

# **PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPTH AS A DIS-INTEGRATIVE DYNAMIC**

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Section**

**A WCTP Symposium:  
The dynamics of depth**

## **Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980)**

**-Polish psychiatrist/psychologist, émigré to Canada in 1960s**

**-developed the “theory of positive disintegration” as a personality theory**

**For this presentation I have freely and loosely adapted a few basic elements from the theory:**

**“depth” is achieved through a dynamic process:**

**1. dis-integration of the current integration or integrity of the psyche**

**2. differentiation (increase in complexity, hierarchicalization)**

**3. re-integration of psychic structures at a higher level**

**My interest in “disintegration”: part of longer term research project on the Axial age (Karl Jaspers, others)**

**-the Axial age described as a “breakthrough to transcendence”**

**-perhaps most potent consequence of this “breakthrough” was a thorough-going critique and “dis-integration” of pre-Axial traditions**

**-Axial insights were then incorporated as a constitutive part of post-Axial traditions (i.e. a disintegration->differentiation->reintegration process)**

**Contemporary crises: ecological, economic-political, energy, etc.**

**-various 'collapse' scenarios (societal collapse, ecosystem collapse) are now commonplace**

**-current systems (our post-Axial traditions) as unsustainable:**

**1. they either are, or they need to be, dis-integrated**

**2. then we have to pick up, work with, alter, 'the pieces'**

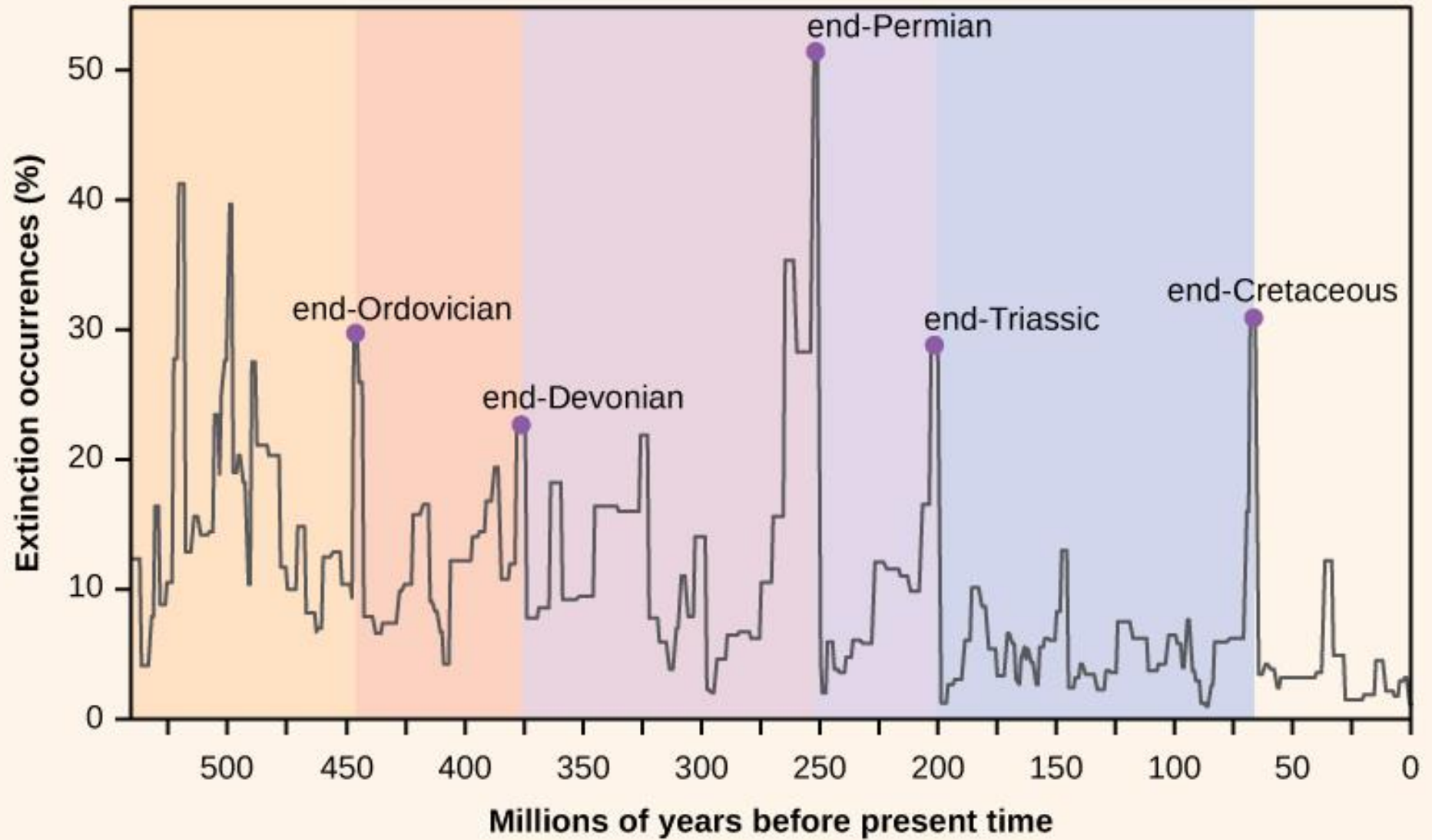
**3. we must aim for new, more live-able (re)integrations**



