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CONFERENCE REPORTS

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REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE: "IL SENSO DELL'ALTRO. CULTURE, GENERI, RAPPRESENTAZIONI: FORME DI MEDIAZIONE TRANSCULTURALE".

(UNIVERSITY OF SAN MARINO, JUNE 21 - 22, 2003)

The conference "Il senso dell'altro. Culture, generi, rappresentazioni: forme di mediazione transculturale" (The meaning of the other. Cultures, genders, representations: forms of trans-cultural mediation), organized by Patrizia Violi (University of Bologna and University of San Marino), was the 60th conference promoted by the International Centre for semiotic and cognitive studies of the Department of communication, University of San Marino. The conference took place on June 21st and 22nd, 2003 in the evocative and familiar atmosphere of the ancient Santa Chiara monastery, which is placed in the old town centre. The ten guest speakers came from different theoretical and disciplinary areas, from semiotics to gender studies and from anthropology to new cultural studies; some of them also came from practical work experiences in the field of mediation. Interestingly, the first practical mediation framework turned out to be that of the conference room, because of the various and non-homogeneous backgrounds of the relators.

Generally speaking, a mediator is a third person involved in the process of solving a conflict between two parties. Given this assumption, it has been presupposed thorough the conference that one must start considering the problem of intercultural comprehension and communication in order to understand the mediator's tasks in a mediation process. For instance, Silvana Borutti (University of Pavia) has presented some anthropological considerations on intercultural communication. My short re-

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lation cannot obviously cover the wide range of topics that have been at issue in the speakers' interventions. What I am going to do is focusing on some specific keywords emerged during the conference.

1. Neighborhood

A very provoking idea is embedded in the use of the term "gender" in the title of the conference. One could consider that mediation is necessary only in case of a (more or less problematic) encounter between peoples coming from completely different cultural systems, who hardly find something in common to start negotiating or even talking with each other. On the contrary, mediation is essential in everyday life practice. The problem of facing differences - from gender differences on - can also emerge in meeting people who are close to our cultural and social environment. In this sense, an interesting topic treated during the conference (and particularly within the intervention of Marinella Sclavi, Politecnico di Milano) was the study of negotiation and mediation practices between neighbors in city blocks.

2. Empathy

The mediator, although he is a third party not directly involved in the cultural conflict, is never completely "out" of the problem. The mediator lives in his own cultural system, which is by the way the background indirectly allowing him to understand the others' reasons for engaging in a cultural conflict. It has emerged from the real mediation cases that the first step a mediator must do to fulfill his task is that to be emphatic with regard to the parties involved in the conflict. Empathy (*Mitleid*), thus, becomes a keyword in cultural mediation, as none can understand the other's standpoints, values and exigencies in a conflictive relationship if not starting from his own experience, as it has been pointed out by Patrizia Violi at the beginning of the conference.

Nevertheless, empathy does not mean complete and uncritical identification. The case has been illustrated of some anthropologists who left for Africa and lived for years among natives of those territories to study the indigenous magic rituals and practices, and never came back. Eventually, their studied turned into identification with what should have been studied: thus, the anthropologist became a native, the scholar and critic of wizardry became himself a wizard. And those examples, of co-

urse, seem far from being representative of good mediation practices, because the mediator should always keep at a distance from the conflicting parties he must talk to: a deep and comprehensive emphatic attitude does not exclude the personal and cultural differences between the mediator and the negotiating parties. In this sense, the concept of mediation implies the consideration of a cultural frontier that must be first identified and then, in some cases, renegotiated - but never neglected. This issue was introduced by Patrizia Calefato (University of Bari).

3. The “banalisation” of the good

It has been pointed out that people generally have a very poor “database” of successful mediation cases. If a mediation intervention fails, the causes and effects are analyzed in order to find where the problem is; whereas, if a mediator is able to find out a positive resolution for both the parties and to achieve a successful ending of the conflict, these outputs tend to be described as the lucky personal gain of the mediator himself. As a result, the cases of positive conflict resolution are not in depth studied, and no consideration is reserved to the mediator's techniques and to the moves that lead him to the successful ending of the case. This attitude, which Marianella Sclavi defined “banalisation of the good”, does not help to understand the mediation process.

4. Building a place for the interaction

In more than one intervention (Raffaella Lamberti, Associazione Orlando, University of Parma; Gabriella Rossetti, University of Ferrara) the mediator has been defined as the one who builds a place for the interaction between the parties involved in a conflict. This is true from a merely physical point of view: two opposing parties often need to find a neutral place, where it is possible for them to start talking. This physical place should not be associated with strong symbolic issues and metaphors that can prevent it from adequately hosting the interaction. As stated during the conference, the importance of building the right place can arise when trying to open a dialogue space in a politically difficult area. Some of the speakers talked about their mediation intervention between Israeli and Palestinian women: in this case, the strategic choice of a neutral hotel, which could later be recognized as their “place for the dialogue” had been a decisive move.

Certainly the idea of preparing a physical set where the parties can meet becomes also a metaphor, as far as the mediator is intended as the third having the task to set or to renovate an interaction place. The mediator is expected to prepare the “communicative area” where the parties can interact. This task involves the definition of communicative rules, interaction roles and issues to be discussed.

As pointed out by Gabriella Rossetti, an essential presupposition for building a place is understanding the parties' physical and cultural landscape. In fact, the organization of a territory reflects the cultural priorities and values of the inhabitants of that territory. In this sense, *landscape* becomes a keyword as indicating the comprehension of the other's point of view and cultural framework.