

Other/otherness

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Publié dans *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2008, Elsevier

Glossary

Ethnocentrism: the propensity of a group (in-group) to consider its members and values as superior to the members and values of other groups (out-groups)

Exotic: belonging to a faraway, foreign country or civilization and thus demarcated from the norms established in and by the West

Exotism: characteristic of exotic things/places/people

Exoticism: a taste for exotic objects/places/people

Other: member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group

Othering: transforming a difference into otherness so as to create an in-group and an out-group

Otherness: characteristic of the Other

In-group: a group to which the speaker, the person spoken of, etc. belongs

Out-group: a group to which the speaker, person spoken of, etc. does not belong

Suggested cross-references to other articles: cultural politics, identity, race, gender, postcolonialism, segregation, ghetto, territory, continent, self-other, psychoanalytic geographies, residential segregation

Keywords: exotic, exotism, exoticism, savage, barbarian, race, gender, segregation, ghetto, ethnocentrism

Abstract

Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups (such as Westerners in the time of colonization) are in a position to impose their categories in the matter. By stigmatizing them as Others, Barbarians, Savages or People of Color, they relegate the peoples that they could dominate or exterminate to the margin of humanity. The otherness of these peoples has notably been based on their supposed spatial marginality. In addition, certain types of spatial organization, like segregation or territorial constructions, allow the opposition between the Self and the Other to be maintained or accentuated. Although it seems that the Other is sometimes valued, as with exoticism, it is done in a stereotypical, reassuring fashion that serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority.

1 A new geographical issue

The questions of the other and otherness took the geographical world by storm beginning in the 1980s. Of course, geographers were interested in the elsewhere before that date. Homer enchanted us with his description of faraway, dreamlike lands; Herodotus was fascinated by Persian society; Hippocrates sought to explain societal diversity through the environment's influence. Renaissance-era explorers were amazed by the peculiarities of the civilizations they discovered. Starting with the end of the 19th century and the institutionalization of colonial geography in Europe, geographers sought to document the particularity of the physical environment and tropical societies.

All of these approaches seek to explain the spatial heterogeneity of societies. Although they claim to be more or less objective, they seek to demonstrate that Western civilization is superior to others and to explain why this is so.

Beginning with the development of radical geography and then feminist geography in the 1960s, geographers took an interest in minority groups who, here, distinguish themselves from the (white, male) norm. But this has more to do with denouncing systems of oppression than with inquiring into the otherness of these minority groups. It was not until the development of postmodern, post-colonial and queer analyses that otherness became a geographical issue. In order to reach this point, geographers have had to ask questions about the diversity of groups in terms of socio-discursive construction rather than in terms of supposed objectives of difference, as had been done until then.

2 Definitions

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To state it naïvely, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. Thus, biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness.

The creation of otherness (also called *othering*) consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us. The out-group is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic. The in-group constructs one or more others, setting itself apart and giving itself an identity. Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa.

The asymmetry in power relationships is central to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. Therefore, if the Other of Man is Woman, and if the Other of the White Man is the Black Man, the opposite is not true (Beauvoir, 1952; Fanon, 1963). Dominated out-groups are Others precisely because they are subject to the categories and practices of the dominant in-group and because they are unable to prescribe their own norms. Out-groups cease to be Others when they manage to escape the oppression forced upon them by in-groups, in other words, when they succeed in conferring upon themselves a positive, autonomous identity ("black is beautiful"), and in calling for discursive legitimacy and a policy to establish norms, eventually constructing and devaluing their own out-groups.

The power at stake is discursive: it depends on the ability of a discourse to impose its categories. But this ability does not depend solely upon the logical power of the discourse, but also upon the (political, social and economic) power of those who speak it.

3 The West and Others

The ethnocentric bias that creates otherness is doubtlessly an anthropological constant. All groups tend to value themselves and distinguish themselves from Others whom they devalue. For instance, according to Cl. Lévy-Strauss, many auto-ethnonyms (such as Inuit or Bantu) refer to “the people” or to “the human beings”, considering more or less the out-groups as non-human.

