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Bookreview: Charles K. Bellinger's *Othering: The Original Sin of Humanity*

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There are multiple ways the Other has been constructed within human history, and this othering has affected different forms and levels of social relations and polity. Charles K. Bellinger's discussion consists of an introduction and four chapters which provides an analysis of the term othering as a technical term, its application in contemporary academic discourse, and intellectual thought expressing processes of (anti-)othering from the angles of anthropology, political history, human rights, and theology. He does this through discourse analysis of certain key texts and authors that "demonstrate othering in action and also voices that spoke up against othering" because "[i]f there is such a thing as moral progress in human history it surely consists in strengthening of such voices."² His descriptive analysis therefore also consists of normative objectives, which can be seen in his ending the book with a theological chapter, but also in two main question driving his analysis: Why do human beings engage in othering, and can othering be validly criticized but also in a half-blind way whereby one's critique of one form othering creates a new form of othering?³ But apart from his Christian confessionism and American culture war concern present throughout the book, Bellinger does present us with one of the first texts which tries to assess the concept of othering itself from an extensive and comparative perspective. One of the only other extensive analyses on othering is Lajos Brons' 2015 article which focuses more on the philosophical aspects relating to the Self and the Other whereby othering is both a result and means to construct a self-identification, whereby the constructed Other is both viewed from resemblance (self-identification) and difference (self-distantiation). According to Hegel othering takes place between any intelligent and interpreting creatures encountering one another and it is therefore an inevitable event and a necessary existential hermeneutic between individual beings, but is as a concept usually understood to be inherently social (social us-versus-them), representing an in-

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² Charles K. Bellinger, *Othering: The Original Sin of Humanity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 10.

³ Bellinger, 9.

group/out-group dialectic.¹ Bellinger does not refer to Brons but comes to a similar analysis based on a literature review whereby the term othering starts to be used from the late 1950's onwards and explodes in use in the 1990's, replacing terms as prejudice and discrimination², whereby he selects Zachary Smith's explanation as the best definition of othering:

"Scholars commonly have defined Othering as the practice of labeling a people or culture as different or separate from one's own group. Much of the scholarship on this phenomenon centers on the theme of Orientalism, or western views of colonial subjects and non-western cultures. Generally, these studies agree on several interconnected aspects of the Othering process. First and foremost, they maintain that Othering is a function of self-identity that conceiving of another group as one's binary opposite allows the in-group to more easily define itself. Second, a groups Otherness often is identified through their observable features, be it skin color or some aspect of the out-groups culture. Third, it is not easy for the out-group to shed the Other label that the in-group places on them. This definitely has been the case with westerners' views of Middle Easterners as well as historic attitudes toward African Americans in the United States. Finally, to Other an entire people or culture is to create, at least in the mind of the in-group, a hierarchical relationship that justifies the domination and subordination of the out-group."³

One of the greatest contributions of Bellinger's book to the intellectual history of othering is in the chapter on the anthropological angle of what he calls dimensional othering. This novel approach clearly comes out of his theological

¹ Lajos Brons, "Othering, an Analysis", *Transcience*, Vol. 6, Issue 1 (2015), 70–72.

² Bellinger, 6–7.

³ Smith as cited in Bellinger, 9.

background as theology generally takes a meta-approach towards other disciplines. In this case it is an advantage as it provides an ontological aspect to othering which is lacking in most other disciplines. Bellinger explains dimensional othering as understanding othering which takes place within the three main dimensions of reality inhabited by the human being (dimensional anthropology):

1. **The vertical axis:** Historically represented by the Great Chain of Being, the hierarchy beginning with matter and energy and then working up through the more advanced forms of life (nature), human beings, and eventually the metaphysical realm ending with God. This vertical axis is studied through the disciplines of physics, chemistry, geology, biology, philosophical anthropology, metaphysics, and theology, representing immanent and transcendent existence which focuses on metaphysical and ontological differences.¹
2. **The horizontal axis:** The social plane of human relationality wherein human existence is defined within and between groups, classes, and categories. This horizontal axis is studied through the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics, representing societal and cultural existence which focuses on social differences.²
3. **The Selfhood axis:** The plane of individual selfhood wherein human existence is defined by the self's existence within time. This turned-in or downwards axis is studied through the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and the arts and literature, representing individual existence which focuses on uniqueness.³

¹ Bellinger, 12, 136.

