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"US AND THEM"

The phrase "us and them" refers to the tendency of marginalized groups to be viewed as "different from" the dominant group. For the most part, group relationships in society have involved assertions of supremacy, specifically the belief that one group is superior to another group or civilization. Early assimilation theorists and scholars specializing in world civilizations were quick to point out how clashes between cultures typically began with ethnocentric judgments of one group against another group.

The notion of viewing outsiders as "others" has historically been used to justify the mistreatment and oppression of one group of people by another. For instance, the notion of Manifest Destiny in the middle 1800s was dependent on the view that the United States, as the "more civilized" nation, had a right to expand westward and assimilate or eliminate other "less civilized" or racially inferior groups in the process. Similarly, slavery and the systematic theft of resources and oppressive treatment of indigenous populations under colonialism were deemed to be justifiable based on the idea that the oppressed group represented a "less civilized" or "subhuman" group of people.

While severe forms of overt ethnocentrism and group discrimination such as slavery are no longer an issue in the United States today, the notion of viewing outsiders with suspicion or as inferior remains. Although these suspicions tend to have racial connotations, they also extend to differences based on ethnicity, class, nationalism, culture, and religion. This entry looks at some expressions of the "us versus them" attitude in the United States.

Orientalism

The term *Orientalism* refers to images of the "Orient" or Eastern-based cultures as being completely different from Western thought or ideals. Used to express European imperialistic attitudes and prejudice toward Eastern cultures and people in the 18th and 19th centuries, the term has recently been used to describe the negative view in the West of Arabs and other Middle Easterners.

For instance, after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia, anti-Muslim sentiments have spread across the United States, creating an "us versus them" mentality between mostly moderate and

right-wing Christian American groups (but other religious groups as well) and Muslim Americans. Although many Muslims have renounced groups such as Al Qaeda or the use of violence as a way to solve problems, Muslim Americans have increasingly been the subject of discrimination perpetrated by not only the U.S. government but also the mainstream public.

Orientalism represents a bipolar relationship between Western and Eastern societies and hence, an "us versus them" mentality regarding Eastern societies by the Western world. In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said was critical of Western philosophy and prejudice against Eastern cultures. Said's central argument was that all discourse and philosophical stances are ideological in nature. As such, any discourse by Westerners creates a biased divide between the West and the East. According to this view, Westerners typically hold the opinion that Eastern cultures and societies are untrustworthy, irrational, and dangerous and have anti-Western mentalities—that people in the East are an inferior group compared with their Western counterparts.

Assimilation and Otherization

Assimilation refers to the process by which people or groups voluntarily adopt or are forced to adopt the language and cultural norms and values of another group. In most cases, the minority group is expected to conform to normative practices and ideals associated with the majority group. Those who refuse to assimilate to the larger culture, such as immigrants who choose to retain their cultural practices and language, are typically viewed as "anti-American" or somehow different from "typical Americans."

Whether people are allowed to assimilate into the dominant culture largely depends on the whether they will fit into the political, social, and economic desires of the dominant group, a group that has historically been (and continues to be) made up of European White ethnic groups. In the United States, for example, Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans have lived in the United States much longer than most European American groups. Unfortunately, instead of being viewed as the normative culture (or part of the normative culture), these groups continue to be viewed as "others" who have cultures different from that of "Americans" or "White" culture.

One way to examine how groups become or remain "otherized" is to look at the issue of citizenship. For instance, U.S. citizenship was once legally denied to

Chinese immigrants, as well Chinese born in America. Although the law has changed so that Chinese Americans today can be legal citizens, in some circles, they continue to be viewed as outsiders and foreigners because of their race. One recent study exposed how Asian Americans continue to be "otherized," even those who have lived in the United States for several generations.

According to the study, when Asian Americans were asked where they were from, the answer that was most unsatisfactory to Whites was "America." Unsatisfied that Asians can be "Americans," many Whites continue the conversation by asking, "No, where are you *really* from?" Some have argued that Asian Americans are "perpetual foreigners" in the United States.

One example of the perpetual foreigner can be illustrated by an incident that occurred during the 1998 Winter Olympics. During the figure-skating competition, Michelle Kwan lost out on the gold medal to Tara Lipinski, both representing the United States. A 1998 MSNBC headline read "American Beats Out Kwan," suggesting that Kwan, an Asian American, was not as "American" as Lipinski, who is White. Four years later, a similar headline appeared in the *Seattle Times*, when Kwan lost to Sarah Hughes, also a White U.S. skater, in the 2002 winter Olympics: "Hughes Good as Gold: American Outshines Kwan, Slutskaya, in Skating Surprise." Both of the above are examples of how minority groups continue to be relegated to "other" status by the dominant group in society.

The Future of Race Relations

There have been numerous studies on the relationship between minority group size and racial prejudice and discrimination. As some scholars have suggested, when the dominant group perceives a "racialized threat" from a minority group, even if the threat is unfounded, there is increased prejudice against the minority group. Other research indicates that typically, the dominant group's prejudice against minority and immigrant groups increases during economic downturns, when the majority may blame them for perceived loss of jobs, economic insecurities, and threat of job competition. During such times, there may be an increase in the "us versus them" mentality.

Recent debates indicate that there is no clear consensus on the future of race relations in the United States. According to some scholars, future race relations in the United States will largely remain a Black/White issue. Other scholars, however, argue that the United States is

becoming a multiracial society similar to many South American countries. These researchers conclude that the United States will be further racially stratified, with White groups at the top, groups such as those who identify themselves as multiracial serving as a buffer group in the middle, and darker-skinned groups at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

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See also Americanization; Assimilation; Minority/Majority; Nativism; Orientalism; Privilege; WASP; White Privilege

Further Readings

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