Otherness and The Other(s)

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What is it?

Otherness can be seen as an articulation of diversity as well as a definition of differences. Otherness is constitutively and inexorably linked with Sameness and Self – no conceptualization of the Other ("Them") is possible without a conceptualization of Same and Self ("Us"). This constitutive connection is, for instance, rendered in a very positive way in the southern African philosophical tradition through the concept of *Ubuntu.* However, more often than not, the connotations are overly positive only for "Us", the in-group, and overly negative for "Them", the outsiders: we are civilized, they are savages. Being essentially about social relationships, Otherness depends on context, situational position and time. Three mobility revolutions of the past decades (human migrations, new information and communication technologies and flows, and globalizing markets) have destroyed relatively stable and territorialized figures of the Other and created new, transient, ever changing and space-independent figures, such as the refugee, the immigrant, the migrant laborer, the "global nomad," but also the ubiquitous (inner) enemy or terrorist.

Who uses the concept?

Multiple social, behavioural and natural sciences as well as the humanities build on this basic concept, as many taxonomic or comparative classifications readily show. Recently, various marginalized groups (e.g. the previously colonized, first nations, the LGBT community and other groups who self-define

as diverse and different) have been gaining a voice by challenging outsider perceptions of them and their cultures, using Otherness as an emancipative concept.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

The extent to which the concept can foster intercultural dialogue depends chiefly on how 'the Others' are perceived: are they seen as a problem or threat to be excluded – or an opportunity and resource to be included into processes and outcomes of dialogue?

What work remains?

Three main challenges are also questions. First, a clear awareness is required about the relative relevance of Otherness when identifying its dimensions: why and in what ways are the Others seen as diverse and different? Second, a clear answer is needed to the question: for what purpose do we want to dialogue with the Other(s) – and why should the Other(s) want to dialogue with us? Third, what units of analysis are meaningful for intercultural dialogue with the Other(s)?

Resources

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