

## BOOK REVIEWS

# States and the Making of Others: Perspectives on Social State Institutions and Othering in Southern Africa and Western Europe

**Edited by:** Jeanne Bouyat, Amandine Le Bellec, and Lucas Puygrenier

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Reviewed by

**Franklin A. Lewis**

franklinalewis@gmail.com

University of South Africa

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## Introduction

*States and the Making of Others: Perspectives on Social State Institutions and Othering in Southern Africa and Western Europe* is a collection of essays that is a recent contribution to studies on social identity, political science, sociology, and anthropology employing an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. The central theme of the book is the process of othering which is inherent to institutionalisation and the formation of the state. The authors explore processes of othering in state and social institutions across geographical settings in Western Europe and Southern Africa. By drawing on empirical and theoretical frameworks, the book provides insights into how state institutions create, reinforce, and sustain categories of “Others”. Using the notion of othering as a central analytical concept, the authors achieve a nuanced exploration and understanding of the making and reproduction of Others by state institutions. The book contributes to the research on the state-Others relationship with regard to the ambivalent politics of recognition,

redistribution, redress, the differentiated legacies of former states' modes of categorising Others, and the globalised trends of neoliberal reforms of state institutions. Focusing on contemporary social and political issues, the authors investigate how mechanisms within institutions and state shape societal views based on race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and socio-political grounds.

*States and the Making of Others* provides a detailed analysis of how state-led othering not only enforces social hierarchies but also plays a critical role in shaping the nature of statehood and governance. The book is a thought-provoking and timely examination of the power dynamics embedded within state institutions. Its analysis of othering practices across different socio-political contexts provides valuable insights into how states shape and control societal boundaries, often to the detriment of marginalised groups. By exposing the exclusionary practices inherent in institutions like education, health care, and immigration, the book challenges conventional perceptions of the state as a neutral entity, prompting readers to reflect on the ethical implications of state-led othering.

The authors do not perceive the Others as refugees or migrants but approach them as “home-made products” (p. 6). The Other is depicted as the unwanted existence of someone who differs from the ideal citizen who is generally associated with affluence and whiteness. Boundaries are created between individuals and groups on the basis of othering to determine who shall qualify for economic and social rights and privileges, such as education, health care, safety, access to employment, access to reproductive rights, and the recognition of sexual and gender minorities.

The book is divided into four parts. First, it deals with conflictual definitions of the nation and its diversity through the “repositioning of the past Others”. Second, the book looks at the moral construction of social order through othering. The third part explores the politics of rejection and subordination by welfare state institutions while the fourth and last part examines gatekeeping practices in the granting of international protection. The book opens with a persuasive proposition that state institutions are powerful structures which define social boundaries, create hierarchies, and produce exclusionary categories that distinguish “us” from “them”. Drawing on the parallels between Southern Africa and Western Europe, the authors argue that despite cultural and historical differences, states in both regions utilise similar mechanisms to marginalise certain groups, suggesting a shared strategy in the politics of exclusion. The empirical case studies in each chapter provide historical contexts, particularly in regions such as South Africa, where apartheid policies explicitly categorised and divided citizens along racial lines, leaving lasting impacts on institutional practices and public consciousness. Similarly, the European context is analysed

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through the lens of migration policies, revealing how postcolonial power dynamics and increasing nationalism shape contemporary practices of exclusion.

Part 1 of the book focuses on the obliteration of the Other through history teaching. The first two chapters engage with national history as a dimension of nation-building that symbolically and epistemically enshrines belonging and hierarchies of citizenship among formerly disenfranchised groups. Drawing on studies of high school history education in Zimbabwe and South Africa, Reim and Robinson explore the ways in which certain communities became othered. The chapters show how forms of othering may emerge as states tend to create rather rigid versions of such narratives following protracted liberation struggles.

