

INTRODUCTION



ALTERITY AND “OTHERNESS” have too often plagued our world. The denigration, even demonization, of the “Other” in order to declare superiority or to construct a contrasting national identity is all too familiar. Trading in stereotypes, manufacturing traits, and branding those who are different as inferior, objectionable, or menacing have had an inordinate grip on imagining the divergent over the centuries. One need not rehearse the devastating consequences that ethnic, racial, or national typecasting of any kind has delivered in human history. And various forms of negative conceptualizations retain force today, creating barriers to communication and understanding, engendering or intensifying hostilities that poison international (and even internal) relations on the contemporary scene.

Analysis of such self-fashioning through disparagement of alien societies has been a staple of academic discourse for more than three decades. A collective self-image, so it is commonly asserted, demands a contrast with other peoples and cultures. Or rather a contrast with the perceptions and representations of other peoples. They can serve as images and creations, indeed as stereotypes and caricatures. Denigration of the “Other” seems essential to shape the inner portrait, the marginalization that defines the center, the reverse mirror that distorts the reflection of the opposite and enhances that of the holder. “Othering” has even taken on verbal form, a discouraging mode of linguistic pollution.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* stands as the classic work, a passionate and powerful voice on the subject.¹ Said focused essentially on the divide between East and West, the Eurocentric design of the “Orient.” His linkage of colonialism and imperialism to the portraits of subordinate peoples conceived by hegemonial powers spawned a whole scholarly industry that advanced, deepened, and occasionally criticized his vision. Said’s penetrating and highly influential text remains central to discussion of the subject. The sweeping study has transformed “Orientalism” into standard phraseology, a defining characteristic of the discourse. It recently prompted a mirror image, appropriately titled *Occidentalism*, which pointed the lens in exactly the opposite direction: a treatment of the depiction and distortion of westerners by nonwesterners.² The alleged confrontation of the societies gained greater public notoriety by Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*,

¹ E. Said (1978).

² Buruma and Margalit (2004).

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which envisioned a fearsome contest of opposites.³ Most recently, the idea took even more extreme form, reaching a *reductio ad absurdum* in Anthony Pagden's *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle between East and West*. On that perception, continuing hostilities date back to the Greco-Persian wars of the fifth century BCE.⁴ The ancients are thus to blame.

The line of reasoning has had a potent impact on scholarship regarding antiquity. Negative images, misrepresentations, and stereotypes permitted ancients to invent the "Other," thereby justifying marginalization, subordination, and exclusion. Creation of the opposite served as a means to establish identity, distinctiveness, and superiority. The Hellenic vision of the easterner cast as "barbarian," inaugurated or intensified by the Persian wars, holds center stage in this interpretation, powerfully argued by scholars of distinction and influence. Francois Hartog's landmark *Mirror of Herodotus* called attention to the modes of representing the "Other" in historical writing.⁵ Edith Hall gained wide impact by exploring this thesis in her *Inventing the Barbarian* through the lens of Greek tragedy.⁶ The portrait is enshrined in Paul Cartledge's pointed survey of the Hellenic experience.⁷ The incisive study of Jonathan Hall further advanced, in nuanced fashion, the idea of the Persian wars as molding Hellenic identity in contrast with the "barbarian."⁸ That notion prevails.

The Jews, of course, fared no better. Division of the world between Jew and gentile has its roots in the Bible. The fierce rejection of idolatry entailed the hostile labeling of most neighboring peoples. Jewish writers excoriated Egyptians for zoolatry and shunned admixture with Canaanites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Philistines. That feature has been emphasized and underscored by a number of publications in the past decade and a half.⁹ Romans scattered their biases widely with negative pronouncements on easterners and westerners alike. They dismissed Greeks as lightweights and belittled Jews for superstition (not to mention what they thought of Celts, Germans, Sardinians, and Syrians). Data gathered in the works of Balsdon and Dauge provide ample testimony on Roman expressions along these lines, although both works are rather short on analysis.¹⁰ Abusive comments

³ Huntington (1996).

⁴ Pagden (2008).

⁵ Hartog (1988).

⁶ E. Hall (1989).

