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RETHINKING STRANGENESS: FROM STRUCTURES IN SPACE TO DISCOURSES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Jeffrey C. Alexander

ABSTRACT Simmel develops his concept of the stranger in an overly structural and reductionist manner. Contrary to Simmel's suggestion, there is an indeterminate relation between structural exclusion and the attribution of strangeness. After showing that 'the stranger' must be rethought in a cultural-sociological way, this essay demonstrates an alternative approach. Articulating a 'discourse' that structures Western projections of strangeness, I explore its relation to colonialism, racial and class domination, and national conflict in modern Western history. This approach suggests an alternative, not only to Simmel but to Merton's and Coser's earlier structural-functional reconceptualization of stranger theory.

KEYWORDS culture • exclusion • Simmel • social structure • stranger

Guy Andre Javitary, a 32-year-old construction worker, left his apartment at 2 p.m. one recent day to look for jobs. By the time he returned early that evening, he had been stopped six times on the streets and strip-searched once by police. Why did authorities single out this law-abiding French citizen for scrutiny? There's only one reason: Javitary has dark skin. And these days in France, people with dark skin are suspected of being Islamic fundamentalists and, hence, possible terrorists . . . With no apologies, the police are focusing on dark-skinned people. And the random checks, sharply criticized by human rights groups, reflect a deeper French antipathy toward Muslims who insist on maintaining their cultural and theological traditions rather than assimilating French values and culture. 'When the police see me, they just see a dark-skinned man, not a Frenchman,' said Javitary, who was born in Martinique and

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who has been 'controlled,' as the police call it, dozens of times in recent weeks. ('Crackdown by Color in France', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 1994, A1)

Before rethinking the stranger, we must first acknowledge the originality of Simmel's concept vis-à-vis other, seemingly comparable ideas which we have inherited from the classical tradition. The 'stranger' (Simmel, 1950: 402–7) is very different from the economically disadvantaged or exploited class, the theoretical category for those impoverished by an impersonal economic order and its elite that Marx took to be the paradigmatic asymmetrical relationship in capitalist society. It is this theoretical category upon which contemporary studies of stratification have continued to concentrate to this day, even if they have defined class more by market position than productive mode. Nor can the 'stranger' be seen as synonymous with the 'dominated', administratively subordinated, politically disenfranchised position that Weber explored in his theory of authority. Simmel's category also differs fundamentally from the idea of the egoist, the anomic, and the criminal, by which Durkheim represented inversions of solidarity in the structural theory of his early and middle years. Finally, the 'stranger' is not the deviant of classical functionalist theory (e.g. Best, 2004) that Parsons described before he developed the much more promising theory of societal inclusion – and, by implication, exclusion – in his later years.

THE 'STRANGER' AND OTHER CLASSICAL TROPES

What makes Simmel's theory fundamentally different from these others? In the first place, he is talking about a categorically constructed otherness – constructed in the contemporary cultural and cognitive sense (e.g. Seidman, 2003) – rather than about some natural condition. Despite the reservations I will express below, it is important to note how vital the phenomenological and hermeneutical dimension is to Simmel's idea of what the stranger is about. Simmel insists that the stranger is understood and experienced as in, but not entirely of, his society. This distinguishes the stranger from other classical categories because Simmel seeks more subtle degrees of differentiation and discrimination. The stranger is not experienced by the host society simply as lower or excluded; rather, she is sensed to be different in some more fundamental way, even while she remains in some important sense a member of the wider society itself. With the stranger, then, Simmel's idea of negation becomes more closely connected with postmodern understandings of otherness. Because it is more cultural and more complex than the negative categories of classical work, it is more useful for us to think with today. It also tells us more about the society in which we live.

Yet, if Simmel discovered this new and fundamentally important social category, he was not, I will argue, entirely successful either in defining its qualities or isolating its causes. After revisiting Simmel's own originating

essay, and raising some theoretical questions about it, I will look at some empirical examples of strangeness as they have been interpreted by contemporary humanistic and social scientific scholars. I will then turn to Lewis Coser's 'The Stranger in the Academy' (Coser, 1965 [1958]), an effort to apply Simmel's model to Simmel himself that appeared almost half a century ago. In order to evaluate this application, and throw more light on the limitations of Simmel's earlier exemplar, I will examine its capacity to explain the unnerving historical document that Coser attached to his publication: the virulently anti-Semitic evaluation of Simmel made by one Dietrich Schaefer, an outside expert to whom the Baden Kultministerium turned in considering Simmel for a chair in philosophy at Heidelberg in 1908, almost another half century before.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL REDUCTION

Today we all 'know' what the concept, stranger, suggests, and common sense knowledge was no doubt just as perspicacious during the period when Simmel himself wrote. Weber, however, warned us against taking the common sense understanding of actors as our own. Indeed, while Simmel no doubt relied on such common social understanding when he formulated his model, one could argue that he relied on it too much.