**A situation of “ongoing crisis” is nothing new – it is evolutionary process (the pressures of selection) at work**

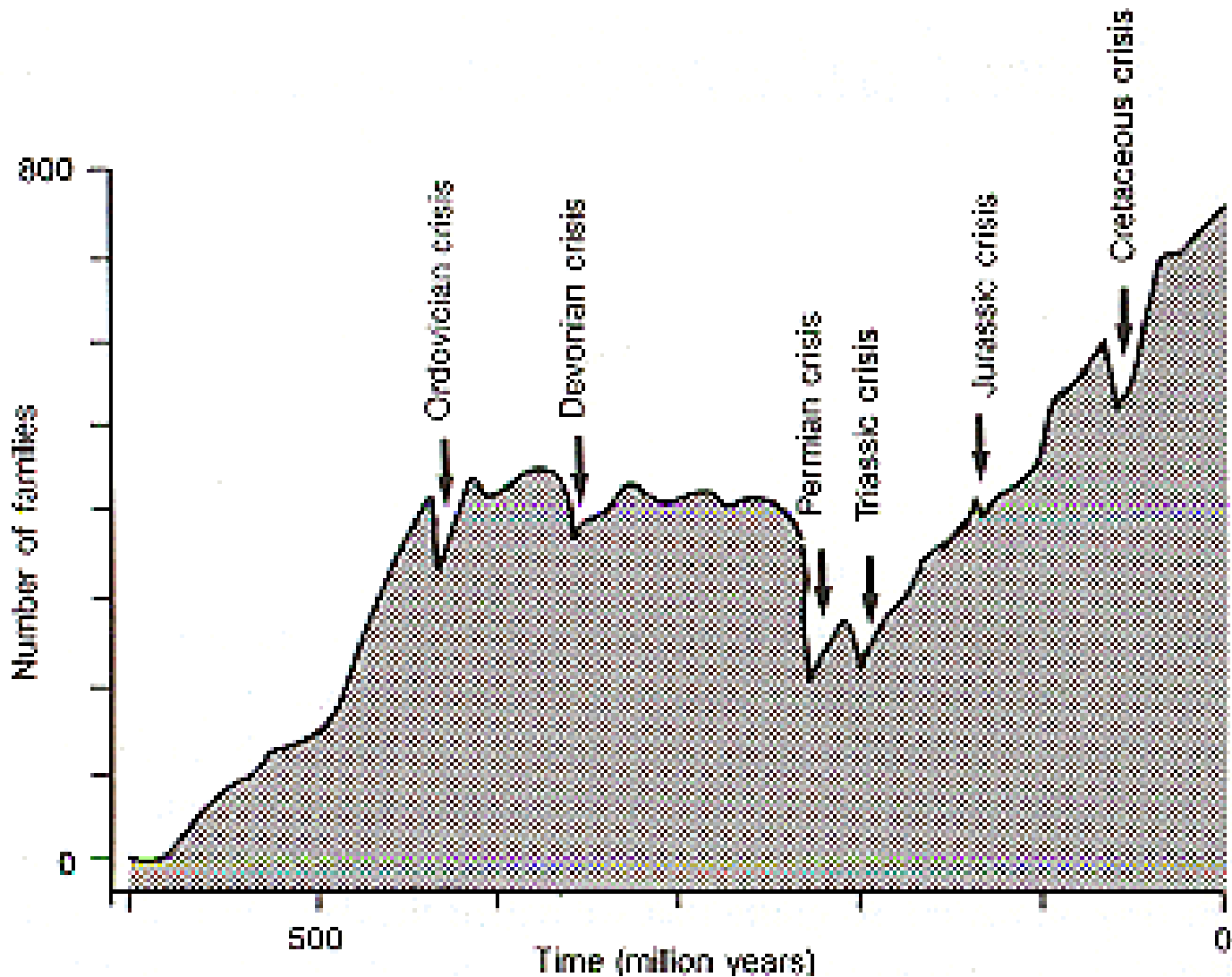
**-recent revisioning of evolutionary process – “punctuated equilibrium” (Gould & Eldredge), and awareness of mass extinction events – highlights that extinctions alongside adaptation/survival is not exclusively a ‘gradual’ process (Darwin’s emphasis; “background extinction”) but is also “punctuated”: crisis events**

