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Dialogue as the Inscription of 'The West'

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The international conference on 'Dialogue and Difference' took place in London, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, between 12 and 14 September 2001. Over three intense days, 26 papers were presented and discussed by leading scholars from Japan, the USA, China, Iran, Korea, Germany, France and Great Britain.

The conference sought to explore the widely felt and growing concern that, despite an increasingly

> globalised system of linkages, there is, at every moment, a general feeling that communication is breaking down everywhere, on an unparalleled scale. (Bohm, 1996)

It was perhaps an increasing awareness of this breakdown in dialogue, in the very midst of dialogue, that the United Nations, at the proposal of President Khatami of Iran, declared 2001 as the 'Year of Dialogue Between Cultures'.

Our forethought while preparing this conference—that for some (the West) there is dialogue, whereas for the non-Western other, dialogue does not exist—was confirmed in all its dreadful clarity on the very day before the start of the conference, on September 11. Indeed the fall of the Twin Towers appeared to signify the dual nature of global interconnectedness. Though it seemed even more significant and compelling, following those events, to go ahead with the conference, our initial questions returned, even more pressing and disturbing and certainly less theoretical, to haunt us. Dialogue appeared in all its ambiguity and with contradictions. This 'benign word', seemingly at the foundation of the Western philosophical tradition, needed to be explored and its equivocal character exposed. While religious and political leaders often invoke dialogue as a sign of 'goodwill', keen to manifest a disposition towards openness and democracy, it may just as often be a cover for manipulation or deceit. Dialogue was called upon in precisely such a manner during

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the spread of Western colonialism, and, even in the light of such knowledge, is still uttered as part of a Western body of theory and discourse.

Questions over the hegemony of discourse and language guided our reflection prior to the conference: How best can this problem of hegemony itself be addressed? Can post-colonial theorizing provide the means by which dialogue may be rethought? How might non-Western languages enter into a dialogue conducted primarily in English? Are 'indigenous' forms of dialogue possible or viable when irreducible to European models, capable of evading existing power structures and opening a path to mutual understanding? Or, must cross-cultural dialogue necessarily find itself reduced to a Western model of 'movement of the self towards the other'? Can critical theory help us to 'un-say' the 'said' of a monological dialogue? Can theories from outside Europe disrupt such dominance? Is European thought able to deconstruct itself so as to welcome other ways of dialogue without once more imposing a universal model? In other words, is an ethical/critical dialogue possible?

Many of these questions were addressed at the conference and great efforts were made to concentrate our attention on two major issues. First, the awareness that the West—as 'inventor' of the concept of dialogue—must necessarily rethink its philosophical bases in the light of the 'irreducible' alterity of other cultures and/or subjects, and thus also taking into account other ways of thinking, applied to the representation of their meaningful universe. And second, promoting a critique of the very concept of Occident/the West, which is always felt as totalizing and/or 'colonizing' *vis-à-vis* the other cultures with which it coexists. Thus, on the one hand, it was the concept of dialogue which needed to be re-thought, and on the other, the West, as hegemonic idea and culture was being put under scrutiny. This 're-thinking', to be precise, did not foresee a renewed narcissistic Occidental strategy trying to mirror itself in the pond of its own history and cultural development. This was meant to trigger a self-critique not borne out of itself but of the encounter with other cultures and other ways of thinking.

Nevertheless, as Tosolini remarked soon after the conference:

> Nowadays it has become both difficult and intricate to talk about dialogue, and the first difficulty lies, in fact, in its very etymology (*dia-logos*, 'through communication' or 'through language' or 'through reason'). To speak of 'dialogue' today means to take into account the conceptual devices that brought it to life as a 'theory for searching the truth'. These devices can be retraced both in the complicated discourse on the inevitability of presence of the '*dia-*' in every dialogical event (i.e. in an atmosphere-presence which does not 'leave intact' but, on the contrary, pushes the identity of the speakers into the precincts of Being, thus reducing it to a 'function' or 'manifestation' of Being itself), and in the fact that language—as *logos*—contains in itself not just positive potentialities but also destructive elements. Language not only explains, says and transmits . . . but also homologues and subjugates every possible discourse and every discussant under the discovery of a presumed truth. Thus, the concept of dialogue is strongly linked to an Occidental history which, although on the one hand has excavated language to find ways which are 'purer', more 'adequate', 'truer', on the other, has generated counter positions which have appeared as ideological and totalizing. It is here that

dichotomies and essentialisms are borne: 'correct/wrong', 'sense/non-sense', 'true/
false', 'real/illusory', 'Being/Nothingness' ... leading into the more insidious 'we/
others', 'civilized/primitive', 'us/them' etc. which are at the root of our interpreta-
tion of facts and of encounters with 'other' cultures.

This theoretical uneasiness and puzzlement becomes a painful and suffered reality
to students, teachers, and researchers across a variety of disciplines where dialogue is
drawn upon as a tool to mediate difference between persons, texts, cultures and
religions; notably in international studies, politics, anthropology, critical pedagogy,
religious studies, theology and mission studies, post-colonial studies, gender studies,
cultural and critical theory and philosophy. The uneasiness is no less felt, in the
current climate of global uncertainty, among policy makers, workers in the UN,
development agencies, NGOs and those involved in the burgeoning industry of
conflict resolution, human rights and peace studies. With this first set of seven papers
published here we propose to continue our reflection on these 'troubled dialogues'
and to focus our attention on the very concept of 'Inscription of the West'.