For the paradox of Simmel's sociological discussion is that, despite his sensitivity to the subtle framing of strangeness, he spends very little time exploring the *meaning* of 'stranger' in contemporary German or more broadly western European culture. He does not undertake a hermeneutic investigation of what Dilthey would have called the *Objectif Geist*, or what we today would call 'cultural structures' (Alexander, 2003) – the codes, narratives, and tropes that create the background understandings from which an idea like strangeness emerges and within which it continues to be reproduced.

Simmel (1950: 403) comes close to such an interpretive approach in the linguistic aside he makes, early in the essay, to the effect that the stranger 'is no "owner of soil" ', adding that he means 'soil not only in the physical, but also in the figurative sense of a life substance which is fixed, if not in a point in space, at least in an ideal point of the social environment'. This aside is revealing. As I will suggest below, it is not an objective position in physical or social space but an interpretive position vis-à-vis the 'social ideal' that is the critical factor in creating the stranger in society.

Yet, Simmel does not develop the kind of culturally mediated approach that this illuminating reference to the 'figurative' suggests. Instead, he confines himself to the restrictive task that occupies so much of his formal sociology. He explores the stranger as a social status produced by so-called structural forces, focusing almost exclusively on 'determinate' forces of a spatial and ecological kind. The stranger, Simmel (1950: 404) writes, results

from 'a particular structure composed of distance and nearness'. Vis-à-vis the host society, the status of stranger is determined by the intersection of two physical positions – 'the liberation from every given point in space' and the 'fixation at such a point' (Simmel, 1950: 402). Simmel elaborates this spatial paradox in a manner that suggests the subjective ambiguity it creates. Distance means that 'he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near' (ibid.). Simmel insists that the stranger's identity in his own particular group is determined in a similarly objectified way: 'He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group *whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries*' (ibid., emphasis added). For Simmel, in other words, it is a social structural status in the quasi-physical sense of that idea that determines the orientation adopted by members of the host society.

How do these external, objective exigencies lead to strangeness? They force members of the host society to assume toward the outsider an abstract, generalizing point of view: 'The proportion of nearness remoteness,' writes Simmel (1950: 406), in a manner that emphasizes his sense of the materiality he imputes to cause, 'finds practical expression in the more abstract nature of the relation to him'. The distinctive spatial connection produces a distinctive subjective orientation, one that contrasts with other spatial connections and the orientations they produce: 'With the stranger one has only certain more general qualities in common, whereas the relation to more organically connected persons is based on the commonness of specific differences from merely general features' (ibid.). The causal chain goes from social structure to subjective abstraction to negative emotional feelings: 'Because the common features are general, they add . . . an element of coolness' (ibid.).

What exactly does Simmel mean when he associates stranger status with generality and commonality, rather than with specificity and difference? By emphasizing 'nearness', Simmel has insisted that the stranger is not entirely a distant object. Evidently, he believes that some basic sense of connection is established with the host group because the stranger is not only far but near. He emphasizes that the occupant of this status is also involved in 'very positive social relation[s]' with the host society, e.g. the merchant who mediates between foreign markets and domestic trade. Nearness is also important for Simmel's rhetorical interests, for it allows him to be ironical in his typically postmodern way. He (1950: 402) goes so far as to suggest, indeed, that being a stranger 'is a specific form of interaction' that is 'an element of the group itself'. Nonetheless, Simmel suggests that these functionally important activities remain marginalized. The host group's orientations are generalized and abstract, and hence cool in their tone.

While this reasoning is consistent with the Romantic notion of expressive individualism within which Simmel worked, one is entitled to ask why generality and abstraction necessarily imply negative judgment and feelings.

