

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 2

Issue 2 *Critical Theories in Applied Settings*

Article 18

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Capetillo-Ponce, Jorge (2003) "Defining the Other," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol2/iss2/18>

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Defining the Other

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“Everything is what is not.”

—G. W. F. Hegel

I

Throughout human history, we find a continuous struggle to define the other, the foreigner, the unknown, the opposite of we or I. And, as the above quote from Hegel indicates, what they are, that we are not, helps define the frontiers of personal and group identity.

In the earliest written accounts, in ancient civilizations like Sumer, Akkad, Egypt, China, India, Mexico, we find stories of battles, of fighting “other” people, as well as accounts of commerce and marriage with people from “other lands.” Through this interaction with the other, with the stranger, humans have gradually defined themselves, assigning to both themselves and others distinguishing and unique racial, cultural, and socio-political characteristics

They are further distinguished from one another by language, art and religion. Over time, such concepts as race, ethnicity, community, nationalism—among many others—emerged to explain certain aspects of our obsessive concern with the other. These concepts have been used to explain the “sense of belonging” we see in groups,

in neighborhoods, in institutions, in primitive tribes, in nations. Sometimes these concepts have also been utilized to explain or foster legitimacy and identity among individuals and/or groups, and sometimes to create divisions and conflict.

Christianity inherited the structure of classical antiquity of defining other peoples by a rank of valuation based on its geographical proximity to a center of civilization such as Rome, Athens, Constantinople or Alexandria. For the “civilized” groups of the ancient Roman world, the closer or contiguous “others” were considered “barbarians,” because they spoke a language that sounded like “bar-bar” to the Romans. But while not considered quite human, these barbarians were still identifiable through their engagement in such social exchanges as commerce and war. Beyond the land of the barbarians, lived the unknown “monstrous races.” As we can see in drawings from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, they were depicted as people with their faces in their belly, with many arms or legs, with only one eye on the forehead, or, in general, with features very close to those of animals.

With the triumph of Constantine as sole emperor of Rome in the fourth century A.D., Christianity became the official religion of the late Roman Empire, and the Roman trichotomy of civilized, barbarians, and monstrous humans was transformed gradually to the religious trichotomy of the faithful (that is, the Christians), the unredeemed, and the unredeemable. Muslims—many Islamic societies until the 17th and 18th centuries were as developed or more than European nations—Slavs, Vikings, Franks, and Germans, were considered heretic but redeemable. That is, their acceptance of the word of God would upgrade their category to faithful or Christian, because members of the unredeemed category had a soul and thus could be transformed.

This was not the case for the category

of monsters, now the unredeemable. Members of this category of religious otherness were not fully human simply because they lacked a soul and could not be converted into Christianity. It was applied to the horseback people that invaded Christendom from the east, such as Mongols, Huns, and Tartars. In fact, the conquests and raids dating from late antiquity up to the time of Gengis Khan and his descendants, were considered by the Christians of the Middle Ages as attacks on the faithful by evil forces. Interpretation of events at that time was based solely on biblical grounds. Thus, these evil strangers were associated with the descendants of Cain, or of Noah's son Ham who had sinned against his father and against God.

Within this unredeemable, monster-like category were also inserted black Africans. The medieval belief that they had no soul constituted one of the key reasons why there was little resistance to black slavery until much later.

Here it is important to underline that at the very beginning of the conquest of the New World, the American natives or Indians were also enslaved by the Spanish. But in this case an enlightened Dominican priest, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, defended the natives and actually took the case to the Spanish court and eventually to the Vatican. The debate between Fray Bartolomé and another learned Spaniard, Ginés de Sepúlveda, was a famous one, with the final result being that Indians were recognized as having a soul, and thus redeemable. Still, while Fray Bartolomé had won his case, and Indian slavery was banned in Spanish America, it was not the same case with African blacks, who were brought as slaves by the millions in the following centuries to Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English-dominated areas of the American continent.

