Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Trumpism, The Wall, and Terrified Whiteness

Back in April I published a piece called "Let's Not Call Donald Trump a Racist." My point was that the labeling of Donald Trump as a racist reinforces the idea that racism is the result of hateful people deciding to do hateful things. And this leads us away from a systems analysis and toward an individualistic analysis, which is not helpful.

In that April essay I said that we should stop trying to figure out whether or not Donald Trump is a racist, or what kind of racist he is. Instead, I said, we should be asking a whole other set of questions. Starting with this one: What sorts of conditions must exist in the culture for *someone like* Donald Trump to ascend to the Presidency?

In this issue I argue that we are now—and have been for some time—in a period of increasing challenge to a long-prevailing social order. How long? Well, white men have been at the top since they first set foot in this hemisphere, really since the age of European conquest began early in the 15th Century. I call it the Age of Conquest. Most of us have been taught to call it the Age of Exploration, or maybe the Age of Discovery. That's because the dominant group in a society gets to name things, and the conquerors would rather we think of them as explorers or discoverers. Language is important; that's why I write.

Big Changes Underway

Elsewhere in this issue I quote scholar and activist john a. powell, who tells us "When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society."

The changes occurring in the early 21st Century are big and rapid indeed! Each one of them is terrifying to large segments of the population, and perhaps are most terrifying to those with the most to lose. What changes

am I talking about? Well... The decline of the U.S. Empire is accelerating. Global climate disruption is unprecedented. Digital technology is revolutionizing how information is produced and distributed. Capitalism is in crisis, with its "boom-and-bust" cycles producing weaker booms and stronger busts, forcing the 99 percent into ever-more-precarious positions.

While it's unlikely that most people fully understand the implications of all these changes, there is an increasing sense that "things are changing," and not for the better. White men in particular are terrified that all this change could result in a re-ranking of the social order, causing them to lose their place as the dominant group. The election of a black president was and is to many people a powerful symbol of this. And I have mentioned in these pages the terror that is felt by many white people as they become aware that the day is fast approaching when white people will no longer be the absolute majority in the United States. Anthropologist H. Samy Alim has called this terror "Demographobia."

At such a time of tumult, when so many are terrified and feeling abandoned, large numbers of people in, or wishing to be in, the dominant group look for leaders who offer a sense of group identity, who promise to clarify exactly who is Us and who is Them. And every time a leader insults, demonizes, excludes, targets, blames, accuses or otherwise scapegoats an identifiable Other it is another brick in the wall separating winners from losers, separating the in-group from the innumerable out-groups, separating the virtuous from the wicked, separating Us from Them.

The Washington Post reported on August 27th that "President Trump is so eager to complete hundreds of miles of border fence ahead of the 2020 presidential election that he has directed aides to fast-track billions of dollars' worth of construction contracts, aggressively

Greetings,

     My work over many years to understand the ever-evolving phenomenon of racism has allowed me to see an even larger, equally complex dynamic called Othering. Othering is related to racism and, as you will see, I consider racism to be a form of Othering. But anti-racists have talked for decades about something called *intersectionality*, which has to do with how different aspects of identity—sex, gender, race, class, etc—overlap and blend together to shape the particular ways in which the dominant culture oppresses particular people.

     I could have written about intersectionality. But I think the concepts of Othering and Belonging better capture the essence of the issue at hand. Which is, to me, the creation of a truly diverse, lovingly inclusive society. Read this issue of the Notes and see if you don't agree.

     All are welcome here,

     Nygaard

Trumpism *from page 1*

 seize private land and disregard environmental rules, according to current and former officials involved with the project. He also has told worried subordinates that he will pardon them of any potential wrongdoing should they have to break laws to get the barriers built quickly, those officials said."

Later in the article the Post reported "Trump conceded last year in an immigration meeting with lawmakers that a wall or barrier is not the most effective mechanism to curb illegal immigration, recognizing it would accomplish less than a major expansion of U.S. enforcement powers and deportation authority. But he told lawmakers that his supporters want a wall and that he has to deliver it."

The reason that the promised wall at the southern border is so important is because it is a tangible, visible symbol of the overriding project of Trump and the social forces—which I call Terrified Whiteness—that have rallied around him. And that project is the narrowing of the definition of who qualifies as a full member of society.

Every time Trump makes comments or publicly takes actions that dehumanize people based on religion, sex, race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation (or whatever) it reassures all who are "not one of them" that they *belong* here, that this society is *theirs*.