Why does the physical position of being near yet far seem strange rather than ominous, frightening, or mysteriously attractive? The answer is that for Simmel, genuine feelings of warmth and attachment can be formed only if there exists a concrete rather than abstract relation between the knower and the known, only, that is, if one views the other as a unique rather than representative human being. Concrete ties cannot be produced with one who is 'also far'. In their absence, even if abstraction and generality produce ideas about common humanity, feelings of real connectedness cannot be formed. Thus, 'the stranger is close to us', Simmel regretfully observes, only 'insofar as we feel between him and ourselves *common* features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature' (1950: 406, emphasis added).

One comes back again to the central question. If such notions of common humanity do exist, might they not actually be grounds for acceptance rather than for strangeness? Simmel strongly disagrees, for he assumes an intrinsic connection between abstraction and alienation. The 'extraordinary and basic preponderance' of common orientations 'over the *individual* elements that are exclusive with [a] particular relationship,' he writes (*ibid.*, emphasis added), prevents any real knowledge: 'He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people' (*ibid.*).

THE INDETERMINATE RELATION OF STRUCTURE AND ORIENTATION

In what follows I take issue with Simmel's emphasis on structural status, with the notion that the meaning of strangeness reflects spatial position and behavioral relation. I will suggest, instead, that to understand strangeness we must focus on the cultural interpretation of social structures and the categories within which these active interventions are made.¹ When we do so, we will see that it is the construction of difference, not commonality, that makes potentially marginal groups into dangerous ones that are strange.

To be sure, one can think of many groups who seem to be the strangers Simmel describes. Jewish bankers in medieval France performed functions that others either could not or would not do; they were never full citizens, but they were often protected subjects of the king. Middle-class black Americans who lived in the northern United States before World War I served whites in roles like barber and tailor, were well respected professionally, and lived in integrated residential settings. Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian immigrants in California have worked in 'middle-men' positions for more than a century, as did southern European immigrants in the American Midwest and the Irish in the Northeast. Indian immigrants have formed the merchant class in various parts of Africa. When German and Austrian Jews poured into the US during the late 1930s, they worked as writers, editors, translators, and, of course, as professors.

These illustrations, however, raise doubts, both about Simmel's structural approach and the evaluative tone this status is supposed to imply. It would seem that virtually every excluded group has, at some point in its career, performed economic or political roles that could be interpreted as placing them 'in but not of' their societies. This very universality, I think, makes for questionable explanatory value. On the one hand, members of groups never convicted of strangeness, such as Protestant English immigrants to Massachusetts Bay Colony in the first half of the 17th century, were forced to undergo years of indentured servitude before they were allowed to assume positions as equal workers and citizens. Structural marginality, in other words, need not be accompanied by strangeness. On the other hand, groups who were indelibly tabooed by otherness can be said to have played functionally indispensable roles. Would anyone argue, for example, that black slavery was not essential to the plantation economy of the US? Evidently, functional importance does not necessarily produce abstract feelings of commonality. When they worked as slaves, black Americans were despised, categorized by whites as closer to animals than to human beings. It was not commonality and abstractness that accompanied this functional importance, but a sense of extraordinary and fundamental difference, illustrated with concrete images of a racist kind. Today, even when American blacks have achieved middle-class status and often work closely with whites, they are integrated neither residentially nor through marriage into the core of American society, and their common humanity remains suspect by many Americans, if not a majority.

It is illustrative to note how different was the experience of immigrants who fled Europe in the 1930s. As historical studies such as H. Stuart Hughes' *The Sea Change* (1975) indicate, and personal memoirs such as Lewis Coser's (1993) also attest, this group's initial marginality was often quickly converted into high status positions. Despite inevitable discomforts, the horrifying backdrop of war and persecution to which these Jewish northern Europeans were subject created a common humanity between these strangers and their American host communities that was pronounced and profound. Americans who never countered these immigrants as concrete human beings experienced a symbolic identification with them that stimulated feelings of generosity, warmth, and concern. These were not the only reactions, of course. Nativistic xenophobia about '100 per cent Americanism' remained, and became stronger soon after the war. Nonetheless, this case, as well as the others I have mentioned, suggests that the strict relationship between structural position, cultural abstraction, and emotional hostility cannot be maintained.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

