PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Chapter Title: Othering: CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

Book Title: American Misfits and the Making of Middle-Class Respectability

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Published by: Princeton University Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt1vwmhfj.12

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Othering

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

TRACES OF HOW nineteenth-century Americans defined respectability continue to be present in the twenty-first century. Although the nation's population is much larger and more diverse and communication technologies are vastly different, we still as individuals and groups desire to be respected and negotiate what that means in our interactions with others. Deciding what respectability means is still a matter of drawing distinctions between "us" and "them," even though the bases of these distinctions may have changed and been influenced by a greater awareness of the realities of diversity and the importance of tolerance. To call someone a huckster, a con artist, or a fanatic is still a way to express disrespect. We do not respect them quite as much as we respect ourselves. They cannot be trusted, they talk too fast and too loud, and they are too emotionally caught up in what they are doing. Despite significant changes in understandings of mental illness, stigma remains significantly attached to the topic. Immigrant groups are widely and repeatedly subjected to abject bigotry and discrimination. In other quarters whatever the difficulties may be, the problems are laid to the evils of the millionaire and billionaire class. And if the rich are not to blame, isn't the trouble that too many parents are on welfare and are failing to properly discipline their children?

Othering is the process through which a person or group is turned into somebody different from us, an "other" from whom it is possible to distance ourselves. It is at heart a relational process that occurs in social interaction, real and imagined, as a person or group defines itself in contrast with and in opposition to someone else. The other, Julia Kristeva writes, is the foreigner, the stranger, the exile, the rebel who nevertheless lives within us and is the "hidden face of our identity."[1] The other is deemed not only distant but also inferior, less respectable than we are, perhaps degenerate, more readily

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stigmatized, and thus more easily abused. The distancing in this sense is both figurative and literal. It carries moral connotations as well. The other is less simply a victim than someone who hasn't quite made the proper effort to fit in or who lacks the mental and emotional timber to behave respectably.

Assertions about a person's own respectability can certainly be made without othering someone else. It might in fact be supposed that being respectful toward other people would be a hallmark of respectability. In practice, however, othering appears to be a common way in which claims about respectability are made. Who qualifies as a respectable person or group and what it means to be respectable are socially constructed by identifying someone who seems deficient. The other's deficiencies may give a clearer sense by way of negative example of how respectable people should behave than anything else. The other is often maligned because of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexual orientation. The other may also be marginalized in less obvious ways, such as because of not grooming properly, speaking too loudly, displaying emotion in inappropriate ways, or appearing to have temporarily lost one's mind.

On a larger scale American politics is one of the principal arenas in which othering takes place. The two-party system provides the occasion and incentive for candidates and supporters of each party to distance themselves from the other party. Numerous instances occur in which differences on the issues escalate into name calling, rumor mongering, and character assassination. In the twenty-first century studies suggest that othering of the opposition is rooted in widening polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Unfavorable ratings of the opposing party have dramatically increased, and some research suggests that turnout is driven more by voters' hostility toward the opposing party than by support of their own. While the etiquette of electoral politics has mostly encouraged candidates to be respectful toward one another and, in the interest of preserving the dignity of holding elected office, to keep things respectable, these norms appear to be easily broken, as illustrated in candidates' spreading innuendo about opponents' sexual indiscretions, using racial epithets to cast aspersions, and calling one another liars and cowards.[2]

The most salient instances in which othering occurs are ones in which a cultural distinction based on a power differential or struggle for power exists. The othering that colonizers inflict on the colonized amplifies the differences separating the two by treating the colonized as members of an inferior culture. Their otherness, which is geographically and politically delineated, is further distinguished by sharp, homogenizing contrasts based on language and style. Racial stereotyping and discrimination and stigmatization based on gender and sexual orientation function similarly. Cultural distinctions and evaluations are mapped onto phenotypical characteristics and perceived differences in biological, psychological, emotional, and intellectual capacities. The other is inferior, abnormal, and immoral, and in the extreme the othering process results in violence. Similar dynamics are evident in the othering of the poor,

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who in many instances have been discursively classified as dirty, diseased, depraved, and dangerous and in more recent contexts as criminal, undeserving, and welfare dependent.[3]

The inadvertent effect of discussions that for obvious reasons focus on the stark inequalities, discrimination, and violence associated with othering is to locate the topic elsewhere. The problem occurs among colonizers and slaveholders or among bigots and rednecks, not among ordinary people in everyday life. Recent discussions have paid greater attention to this bias. Robert A. Orsi, for example, has noted the tendency in postcolonial scholarship to otherize the colonizers and in academic religious studies to do the same toward devout members of evangelical and fundamentalist groups.[4] The anthropological and ethnographic literature similarly has devoted significant attention to how the subjects of field research are often otherized by being treated as representatives of radically alien cultures and in less alien settings only as victims, recipients of charity, or underprivileged and stigmatized minorities.[5]

The common template for these discussions, however, has been the othering that occurs along relatively sharp distinctions such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. While these are understood to be socially constructed divisions, the focus of analysis starts with a distinct categorical separation—a "social fact"—that can be treated as a symbolic boundary and then examines such questions as how it manifests itself, when it becomes salient, why it is or is not associated with behavioral patterns, and what its results are in terms of inequality, intolerance, and misunderstanding.[6] What is missing from consideration is how vague, blurred, ill defined, or nonexistent a potentially important symbolic boundary may be in the first place.