⁷ Cartledge (1993).

⁸ J. M. Hall (2002).

⁹ See, among others, Cohn (1994); Machinist (1994); Benbessa and Attias (2004); Wills (2008).

¹⁰ Balsdon's cascade of examples (1979) receives little interpretation. Dauge's gargantuan volume (1981), with its idiosyncratic organization, makes it difficult to find one's way around. But his firm stance on the polarity of Romans and non-Romans (or "barbarians") is clear; see, especially, 57, 393–402, 532–579.

can be found without difficulty. Some Greeks, for instance, decried Romans as boors and regarded Jews as having contributed nothing useful to civilization. Egyptians mocked Greeks as recent arrivals in the world's history, and they transformed the Exodus story into a flight of Jewish lepers and pollutants. The list of ethnic aspersions is long. No need to dwell on the matter. Scholarship regularly identifies the construction of the "Other" as a keystone of collective identity. Recent collections of essays attest to continuing scrutiny of the subject.¹¹ And the most sweeping contribution to this topic, the immensely learned and indispensable volume of Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, assembles a plethora of Greek and Roman adverse attitudes toward an array of foreigners across the Mediterranean, reaching the conclusion that they amounted to either ethnic prejudice or proto-racism.¹²

The present work offers an alternative approach. It argues that Greeks, Romans, and Jews (who provide us with almost all the relevant extant texts) had far more mixed, nuanced, and complex opinions about other peoples. A spark for its inception came from the brilliant study of Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*. That slim volume of lectures interweaves diverse aspects of Greek intellectual encounters with various folk like Jews, Romans, Celts, and Iranians. The chapters are jammed with insights and unexpected connections, affording a stimulus to thinking on every page. Its compactness and density, however, did not allow for expanded treatment of texts or authors.¹³

It is easy enough to gather individual derogatory remarks (often out of context), piecemeal comments, and particular observations that suggest bias or antipathy. The ancients were certainly not above prejudicial reflections on persons unlike themselves. It is a very different matter, however, to tar them with a blanket characterization of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, let alone racism. The thrust of this study is to argue that ancient societies, while certainly acknowledging differences among peoples (indeed occasionally

¹¹ See, for example, the fine volume of essays in Hölischer (2000). The contrast of Greeks and barbarians has most frequently stimulated scrutiny. A valuable assemblage of articles on the subject may be found in Harrison (2002). Silberstein and Cohn (1994) provide a comparable collection on Jews and "Others." The pieces on this topic gathered in Neusner and Frerichs (1985) are a more mixed bag, but the characteristically acute and far-ranging contribution of J. Smith (1985) is well worth reading. See also the monograph by Benbessa and Attias (2004). For Egyptians and non-Egyptians, see now Vittmann (2003) with telling illustrations. One should note also the visual images of western "barbarians," often harsh and brutal, by Roman or provincial artists, as treated, e.g., in the works of Ferris (2000) and Scott and Webster (2003).

¹² Isaac (2004). An older but still useful study by Haarhoff (1948) collects a broad range of Greek and Roman opinions about aliens with the noble aim of promoting racial harmony in the postwar world.

¹³ Momigliano (1975).

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emphasizing them) could also visualize themselves as part of a broader cultural heritage, could discover or invent links with other societies, and could couch their own historical memories in terms of a borrowed or appropriated past. When ancients reconstructed their roots or fashioned their history, they often did so by associating themselves with the legends and traditions of others. That practice affords a perhaps surprising but certainly revealing insight into the mentalities of Mediterranean folk in antiquity. It discloses not how they *distinguished* themselves from others but how they transformed or reimagined them for their own purposes. The “Other” takes on quite a different shape. This is not rejection, denigration, or distancing—but rather appropriation. It represents a more circuitous and a more creative mode of fashioning a collective self-consciousness.

The book does not pretend to cover this subject in all its manifestations and ramifications. Of necessity it must be highly selective. It engages, for the most part, with major and extended texts rather than fragments or isolated ruminations. And it investigates a variety of means whereby thinkers and writers conceived connections among peoples instead of creating barriers between them. Much of the material delivers ancient perceptions and impressions, often conveyed through inventions, legends, fictions, and fabrications. It is not part of the purpose here to inquire how closely they correspond to “historical reality,” but rather to employ them as a window on ancient mentalities.