II

There were other categories of otherness in Europe. Through the accounts of travelers like Marco Polo, far-away nations such as China and India became partially known. They were considered civilized but unknown peoples. They were enigmatic people. This started to change in the fifteenth century, when the era of voyages of discovery began in Portugal, inspired by the Portuguese prince Henry the Navigator. And soon enough, the "discovered" others began to realize that discovery was synonymous to colonization and submission.

But the Europeans were not the only ones to produce categories of the other. In fact, all communities and nations have a similar view, considering themselves as the center of humanity—what social scientists call ethnocentrism. One good example is the Chinese, who for many centuries were, indeed, the wealthiest, most populous, and powerful state on earth. One great example of this ethnocentrism is the that in the sixteenth century the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci brought to China a European map of the world showing the new discoveries in America. The Chinese were glad to learn about America, but one point in the map offended them. Since it split the earth's surface down the Pacific, China appeared off at the right hand edge and the Chinese thought of themselves as literally "The Middle Kingdom."

The Hindus, for their part, developed an intricate and hierarchical method to divide their own society into different segments or castes. But they also developed a special category, the Mlecchas, that was applied to the uncivilized barbarians living outside their land. In fact, no pious Brahmin (the highest caste in India) dared set foot on the land of Mlecchas, because they had a fear of physical and cultural contamination.

Another example is that for the medieval Muslim the world looked very different from what it did to the Christians, or the Chinese, or the Hindus. Most Muslims believed that Mohammed's birthplace, Mecca, was the center of the earth's surface, and Muslim maps showed precisely that location for the holy city. We still see this idea of Mecca and Medina holding a special place in the world, in the pilgrimage to those cities—or *Hajj*—that every good Muslim should embark upon at least once in a lifetime. It is also important to note that Muslims had their own categories of the other, based also on religion. They called Christians and Jews *ahl-al-kitab* or “people of the book” who, even though had a lower status, were differently treated in comparison to peoples and groups belonging to other religions.

III

For many centuries, the biblical texts, and the accounts of classical authors from Greece and Rome, continued to provide the main paradigms for the interpretation of other peoples and cultures. With the gradual secularization of Europe during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a more scientific approach was developed. One example is Linne's theory, that categorized human races as follows:

- Americans: reddish, obstinate, regulated by custom
- Europeans: white, gentle, and governed by laws
- Asians: yellow, severe and ruled by opinion
- Africans: black, crafty and ruled by caprice.

This classification exhibited some enduring characterizations of raciology. It implied a certain bias in physical traits, temperament, and political-moral behavior. By the 19th. century, these bases were being inserted into scholarly treatises that interpreted national histories as accounts of

struggles between races; with victors showing a racial superiority over the vanquished. By this time too, there were a few centuries of experience with black slavery and Indian semi-slavery, which further reinforced the sentiment of unquestioned white European superiority.

Of course there were exceptions to this trend. Even during the time of the Roman Empire, Tacitus saw Rome corrupting the barbarians. During the Enlightenment, Rousseau held similar views when he idealized the primitive man. Some even joined the other, like the Spaniard Gonzalo Guerrero, who at the beginning of the conquest of Mexico by Hernn Cortés, joined the Mayans in their efforts to fight the *conquistadores*. But the dominant view of European superiority gradually spread, through the pervasive economic and political structures of colonialism, to most of the world, and even more rapidly with the technical advances in communication and printing.

This tendency to see history as a struggle of races for dominance was aided by such natural sciences as biology. One example is a theory developed by Franz Von Gall, called “phrenology,” which proposed that mental activity had a physical base in the brain which in turn shaped the skull of the specific individual. This approach, which tried to correlate cranial morphology with racial characteristics, was being widely used at the turn of the 20th century, as we can see in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, where the central character, Marlowe, is submitted to such a test by a Belgian doctor in Congo.

The 19th century produced various racial theories, that led gradually in the twentieth century to the Nazi “racial science” with the results that we all know. Only after WW II, with the crushing defeat of fascism and nazism, did these theories start to assimilate the idea that any attempt to explain cultural forms on a purely biological basis is doomed to failure.