At the dawn of independence and democracy for many African countries, both Zimbabwe and South Africa were tasked with writing new histories to unite what were, in both cases, highly diverse populations. While their struggles for liberation came with a sense of unity for those who fought against oppression, discourses of united Black or African struggle were also used to downplay the diversity, frictions, and alternative strategies that existed among oppressed groups. Both reveal that such state practices of othering do not occur only through outward “demonisation”, but can also take more subtle forms of silencing or side-lining. Drawing on interviews with Ndebele-speakers from the Matabeleland region, Reim (Chapter 2) shows how many people in these regions feel alienated from Zimbabwe’s official national narrative. Importantly, this is linked to the “silencing” of a period of violent state repression that occurred in these regions in the immediate post-independence period. At the same time, it referred to negative depictions of the pre-colonial Ndebele State as well as a liberation narrative that privileged the contribution of the current ruling party (ZANU-PF) over that of the “other” liberation movement (ZAPU), to which most freedom fighters from the Matabeleland region had belonged.

In chapter 3, Robinson speaks of the South African youth and shows how the inclusion of “Coloured” identity within a wider political understanding of “Black” identity as synonymous with “historically oppressed” means that a distinctive “Coloured” identity is effectively excluded from the national narrative. She describes it as a process of state-sponsored “subsuming” of a minority group. Furthermore, Reim and Robinson show that feelings of alienation from national narratives are tied to a broader sense of rejection from South African and Zimbabwean national identities. However, reactions to such

alienating narratives differ. On the one hand, both chapters find that some of the young people interviewed expressed a sense of disengagement or disinterest in learning “their”

country's history. On the other hand, some informants actively engaged in reclaiming or unburying history. In Reim's study on Matabeleland, some of those engaged in producing historical counter-narratives sought to reinscribe Matabeleland within the Zimbabwean nation; others, however, sought to crystallize a separate Ndebele history and identity in ways that feed into claims for separate nationhood.

The second part of the book explores how the production of Others is rooted in political assumptions about the threats to social disorder, and states' attempts to protect and promote the morality and the dignity of the "good" subjects. It examines two institutions that are heavily regulated by the state: labour and family, respectively in Malta and in France.

In chapter 4, Puygrenier discusses how some sub-Saharan asylum seekers who reached the island of Malta on the border of Europe were prosecuted for "leading an idle and vagrant life" in a surprising revival of the old Victorian provision used to regulate the roaming presences in the port region. Drawing on the comparison of old and new "vagabonds" in Malta, Puygrenier argues that othering is intricately bound up with state authorities' attempts to regulate production and public space and their claims to determine what constitutes respectable employment and activities at a given time.

Pursuing the reflection on the articulation between othering and the promotion of social order, Chabanel, in chapter 5, focuses on the recommendations issued by the French National Consultative Committee on Ethics to advise the government on reproductive matters. Focusing on the designation of gestational carriers as "surrogate mothers" (*mères porteuses*), Chabanel highlights the discursive production of other mothers (both gestational carriers and the women who turn to their services) seen as disrupting traditional motherhood. In this instance of what Chabanel calls an "epistemic injustice", the denunciation of these new Others at the margins of law and order turns out to immediately serve a discourse on the proper or conventional practices people are expected to embrace. In both chapters, Others appear as unruly subjects, created by state institutions as a way of enforcing the activities and behaviours of the "normal" or "honest" individuals; the latter and the former are the two sides of the same coin. Others, whether women who engage in surrogacy or migrants who are undocumented are ultimately charged with a defining power: they are instrumental in drawing the contours of the community of "good" subjects. Othering, in this perspective, is inseparable from the very act of governing populations.

Part 3 focuses on gatekeeping and the subordination of the Other through public welfare delivery. This part offers views of the ways in which othering occurs in state institutions renowned for their "caring" for the "vulnerable" (i.e., the sick, the elderly, and children) through the school system in South Africa (Chapter 6) and the health and elderly

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care system in France (Chapter 7). Both present themselves as state institutions in which othering is less likely to occur. While the South African school system was historically segregated, it became centrally invested with the mandate of “redress” and “transformation” for the benefit of formerly disenfranchised groups under the democratic dispensation.