On the other hand, the forms of this ethnocentrism are varied and have been constructed by discourse and practice throughout history. Certain constructs are specific to certain societies (such as the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy,) and others seem universal (such as the male/female dichotomy). All societies, then, create the self and the other with their own set of categories. Western society, however, stands out for two reasons.

First, otherness and identity are based on binary logic. Western thought, whose logic has been attached to the principle of identity, the law of noncontradiction and the law of the excluded middle since the time of Aristotle, has produced a number of binaries that oppose a positively-connoted term and a negatively-connoted term and thus lends itself well to the construction of the self and the other. Many such dichotomies exist: male/female, Man/animal, believer/non-believer, healthy/ill, heterosexual/homosexual, Black/White, adult/child, etc.

Second, colonization allowed the West to export its values and have them acknowledged almost everywhere through more or less efficient processes of cultural integration. Western categories of identity and otherness, transmitted through the universalist claims of religion and science and forcibly imposed through colonization, have thus become pertinent far beyond the boundaries of the West.

Although this article only discusses Western constructions of otherness, this does not mean that other societies are unaware of the process. Rather, their particular categories of the self and the other have been less widely diffused than those of the West. Therefore, the system of races, although very recent and Western, has been imposed everywhere as a framework to conceive of human diversity, while the older caste system, belonging to the Indian world, has not.

4 Geographical Others

We, here, are the Self; they, there, are the Other. How and why do we think that those who are far away are more and more radically different, to the point of being Others? How can otherness be essentially geographical?

In Ancient Greece, the geographical form of otherness opposed Greek-speakers and Barbarians. A Barbarian was a person who did not speak Greek and thus had not mastered the *logos* (and was not familiar with democracy.) His culture was lacking and he belonged to another civilization. If this otherness comprises a geographical dimension, it is because cultural surfaces are divided into supposedly homogenous spatial blocs (countries, zones, continents, etc.) This construction of otherness is based on a hierarchy of civilizations and requires the use of a universal criterion that allows their comparison. Language and political systems fulfilled this role until the advent of Christianity and Islam, and then religion replaced them to oppose Us, believers, and Them, non-believers. The Renaissance and the discovery of

new civilizations, especially in America, brought the issue back to the forefront, paving the way for Westerners to search for the means to classify societies. The idea of universal progress, or a chronology that is valid for all societies, allows societies to be organized into a hierarchy from the most primitive (Hottentots, Kanaks, Bushmen, Pygmies, etc.) to the most civilized (Europeans.) From the end of the 19th century onwards, anthropology, ethnology and geography (still poorly differentiated) sought to give scientific basis to a typology of peoples and societies, a typology that is more or less explicitly a hierarchy. Darwin's theory of evolution offers a coherent scientific framework to explain species diversity through the diversity of the environments where natural selection takes place and through the relative isolation of these environments, which makes them favorable to the development of differentiated species. In order for it to "justify" the otherness of man, Darwin's theory needs only be transposed to human societies, with the development of a hierarchy of different environments and societies and the implementation of certain differences as principles for exclusion. Therefore, Europe's climate and natural resources would explain the fact that (one of?) the world's most advanced societies developed there, while the extreme climates and lack (or abundance, that works equally as well) of natural resources characteristic of all other parts of the world would lock humanity there into a prior and primitive evolutionary stage.

Obviously, thinking of civilizations as different like Others justifies the supremacy of Ours and legitimizes its propensity to dominate them. The Greeks must go to war with the Persians, believers with non-believers, Europeans with indigenous peoples. At worst this is extermination or enslavement; at best it spreads the Good Word, civilization, and progress.