And so, brick by brick is built the real wall promised by Trumpism: It's a conceptual wall. On one side of it are those who belong. On the other side are those who do not belong. Such a wall requires a lot of maintenance, and constant reminders of which groups belong on which side.

The construction and maintenance of this wall is carried out by a process known as Othering, which is the subject of this issue of Nygaard Notes. ◆

What is Othering?

"The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of 'Othering.' In a world beset by seemingly intractable and overwhelming challenges, virtually every global, national, and regional conflict is wrapped within or organized around one or more dimension of group-based difference."

A couple of times in the past year I have quoted from a remarkable publication called "Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern." The above quotation is taken from that publication, in fact from the first issue that came out in 2016.

What is "Othering"? Othering is defined as a complex set of "dynamics, processes, and structures" that work together to mark some people as belonging and others as not belonging to a group. Scholar and activist john a. powell says that "When societies experience ↗↗↗

➜➜ big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society." And this process is what he calls "Othering."

In Issue #1 of "Othering and Belonging," john a. powell and Stephen Menendian state that
"The most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership. The right to belong is prior to all other distributive decisions since it is members who make those decisions. Belongingness entails an unwavering commitment to not simply tolerating and respecting difference but to ensuring that all people are welcome and feel that they belong in the society."

In the pages of Nygaard Notes I often refer to "us" and "them" and the processes by which the dominant group decides who is one of "us" and who is one of "them." Sociologists talk about "ingroups" and "outgroups," where ingroup members get stuff that outgroup members are denied.

Rapid social and economic change breeds insecurity, as people fear losing whatever they have. Such insecurity can lead to greater unity—as people band together in defense of their common interests—or it can lead to greater division, as demagogues attempt to unite the dominant groups against those who can be labeled "The Other." The Other is identified as the cause of the problem, what we call the scapegoat. There's a lot of scapegoating going on these days.

> ***Othering seeks to narrow the very definition of who qualifies as a full member of society.***

Intersectionality

When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989, she was pointing out that neither feminist analyses nor anti-racist analyses by themselves were able to capture the complexity of the oppression that is a part of the lives of black women. Crenshaw rejected the use of what she called a "single categorical axis" (that is, either racism or sexism) to describe the experience of "multiply-burdened" people, saying that "Because the intersectional experience [of black women] is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."

As the United States gets more diverse, the process of Othering—which has been going on as long as the United States has been going on—becomes ever more complex.

There are all sorts of markers of human difference that can be—and are—used to group people together for the purpose of Othering, among them religion, sex, race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone. And the concept of intersectionality reminds us that identity is complex and the basis for Othering someone often involves multiple aspects of their identity. Opening the door to full Belonging thus requires us to understand and engage with Othering in its various forms.

Such understanding is essential if we want to be effective in countering the Othering process that is so prevalent today. And it's even more essential if we want to be effective in building a new society based on true Belonging. ◆

An Othering Story (From the Life of Nygaard)

I recall sitting next to my classmate, Steve, in our 10th-grade speech class in 1971. I do not recall how it came up, but for some reason he remarked to the class that "I don't like black people." I think I might have laughed out loud before saying, "Steve, you don't KNOW any black people." I was on pretty solid ground there, as my hometown was, at that point, lacking in any black residents. When I asked Steve why he would say such a thing, he said that he had seen a black man being

interviewed on TV and didn't like him. When I pointed out that there were millions of black people in the United States, it didn't seem to matter. The instructor let the two of us debate in front of the class for a while, but as I recall we got nowhere. I didn't realize at the time that I was being offered a small glimpse of the social phenomenon I now know as "Othering."

Steve *from page 3*

I thought of Steve when I read an opinion piece in the London Guardian of November 8th 2017 entitled "Us vs Them: the Sinister Techniques of 'Othering' – and How to Avoid Them." The author, john a. powell, wrote that "Othering is not about liking or disliking someone. It is based on the conscious or unconscious assumption that a certain identified group poses a threat to the favoured group. It is largely driven by politicians and the media, as opposed to personal contact. Overwhelmingly, people don't 'know' those that they are Othering."

So the fact that Steve didn't "know" any black people didn't matter. When Steve saw black skin, he was predisposed (as a white person in the United States) to notice any behaviors that he had been taught to associate with members of a social group designated as inferior. Witnessing such undesirable (to him) behaviors affirmed for Steve the soundness of his judgement that black people, *as a group*, are inferior. It's a circular process.

I took what Steve said literally, thinking that the problem was his emotional reaction to "black people." But I now see that he was simply engaging in categorization, attempting to figure out where "those people" were to be placed in the hierarchy of racial groups. I didn't realize that I was being offered a real-life example of Othering.