The alternative I have in mind is straightforward. It is a question of culture. Feelings of strangeness towards others are produced by the active

employment of distinctive standards of interpretation. These standards are polarized, dichotomous symbolic structures that draw from a centuries old discourse (Alexander, 1993, 2003) about what kinds of persons are in and out, about the qualities and feelings that are deserving of honor and liberty versus those that are polluted and need to be repressed. The objects of the negative, polluting side of this discourse are often functional intermediaries or outgroups, rarely those who are in the highest stratum of society. But to many intermediate level groups the truly denigrating forms of this discourse are not applied, and there are some groups ranking relatively high in the social structure to whom they are. It is not structural position per se, but rather its active interpretation and reconstruction in terms of polluted representations, that leads the occupants of this status to assume a strangeness in the core group's eyes. Once they are so labeled and delegitimated, in fact, their social position is often altered to be more congruent with their cultural status.²

As Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) documented in a particularly powerful manner, the physical segregation of American blacks did not precede white people's cultural construction of their strangeness. To the contrary, for decades before World War I, African Americans lived amidst white populations and often, as I earlier suggested, worked among them and with them as well. However, because Northern whites shared the nation's racist culture, when faced with the massive postwar black immigration they quickly moved to take away this opportunity to live with whites in a dispersed and heterogeneous way. Blacks were strictly segregated, and what became known as the ghetto was born. Deeply entrenched feelings of strangeness toward black people had inspired political and economic actions, which in turn created separate ecological positions, a separation that prevented economic mobility and reinforced the culture of racism.

If we are really to understand what makes the stranger, we must look more closely at the role that such an active intervention of culture plays. When we do, we observe something which, while at first glance tautological, actually opens our investigation of strangeness to causal processes of an entirely different kind. We discover that the employment of the *language* of strangeness creates the strangeness of a status, not the other way around. This is not to deny that many and various social structural pressures come into play. Imperialism may lead to the demand for rationalizing ideology; immigration may lead to the need to defend jobs; economic impoverishment may lead to renewed class conflict; military defeat or political instability may provide opportunities for new social actors to take power. None of these factors, however, can, in and of themselves, specify who will be constructed as strange, or how.

Not only the objective but the subjective status of core groups (Alexander, 1988) must be challenged for strangeness to be assigned; only then, if fear becomes subjective, will polarizing categories be applied. Core

groups do not feel frightened by every entering or potentially marginal group. Do they share race, religion, language, or ethnic origin? If these primordial qualities overlap significantly with the core group's own, the hosts will be more inclined to believe that the newcomers are not actually strange after all. As a result, they will not need to defend themselves by drawing upon the categories of pollution that members of civil society always find close at hand.

Insofar as such purportedly primordial qualities do not overlap, and certainly there is no exact structural calculus for predicting when they do and do not, these distancing categories come more decisively into play. The possibility of strangeness now becomes the palpable certainty of it; fear of outsiders now seems to be based on reality. The decisive factor is cultural action. Groups are *made* strange by the active intervention of interpreting subjects. Challenged by objective possibilities and frightened by subjective threats, intellectuals, political leaders, and ordinary persons alike move to create a division between 'us' and 'them'.³ They desire to create boundaries, to be separated from these others (cf. Erikson, 1966). But, contrary to the more middle-period Durkheimianism of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982), those who create social divisions are not preserving community simply for community's sake, much less for some status interest, if that term is interpreted in the instrumental and egoistic sense. Core groups act to create social boundaries that are 'always already' there. Drawing upon long-standing symbolic structures, they experience certain groups as strange and frightening. It is to protect themselves against those who have been so constructed that they draw the wagons around.

FORMS OF STRANGENESS AND THE DISCOURSE OF REPRESSION

Let me illustrate this revision of Simmel's structural perspective with some empirical illustrations of how interpretive categories about strangeness come into play.⁴

Colonial domination

On the first page of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, he reminds us of precisely the general theoretical point I have been trying to make. 'The Orient,' he writes (1978: 1), 'is not only adjacent to Europe' physically, but it is 'its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.' Despite its physical proximity and the frequency of commercial interaction, 'the Orient is not an inert fact of nature,' Said insists; 'it is not merely *there*' (1978: 4, original emphasis).

