

## THE OTHER: FEARING ALTERITY



There are not too many questions that keep haunting humankind more fiercely than “Who exactly is the Other?” Regardless of some brilliant answers, *the answer* continues to elude us. One explanation for such a fiasco could be that, first, one should answer another question: “Who exactly am I?” Without previously calling oneself into the question and finding a reasonable answer to it, trying to understand the Other remains only an act of futility.

Nothing speaks louder about who we really are than our relationship with the Other. As long as the answer to the first question mentioned above evades us, fearing otherness continues to build up. Little wonder that—too many times—stereotypes prevail over understanding, prejudice overwhelms tolerance and vengeance surpasses mediation.

A straight answer to the second question can become a martyrdom. The classic example is the one of Socrates. It did not help the philosopher at all that he spoke out about whom he thought he was: “I am not an Athenian or a Greek, I am a citizen of the world.” On the contrary, he was given death by the ones who thought that Socrates belonged to them. It was their “distinct privilege” and “express duty” to do so.

Being different is “bad” enough. Claiming your difference could “void” your right to inclusiveness. After so many nightmarish eras, the rule is still: “If the other is different from myself, he is inferior to me.” Even the glossary of inclusiveness raises some doubts: “Harmonious inclusiveness” implicitly means that we are aware of “disharmonious” ones; “consciously achieved inclusiveness” implicitly acknowledges the existence of “unconsciously achieved” ones. So on and so forth.

As for how strong stereotypes can be, here is a paragraph of a report from *The Sunday Times* on a conference on “Stereotypes and Alterity: Perceptions of ‘Otherness’ in the Mediterranean”:

*The story concerns two boys who live in neighboring homes—one North African, the other Maltese. They were once playing football in the street. Before taking a free kick, the Maltese boy made the sign of the cross, a gesture mocked by his*

*North African friend. The Maltese boy responded by saying ‘Alla Kbir, mawmettu hanzir. God is great, Mohammed is a pig.’ The words were once used by Maltese children to taunt the Tunisian vendors who visited their villages over 50 years ago, two generations before that football game.*

The reporter assures us that “The incident involving the two boys passed without ill effect.” Glad to hear it. However, boys become adults, and the result of what scientists call “early infant perception: you are not me, I am not you” often develops into the bad habit of trying to annihilate the Other.

Somehow, fearing alterity will be with us forever. The best we can hope for is to finally learn how to deal with it decently.



Editor-in-Chief

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