The work falls into two parts. The first, “Impressions of the Other,” treats attitudes toward and assessments of foreigners by a range of authors and texts. It tackles the prevailing scholarly consensus on the Greek image of Persia, the cornerstone of whose argument traces antipathy and “Otherness” to the aftermath of the Persian wars. Examination of Aeschylus’ poignant *Persae*, Herodotus’ intricate portrait of Persian practices and personalities, Xenophon’s fictive homage to Cyrus in the *Cyropaedia*, and Alexander’s remarkable receptivity to collaboration with Iranians presents an important corrective. A similar revisionism applies to Roman attitudes toward their most fearsome and formidable foe, the Carthaginians. The pernicious concept of *Punica fides*, often seen as the defining feature, in fact masks a more differentiated, varied, and even sympathetic appraisal. A summary of sentiments on blacks and “Ethiopians” further illustrates the broad-mindedness of classical authors and artists toward people who have lacked comparable consideration in more modern times. Other chapters apply close scrutiny to pivotal texts that supply some of the most significant surviving evidence on representations of the alien: Herodotus, Diodorus, and Plutarch on the Egyptians, Caesar on the Gauls, Tacitus on Germans and Jews. They endeavor to show that the descriptions and conceptualizations, far from exhibiting simplistic stereotypes, display subtle characterizations that resist reductive placement into negative (or, for that matter, positive) categories.

The second part, “Connections with the Other,” explores fictive genealogies, invented kinship relations, foundation legends, and stories of multiple migrations that underscore interconnections and overlappings rather than disassociation and estrangement. The objective here is not to discern cultural “influences,” the impact of one people on another, whether in art, artifacts, literature, or mythology.¹⁴ Part II concerns itself rather with the manner in which Mediterranean societies encountered, even embraced, the traditions of others and introduced them into their own self-consciousness. The chapters examine these themes across a wide range. They include analysis of biblical tales like those of Judah and Tamar and of Ruth, post-biblical legends of Jews and Spartans as common descendants of Abraham, and the traditions of Ishmaelites and Arabs, all of which express intimate ties between Jews and “Others.” Additional chapters investigate fictive kinships that emerge in the legends of Perseus tying together a number of societies, the connections of Athens and Egyptian Saïs, the story of Nectanebos conceived both as Macedonian and Egyptian, the tales of Roman derivation from mythical Troy, and the fantasized associations of Rome and Arcadia. They proceed to a scrutiny of foundation legends, with a stress on foreign founders like Pelops, Danaus, Cadmus, and the Pelasgians, Greek claims on the origins of Armenians, Medes, and Scythians, Egyptian assertions of responsibility for the inception of Macedonians, Jews, and Thebans, and the variety of stories on Jewish beginnings recorded by Tacitus. The intertwining of divergent peoples surfaces again and again. A final chapter on cultural appropriation encompasses the reciprocal influences imagined between Jewish and Greek philosophers, the refashioning of Hellenic traditions for Jewish purposes by authors like Artapanus, Aristobulus, the *Letter of Aristeas*, and the Sibylline oracles, and the Romans’ association of themselves with Greek figures, cults, and history.

Plainly the book, while traversing multiple and disparate territories, is illustrative, not exhaustive. But it aims to demonstrate that the conception of collective identity in terms of (rather than in contrast to) another culture forms a significant ingredient in the ancient outlook. This did not issue in some bland amalgam, a Mediterranean melting pot—let alone any starry-eyed universalism. Of course, prejudices existed, a wariness of those whose habits and beliefs seemed peculiar, even a resort to misrepresentation and stereotype. The multiple mirrors reflect mixed mutual perceptions. But this investigation brings into prominence the powerful ancient penchant (largely unnoticed in modern works) of buying into other cultures to augment one’s own. That feature complicated the sense of collective identity—but also substantially enriched it.

¹⁴ On this, see, e.g., the important works of M. West (1997) and M. Miller (1997). Cf. now the remarks of Mitchell (2007), 114–124.