with Bateson's late work on ecology. In "Ecology and Flexibility in Urban Civilization" (Bateson, 1972a), Bateson defined flexibility as "uncommitted potential for change" (Bateson, 1972a, p.497). The context for his usage of the word was the emerging environmental degradation which first attracted widespread attention in the early 1970s. Bateson argued that increased energy use entails a loss of flexibility in the sense that it shrinks the opportunity space. In a society which is built around the daily use of the car, for example, it is difficult to revert to slower and less energy-intensive means of transportation. More fundamentally, his view was that the flexibility used (and used up) by growing populations harnessing much of the available energy for their own purposes, reduced the flexibility of the environment.

Bateson describes a healthy system, flexibility-wise, by drawing an analogy with an acrobat on a high-wire.

> To maintain the ongoing truth of his basic premise ("I am on the wire"), he must be free to move from one position of instability to another, *i.e.*, certain variables such as the position of his arms and the rate of movement of his arms must have great flexibility, which he uses to maintain the stability of other more fundamental and general characteristics. (Bateson, 1972a, p. 498)

Maintaining flexibility in the system as a whole, Bateson adds, "depends upon keeping many of its variables in the middle of their tolerable limits" (Bateson, 1972a, p. 502). In order to use the term accurately, it is thus necessary to specify the parameters limiting the upper and lower threshold values, and also to demonstrate the significance of wider systemic connectedness which affects, and is affected by, flexibility in the realm under investigation.

Although the word is used surprisingly rarely in academic work, ideas of flexibility which are compatible with, and largely true to, Bateson's concise definition are widespread and important in many areas of intellectual exploration. Let us briefly consider some examples.

Flexibility and rigidity

In cognitive theory, a major theoretical issue concerns the way in which knowledge is being selected, sifted and organized. In a book offering a critical overview of the state of the art in the field, Nørretranders, in *The User Illusion* (1999), distinguishes between information and exformation, the latter being potential information that is consciously or unconsciously selected away or filtered out. Sperber and Wilson's (1986) notion of *relevance*, largely informed by linguistics and Darwinian selectionism, is a kindred concept. While the dynamics of information exchange and

knowledge development are not random, they are also far from predictable. There is much, much more potential knowledge present in our surroundings, in our brains and in our bodies than that which is being used. The "uncommitted potential for change" is very considerable.

In one of the late-20th centuries controversies about natural selection, Gould and Vrba (1981, see also Gould 2002) introduced the term *exaptation* to denote phenotypical features whose functioning had undergone change due to changes in the wider system. These structures were, in other words, flexible and responded, like the acrobat on the high-wire, to changing parameters in their surroundings.

In another debate about natural selection, Rose (1996) and others have argued that there cannot be a simple relationship between DNA and the organism, between genotype and phenotype, since there are important phenotypical effects arising from the interaction between hereditary material and its surroundings. Already at the level of cell chemistry, this kind of flexibility in hereditary material is evident. For one thing, it is well known that there are common characteristics in humans that are inborn but not genetic, which are caused partly by the mother's diet during pregnancy.

A third debate relating to neo-Darwinian theory concerns memetics, or the view that ideas spread and replicate themselves in a manner analogous to the replication of genes. In a recent edited book about memetics (Aunger 2000), several anthropologists – Sperber (2000), Bloch (2000) and Kuper (2000) – voice their objections to this, in their view, simplistic view of cultural transmission (see also Ingold 2001). Their main argument, which has also been developed at great length by Sperber elsewhere (Sperber 1996), is that contextual factors which could be described as noise, redundancy, distortion and recontextualisation tends to modify even simple, apparently straightforward concepts when they are transferred between individuals. In other words, the *memes* are malleable and flexible by virtue of their embeddedness in complex, largely unpredictable processes.

In research on identity politics, similarly, many have shown how rule-bound adherence to tightly closed bodies of cultural norms and conventions are practically incompatible with life in culturally complex societies. As Bauman once put it: "If the modern 'problem of identity' is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open" (Bauman 1996, p. 18).

In sociological and anthropological studies of technology and science, moreover, a main research strategy consists in looking at the unintentional side-effects of technological change – in other words, a kind of flexibility that could not conceivably have been intended by the initiators of the changes. Technologies are generally much more flexible than their inventors have imagined, simply because users are more varied and complex than the technologies themselves.