Examples taken from the nineteenth century in which ordinary people negotiated the meanings of middle-class respectability demonstrate that significant symbolic boundaries often were not sharply defined and often did not fall neatly along major cultural fault lines. The hucksters who peddled goods from farms to towns and from towns to farms and who were often regarded with suspicion by their customers and became the trope for later references to fast-talking, slick, conniving, con artists were hardly the persons who could be understood in terms of simple well-established symbolic boundaries. To the extent that such boundaries were important, it was the boundary between town and country that was dramatized as hucksters traversed it, and it was their own lack of place—the placelessness of their labor—that set them apart from the settled populations of town and country. And it was this placelessness that contrasted with arguments claiming that market houses were the preferable places in which respectable pricing processes could occur without threat of immoral impulses taking over. The lesson huckstering communicates is that othering is specific to the times and places in which—in this case, commercial—interaction occurs. It need not result in extreme rejection or exclusion and indeed may be reinforced by the fact that regular interaction exists.

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At first glance the lunatic, as another example, might appear to represent the kind of othering that occurs along sharply defined boundaries: the person locked away in an asylum, concealed from public view, physically confined in a separate place away from the normal daily activities of respectable people. If the distinction was well defined in these terms, it was nevertheless the result of a definitional process. Determining that someone was insane was a matter of collective authoritative categorization, just as decisions were about persons of mixed race and ambiguous occupational status. It was in fact a difficult designation to make because it referred to qualities of mental soundness that could be disputed and were in any case understood to be sudden and often temporary occurrences. The sharp distinction between the insane who were institutionalized and ordinary people who were not, moreover, was not sharp at all when it came to the many whose lives were ambiguously affected. That number included the persons who were suspected of lunacy or had even been diagnosed as temporarily insane but for whom there was no space in the asylums. It included the spouses of institutionalized persons who struggled to make ends meet and whose neighbors wondered if something unspoken or even fraudulent was taking place. And it included the children of the insane who were widely suspected of being in line to inherit insanity. If lunacy illustrates anything about othering, it underscores the fact that seemingly sharp symbolic boundaries have wide margins that put those who are close to the margins at risk.

Accusations of fanaticism represented an even harder to define symbolic boundary along which othering could occur. Terming a political opponent a fanatic was tantamount to suggesting that the person was obsessed to the point of irrationality—and yet it was a commonly made allegation. Saying that an entire religious group was composed of fanatics was a more serious charge. Fanaticism illustrates how othering can be based on relatively subtle behavioral cues, such as the display of emotion, which under many circumstances is expected and even encouraged in religious settings but also risks challenging the authority of religious leaders and can result in observers claiming that the fanatics are not properly rational about their religion or are dangerous. Othering on grounds of fanaticism demonstrates that symbolic boundaries are context specific but depend on broader interpretations as well. Heightened displays of emotion may be an important part of what makes religion—or sports events or political rallies—meaningful, but people also have to decide how much or how little is appropriate.

Besides the ways in which symbolic boundaries may be ill defined and context specific, another complication stems from assumptions about who is doing the defining. Discussions of othering usually treat it as a phenomenon imposed by a dominant group. But that may not always be the case or at least may not fully capture the relational dynamics involved. One argument, for example, suggests that race and ethnicity should be distinguished on grounds

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that race is a category over which people have no control, whereas ethnicity can more often be a matter of self-assertion.[7] This argument in more nuanced form has been made in studies showing that the making of Hispanic identity in the United States has resulted from strategic political and cultural organizing among Hispanics even though this organizing has taken place within the context of highly structured external power relations.[8] Another example is research on the exoticization of art and on enclaves of artists who intentionally marginalize themselves from mainstream patterns of behavior.[9] Immigrant religious congregations are yet another example, which, as nineteenth-century examples as well as recent studies suggest, are sometimes self-marginalizing because of distinctive beliefs and are able to preserve their identity through strong in-group solidarity. The difficulty with many of the discussions of symbolic boundaries, though, is that they fail to distinguish the specific kinds of behavior to which they apply. Immigrant congregations illustrate the complexities involved. They were sometimes able to separate themselves on the basis of exclusive worship practices and adherence to strict marriage policies, for example, but mingle readily with nonmembers when engaging in economic transactions. In short, othering may be all encompassing in some instances, distancing groups from one another in every regard, while in others limited to only specific kinds of interaction.

