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Preface [of "Critical Currents", issue 8, Jan, 2010 "Can we save true dialogue in an Age of Mistrust? The Encounter of Dag Hammarskjöld and Martin Buber"]

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Preface

Dag Hammarskjöld was known for his wide interests and contacts, and for his capacity to interweave nature, art, science and politics into a tapestry of varied but complementary colours and textures, creating a harmonious and integrated whole. For him, philosophy, poetry and politics not only had their first letter in common; combined, they constituted a passion, the fourth in this mutually reinforcing collection of ingredients that made him such a remarkable international civil servant with an enduring impact.

Hammarskjöld's impressive correspondence, which went far beyond the limits of his professional duties as narrowly defined, included exchanges with many individuals representing these various spheres of life and thinking. Among the thinkers he engaged with intellectually was Martin Buber. Evidence of this was even found in the debris from the plane crash near Ndola in then Northern Rhodesia, in which Hammarskjöld died in the early hours of 18 September 1961. A copy of Buber's *Ich und Du* was among the scattered items collected from the wreckage. During his last flight Hammarskjöld had been using the time to continue the translating of Buber's work into Swedish, which he had recently started: a task bordering on the impossible, but very much in keeping with the unlimited ambitions of Hammarskjöld's intellect.

Accepting on Dag Hammarskjöld's behalf the posthumously awarded Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo on 10 December 1961, the Swedish ambassador to Norway, Rolf Edberg, referred in

his short speech to this engagement, which was such clear evidence of the attraction of thought between the second Secretary-General to the United Nations and Buber:

... perhaps we can think that he found something that was essential to himself in the last book that he was engaged in translating, the powerful work *Ich und Du* [I and Thou], in which the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber sets forth his belief that all real living is meeting. He himself believed that there were invisible bridges on which people could meet as human beings above the confines of ideologies, races, and nations.¹

The notion of dialogue promoted by Buber was similarly an integral and substantial part of Hammarskjöld's approach to life. In one of his postings on his Hammarskjöld blog, biographer Roger Lipsey draws attention to this: 'His respect for the word was immeasurably great. His recognition of its frequent corruption in public life was also great.'² Lipsey also reproduces an exchange from a press conference in January 1955, when a journalist enquired of Hammarskjöld what he would do with all the information from conversations after he had visited China. Hammarskjöld's recorded answer was: 'Well, the risk of mistakes and false initiatives may be reduced. The possibility of saying the right word at the right moment may be increased.'

1 http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1961/hammarskjold-acceptance.html.

2 <http://www.dag-hammarskjold.com/2009/07/dialogue-part-1-right-word-at-right.html>.

Maurice S. Friedman is by far the hitherto most authoritative author dealing with Martin Buber. He published several monographs comprising the most comprehensive work on the philosopher (frequently referred to in the following essay). In 1960 he added a postscript to chapter 23 (on ‘social philosophy’) to the revised edition of his pioneering study, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (first published in 1955), in which he shared his observation that Dag Hammarskjöld echoed Buber’s call for renewed ‘contact and communications across geographical and political boundaries’.³

As Manuel Fröhlich summarised, ‘Buber’s analysis of the underlying forces that dominate the Cold War scenario, which for him basically was an age of distrust, also influenced a number of speeches by Hammarskjöld who shared Buber’s diagnosis that many of the political and military problems were in fact problems of human behaviour, trust and communication.’⁴

This essence of dialogue remains more relevant than ever in times where ‘otherness’ is all too often misconstrued as alien. Despite today’s much higher degree of mobility (physically as well as mentally, and in

terms of communication technology), the global divide has not been bridged, and antagonisms based on different religions and other identity-forming beliefs and convictions persist. More than ever, we are living in a world of fear and misunderstanding, in which differences dominate over commonalities. In this light, reflections on the relevance of dialogue, as testified in the communication between Hammarskjöld and Buber, are as relevant for politics today as they were half a century ago.

The ‘age of mistrust’ has not yet come to an end. It continues, despite efforts such as this to bring back into public discourse ideas that remain as relevant today as they were at the time of the correspondence between Hammarskjöld and Buber. But this is no excuse for not reminding ourselves and others that tools to address most of the issues confronting us in our search for a better future have already been thoroughly explored. After all, more dialogue rather than less might not be such a bad idea in our times either.

Henning Melber

3 <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=459&C=393>.

4 Manuel Fröhlich, “‘The Unknown Assignment’: Dag Hammarskjöld in the Papers of George Ivan Smith”, in ‘Beyond Diplomacy: Perspectives on Dag Hammarskjöld’, Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2008 (Critical Currents no. 2), p. 16. The publication is accessible for download at www.dhf.uu.se.