

The Voice of "Others": A Critical Analysis of In Custody

The concept of "the Other" is a complex one, and it is hard to pinpoint exactly what it means. Does it have any meaning at all? The question of who the other is might seem useless, because in some way we are all "others" to someone, and everyone else is "other" to us. We can never fully know the other, and even if we strive to do so, "the other" is constantly changing. At the same time, there can be no "I" without a relation to and a concept of the other. We need *something* that in some degree is different from ourselves to actually constitute a self. Still, how do we bring meaning into a term that refers to absolutely everyone?

According to Michel Foucault, othering is strongly connected with power and knowledge. When we "other" another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better. It implies a hierarchy, and it serves to keep power where it already lies. Colonialism is one such example of the powers of othering.

We cannot get away from the concept of the other, as it is too crucial for an understanding of the self. What we can do, though, is to limit the ways in which we group people up and construct them as something entirely different from an imagined "us". The power of definition is a strong one, and when used in the context of othering, it continues to reinforce discrimination.

In my field, anthropology, "the Other" was for a very long time the core object of study for the entire discipline, and one could even argue that early anthropology was a direct result of colonialism. What anthropologists did, was to travel somewhere else and study what someone else did – often ignoring factors such as the so-called "natives" relations to neighboring groups and to the rest of the world. The exciting Other societies were described as separate, stable entities, and both cooperation with other groups and development within the community were often neglected. Anthropology today has become something much more self-reflexive – not only are our own societies looked upon with perhaps the same curiosity as "the others" once were (and still is), research today also pays more attention to issues like change, globalization and power relations. Still, the examples from pre-1960s ethnography underline an important element of othering – differences between societies are emphasized while similarities are hidden. It is easier to legitimize power over another group when this group seems to have very little in common with the group in power.

It's hard to imagine a society in which we divide people into "us" and "them" without putting "us" above "them". Simultaneously, it's difficult to defend an idea of absolutely all groups thinking as solely negative, because a completely individual mode of thinking makes it almost impossible to address discrimination and the collective aspect of power and power abuse. What is more important to remember, though, is that most of us are members of countless different groups, that might need to act as *groups* at different times. Context is important when playing out identities.

Reference:

1. <https://newnarratives.wordpress.com/issue-2-the-other/other-and-othering-2/>