Such studies also often illustrate one of Bateson's most important points regarding flexibility, namely that there is a tendency that increased flexibility in some areas leads to reduced flexibility in others. In line with this view, it could be argued that Gutenberg's fateful invention led to enhanced flexibility in the transmission of

information, but to a loss of flexibility in linguistic variation (standardization of dialects) and in locally embedded world-views (knowledge was frozen and externalized). Similarly, the car made people living in the suburbs spatially more flexible, but less flexible locally. The car pulled them out of the local milieu and deprived them of some of the moral ties that could have been drawn upon in their relationship to their neighbors. The telephone had similar effects.

At an even more general level, it is often said that even a perfect knowledge of the norms and values in a given society does not enable us to predict how people will act. This is not necessarily because the norms themselves are flexible, but because the contexts of action necessitate their interpretation; in order to be useful, of course, norms must be interpreted.

Many of the issues relating to flexibility can be translated, remaining with the Batesonian spirit, as map/territory or menu/food issues. In other words, there is a variable and indeterminate relationship between model and reality. Simplistic genetic determinism or adaptationism in biology, or structural-functional determinism in classic social anthropology, or even cultural determinism in cultural anthropology, fail to grasp the grey zones of indeterminacy and variability, and they do so in ways which are actually quite closely related. To take an example from current public debate in Europe and North America: After 11 September 2001, some well-intentioned commentators argued that in order to understand the Muslim world, one should begin by reading the Koran. Naturally, such an endeavour would teach us little that is useful about Muslims. Not only is the Koran only a map or a menu; it is also a map/menu which is known only patchily by most of its adherents, the vast majority of whom have a sketchy or non-existent knowledge of Arabic.

Of course, the fact that there is indeterminacy, improvisation and ambiguity in social life is far from unfamiliar in anthropology; it has been explicitly recognized by, among others, Gluckman (1964), Bourdieu (1977) and many others, including even the card-carrying materialist determinist Marvin Harris in a paper about the relationship between norms and behavior (1975). Earlier still, Firth (1951) introduced the concept of social organization, distinguishing it from social structure in the manner that we might distinguish *parole* from *langue* or territory from map. However, if we follow Bateson, we may – instead of throwing our hands up in despair over the loss of precision entailed by growing complexity – try to find out if it might not be possible to describe and come to terms with forms of flexibility accurately.

Some implications

Some of Bateson's original examples of flexibility lend themselves easily enough to accurate descriptions; he draws chiefly on grand cultural history of the *big ditch* kind. Essentially, he argues that simpler technology and less intensive exploitation of the natural environment entails greater flexibility since most of the potential for change has not been used up. A more recent example, too recent for Bateson to have taken

into account, is the Green Revolution in India from the 1970s onwards, which entailed the introduction of new cereal strains to enhance productivity. With hindsight, it appears that the green revolution reduced flexibility in two ways: it led to a reduction of genetic variation in the cereal strains, and to a reduced flexibility regarding population size since the Indian population was stabilized at a higher level than before, making it impossible to revert to the earlier cereal strains without risking major famines. Even if the new cereals should be shown to be environmentally harmful in the longer run (which some critics have argued), the change was irreversible and led to reduced flexibility.

However, Bateson did recognize that unspecified and unacknowledged potential for change is useless, in other words that increased complexity in knowledge itself implies flexibility. There can thus be no unambiguous, objective definition of flexibility, and moreover, the parameters defining the range of options can also be changed. Just as it does not make sense to talk about evolution of a single species independently of the wider ecosystem, the term flexibility can only be meaningful on the background of a description of the context.

Narrow parameters always suggest vulnerability. In animal species, a narrow genetic range tends to be associated with vulnerability, specialization and poor adaptability to environmental changes. One current example is the cheetah population in East Africa and elsewhere. The cheetah is highly specialized and displays little internal genetic variation (O'Brien et al. 1985), and some biologists have argued that the species was on the verge of extinction around 10,000 years ago. As a result, it is adapted to a single biotope (dry savanna) and vulnerable to disease. Furthermore, criticism of current attempts at artificial selection among humans (through new reproductive technologies) point in the same direction, warning against the unintended consequences of a planned reduction in intraspecies genetic variation. Similarly, the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe points out, in his lamentably untranslated, major treatise on tragedy from 1943 (Zapffe 1984 [1943]), that the human hand, with its opposable thumb, displays a remarkable lack of fixity, or flexibility as I would put it: Unlike a claw or paw, it is not obvious what it should be used for. The uncommitted potential for change is considerable.

