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# Otherness, Orientalism and Objectivity in the United States

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**The contemporary preoccupation with "otherness" at once represents a concern for personal identity in a time of social homogenization and global economic integration and fears of "aliens" perceived as threatening familiar life patterns. This is a complex and multi-faceted process that, in the United States, has been revealed in changing perceptions of "oriental others" who include, particularly, "Jews" and "Arabs". The most striking fact in this regard is that over the past half century anti-Semitism (or, rather, "judeophobia") has been supplanted by an "anti-Arabism" ("arabophobia") often expressed as "islamophobia". The transition between these two phobias can be seen in the evolution of popular culture and in ideological changes generally. The notion of "otherness" is part of these cultural and ideological changes.**

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The study of "otherness" in academic work and the presence of the idea of "otherness" in the popular imagination are two facets of a specifically modern ontology engendered by social changes and political imperatives. Focusing on "otherness" as a way of understanding the self is most fundamentally a choice (even if often an unconscious choice) to consider differences more important than similarities. In scientific work, this orientation seems justified by the necessity of observation and classification; categorization and the construction of typologies are at the heart of any application of the "scientific method". "Objectivity" would seem to require "critical distance" from 1) the object of study and 2) the investigator's own possible presumptions and cultural values.

The first part of this scientific attitude is clearly more easily achieved. The "objectification" of the world external to the self is a natural process that does not require any notion of scientific method. Once an individual becomes aware that a world external to his or herself exists – a world "other" than the familial entourage – the potential is there for protective reactions conditioned by the social and environmental context. The narcissistic perceptions and behavior of the child, as described by Jean Piaget [1], are given emotional and ideological content and expression by all types of educational experience. Fear of the "alien" – that which is "foreign" to the individual and to those with whom the individual is familiar – can only with difficulty be construed as "instinctual" behavior, but it can be easily understood as a reaction formation related to observable or simply perceived dangers.

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Xenophobia, racism and confessional hatreds are contemporary examples of how frightened people retreat into themselves, seeking protection against those they do not, or cannot, understand. This type of "objectification" is different in inspiration from that which attempts to understand, but the mechanism is similar. For example, the historical phenomenon of racism cannot be dissociated from the elaboration of scientific knowledge and method. However, nationalism, religious intolerance, racism and eugenics are all frequently defended by the invocation of scientific observation and study that has led to the conclusion that there exist "others" who constitute a grave danger for "us".

Among the non-scientific population, a concern for the "other" can be the expression of "humanitarian" impulses that are readily incorporated into political programs. Again, the most familiar example of this process is racism and the professed desire to preserve what is most valuable in human society by reducing the influence, and even the existence, of others deemed inferior. Who could deny the altruism implicit in the racialist attitude? What is more natural and admirable than to protect a beloved community against influences perceived as destructive of health and cultural integrity? From this point of view, racism is perhaps the best example of focusing upon the "other" (although anti-"Communism" and anti-"terrorism" have served well in this regard in recent decades). History is, unfortunately replete with the injustices and genocidal consequences of this kind of "altruism".

The second aspect of the "scientific" orientation – the need to take "critical distance" from one's own cultural values and conceptual premises – is more difficult for the investigator. [2]

The paradox is that consciousness of the limitations of scientific method holds out the greatest promise of expanded knowledge and understanding. From this standpoint, it is possible to celebrate "otherness" on principle, to place greater value on dissimilarity, diversity or the exotic. This, less conflict-laden orientation, is the foundation of a certain "humanitarian" perspective the central value of which is a kind of cosmopolitan tolerance. In this conception, the "other" is valorized precisely because of his or her strangeness.

