

The Other

by Bill Herbst

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"The Other" is a term used in psychology, anthropology, and other social disciplines. It isn't applied in the typical connotation of "someone else," as one might say to the host at a restaurant: *"There are two in my party; one is myself and the other is my friend/wife/associate."* No, "The Other" is the Boogeyman — a semi-human creature from the archetype realm who is monstrous, menacing, dangerous, and evil. Psychologically, The Other is an expression of our worst fears about aggression and harm projected onto other human beings. Calling it a projection doesn't imply that it's always illusory or false, of course. People do exist who may willfully do us harm, and sometimes those people are on our inner circle of beloveds. That's part of the complexity of human life.

As individuals, we are not a single identity or self, but many identities or selves that co-exist beneath the level of the conscious ego. A particular facet arises out of the unconscious at any given time, stimulated by circumstance or our emotional reactions to a given situation, that temporarily merges with the ego under the mask of "self." Later — sometimes mere minutes later — that facet may disconnect and sink back down into the unconscious as a different facet arises to take its place and merge with the ego. Different groups of facets may even emerge together. This kaleidoscopic panorama of ever-changing facets merging with the ego goes on constantly. Who we are changes, but our ego maintains the illusion in our self-awareness of being a singular self, in charge and in control (even when we are clearly out of control).

Basically, however, The Other is a part of our own psyches that we don't want to own, so we project it onto others. We are all capable of terrible cruelty and grievous harm to others, but, for most of us, that fact is so distasteful to our sense of self that we disown it. That horrific part of us continues to lurk within our psyches, however, so one way to deal with it is to project it onto others. *They* are the evil ones, not us.

The criteria for our projection is fairly simple: The Other must be different, which is to say, not like us. The differences that are most obvious are biological — skin color, body shape, bone structure — characteristics that we can see (since human beings rely on vision more than any other physical sense). Skin color is the most obvious. If my skin is "white" (well, not white really, but pale with a pink or green tint) and your skin is "black" (not really black, but pigmented with

various shades of brown), then you are clearly different and not like me. You become a candidate for my projection of The Other. This applies to all racial subgroups in their various tones of lighter versus darker skin pigments: black, brown, red, yellow, white.

Not content to perceive only superficial differences in our biology, fearful human beings have gone much further. Based on those cosmetic differences, entire systems of classification and evaluation have been proposed, put in place, and believed (if not by all of us, at least by some), to assess the relative goodness (or its lack) of all our racial traits — intelligence, morality, socialization, even spirituality. The shadow of The Other is so dangerous and fearful to our psyches that we have to find sweeping justifications for their continuing subjugation.

I was born at the midpoint of the previous century in 1949. I was a white, middle-class kid who grew up in the burgeoning California-ranch-style suburbs of 1950s America. My parents were mildly “closet” racists. They weren’t card-carrying KKK members who espoused white supremacy outright, but their fundamental, unquestioned, a priori belief was that the “white” race was superior. Blacks were presumed to be lazy, morally suspect, mentally inferior, and to be feared. That’s why my parents moved to the suburbs when I was two years old, at the beginning of the wholesale white flight from middle America’s inner cities.

I came of age during the wild turbulence of the late-1960s during the Vietnam war (which I protested against and almost went to Canada to avoid the draft, getting out on a technicality at the last minute). I dove into the alternative subculture of new age spirituality, communes, music, and psychedelics, all of which arose suddenly in American culture, burned brightly (and naïvely) for a very brief period, then passed quickly as all that was absorbed in an ersatz and superficial manner into mainstream culture.

Had I been black, I think it likely that I would have participated actively in the civil rights movement. Would I have been a follower of Martin Luther King? Perhaps, but my guess is that I would have taken a more militant direction, embracing Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, or the Black Panthers. This seems probable to me because even then I knew a lot about the terrible history of race relations in America. Something in me has always understood and empathized with the sickening sense of fear and mounting rage over such longstanding and systematic cruelty and oppression. But then, subjugation and slavery in one form or another are a tragic stain corrupting the very heart of civilization

Had I actually been black, and had I taken a radical path, I might have become a martyr to racial violence and never even survived into my adulthood. Or I might have ended up in prison, as is the case with a disproportionately high percentage of young black men, both then and now.

It is no overstatement to suggest that racism and xenophobia are America's "original sins." They emerged out of the rise of European empires after the Middle Ages, but, more generally, date back throughout civilization and far before, all the way to hunter-gatherer tribalism. Some tribes were peaceful and cooperative, especially when matriarchy reigned, but many were not, and the human dilemma of defense against attack and harm by other human groups has never been solved. The very idea of The Other is now so entrenched that I don't know what could happen to remove that weed from the humanity's garden.

When European explorers, mainly from England, France, Spain, and Portugal, first arrived in the western hemisphere at the end of the 15th century and through the 16th, they came not in peace to discover and visit an amazing new world of human kinship, but rather in armed force for purposes of conquest in pursuit of wealth. The two new continents were not devoid of human beings. They contained indigenous natives of varying racial lineages living in communities that ranged from the nomadic villages of the Lakota in North America through the jungle tribes of the Amazon to the complex societies of the Aztecs in Mexico, the Maya in Central America, and the Incas in South America.