As mentioned, Bateson suggests that growing flexibility in one field tends to lead to the loss of flexibility in another. However, the model does not necessarily result in a zero-sum game: in some cases, conditions of *matching flexibility* are achieved, that is to say complex systems where a desired level of flexibility is maintained in both, or all, of the relevant interacting systems. When there is no attention to matching flexibility, the relationship between systems, or subsystems, becomes skewed. His main example is the relationship between civilization and environment, as he puts it. Civilization becomes ever more flexible in terms of cultural production, individual choice and so forth, and as a result, the culture–environment relationship loses flexibility because of increased dependency on massive exploitation of available energy and other resources.

In order to appreciate this view of flexibility, it is necessary to think in terms of cybernetic systems with governors and threshold levels (upper and lower): under stress, the system is pressed towards one of its limits which consequently, if unchecked, leads to system collapse. Loss of flexibility may entail changes in tolerance limits (new ways of exploiting nature etc.), which could in turn deepen the more fundamental flexibility deficit. Bateson's general policy advice is Aristotelian: keep activities/systemic features within the middle range – you can always do less of it, and you can always do more of it – however, he does not even begin to indicate how to justify changes in tolerance limits which is, of course, a crucial issue in planning and politics since one man's flexibility can be another man's straitjacket.

Sometimes, deliberate reduction of flexibility in one respect stimulates flexibility in another. In the realm of word processing, it may appear that Microsoft Word, a huge, bloated package including multi-language dictionaries, a bewildering array of formatting options, graphics editors, irritating automatic functions which are almost impossible to turn off as well as numerous other features, offers an enormous extent of flexibility among the users. This is not necessarily the case in practice: flexibility gained in one area may be parasitical on flexibility in another. Many Word users have, during the last two decades, spent much of their creative energy simply trying to come to terms with the software (Eriksen 2002), thereby being effectively deflected from their work. By contrast, Unix-based word processors such as TeX (LaTex) and LyX give the user little choice in formatting. For example, they do not allow footnotes in headings, more than one space between words or more than one line between heading and text. For advanced page layout, dedicated software is recommended. As a result of the reduced flexibility in the realm of formatting, increased flexibility may well obtain with respect to the content of whatever it is that the user is writing.

In the realm of poetry, the sonnet and the haiku are arguably the most perfect forms. The former imposes a strict set of structural rules forcing the poet to exercise creativity within delineated boundaries, while the latter imposes similar constraints regarding length: If you cannot say it in seventeen syllables, don't. (It remains to be seen, but compact, accurate, haiku-like communication may be one of many unintended consequences of the constraint on length imposed by the SMS technology.)

As I write this paragraph in December 2004, I am distracted by two visual impressions: A poster depicting a solemn John Coltrane at the time of the recording of *Blue Train*, and the leaden skies outside my window. Now, Coltrane, a pioneer in jazz improvisation, was aware of the importance of constraints for the exercise of flexibility. Unlike the free improvisers who succeeded him, he kept a few sets of variables relatively constant, chiefly the rhythm and the melody line. The melody was always repeated immediately after his lenity forays into improvisation. Freedom needs a ceiling and a floor.

Why do things have outlines [in paintings], the semi-fictional seven-year old Mary Catherine Bateson asks her father in the eponymously titled metalogue (Bateson

1972b). Because, her father answers in many different ways, with and without the help of William Blake, boundaries are necessary.

The dark clouds, driven across the Atlantic by unusually strong winds and heavy with rain, are atypical of Oslo in the week before Christmas. Normal mid-December temperatures are several degrees below freezing, and strong winds are rare in this sheltered part of Scandinavia. If the mild weather continues, I'm going to have to mow my lawn in January. Global climate change is clearly occurring now, and it has in all likelihood been triggered by human activity. The increased flexibility of movement resulting from the usage of non-renewable energy sources seems to reduced the ability of the biosphere to maintain a relatively stable (or slowly changing) global climate. It has become much more flexible in a few domains and less flexible as a total system.