This idea of Othering as a ranking of social groups was explained quite clearly in an obscure sociology journal back in 1958. We'll have a look at that essay now. ◆

The Sociology of Othering

Othering—which often manifests as what we call Racism—is not primarily a psychological problem, nor is it an emotional problem, although the psyche and the heart are certainly involved in the development and perpetuation of racist systems and processes. Othering can best be understood as a sociological problem. That is, it's about groups, and specifically about which groups are "in" and which groups are "out." This was all explained quite clearly in a classic 1958 essay in The Pacific Sociological Review entitled "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." The author, sociologist Herbert Blumer, wrote the paper to make the point "that race prejudice exists basically in a sense of group position rather than in a set of feelings which members of one racial group have toward the members of another racial group."

Blumer said at the time that this idea is "different from that which dominates contemporary scholarly thought on this topic," which held that racism "exists fundamentally as a feeling or set of feelings lodged in the individual". I'm sure he was right, and I'm quite sure that this same misconception about the nature of racism (what Blumer calls "race prejudice") dwells in the minds of most USAmericans today, sixty-one years later.

Blumer's paper is so remarkably relevant to the current political moment that I will highlight some of his main points here. Blumer is talking about racism, but his points apply to the broader concept of Othering, of which racism is but one aspect. In fact, when you see the phrase "race prejudice" in the following excerpts, I invite you to substitute the word "Othering," with the understanding that race prejudice/racism is but one form of Othering.

In the very first paragraph of his 1958 essay, **Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position**, Blumer explains the nature of the sociological approach to understanding racism and Othering. He says that we need to view racism as a *grouping and ranking process* rather than as a matter of individual emotional reactions. This different way of looking at racism, he says, "shifts study and analysis from a preoccupation with feelings as lodged in individuals to a concern with the relationship of racial groups. It also shifts scholarly treatment away from individual lines of experience and focuses interest on the collective process by which a racial group comes to define and redefine another racial group."

The Collective Process

The "collective process" by which people define social groups and their place in them has a lot to do with political leadership and media, as Blumer explains:

"A basic understanding of race prejudice must be sought in the process by which racial groups form images of themselves and of others. This process ... is fundamentally a collective process. It operates chiefly through the public media in which individuals who are accepted as the spokesmen of a racial group characterize publicly another racial group. To characterize another racial group is, by opposition, to define one's own group. This is equivalent to placing the two groups in relation to each other, or defining their positions vis-a-vis each other. It is the sense of social position emerging from this collective process of characterization which provides the basis of race prejudice."   ↗↗↗

➜➜ "The sense of group position is clearly formed by a running process in which the dominant racial group is led to define and redefine the subordinate racial group and the relations between them. There are two important aspects of this process of definition that I wish to single out for consideration. First, the process of definition occurs obviously through complex interaction and communication between the members of the dominant group. Leaders, prestige bearers, officials, group agents, dominant individuals and ordinary laymen present to one another characterizations of the subordinate group and express their feelings and ideas on the relations. Through talk, tales, stories, gossip, anecdotes, messages, pronouncements, news accounts, orations, sermons, preachments and the like definitions are presented and feelings are expressed. In this usually vast and complex interaction separate views run against one another, influence one another, modify each other, incite one another and fuse together in new forms. Correspondingly, feelings which are expressed meet, stimulate each other, feed on each other, intensify each other and emerge in new patterns. Currents of view and currents of feeling come into being; sweeping along to positions of dominance and serving as polar points for the organization of thought and sentiment."

Decades before Fox News and the Internet, Blumer described the danger of insulated groupthink in reinforcing the process of Othering. When channels of political communication are limited to the voices of like-minded members of the dominant group, "the interaction becomes increasingly circular and reinforcing, devoid of serious inner opposition, [and] such currents grow, fuse and become strengthened. It is through such a process that a collective image of the subordinate group is formed and a sense of group position is set."

Racist Groupthink

Blumer says that "There are four basic types of feeling that seem to be always present in race prejudice in the dominant group. They are (1) a feeling of superiority, (2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien, (3) a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, and (4) a fear or apprehension that the subordinate racial group is threatening, or will threaten, the position of the dominant group."