More precisely, as Naoki Sakai's paper ('The West: A dialogic prescription or
proscription?') underlines, there is a need to explore the 'conflict' between 'the West
and the Rest' and to challenge the pervasive assumption that the West exists, and the
historical conditions thanks to which the contour of the West is imagined to be a
clear and distinct entity. What Sakai calls into question is the imagined configuration
of races, cultures and nations according to which the most radical and unpredictable
gaps are always to be located between the 'West and the Rest'. The questions raised by
Sakai's paper, also in the light of recent international events, are still very open to
reflection and debate: does the West exist? Can its culture be considered a yardstick
for the classification of other cultural expressions? Should the West not be treated
today as one of the many partners in the dialogue among cultures? And, what type of
dialogue should we propose now that the West has lost the 'master's voice' in contact
with other ways of existence? In other words, dialogue might have a chance of
survival only if and when 'difference' forms part of the equation.

In a slightly different vein, but following on from this, John McCumber's paper
('Dialogue as Resistance to Western Metaphysics') isolates in the linguistic relation-
ship with the other the concept of 'ambiguity'. This is discussed as a possible way out
of the kind of dialogic language which many still identify with a kind of
'homogenization' of minds reached through the transfer of a mental concept from
one person to another. In this case dialogue and language would be enemies of
difference. The fascinating dialogue between early twentieth century anthropology
and philosophical phenomenology motivates Robert Bernasconi ('Lévi-Brulh among
the Phenomenologists: Exoticization and the Logic of the "the Primitive"'), to
dismantle the idea of a possible unitary dialogue of the West with a different Other,
given that difference is already present within the European self. Thus, Bernasconi
juxtaposes two contrasting, if not contradictory motifs of Western thought: firstly
self-recognition in otherness; secondly the tendency to project onto the other those
aspects of oneself that one refuses to recognise in oneself. He illustrates this through

the complex dialectic where the West enters into dialogue with the non-West, by examining the figure of the 'primitive' within twentieth century phenomenological authors including Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Whilst Bernasconi reminds us that the other is silenced by making him or her 'primitive' or 'exotic', he also urges us to reflect 'on the institutions that dominate our own practices' which reinvent primitivism, exoticism and racism.

Bernasconi's attempt to expose philosophy's dialogue with anthropology as well as the dialogue of Western anthropologists with their so-called 'primitives', triggers also a self-critique of the West borne out of the encounter with other cultures and other ways of thinking. Thus Hans Koegler in his 'Recognition and Difference: The Power of Perspectives in Interpretive Dialogue' tries to rethink the West's own dialogical epistemology which takes its moves from the way the dialogical partner understands itself and its own history. Such an effort, according to Koegler, is ethical in the sense that this is the only way to respect and recognise the alterity of the other. Koegler's paper neatly analyses some of the key moves and presuppositions made by many anthropologists and textual hermeneuts dealing with the non-Western.

This is developed in Alphonso Lingis' paper 'New Walls in the Age of Information', where Lingis deals with three main issues: 1) how ethnic and racial prejudices are now being created overnight, 2) how and why dialogue with past civilizations is now broken, and 3) the role of religion in conflicts that turn genocidal. Linking these issues is Lingis' personal reflection on how the notion of trust can operate as a counter to situations where dialogue is not possible. Alphonso, himself caught up in the events of September 11, did not manage to attend the Conference, but he did send us his heartfelt paper where he laments, almost as an inevitable prophecy, that 'dialogue will become possible ... But first, the streets and fields will have to be littered with a certain critical number of dead bodies'.

Dialogue as tolerance becomes an index of peoples' maturity; a maturity which, in its turn, is open to a deeper comprehension of cultural inter-connection and enrichment taking place in the encounter with the other. Drawing from Ricoeur's analysis of narrative identity and the problematic of forgiveness and debt and from Derrida's discussion of hospitality and responsibility, Couze Venn ('The Repetition of Violence: Dialogue, the Exchange of Memory, and the Question of Convivial Socialities') proposes for discussion the Israel/Palestine conflict as an example of 'proliferating cases where the weight of history ... condemns the present to the repetition of violence'. The 'incommensurability of difference', this 'differend'—Venn tells us—'goes to the heart of the issue of the possibility of dialogue'. Narratives of belonging, the foundation of a nation, relations of power, the construction of identity—all of which contain forms of oppression and violence—can find a possible solution in the application of ethics founded on the idea of responsibility for the other, in which the 'exchange of memories' and the 'translation' between cultures occupy a prominent place.

Bringing to fruition his concern quoted here earlier, Tiziano Tosolini attempts in his paper ('Infinity or Nothingness? An Encounter between Nishida Kitarō and

Emmanuel Levinas') to stage an encounter between Kitarō and Levinas. Despite the great distance and the obvious 'difference' which separates both philosophers, Tosolini's effort signals possible signs of hope for our understanding of the self, the world and the other: Infinity and Goodness 'seem to "surprise" and "touch" the laboured stillness of Absolute Nothingness'.

   We wish the dialogue to continue. We hope to return to some of these problematic questions with further contributions to this journal which underline yet again the ambiguities of dialogue, the asymmetries of power and different perspectives of difference. Perhaps on this occasion we may have been over-preoccupied with a Western predicament. But it was worthwhile if only to come to terms with our own shortcomings, in order to be able to then listen to other voices so that some form of dialogue, however troubled, may continue.

Acknowledgements

Reference

Bohm, D. (1996) *On dialogue.* London: Routledge.