Flexibility and new work

It is now time to turn to my main example, discussing how Bateson's systemic view of flexibility relates to the term flexibility as it is being used in the new economy of cellphones, laptops, waiting lounges and e-mails. The term flexibility is often used to describe this new situation: Jobs are flexible in the sense that they are unstable and uncertain, few employees hold the same jobs for many years, the content of jobs can be changed, and the boundaries between work and leisure are poorly defined. Summing up the dominant, current views of these concepts, Webb explains:

> Flexibility is, at least in theory, multi-dimensional, covering employment contracts, skills, management and information systems, business strategies, and organization structures. Networks are regarded as the means of enhancing flexibility because they are seen as fluid, permeable, infinitely expandable and dynamic. (Webb, 2004, p. 721)

Bateson's pivotal ideas about flexibility that should be considered in a critical examination of the role of flexibility in new work:

(i) Flexibility is uncommitted potential or elbow room, and
(ii) flexibility gains in one area tend to imply flexibility loss in another.

As Sennett (1998) showed in his pioneering book about the human consequences of *new work*, people seem to become less flexible by becoming more flexible. Sennett begins his book like this:

> Today the phrase "flexible capitalism" describes a system which is more than a permutation on an old theme. The emphasis is on flexibility. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as are the evils of blind routine. Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures. (Sennett, 1998, p. 9)

The tone suggests that flexibility is not necessarily a good thing. Sennett intimates that employees in the new economy are deprived of stability, safety, security and

predictability. However, he does not say that they have become less flexible; on the contrary, he sees flexibility as the enemy. In this he draws on the emic (native) delineation of flexibility rather than using a more analytic definition of the term. Using Bateson's definition, we may ask: Where does the increased, uncommitted potential for change occur in the contemporary business usage of the word flexibility? It appears that the increase in flexibility takes place in the employee's use of space and in his short-term commitments. In the long term, flexibility evaporates altogether, since the time horizon typical of new work is extremely short. The trade-off in this kind of flexibility budget, thus, appears to consist in a swapping of the short-term with the long-term, or freedom with security, or even space with time: New work, I would like to argue, enhances flexibility regarding space but accordingly reduces it with respect to time.

Take the VCR (more recently the DVD), as an alternative to the cinema. Many would say, if asked why they prefer to watch films on television rather than in the cinema, that it makes them more flexible since it enables them to see the film whenever they want. If the parameters defining limits of flexibility pertain to space and time, this assumption must be misguided. If one fills two hours of the evening watching a film, filling a gap which may manifest itself between the children's bedtime and one's own, one effectively reduces one's "uncommitted potential for change." Instead of doing anything or nothing in this precious time of the evening, one narrows down the options to zero by filling the period with media consumption. However, the video indisputably increases spatial flexibility, since it enables us to watch films anywhere. As my colleague Tian Sørhaug once put it, in an assessment of the consequences of new work: You may no longer have to be on time, as long as you're online.

One recent innovation typically associated with flexibility is the home office. In Scandinavia (and some other prosperous, technologically optimistic regions), many companies equipped some of their employees with home computers with online access to the company network in the early 1990s, in order to enhance their flexibility. This was intended to enable employees to work from home part of the time, thereby making the era when office workers were chained to the office desk all day obsolete. In the early days, there were widespread worries among employers to the effect that a main outcome of this new flexibility would consist in a reduction of productivity. Since there was no legitimate way of checking how the staff actually spent their time out of the office, it was often suspected that they worked less from home than they were supposed to. If this were in fact the case, working from home would have led to a real increase in the flexibility of time budgeting. However, work researchers eventually came up with a different picture. By the late 1990s, hardly anybody spoke of the home office as a convenient way of escaping from work; rather, the concern among unionists as well as researchers was now that increasing numbers of employees were at pains to distinguish between working hours and leisure time, and were suffering symptoms of burnout and depression. The home office made it difficult to

distinguish between contexts that were formerly mutually exclusive because of different physical locations.

The blurring of the boundary between work and leisure can be seen as a result of increased spatial flexibility for office workers. In addition to the home office, laptop computers, cellphones and – increasingly – their merger through the advent of wireless Internet access, are in some quarters hailed as liberating innovations enabling people to work any time, anywhere. Consider the following examples.