I would say that the first three "feelings" are not feelings at all, but beliefs or, collectively, an ideology. The fourth one—fear—certainly IS a feeling, and one which Blumer identifies as a very key one:

"The source of race prejudice lies in a felt challenge to [the dominant group's] sense of group position. The challenge, one must recognize, may come in many different ways. It may be in the form of an affront to feelings of group superiority; it may be in the form of attempts at familiarity or transgressing the boundary line of group exclusiveness; it may be in the form of encroachment at countless points of proprietary claim; it may be a challenge to power and privilege; it may take the form of economic competition. Race prejudice is a defensive reaction to such challenging of the sense of group position. It consists of the disturbed feelings, usually of marked hostility, that are thereby aroused. As such, race prejudice is a protective device. It functions, however short-sightedly, to preserve the integrity and the position of the dominant group."

Think here of the chants heard at the right-wing rally in Charlottesville Virginia: "Jews will not replace us! You will not replace us!" This is fear talking.

Reading the following paragraph, I begin to understand the mysterious (to me) phenomenon of the loyalty and even affection apparently felt by working- and middle-class whites for the narcissistic plutocrat in the White House:

"The sense of group position refers to the position of group to group, not to that of individual to individual. Thus, vis-a-vis the subordinate racial group the unlettered individual with low status in the dominant racial group has a sense of group position common to that of the elite of his group. By virtue of sharing this sense of position such an individual, despite his low status, feels that members of the subordinate group, however distinguished and accomplished, are somehow inferior, alien, and properly restricted in the area of claims. He forms his conception as a representative of the dominant group; he treats individual members of the subordinate group as representative of that group."

Trump is best understood as a leader of the traditionally-dominant social group, playing a key role in the "running process in which the dominant racial group is led to define and redefine the subordinate racial group and the relations between them," as Blumer puts it.

Of course the Othering process currently being led by Trump encompasses far more than race. The targets of Trump's insults and attacks are chosen (consciously or not, it doesn't matter) based on a wide variety of characteristics, among them religion, sex, ethnicity, class, disability, and sexual orientation.

Recall Blumer's statement that "To characterize another ... group is, by opposition, to define one's own group." Looked at in this way, we can see all of Trump's comments demeaning members of various groups as attempts to ➜➜

Sociology *from page 5*

define the groups, to Other the members of those groups.

Now recall john a. powell's comment: "When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society."

Blumer makes a similar point when he says that overt racist feeling ebbs and flow in a society, "usually becoming pronounced only as a consequence of grave disorganizing events that allow for the formation of a scapegoat."

The Herbert Blumer essay excerpted here is readily available on the Internet, and it's only five pages long! Aim your search engine at "**Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position**." Or click here: *www.vanderbilt.edu/diversity/wp-content/uploads/sites/96/2016/09/Race-Prejudice-as-a-Sense-of-Group-Position.pdf*

I'll conclude with a small illustration from this week's newspapers.

Earlier this month, a neo-Nazi named Stefan Jagsch was appointed mayor of Altenstadt, a small district near Frankfurt, Germany. Since Jagsch was the only one who stepped forward to fill the position of mayor, the governing body thought they had no choice but to appoint him. Many are outraged, but I call your attention to a short paragraph nearly at the end of an article on the appointment that ran on page 6 of the September 10th New York Times:

"On Thursday, [Jagsch] celebrated his appointment on his official Facebook page, which is marked with a banner decrying the 'Lying Press' and where he has posted screeds against migrants, Muslims and established political parties, by saying 'Of the people, for the people.'"

No doubt this sounded like an ironic contradiction to the Times editors and their readers. But that's exactly how Othering works. An ever-smaller group is identified as "the people," and the Others are stripped of their humanity. Sometimes the Othering process is led by a mayor of a small district in Germany. Sometimes it's led by the chief executive of the most powerful nation on the planet. But we should know what we're looking at.

I'll close with the wise words of john a. powell:

"If we are to combat the rising tide of extremism across the globe, we must actively create bridges across difference, and resist strategic exploitation of our collective anxiety. For when we bridge, we not only open up to others, we also open up to change in ourselves—and actively participate in cocreating a society to which we can all belong. The opposite of Othering is not 'saming', it is belonging. And belonging does not insist that we are all the same. It means we recognize and celebrate our differences, in a society where 'we the people' includes all the people." ◆

"Quote" of the Week: *"Culture and Beliefs Deemed to Be a Threat"*

Othering—a term created by cultural theorist Edward W. Said—is a commonly used agenda that seeks to 'other' a minority group on the basis that their culture and beliefs are fundamentally different (and deemed as a threat) to the rest of society. By deliberately creating the idea of an alien 'other' it reinforces difference and promotes social and political dominance over the group deemed as being 'the other'.

From an article in *The Sociological Imagination* entitled *'Othering' in Education* by Sadia Habib
Find it here: ***http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/18405***