² Bellinger, 12, 136.

³ Bellinger, 12, 15, 136.

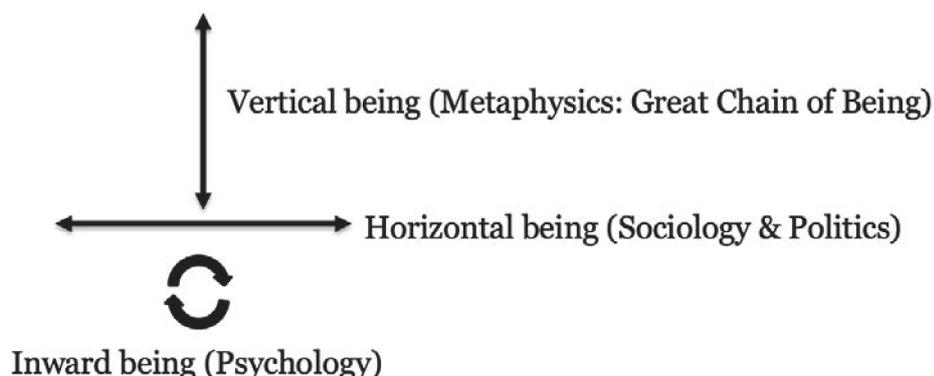


Figure 1. Bellinger's Dimensional Othering by A.Y. Mol

Each axis is analyzed for the different forms of othering it can generate. It is of course on the horizontal axis on which the majority of othering takes place, especially how it is studied in contemporary academia, as here it takes on its most visible form of in-group/out-group dialectics.¹ But much of the philosophical grounding and justification of othering occurs through certain conceptualizations of the vertical axis. Defining a group as a specific class with certain defining characteristics occurs within the horizontal plane but defining that group as inferior, which justifies its subordination or even its extermination, occurs on the vertical plane (which Bellinger calls 'the rhetoric of vertical othering').² Major shifts within vertical othering rhetoric occurred during the 18th and 19th century with the American and French revolutions, abolishment of slavery, and the introduction of human rights in constitutions, and national and international law, which delegitimized many practices of horizontal othering.³ Starting with the Declaration of Independence and many other modern and postmodern texts, Bellinger provides an extensive discourse analysis throughout the chapters how othering develops on the three axes throughout history, representing both moral progress and digress, whereby modern human rights has been one of the most successful historical attempts to delegitimize horizontal othering.⁴ But contemporary human rights language emphasizes the selfhood axis, and thereby de-emphasizing or even rejecting rights connected to the vertical axis (i.e., religious belief) and horizontal axis (i.e., cultural

¹ Bellinger, 14.

² Bellinger, 13–14.

³ Bellinger, 136.

⁴ Bellinger, 10.

rights). Just like previous emphasis on vertical rights (i.e., divine rights of kings) reduced and rejected on the horizontal and selfhood axes, and the emphasis of horizontal rights (i.e., collectivism) reduced and rejected vertical (i.e., religious belief) and selfhood axes (i.e., individual expression).¹ The resistances towards certain forms of othering almost necessarily result in other forms of othering. But there are of course forms of othering that can be discerned as being either harmful or harmless. Bellinger therefore proposes that the only way to overcome this constant imbalance is formulate a concept of 'natural law' which holds the moral spectrum of each dimension together², and as humans to learn "to inhabit all of the dimensions in an open and expansive way" as "our rejection of that call to wholeness is the deepest root of our violence."³ The biggest drawback of Bellinger's book is that he understands this natural law and wholeness through an explicit Christian worldview, and his critique of contemporary delegitimization of othering through the lens of American culture wars, whereby he implicitly othered audiences which do not share his specific worldview or cultural concerns to participate in his proposed ideas. He is clearly talking to a wide but specific in-group. But this does not mean that his analysis on othering is useless. It provides important insights into the modern intellectual history of othering and de-othering, introduces the immensely useful conceptualization of dimensional othering, and also shows the sensibility of the term othering itself as category of analysis.

Charles K. Bellinger's *Othering: The Original Sin of Humanity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020)

¹ Bellinger, 137–138.

² Bellinger, 16.

³ Bellinger, 17.