Men make their own history . . . and extend it to geography . . . The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West. (1978: 5)

When we look at the reconstruction Said makes of orientalist ideas themselves – an impressively hermeneutical excursion that illuminates a culture structure extending over four centuries – we see the familiar polarities between reason and irrationality, autonomy and dependence, honor and self-interest, conscience and greed, equality and hierarchy that have been used time and again to establish the strangeness of those who are unfit to enter into civil society. One small example must suffice. Between 1882, when England first occupied Egypt and put an end to the nationalist rebellion of Colonel Arbi, and 1907, England's colonial administrator was Evelyn Baring. After his retirement, this former official, now the honorary Lord Cromer, published his thoughts about who his former subjects really were and why they had merited the repression of British rule.⁵ Whereas Westerners are 'conscientious' and motivated by 'unselfish conduct,' Lord Cromer writes, he himself has found the Oriental to be 'devoid of energy and initiative' and 'lethargic and suspicious'. It is self-evident, according to Lord Cromer, that the European is a 'close reasoner', 'sceptical', bound by 'truth', 'principle', and a 'cosmopolitan allegiance'. By contrast, he found those whom the European was colonizing to be exactly the opposite. For the Egyptian, 'accuracy is abhorrent'; his mind 'easily degenerates into untruthfulness'; it is 'wanting in lucidity' and 'symmetry' and is constricted by 'narrow nationalism'. Is it any wonder that these 'subject races' need to be colonized, and that the colonizer must make every effort, through both force and persuasion, to create 'a stronger bond of union between the rulers and the ruled'?

Racial domination

If any group in America can be seen as a structurally produced 'stranger' community, it would be ghetto blacks, not only economically degraded by generations of poverty but physically separated from whites in different economic classes. The streets of the transitional neighborhoods that border America's urban ghettos are viewed by many social scientists, in fact, as paradigmatic arenas for the interplay of structural forces. City streets seem like merely physical spaces framing impersonal interactions, an objectification that is underlined by the racial and class structuring of underclass life. In his ethnographic study of public behavior in such transitional neighborhoods, Elijah Anderson challenges this perspective. His findings vividly demonstrate how categories of meaning create strangeness even in the most objectively degraded arenas of human life.

Much as Said opened his work, Anderson begins his pivotal chapter, 'Street Etiquette and Street Wisdom', by attacking the notion that space has a merely physical status. Evoking such a determinist perspective, he takes a hypothetical first look at the streets in 'Village', the transitional town that borders the underclass ghetto, 'Norton'.

Usually pedestrians can walk there undisturbed. Often they seem peaceful. Always they have an elegant air, with mature trees, wrought-iron fences, and

solid architecture reminiscent of prewar comfort and ease. (Anderson, 1990: 207)

However, this physical appearance, and these behavioral facts, are not reflected in the subjective understandings of Village inhabitants themselves. 'In the minds of current residents,' Anderson discovered (*ibid.*), 'the streets are dangerous and volatile.' When the middle-class white residents of Village walk their streets, they encounter strangers of whom they are afraid. In part, Anderson acknowledges, this fear is based on objective experience with reality.

Muggings occur with some regularity. Cars are broken into for tape decks and other valuables. Occasionally people suffer seemingly meaningless verbal or even physical assaults. (*ibid.*)

For these objective reasons, Village residents 'know they should distrust' (*ibid.*) some of the people they meet in the streets. At the same time, Anderson insists, such distrust does not emerge automatically, as a reflection of actual experiences, impersonal social forces, or physical space. To the contrary, he suggests, developing trust 'requires tremendous energy' (*ibid.*). When it is achieved, moreover, it goes way beyond actual experiences to cover whole categories of people.

Anderson (1990: 208) closely studied the fleeting public interactions that occurred between whites and ghetto blacks, the 'few crucial seconds [in which] people are conditioned to rapid scrutiny of the looks, speech, public behavior, gender, and color of those sharing the environment'. Finding interpretive action everywhere at work, he focused on the cultural categories within which they were framed. 'Public awareness is color-coded,' Anderson observes (*ibid.*): 'Simplistic racial interpretation . . . creates a "we/they" dichotomy between whites and blacks.'

White skin denotes civility, law-abidingness, and trustworthiness, while black skin is strongly associated with poverty, crime, incivility, and distrust. (*ibid.*)

The codes that regulate street life, in other words, connect color to the discursive categories of civil society, to self-control versus the lack of it, to respect for others versus aggression, to the ability to be rational that creates trust and vice versa. These categories are not merely cognitive; their negative sides are polluting. The people to whom they apply must be kept at bay. Anderson (1990: 216) shows that 'the collective definitions of "safe", "harmless", "trustworthy", "bad", "dangerous", and "hostile" become part of the Village perspective'. He documents how 'reports of personal experiences, including "close calls" and "horror stories", initiate and affirm neighborhood communion'. It is a cultural 'perspective,' he insists, not the objective fact of spatial position itself, that 'creates social distance'. The end result, of course, looks deceptively the same. Living in but not of white society, young black men are strangers who inspire decidedly cool emotions in the whites they meet.