If, as studies suggest, othering usually occurs in asymmetric relationships where the otherized has less power than the otherizer, a further complication that merits attention is how, if at all, the reverse may happen. A few studies suggest that it does. Research among working-class men, for example, suggests that African Africans sometimes set themselves above white coworkers who they claimed were not as loyal to their families or less moral, and African Americans and whites alike criticized upper- and middle-class men for being shallow and materialistic. The case of Gilded Age and Progressive Era profiteers, however, suggests that more has to happen for large-scale othering to be mobilized. Wealthy individuals could be criticized for moral failings such as greed and engaging in fraud, but collective entities such as power interests, moneyed interests, monopolies, and the plutocracy had to be identified for othering to occur that included demands for political intervention. Bringing politics to bear on othering may in turn sharpen the symbolic boundary, as it did in that case, but also significantly shift the nature of the distinction from moral criticism toward measurable bases on which to impose regulations.

A remaining aspect of othering that requires clarification is the extent to which it refers to an out-group that is relatively stable and thus permanently marginalized or whether it applies to symbolic boundaries that are relatively permeable. Othering people on the basis of race and gender suggests that the categories are fixed, with only their salience and implications varying in interesting ways. But other cases do not fit this pattern. Examples might include an atheist who has been maligned for being an unbeliever who then undergoes a

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conversion experience and becomes a member of a respected church, a convicted felon who serves a full sentence in prison and then rejoins the community, a member of an ultraconservative religious group who defects, or a gay person who comes out of the closet. In each case a symbolic boundary has been crossed, and its crossing both reveals that it exists but also implies that something about the person who has been (or who might be) otherized is likely to change. In the nineteenth century discussions of naughty children held the same implications. It was important that the child not be an outsider who was evil from the start, but that the child became an outsider by virtue of a particular act and then could be redeemed through some act of contrition or punishment. The othering that occurred in these instances was important even though it was temporary because it permitted the difference between good and evil to be taught.

Whether they are crisp or vaguely constituted, the symbolic boundaries around which othering revolves vary in salience and thus pose the question of why they are more important under some circumstances than others. Studies provide a variety of explanations, which on closer inspection turn out to be more about different perspectives than about testable empirical propositions. The perspectives range from ones focusing on cognitive, discursive, and psychological factors to ones concerned with large-scale social conditions.

Cognitive, discursive, and psychological perspectives get us to the point of understanding that we do process information by organizing it into categories, which we reference as alterity in speech, and which sometimes relate to anxiety, as in instances of scapegoating others when feeling under duress. In these perspectives othering is in the first instance the imposition of differences, as Saussure argued, on which meaning depends.[10] The perspectives focusing on societal conditions tell us that othering is likely to be directed toward groups that are already in the minority because of race, ethnicity, and national origin, and that othering may erupt into violence or become more vicious because of struggles for power, such as during hotly contested political campaigns. Discussions of societal conditions also suggest that othering becomes more salient when a society's members feel threatened. Kai T. Erikson's *Wayward Puritans*, for example, showed the relationship of New England colonists feeling under threat to the outbreak of the Salem witch trials.[11] Research on purges in Stalinist Russia and anti-immigrant hysteria in the United States following the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 attacks serve as similar examples, suggesting the effects not only of feeling threatened but also of being committed to the nation's collective interests.[12]

Less attention has been given to the possibility that othering is a response that helps people feel respectable when the diversity to which they are exposed makes it difficult to stipulate in more positive ways what respectability is. This possibility would pertain to situations in which well-intentioned people want to get along with others with whom they differ and simply find it easier to

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target some out-group as exemplifying what not to do than to work out the details of what respectability actually is. For example, a devout African American Baptist and a devout Italian American Roman Catholic who were friends and had mutual friends might find it awkward to talk about their churches' different doctrines and hierarchies or their different ethnic and racial lineages but easily fall into discussing how terrible it is to have Hispanic immigrants living in America. The point is not that their othering of immigrants is "caused" by the lack of theological agreement but that it allows them to have something in common with each other without having to specify in much detail what that is. The logic is similar to saying that "the enemy of my friend is my enemy" except that it becomes "I consider X my friend because we have a common enemy."