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An excellent example of the antinomies of "otherness" is the notion of "Orientalism" On the one hand, orientalism was constructed as a way of excluding or diminishing non-Western values and cultural accomplishments. Under the influence of Edward Saïd, [3] Orientalism is generally taken to be an ideological bias typical of European cultures. On the other hand, Orientalism can be understood as representing a fascination with the non "occidental" world. In this perspective, an "orientalist" can be considered a connoisseur of a way of life valued because of the counterpoint it offers to Western civilization, and not an ideologue engaged in the denigration of non-Western culture and society. All the ambiguity inherent in the ideal and reality of Orientalism is present in the different forms of fascination with the culturally exotic that have emerged in the Western world for over two centuries, such as orientalist painting, theosophy and other assimilations of Eastern religion and philosophy, and the appropriation of "primitive" or "traditional" cultural expression in art and music. The recent vogue for "world music" is but a continuation and expansion of this strengthening trend.

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A more recent variation of the expression of "otherness" is found in the "identity politics" that emerged with a certain force in the United States during the 1970s and that tended to dominate political discourse in certain social milieus for a generation. The felt need to rediscover one's "ethnic roots" or to discover the foundation of one's specific "gender" contributed to the epistemological vagaries of different articulations of "postmodernism".

Recently, Gilad Atzmon has recalled the somewhat pathetic lengths to which some people in search of their "ethnic" identity will go. In discussing how non religious people of Jewish ancestry can attach themselves to a religious culture and identity and seek acceptance from the "Jewish community" and support a "Jewish state", he observes:

"Identity and identity politics alienate one from one's reality, not to say authenticity. … that which is called by multi-culturalists Identity is in fact nothing but Identification. Searching for Identity is not a genuine search into the notion of one's authentic self. Identity politics aim at setting measures of Identification, it sets categories of belonging, it demands recognition and it opposes any form of authenticity or real self. It prefers gathering and grouping rather than meditation on the self. In fact, people who possess a genuine notion of a real self do not crave the acceptance of any community, neither Jewish nor any other. People with real self are recognized for who they are rather than accepted for what they claim to be. […] Unconsciousness, says [Jacques] Lacan, is the 'discourse of the other'. The discourse of the other is very much the male fear of impotence. Rather than the anxiety of being caught malfunctioning, it is the unbearable threat that the fiasco may become public knowledge which is the real terror." [4]

Preoccupation with the authenticity of the self quite naturally displaces much political debate and social analysis from considerations of social class domination and conflict, economic exploitation and political manipulation towards more individualistic concerns. The "other" became significant mainly to the degree that "it" revealed the essence of he or she who perceives it. In the United States, this phenomenon became a collective syndrome in the 1970s (that the social commentator Tom Wolfe called the "Me Generation"). It was one aspect of the cultural tendency that David Reisman called "other direction" in 1950 and whose more aggravated state Christopher Lasch referred to with such prescience in his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979). [5]

Reisman's and Lasch's observations do not, however, account for religiosity as a form of alienated consciousness. On the one hand, religion as we know it generally divides the cosmos into sacred and profane realms, thus bifurcating existence. "When alienation is religiously legitimate," observes Peter Berger, "the projected meanings of human activity congeal into a gigantic and mysterious 'other world,' hovering over the world of men as an alien reality. By means of the 'otherness' of the sacred the alienation of the humanly constructed world is ultimately ratified." [6] Among the profane, belief in the celestial "other world" and its reverse side – hell, the realm of eternal pain and darkness – allows individuals, and even groups of people, to be understood as possessing qualities corresponding either to the possession or to the lack of divinity. Religion permits the "other" to be consciously identified in a context of moral absolutes; good and evil necessarily imply the determination of some others as enemies to be combated.

In secular thought, it is equally convenient to reduce complexities of existence to the binary mode of conceptualization. The "either/or" proposition is, pedagogically and didactically, a discursive logic rooted in both theological rhetoric and scientific predilections.