An unknown young black male is readily deferred to. If he asks for anything, he must be handled quickly and summarily. If he is persistent, help must be summoned. (Anderson, 1990: 208)

Class domination

Not only races and civilizations, but rival social classes and nations have been interpreted as strangers to each other for the same reasons and with similar effects. Since the beginning of industrial societies, for example, conservatives have tried to legitimate efforts to block egalitarian social movements by generating public alarm about 'the Red scare'. They have done so by making efforts to link manual workers, socialist and communist leaders, radical intellectuals and students, and middle-class muckrakers to the same polluted categories that Said and Anderson evoke. The 1848 revolutionary uprising in France, for example, increased the size of the electorate from a quarter million to more than 10 million, of whom three-quarters were peasants and a good third illiterate. While 'Republicans' dominated the Provisional Government, self-proclaimed socialists were represented as well. A massive backlash against the reforms emerged, and harsh repression followed the victory of the right. Despite the fact that these dramatic moves were highly polarizing, they gained significant public support, so much so that a long period of relative stability followed under the rule of Napoleon III. One reason for the right's success in countering the leftward surge was that it succeeded in categorizing the democratic forces as enemies of civilization. The familiar negative categories are strikingly employed, for example, in the call to arms issued by a rightist named Henri Wallon, in May, 1849.

A red is not a man, he is a red. . . . He is not a moral, intelligent, and free being like you or me . . . He is a fallen and degenerate man. His face is marked by signs of that fall. A beaten appearance, brutalized . . . eyes as colorless as those of a pig . . . the mouth as mute and senseless as that of an ass . . . The 'dividers' have written on their faces the stupidity of the doctrines and ideas by which they live. (quoted in Goubert, 1988: 248)

National conflict

Relations among nations have been distorted in similar ways. Richard Kuisel, for example, has documented the extraordinarily stable set of categories that have mediated French perceptions of the United States. The emergence of America as a major industrial nation during the interwar years stimulated many influential French intellectuals to formulate their 'national identity. . . through negation, by establishing a counter-identity, by constructing a "we"/"them" dichotomy' (Kuisel, 1993: 6).⁶

Compared to the putative maturity of the French, for example, Americans were defined as *les grands enfants* (big children) who represented the 'new barbarism'. In contrast with French *civilisation* and its emphasis on *honneur*, Americans were portrayed as 'ignorant manipulators', or as

'comfortable brutes' who resembled animals more than humans. 'What strikes the European traveler' in America, Duhamel wrote in 1931, 'is the progressive approximation of human life to what we know of the way of life of insects.' As such, Americans were not believed to possess the qualities necessary for democratic society. Duhamel notes, for example, 'the same effacement of the individual, the same progressive reduction and unification of social types . . . the same submission of every one to those obscure exigencies of the hive or of the anthill'. At the same time, American civilization, or the lack of it, was likened to a machine. The 'box-like skyscrapers', the 'over-sized cities', the thirst for material goods – all these had made America into a 'technicized horror of inhuman efficiency'.

Americans were being *made* strange to the French. In the earlier years of the 20th century, this strangeness 'explained' how Americans could be so dominated by capitalism, for in the eyes of both the radical French left and the religious French right, Americans were merely 'happy slaves'. In mid-century, the same categories were employed to warn against the imminent 'American conquest'. Because Americans had so often been *conceived* as deprived of the rational and human qualities necessary for civil life, it was difficult for postwar French people to welcome American soldiers, administrators, businessmen, and intellectuals as either liberators or guides. Their presence, rather, indicated an incipient authoritarianism inimical to the French way of life. In short, Americans were 'occupiers' (32); as such, they should be systematically removed. Only in the late 1960s, with the emergence of the new youth culture and fundamental changes in the social structure of France itself, did such categorical representations begin to change. America began to seem more capable of generating an active civic life, and Americans were more frequently seen as attractive than strange.