The second geographical form of otherness does not oppose civilizations. Rather, it opposes civilized (meaning fully human) humanity and humanity still out in nature (or almost animal.) It is the Savage, etymologically the Man of the Forest, opposed with man from cities and fields. This figure stigmatizes the Man who has not (yet) left his natural state. Folklore, if not European reality, is overflowing with these Woodsmen. Hairy and violent, they threaten villagers (especially the women of the village.) But the figure of the Savage imposes itself as the descriptor of those who would constitute a lesser form of humanity during the Renaissance and the great explorations of Africa and, especially, America. It is thought that they go naked, cannot talk, engage in cannibalism, etc. They are even more worthy of extermination than the Barbarians because their ability to integrate into Humanity is called into question. This form of otherness has a spatial component because civilization is seen as being diffused from a central location (Jerusalem, the city, Europe), and savages are in faraway zones (Australia) or the interstices (our forests.)

Carving humanity into races and the world into continents is the third and most recent template that Europe has used to create a spatial form of otherness. This template still uses the figures of the barbarian and the savage but puts a new criterion into place that allows us, White Men, to be opposed to them, Men of Color. Skin color and certain secondary signs that physical anthropology has helped to identify are used to distinguish White Men, the "superior" phase of humanity, from "inferior" races. Each race has a corresponding continent, a natural birthplace from which it can flourish. The anthropological fiction of races and the geographical fiction of continents allow these categories to be reified and naturalized by giving them a supposedly geographical legitimacy and a false sense of evidence ("it's obvious.") They feed off of each other to justify colonial policy and the domination of one race and continent over others. Looking beyond the many races, it is actually a binary form of otherness: the opposition of colonist/native or White/of Color.

Orientalism, as analyzed by E. Said, encompasses all of these components. The Oriental is characterized by his barbarity, his savageness and his race. The Orient is the geographical fiction that gives him geographical basis. Orientalism is the discourse through which the West constructs the otherness of the Turks, Moroccans, Persians, Indians, Japanese, etc., all reduced

to the same stigmatizing stereotypes, and thus gives itself an identity in opposition to them. The West thereby gains the right, if not the duty, to dominate the Orient, to save it from despotism, superstition, misery, vice, slavery, decadence, etc.

5 Spatial organization

Not all forms of otherness are fully (or even mainly) geographical in nature. Women, homosexuals and the insane, all major figures of otherness in the West, owe their stigmatization to something other than their location. They are, after all, found among the self. In addition, migrations (notably forced migrations in the context of trade) have resulted in making geographical Others from elsewhere come and live here amongst us.

The cohabitation of the Other and the Self in a common space is not a given. On the one hand, discriminatory policies towards Others are more difficult to implement if the two populations are intermixed. On the other hand, their cohabitation makes it more risky to maintain the particularities (real or imagined) and the stereotypes that distinguish the Self from the Other. Finally, it seems that symbolically, nothing can trump an otherness based on and justified by geography. It would be all the more clear if men came from Mars and women came from Venus. Also, sets of spatial constructs and practices are based on the discursive construction of otherness to separate the self from the other.

Segregation is the most evident of these constructs. Confining Blacks and Jews to ghettos prevents them from intermixing with and therefore contaminating Whites and Christians. Furthermore, confining Others to community life amongst themselves in a degraded ghetto – where the concentration of poverty and exclusion compounds their effects – creates favorable conditions for the development of visible misery and a specific culture. These serve *a posteriori* as justification for the stigmatization and isolation of the incriminated group and confirm the dominant group's sense of superiority. The ghetto creates otherness. In addition to "pure" forms of ghettos created by law, there exist less clearly delimited forms of segregation that are maintained by the land market and/or the symbolic or material violence of the dominant groups. There again, the in-group and the out-group derive part of their identity and their otherness from the more or less stigmatizing space prescribed to them (for example, the inner city or the suburbs.)

On a smaller scale, the constructs confining the insane or the condemned in asylums and prisons fit the same logic. Their confinement sets them apart, worsens their condition and confirms their particularity. They derive part of their identity – or rather, their otherness – from their prison. The domestic confinement of women can be analyzed in the same terms: by forbidding them access to public spaces and reducing the woman to her domestic role, patriarchal society creates and reproduces gender inequality. Female otherness is created by discourse but also by spatial practices and constructs.