Extinction events over past 500 million years  
(with 5 “mass extinctions” highlighted)



Mass extinction	Age mya	Extinctions		
		% Families	% Genera	% Species
Ordovician-Silurian	450–440	27	57	86
Late Devonian	375–360	19	35	75
Permian-Triassic	252	57	56	96
Triassic-Jurassic	200	23	47	80
Cretaceous-Paleogene	65.5	17	40	76

# The Five Mass Extinction Events





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**1. an achieved state of equilibrium is “punctured” by an extinction event (mass, rapid extinctions)**

**2. a “radiation” of adaptations (e.g., increased biodiversity)**

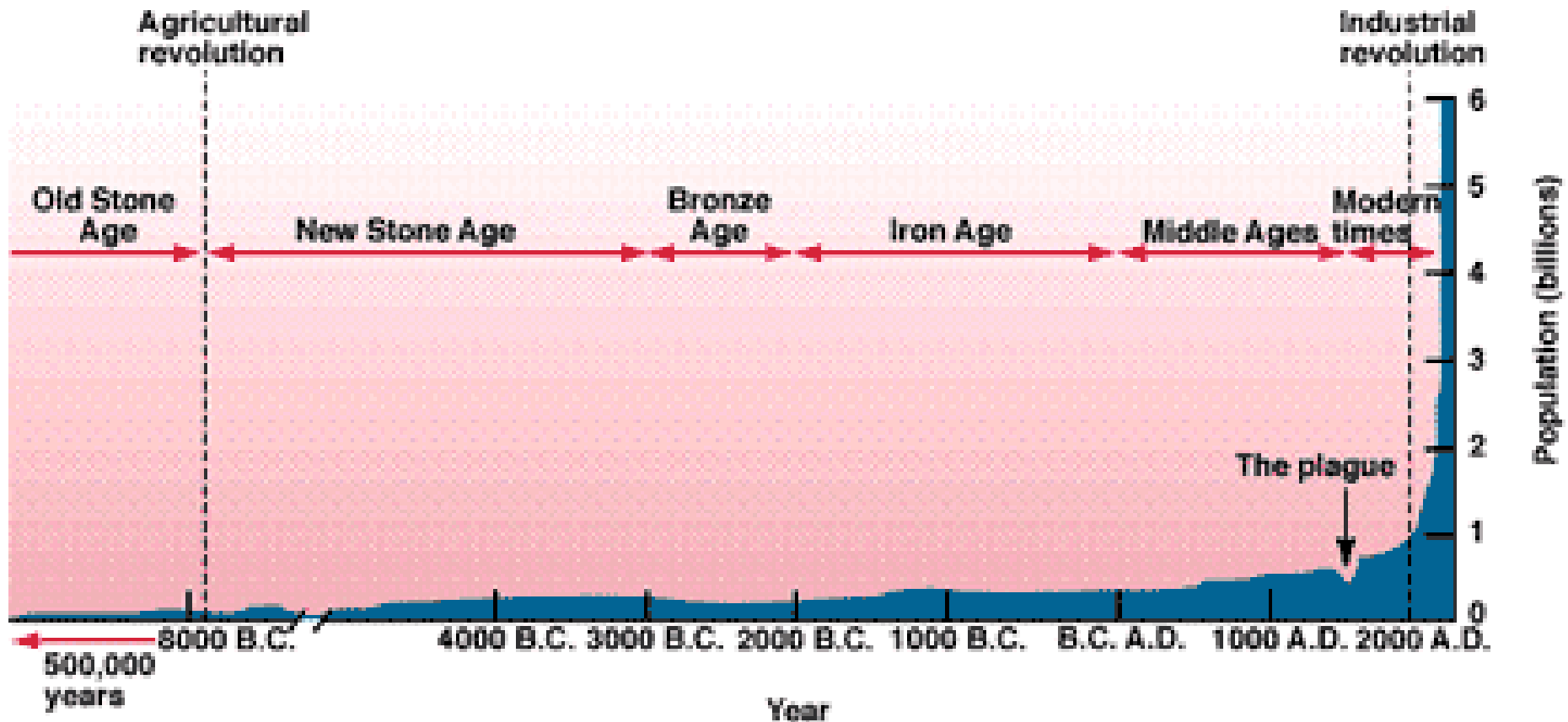
**3. a new equilibrium achieved**

**After the most recent (fifth) extinction event (end-Cretaceous; i.e. end of dinosaurs):**

**hominids, specifically we homo sapiens sapiens, prove the most 'successful' adaptation amongst the 'radiation of adaptations', within the increased biodiversity, that follow**

**-'successful' to the point of: we spread across the whole earth; we develop 'civilizations'; human population shows inexorable growth; we become the instigators of the current, i.e. the sixth, extinction event**

# Human population levels through history.



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**hominids, specifically we homo sapiens sapiens, prove the most 'successful' adaptation amongst the 'radiation of adaptations' that follow**

**What is the adaptation?**

**“Sapience”, i.e. symbolic consciousness; or in Terence Deacon’s terms, the “capacity for symbolic reference”**



**As a consequence:**

**First claim: -in human being this evolutionary process is raised, through our symbol-making ability, into consciousness**

**-in being raised into consciousness, it is 'given' a meaning, experienced as meaning-full**

**My further claim: because part of the process involves a "dis-integration" (of the psychic structures that embody our consciousness of their meaning) their meaning manifests in our consciousness as depth/as being deep/as having depth**



## **Levels of reference (Deacon takes from Peirce)**

**Icon: refers in the sense of a resemblance btwn icon and what the icon represents; e.g. a landscape