Some time ago, I urgently needed an electronic form to be filled in and submitted to the powers that be, that is, in this case, the central administration of the University of Oslo. It was well beyond the deadline, but the only person who had the correct version of the form on her computer was on sick leave. I asked other members of the administrative staff whether someone perhaps knew her password or even had a copy of the form on their own computer, but alas – only one known copy existed. Finally, one of her colleagues said, "But surely you can send her an e-mail?" I responded, sheepishly, "But she's at home with the flu, right?" He said, "Well, yes, but don't you worry, naturally she responds to e-mail!" I shouldn't have done it, but I did: I sent her an e-mail, and a couple of hours later I got the form. It saved my day, but it also made me reflect on the working conditions that impel people on legitimate leave to get out of bed, put on their dressing-gown and slippers, turn on their computer and respond to e-mail. Of course, had she not done it, the workload would have accumulated while she was away. In the era of the e-mail, it does not matter whether or not people are in their office. They can be reached anyway. In a sense, they are always in their office. The tyranny of the e-mail is an integral part of the 24-hour society and illustrates a form of spatial flexibility which makes people much less flexible regarding time.

Talking to an executive at a large communications company in Norway, I was told that at their new location, they would only have office space for 60 per cent of the employees. This would save the corporation a lot of money, but the solution was marketed internally as an exciting innovation. Nobody would have their own desk, but were free to work wherever they pleased. Working from home, from the airport train or from a cottage in the mountains, would now be unproblematic and morally perfectly justifiable, the executive proudly told me. Speaking to other employees, I got this view confirmed, but many saw problems as well. Some were concerned about the lack of privacy entailed by the new office arrangement; one could no longer make confidential phone calls from the desk, and would have to wander far away to have a meeting under four eyes. Others felt homeless in an environment where they couldn't even pin a picture of their children on the wall. One said that as a consequence of this de-territorialization of the working space, they would in practice have to be online and with their cellphones turned on most of the time. It would from now on be unthinkable, he added, to go away for the weekend without bringing the mobile and the laptop.

In the old days, that is at least until the mid-1990s, weekends were considered sacred in Norwegian working culture. Hundreds of thousands migrated to their cottages or country houses on Friday afternoons, and a main benefit of going out of

town would consist in their being completely out of touch with the outside world for a few days. This is increasingly becoming illegitimate. Nowadays, it is far from rare to see Scandinavian tourists on beaches in the Canary Islands talking in animated voices with colleagues at work on their cellphones.

A few years ago, a lawyer interviewed by BBC World said that his firm was investigating the possibilities of passing a law protecting employees against being contacted by their bosses outside of working hours. In the old days, people could feel safe on the tube, in the pub and a number of other locations – indeed, not so many years ago, even phoning people at home was considered an intrusion into domestic life which should be avoided unless something urgent had come up. According to the lawyer, many employees now feel harassed by the feeling that they are never truly off work. Whenever and wherever the phone rings, it could be someone from work. The law is not likely to be passed, but it is significant that this kind of issue is now suddenly on the agenda.

Another issue, which might deserve an essay of its own at a later stage, is the interesting possibility that mobile and flexible work may not even enhance productivity. A Danish advertising firm has actually denied its employees access to the Internet, including e-mail, for the duration of the core working hours, because e-mail makes people very efficient at doing one thing, namely handling e-mail, which effectively prevents them from doing their work.

My point is a simple one: The new, flexible job arrangements based on mobile telecommunications and computers, have led to a real gain in flexibility regarding space: People can be anywhere and do their job. However, as Bateson might have predicted, there has been a concomitant loss of flexibility regarding time, since the omnipresent communications technology tends to fill all available gaps. I have written about this at some length in my book *Tyranny of the Moment* (2001), arguing also that in information society, the intensified competition for the attention of others implies the packaging of information in ever smaller packages, in order to make it fit the increasingly tiny gaps in the time budgets of the audiences.

There seems to be a classic Batesonian flexibility trade-off associated with the new information technologies: increased spatial flexibility entails decreased temporal flexibility. If inaccessibility and *empty time* are understood as scarce resources, the context of new work thus seems to be an appropriate context for a new economics as well. In fact, a main environmental challenge of our near future will consist in protecting slow time and gaps from environmental degradation. And not only that: Linear time as such is under threat. The late Neil Postman noted, in one of his last books (Postman 1996), that his students no longer used the term *because*. They were exceedingly clever at stacking sophisticated ideas on top of each other, but did not even try to link them together in causal, temporal chains. The there and then is sacrificed for the here and now. Increased spatial flexibility leads to a pollution of time.

For when something happens all the time, nothing in fact happens. All the gaps are filled. That, in effect, is why it is that it is only when nothing in particular happens that anything could happen. And this is what Bateson was trying to tell us.

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