Several lines of argument point to the possibility of cultural diversity being associated with a tendency to find solidarity by identifying an outside group as the "other." One possibility is that communication across a diverse population becomes harder and thus changes in quality, leaving the option of communicating more easily about an objectified outsider. Émile Durkheim, for example, suggested that in larger, more voluminous societies, "the common conscience is itself obliged to rise above all local diversities, to dominate more space, and consequently to become more abstract." A theological system in a large complex religiously diverse society, for instance, might refer abstractly to God or a higher power, whereas the sacred in a small isolated context might refer to a particular animal or ancestor.[13] An abstract symbol capable of speaking to the common conscience, such as references to God, pride, or freedom, might serve as a unifying principle, Durkheim argued, but only if it could be revered as especially powerful or sacred—which was the function of the "negative cult," the taboo, the forbidden fruit, the impure that, by contrast, defined the pure.[14]

A related argument is suggested by recent scholarship on whiteness. Whiteness in this understanding is an empty cultural category that masks the diversity it contains. It is the default, the center, the majority that supposedly is homogeneous and requires no further specification, whereas in reality it is composed of much diversity. Lacking in detail, it is, as Cornel West has observed, a "constructed category parasitic on blackness." It "expels its anxieties, contradictions and irrationalities onto the subordinate term," West argues, "filling it with the antithesis of its own identity; the Other, in its very alienness, simply mirrors and represents what is deeply familiar to the center, but projected outside of itself."[15]

It would be inaccurate to say that nineteenth-century definitions of middle-class respectability were similarly empty. Writers advocated for parents to responsibly teach their children good morals and for children to obey. There were efforts to link middle-class membership not only with schooling and indoor jobs but also with appeals for good taste and refinement in character. However, it was not always easy to specify the meaning of these abstractions. The nation was ethnically and racially and culturally diverse from

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the beginning and became increasingly so. Respectability as an ideal had to be specified in practice. It was specified relationally. The good guys gained specificity in relation to the bad guys. The bad guys were puzzling, interesting, different, and often ambiguous, and they attracted attention for that reason. Whether it was the stranger who came as a huckster with wares to sell or the neighbor who went berserk or the German farmers who seemed to be promoting sedition, they sparked discussion of what was not quite right. The profiteers and the plutocrats played a similar cultural role. If it was hard to say who exactly the "common man" was, it was at least possible to claim that ordinary people were not like those scandal-ridden millionaires.

In 1922 G. K. Chesterton hinted at something like this when he wrote about America being a "nation with the soul of a church." More than nearly anything else from his visit, the phrase caught the imagination of subsequent observers. Yes, it seemed, America was founded on religious principles; yes, the nation was exceptional in the extent of its religious beliefs and participation; and yes, the United States embraced the ideal of religious freedom. If there was something practical to be remembered from Chesterton's observation, it was the idea that America was engaged in a continuing quest to uphold its principles of inclusion, pluralism, and tolerance. Surely this was the challenge that good-hearted Americans would face again and again as the nation sought to retain its moral character at the same time that it dealt with successive waves of immigrants.[16]

But there was an irony in all of this that not even Chesterton fully appreciated. What American culture fundamentally stood for, he argued, was citizenship and nothing more. Everyone should be treated as citizens, full stop. That was the meaning of equality. In all other respects the principle of equality meant that differences should be embraced, or at least tolerated, and that in treating one another as equals, citizens proved themselves worthy of public respect. And yet that was not the reality of America at all. It was not the reality Chesterton observed in 1921 when his visit prompted him to comment critically on rampant racism, anti-Semitism, political conflicts, and religious divisions. It was not the reality when he visited a decade later, and it was not the reality that later commentators observed.[17]

The irony was actually a paradox. Citizenship and citizenship alone may have been the ideal, but if the nation did in any way have the soul of a church, its soul was an impetus to define what good citizenship should involve. It was the desire to identify common values and to instill them in children and uphold them through legislation. The notion that citizenship should be minimally defined and the fact that in reality there was considerable diversity in ideas of good citizenship, though, meant that it was difficult to spell out much more than the abstract terms in which values and character could be discussed. Honesty, integrity, and fair play, to be sure, but beyond that it was harder to elicit agreement.

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And that was the connection with Americans' penchant for disagreement and exclusion. In the breach, when it was difficult to say with much specificity what the values on which good citizenship should be based were, it was easier to say what they were *not*. Criticizing, castigating, stereotyping, finding fault with, and excluding those who were different was not simply the problem with which Americanization had to deal; it was part and parcel of the Americanization process itself.

Nearly a century later the nation's soul would less aptly be described as a church—perhaps more as a mosaic, a cacophony, a nation in search of itself, or a dissonant space. Calls are made from time to time for common ground to be identified and for a middle way to be affirmed somewhere between the radical right and the radical left. In the name of reason, elected officials call on the citizenry to show respect and to uphold basic values. They caution against mudslinging and vulgarity. That's not who we are, they warn when bigotry and violence erupt. That betrays our values. We're better than that. But it is far easier to say what we are against than what we are for.

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