Total population of the western hemisphere at the beginning of European conquest and colonization is not precisely known, but estimates based on continuing research by historians and anthropological demographers have been steadily increasing and now stand at 50–100 million human beings. Europeans brought with them infectious diseases, such as influenza, measles, and smallpox, against which the indigenous people had no immune resistance. By the end of the 16th century, a mere 100 years after the arrival of the Europeans, a significant percentage of the western hemisphere's population had been decimated by epidemic diseases that raged through both continents with a virulence not unlike the Bubonic Plague in Europe two centuries earlier. Entire subcultures were wiped out.

Development of the modern societies of the Americas — the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the nations of Central and South America — was built on stolen territory, displacement, servitude, or genocide of indigenous peoples, and outright slavery of Africans transported to the New World. In 1818, the total population of the USA was 9.5 million, 1.5 million of which were Black slaves owned as property. That's one person in six. This is the shameful truth of our history, a secret that hides in plain sight. No, it's not the narrative of Manifest Destiny that I was taught in school as a child growing up in 1950s America. But it was there all along, lurking in the shadows of our past. Chattel slavery in America may have been abolished finally at the end of the Civil War, but racism and the belief in white superiority still exists in the seemingly clear light of our present.

This is a history based on human suffering. Once the lid of insensitivity and denial is initially peeled back, the contents spill over in every direction. We find

these terrible truths not just in the western hemisphere over the past 500 years, but throughout the entire 11,000 years of "civilization." Most of the wealth ever created involves domination by the few and subjugation of the many through servitude or slavery, achieved and justified by every possible means — brutal force, legal chicanery, and philosophical lies. To call that part of the dark side of human nature is an understatement.

Early on in the evolution of our species, we lived in small groups of less than 100 humans, and the "tribalism" that defined our family group as "us" (meaning people with whom we were safe) and everyone else as "them" (meaning potential enemies that were seen as threatening the safety and survival of the tribe) was an advantage to help insure that our genes would be passed on. Those days are long gone, and the instinct toward strict tribalism is now a threat to our continued survival.

That built-in, hard-wired biological reaction to strangers has evolved past simple caution to deeply-held beliefs reinforced by social memes about the innate superiority of those we regard as "us" and the inherent inferiority of those we regard as "them." We've gone far past just fear of The Other to loathing and hatred that include justifications for cruel treatment, such as systematic subjugation and even outright destruction.

The ersatz 19th-century concept called Social Darwinism — loosely based on British philosopher Herbert Spencer's term "survival of the fittest" — was a crazy-quilt of ideas about politics, economics, and culture based loosely (very loosely) on natural selection in evolutionary biology. It was typically invoked to justify the notion that the strong deserve to dominate the weak. Never a coherent philosophy, Social Darwinism has been largely discredited as misapplied theory. Survival may indeed be a struggle, but nature sets up life to include both competition and cooperation within and between species. Nevertheless, Social Darwinism continues to impact and influence civilization in the 21st century.

The perverse science of eugenics was an outgrowth of Social Darwinism that became a significant movement in the first half of the 20th century. The effort to protect racial "purity" and prevent "mongrelization" of the gene pool was aimed almost entirely at preserving northern European stock, which was regarded by the proponents of eugenics as genetically superior in nearly every way, including intelligence, character, and culture. Eugenics was carried to its most extreme conclusion in Nazi Germany's Third Reich, through the industrial genocide of extermination camps in the Holocaust.

Where racism, domination, and forced subservience are concerned, I don't get it. However much I study history, psychology, and culture — and I've been doing so my entire adult life, learned a great deal, and accept that these in-group/out-group, us-versus-them, we're-superior-to-you beliefs are deeply embedded in the disturbed psyches of human beings and the shared memes of culture — I still

don't get it. I understand that Life on Earth can be aggressive, harsh, and capricious at times (especially from our perspective), but is there something in our DNA that causes our species to exhibit such cruelty, even to our own kind? Putting aside for a moment the attitude that the earth is not a living, interconnected, and interdependent environment, but instead nothing more than a repository for resources we humans want (and for which we refuse to pay), how is it that we continue to treat even our own species with such cruelty and disregard?

I'm not an academic or a scholar. I don't flatter or delude myself into thinking that I can offer any profound insights about racism or servitude in a 1500-word commentary, and I certainly don't imagine that anything I wrote would convince a white supremacist to change perspective. Beyond that, this commentary is so brief that almost nothing has been written here about the increasing "wage slavery" of predatory capitalism, where workers are considered little more than replaceable parts in the cost structure of business, and wages are kept as low as possible. My words aren't likely to encourage any CEOs to pay their workers a living wage, share profits, or consider their employees to be part of an extended family.

I write these commentaries to share what's on my mind and in my heart, in the hope that some people might read them and recognize some of their own thoughts and feelings. For a civilization with 7.5 billion human beings, we live with an astonishing (and increasing) amount of isolation and alienation; among the profound needs of civilization in the 21st century is the resuscitation of the experience of social kinship.

I certainly don't wish to be Chicken Little, running around with my hair on fire, shouting that "The sky is falling," and that everything is wrong. That's a hell of a challenge, given the dramatically accelerating rates of change in technology, global commerce and finance, and the ways they are outstripping our human ability to adapt by reforming our institutions and restoring some sense of personal and social stability. Flexibility is not our strong suit, and public faith in our aging institutions is at an all time low. Of course, climate change may alter all that and force us to slow down and adapt.

As I stand on my little soap box in the virtual town square, I don't claim to have easy answers to our dilemmas. I continue to lobby for expansion of basic human goodness through love and compassion.

From that perspective, The Other is a phantom, a disturbed fear from deep in our brainstems.