Even attempts to explain the philosophical thrust of this proposition find it difficult to escape. For example, Erich Fromm has explained that the positing of opposites, while seemingly typical of "Western" thought, represents only one tendency in philosophy. The influence of Aristotle's philosophy produced an essentialist bias in logic. Fromm quotes from the Greek philosopher's *Metaphysics* in describing this bias: "It is impossible for the same thing at the same time to belong and not to belong to the same thing." Fromm explains that "This logic is based on the law of identity which states that A is A, the law of contradiction (A is not non-A) and the law of the excluded middle (A cannot be A *and* non-A, neither A *nor* non-A)." [7]

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However, a contrary strain of philosophical logic has more recently emerged in Western philosophical that attempts to transcend the limitations of Aristotelian logic. Fromm calls this "paradoxical logic" because it "assumes that A and non-A do not exclude each other as predicates of X." [8] It is a proposition that found its most influential modern articulation in the writings of Spinoza and in G.W.F. Hegel's conception of the dialectic explained as the "negation of the negation" and the "unity of opposites". Fromm stresses that such postulates can be found in the philosophy of Heraclitus among the ancient Greeks and more generally within Eastern philosophy. In this regard, he quotes Lao-tse and Chuang-tzu ("That which is one is one. That which is not-one, is also one."). Later elaborations are found in the historical philosophy of Karl Marx, the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich and the twentieth-century phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. In all these expressions of paradoxical logic, as in Indian and Chinese philosophy, the central idea is that dualism and binary logic is a highly limited form of thought: "Opposition is a category of man's [sic] mind, not in itself an element of reality."

In contrast to Aristotelian and, by extension, Judeo-Christian thought, paradoxical logic tends towards understanding oneness, or rather the unity implicit in diversity, as the ultimate realization of wisdom or understanding. From this perspective, the Socratic dictum – that as we learn we are increasingly aware of our ignorance – is the highest possible degree of enlightenment; it is, for example, how "Nirvana" is explained in the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra*. Although this text avoids real definition, preferring to explain what Nirvana is not, it nevertheless suggests that the state of "Noble Wisdom" (Nirvana) is the transcendence of binary fictions: "Nirvana is where the two-fold passions have subsided and the twofold hindrances are cleared away and the twofold egolessness is patiently accepted, is where, by the attainment of the 'turning about' is the deepest seat of consciousness, self-realisation of Noble Wisdom is fully entered into". [9]

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In the history of Western social thought, paradoxical logic has had a difficult struggle against the binary essentialisms that are more congenial to the propagation of nationalist and racist ideologies. For their seminal work in describing and explaining the genesis of Orientalism in Western thought, we must be grateful to Edward Saïd and Martin Bernal

; but their work is only a starting point. The ideologies they exposed continue to produce demonized others as means of social control. The mobilization of populations through the use of nationalistic appeals and the creation of scapegoats is both a process of consciously cynical manipulation and of elements of irrational, emotional dispositions that recent decades have seen perfected.

*Post-scriptum :*

*This article is taken from Larry Portis, « 'Arabs' and 'Jews' as Significant Others : Zionism and the Ambivalence of 'Orientalism' in the United-Statesian Imagination, » Middle Ground. Journal of Literary and Cultural Encounters*, number 1, 2007, pp. 75-96.

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[1] See Jean Piaget, *Le jugement moral chez l'enfant*, Paris, 1932.

[2] The quasi impossibility of transcending cultural reflexes is the conundrum faced by all conscientious anthropologists and sociologists. This dilemma is at the heart of the notion of "inter-subjectivity"; it is the recognition that inter-cultural interaction conditions behavior to the point that the act of observation modifies the subject of the observation. The only consolation is that in even the "hard" sciences such variables exist. Werner Heisenberg's "principle of indeterminacy" is often invoked in discussions of how all types of scientific investigation are imbued with an inescapable "relativity".

[3] Edward Saïd, *Orientalism*, London, Peregrine Books, 1985 [1978].

[4] Gilad Atzmon, "One Hundred Years of Jewish Solitude," *Counterpunch*, counterpunch.com, 20 January 2007.

[5] See David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd : A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950 and Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism : American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1979.

[6] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York, Anchor Books, 1969 [1967], pp. 95-96.

[7] Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York, Harper & Row, 1956, p. 61.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[9] From « What is Nirvana, » *Surangama Sutra*, as translated by Dwight Goodard and Wei-Tao and exerpted in Lin Yutang (ed.) *The Wisdom of China and India*, New York, The Modern Library, 1942, p. 556.