Similarly, in the management of its employees, the French public system aims to embody a “republican” ideal associated with values such as meritocracy and impartiality, which take on heightened significance when state work involves care work. The two authors demonstrate how these features counterintuitively inform processes of othering directed at subgroups of intra- and international migrants, by investigating the inner workings of the institutions in relation to national as well as metropolitan contexts that concentrate immigrant populations, economic opportunities, and state resources. They pay attention to historical and structural dynamics, legal and policy frameworks, policy instruments, as well as everyday professional practices of state agents in (re)producing unequal treatment toward specific Others that generate material and subjective processes of exclusion, subordination, and stigmatisation.

In chapter 6, Jeanne Bouyat discusses the imperatives of the post-apartheid school system to ensure socio-historical justice for the formerly oppressed in South Africa and highlights the intensification of prevalent and state-sponsored xenophobia. This translates into practices of gatekeeping and criminalisation directed at foreign Others at school and the resultant effect on access to education. Marine Haddad shows in Chapter 7 how the legacy of colonial labour immigration schemes and a colourblind ideology that underpins public hiring in France (re)produce a segmented public job market, in which French Caribbean women are relegated to subordinate positions. Their “dirty work” at hospitals and nursing homes puts them in direct contact with patients, which exposes them to racist interactions that they tend to minimise. Both Chapters 6 and 7 appropriate the concept of institutional racism to make sense of multi-level, heterogeneous processes of state othering. Marine Haddad incorporates institutional racism to reveal how racism intersects with class, gender, and migration trajectories to produce segmentation within citizenship. Jeanne Bouyat’s chapter contributes to the application of theoretical and methodological frameworks to investigate state othering based on multiple intertwined criteria or on the distinctive salience of a line of division. She expands on institutional racism by explaining how institutional xenophobia fuels the national/non-national divide in the post-apartheid school.

Part 4 contests Othering, neoliberal politics of recognition, and assignment of alterity. The authors expand on the discussion on recognition and care by analysing how measures

designed to counter othering can ultimately end up reinforcing these dynamics. Focusing on European policies (Chapter 8) and on the French asylum administration (Chapter 9), both chapters highlight how seemingly protective measures in asylum policies actually contribute to creating ambiguous Others in the context of a restrictive control of human mobility. In Chapter 8, Le Bellec argues that it is important, when analysing the recognition of LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers in European migration policies, to never view this “new” form of protection in isolation from the broader political context of migration. She shows how discourses of recognition can feed the dynamics of othering. Based on interviews with actors involved in LGBTIQ+ asylum policies at the EU level and on document analysis, the chapter shows how the recent progressive development of European asylum policies has perpetuated the assignment of LGBTIQ+ groups to essentialised otherness.

In chapter 9, Maxime Maréchal questions the provision of language interpreters as a guarantee of procedural equality. Based on interviews with professional interpreters and on archival analysis, the chapter focuses on the French asylum adjudication body, to show that interpreters are assigned to an ambivalent function. In a context of institutionalised suspicion, the neutrality of interpreters is threatened by their own migratory background and their key role in inquisitorial asylum interviews. They appear as internal Others who adopt multiple positions toward claimants and the institution, thus ambiguously participating in the constitution of otherness that is at the core of the administrative decision.

## Conclusion

*States and the Making of Others* make a significant contribution to discussions on statehood, identity, and power by foregrounding the role of state institutions in the creation of social hierarchies. The book’s interdisciplinary approach, by incorporating insights from sociology, anthropology, and political science, enriches its analysis, making it accessible to readers from various academic backgrounds. However, the comparative scope sometimes falls short of addressing local complexities. Some chapters, for instance, highlight distinctions between Southern Africa and Western Europe without fully accounting for unique historical and cultural nuances that might influence state practices differently. Additionally, while the theoretical foundations are robust, the language can be dense, potentially limiting accessibility for readers unfamiliar with specialised sociological or political terminology. Despite these limitations, the book succeeds in offering a compelling critique of state institutions and their role in perpetuating social inequalities. It challenges readers to

question the neutrality of public institutions and to consider how these bodies might be transformed to better serve all citizens, rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies. While challenging in parts, the volume is essential reading for those interested in social justice, state-building, and institutional reform. The book does not only enrich the academic discourse on othering but also invites policymakers and activists to reconsider how state practices might be reoriented to promote inclusivity and equality.