painting (a one-to-one relationship, that requires a physical similarity)**

**Index: refers through either a causal linkage or some correlated association between it and what it represents; e.g. a thermometer is linked to temperature, the odor to the skunk (Deacon notes “most forms of animal communication have this quality”) (a one-to-system relationship, that requires a consistent correlation)**

**Symbol: refers through some social convention, tacit agreement, or explicit code that links the symbol to referent, e.g. a wedding vow formalizes marriage (a one-within-a-system, relating to the system, relation; a word can refer to, 'be about' an indexical reference, for example.)**

**This requires a system of higher-order relationships, combinatorial possibilities and impossibilities, in relation to which a word makes sense.**

**Deacon uses example of the Boy Who Cried Wolf: boy's crying of "wolf" fails in its indexical functionality (there are no wolves correlated to his cry), but it does NOT fail in its symbolic referentiality, as this depends on a whole system – the "indexical power is distributed, so to speak, in the relationships between words"**

**-unicorns & chimerae will always "fail indexically" by definition – they don't exist – but they "succeed symbolically", b/c they make symbolic sense**



## **The levels of reference hierarchically (not linearly!) ordered**

**This hierarchy is replayed developmentally:**

**3. learning of the new level is not only the acquisition of something new, but crucially :**

- 1. unlearning of the old level as dominant (i.e. this is not a 'complete' unlearning), and**
- 2. capacity to subordinate, distinguish, and differentiate, both between higher and lower levels of reference and within levels of reference**

**i.e. 1. disintegration 2. differentiation 3. reintegration at a higher level**

**what Peirce has described analytically & Deacon empirically by reference to learning strategies, neural capacities, and brain structures, as hierarchies of levels of reference,**

**I would argue is psychologically experienced through a dynamic process of disintegration-differentiation-reintegration, as depth**