

## ENCOUNTER IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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Encounter can only take place in the context of diversity. Contemporary man inhabits a multicultural world in which he encounters diversity during travel, through the media, at work, when moving to another residence in pursuit of work, when establishing a liaison with a life partner from another culture, or in encounters with culturally diverse individuals at school or at work. Contemporary man has no trouble in discerning difference within his life-space. It may be perceived as that which distinguishes or that which antagonises. It can also be perceived as an excuse for disregarding concepts like truth or falsehood. And it may also lead him to the conclusion that difference is enriching.

Difference is important for all thought paradigms, its role is especially prominent among the categories of postmodernism, where it replaces identity. In an effort to remain within modern thought paradigms and counteract post-modernistic antagonisms, theoreticians tend to postulate acceptance for all difference. The effects are disregard for universal values like truth, good and beauty, an all-embracing striving to differ at all costs - even from one's own self - and life based on incidence. Lost in a world of anonymous diversities, man is unable to develop an identity, nor can he appreciate the identities of others. Consequently, he cannot experience encounter.

In the post-modernistic approach to relations "existence" is a set of elements threatened by totalitarisation and uniformisation. The post-modernistic world outlook with its stress on difference as an autotelic value commands the individual to consistently focus on defending its otherness - in other words, strive not to be like others - nor like itself. The individual should not repeat itself. All that is acceptable here is the appointment to life of the "new", which has not duration. This "new" is a negative response to what we perceive. Are identity and encounter at all possible in this context? This seeming defence of otherness leads to the rejection of the content carried by otherness. And encounter appears unnecessary, even dangerous. Post-modernistic and modernistic difference possesses an alarming capacity to antagonise.

Another approach to difference is offered by the eco-systemic thought paradigm. The eco-systemic perspective and eco-systemic relations allow us to see that difference is neither monadic nor collectivistic, that it belongs to systemic relations and is necessary for the emergence and endurance of eco-

systems and their elements. Here we begin to understand that difference must not necessarily antagonise.

Diversity is the life-blood of eco-systems, it also enables the creative survival of cultures. Why? In posing this question we begin to perceive the value of encounter and realise that encounter is only possible when the elements that make up difference are aware of their identity. Contemporary humans may make use of difference and encounter only when they have a sense of their identity. Contemporary man can also be a medium which facilitates encounter between cultures.

The kinds of encounters we will be able to enter will depend on how we approach difference - antagonistically, dialectically, complementarily or synergistically.

The antagonistic approach bases on an "either-or" principle, where difference disqualifies one of the elements which differ. Consequently, we either reject that which is alien in favour of that which is "ours" or, drawn to the alien, accept it at the cost of our own otherness. In the dialectic approach difference functions as an antithesis enabling the attainment of synthesis. In the complementary approach difference is viewed as an aggregate of varying perspectives on one issue, and the synergistic approach sees difference as an inspiration to deepen understanding.

The antagonistic approach implies encounters of a competitive or hostile kind. The dialectic approach - ones based on a "common sense of loss". The complementary variant results in encounters of a supplementary nature. The synergistic paradigm enables encounters based on a bilateral sense of dignity. In the synergistic thought and action model difference does not antagonize, provoke defense of identity, complement or justify the lack of universalistic perspective, but enriches the perception of the world. In synergistic encounters difference inspires us to seek and comprehend universal truths and values and enables us to move beyond its limits without loss of our own identity. Activity ordered by synergistic thinking enriches our own otherness without the threat of uniformisation or conflict.

Conflict is a major phenomenon in today's reality. We view it with anxiety and feel compelled to avert it, sometimes at all costs. Let us take a closer look at the conflict concept (in the assumption that under "concept" we understand a projection of our perception of reality and a storeroom of knowledge). The term "conflict" derives from the Latin *conflictus*, which can be translated as "collision", and the verb *confligo* - clash, confront. Generally speaking conflict entails a unique encounter of "inhospitable", mutually-excluding arguments, interests, opinions or attitudes. In today's antagonistic thought model, which sees controversy as a fundament of

growth, the conflict concept is more important than the dialogue concept, which is considered a means of resolving conflict.

The compromise proposed as a way to cope with conflict entails silencing subjectivity, which requires both conflicting sides to reduce the diversity of their positions in favour of that which is similar - a “suspension” of their respective standpoints and the rights these standpoints imply. Another way to end conflict is for one of the sides to submit to the other. This is similar to the first proposal, the difference being that only one side resigns its individuality and subjectivity.

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