Territorial constructions also fit the same logic, except that their effect is less to separate preexisting groups than to confer geographical identities on one another, creating an in-group of those on this side of the border and an out-group of those on the other side. This process works on all scales: from gangs who occupy different urban neighborhoods to nations separated by interstate borders. A material and symbolic affectation is added to linguistic, religious, ethnic and other oppositions: people think that they owe their identity and superiority to those of their territory, and they ascribe to others the faults of their respective territories. B. Anderson has shown how discursive and spatial processes participate in the construction of national imagined communities and, thus, in the construction of figures of otherness against which these communities define themselves.

6 Exotism

Exotism constitutes the most directly geographical form of otherness, in that it opposes the abnormality of elsewhere with the normality of here. Exotism is not, of course, an attribute of the exotic place, object or person. It is the result of a discursive process that consists of superimposing symbolic and material distance, mixing the foreign and the foreigner, and it only makes sense from one, exterior, point of view. As a construction of otherness, exotism is characterized by the asymmetry of its power relationships: it is Westerners who, during the phases of exploration then colonization, defined elsewhere and delimited exotism. The word exotic has become a synonym of tropical or even colonial. It is out of the question to describe Europe as exotic until minds and words are decolonized.

Exoticism is characterized by giving value to the other, contrary to ethnocentric bias. From Homer's fascination with faraway, more or less imaginary peoples to J.-J. Rousseau's nostalgia for the noble savage, from the Romantic Orientalism of 19th-century writers and painters to the primitivism of a Gauguin painting, from curiosity for ethnic tourism to the recognition of specific rights for first peoples, the West celebrates the Other and even proclaims its superiority through multiple forms (that are not always unambiguous.)

The taste for exotica was established in the 18th century when exotic turquerie, chinoiserie, japonaiserie etc. came into fashion. It became commonplace in the 19th century with colonization and spread to the tropical world. Up to that point, it was essentially characterized by the import of exotic products, by their pastiches, and by travel books and then colonial literature. Only certain privileged persons, well-to-do aristocrats or explorers, traveled to experience the pleasures of exotic lands. The development of mass tourism in the 1960s leveled the playing field and made their exotism a major resource for many countries.

According to V. Segalen, exoticism is the pleasure of a sensation that, worn down by habit, is excited by novelty. But Segalen notes that from the end of the 19th century onward, everything has been seen and radical exotism, the exotism experienced by the first explorers, is dead. In fact, T. Todorov demonstrates that it is paradoxical to value or desire something that is unknown. Exoticism consists more of showing enthusiasm for what has already been seen, said, or painted: what has been marked elsewhere as picturesque and been reproduced as such. The otherness of the exotic is not the brute and brutal otherness of the first encounter; it is the bland otherness, staged and transformed into merchandise, of the colonial world offered up as a spectacle, as in orientalist paintings, human zoos... and exotic dance. Exoticism is less the pleasure of confronting otherness than the pleasure of having the satisfaction of experiencing the sight of a reassuring version of this confrontation, true to our fantasies, that comforts us in our identity and superiority.

7 Conclusion

Geography is an remarkably effective producer of otherness. On one hand, certain spatial patterns are very efficient, albeit discrete, in constructing and maintaining alterity. On the other hand, geography, like physical anthropology or history, has in the past proposed and continues to provide tales that form the basis of discursive constructions of a number of expressions of otherness. Yet these tales, rather than being taken for what they truly are - that is to say fictions delegitimized by their links to colonial regimes - have acquired a veneer of inevitability by grounding themselves in apparent scientific rationality.

For instance, one of the most common arguments against Turkey's recent claim to being integrated into the European Union is that this country does not belong to the European continent. Legitimized by the so-called evidence of (physical) Geography, this tautological

statement seems not refutable, unless one acknowledges that continents are geographical fictions produced and used by colonial ideology.

Since alterity is consubstantial to relations of power and processes of oppression, geographers concerned by these must take personal responsibility in identifying and studying the spatial patterns that ground these. A critical and reflexive perspective thus necessarily implies identifying and deconstructing that various more or less learned and so-called scientific geographical representations that serve as discursive bedrock for oppression.

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