WAS SIMMEL 'STRANGE'?: ANTI-SEMITISM VERSUS SOCIOLOGY

In 1908 Simmel was considered for a Chair in Philosophy at Heidelberg University. His failure to win the position can be linked, in part at least, to the influence of anti-Semitism at the highest levels of the German university life. This is well illustrated in the 1908 letter of evaluation provided by Dietrich Schaefer to which I referred in my introduction above. Schaefer concentrated on the unconventional elements in Simmel's academic profile, particularly on the enormously popular public lectures he gave in Berlin, upon which many of his published essays were based. Constructing the man, the lectures, and the audience in patterns that are by now familiar dichotomies, Schaefer demonstrated that Simmel was a stranger in the German university system and did not deserve inclusion at the highest levels of the nation's academic life.

Fifty years later, in an article published in the *American Journal of*

Sociology, Lewis Coser looked back at this historical incident. While acknowledging Simmel's intellectual unconventionality and the iconoclasm of his popular lecturing style, Coser suggested that there was a sociological explanation for the attribution of strangeness to him, and he used as his model Simmel's own theory. Coser suggested that the social structures that had impinged on Simmel had made it impossible for him to conform to the typical norms of German academic life. Without denying that there are both empirical and theoretical grounds for Coser's explanation, I wish to suggest, nonetheless, that this social structural argument does not go far enough. The interpretation of cultural structures is just as important for explaining Simmel's strangeness as the pact of structures of a more material kind.

Indeed, if we look closely at Coser's own 'social' explanation, we can see it as implicitly offering an interpretation of Simmel in cultural terms. The value-laden terms Coser employs to characterize Simmel offer a purging antidote to the repressive moral discourse that Simmel's anti-Semitic critics applied. Coser emphasizes the role of external social structures on Simmel, yet this emphasis allows him to portray Simmel as a rational actor, not a strange one. Simmel's unconventional behavior was a rational response to circumstances. Any other German academic would have behaved in the same way. Simmel was not strange, therefore, and his anti-Semitic critics were wrong to say so. He was perfectly capable of participating fully in German civil life.

Professor Schaefer employs dichotomous moral codes to characterize both himself and Simmel. He began his confidential letter to the Baden *Kulturminister* by underlining his openness and universalism, his determination to 'express my opinion about Professor Simmel quite frankly'.⁷ Noting that Simmel was a 'dyed-in-the-wool Israelite, in his outward appearance, in his bearing, and in his manner of thinking', Schaefer argues, nonetheless, that 'it is not necessary to adduce this fact' to explain why Simmel had thus far been denied promotion. The reasons, rather, have to do with Simmel's actual qualities of mind. The qualities to which Schaefer points turn out to bear striking similarities to anti-Semitic stereotypes about the Jewish mind.

Schaefer devotes the heart of his letter to explaining why Simmel's lectures show him to be intellectually unqualified, despite their being 'well-attended . . . well rounded, succinct, and polished'. In fact, Schaefer writes, these lectures actually offer 'little material' of a scholarly kind. This damning fact is camouflaged only because Simmel 'speaks exceedingly slowly, by dribs and drabs' and because 'he spices his words with *clever* sayings'. Simmel's lecture halls are filled to brimming because 'these features are very much appreciated by *certain* categories of students'. Using the lecture audience as an empirical reference point, Schaefer proceeds to analogize the polluted categories of Simmel, Israelite thinker, and superficial lecturer with persons and regions who are symbolically degraded in ways he assumes the readers of his letter will tacitly understand. He notes, for example, that 'the

ladies constitute a very large portion' of Simmel's audience and that there is 'an extraordinarily numerous contingent of the *oriental* world' who are 'still *flooding* in semester after semester from the countries to the East'. Simmel's 'whole manner,' Schaefer claims, 'is in tune with' the 'orientation and taste' of these groups, who demand '*titillating* stimulation or *volatile* intellectual pleasure'. Here Schaefer contaminates Simmel by metonymically associating him with sexual desires that civilized persons should normally repress.

These associations make it impossible for Simmel's intellectual qualities to be conceived in anything other than a negative way. Rather than 'solid and systematic thinking', Simmel operates more by 'bias' and 'wit', and, indeed, even by 'pseudo-wit'. Rather than ideas that 'lay foundations and build up', Simmel's 'undermine and negate'. Rather than being motivated by 'scholarly zeal', Simmel is propelled by 'a thirst for notoriety'. In short, Simmel is strange. The 'world view and philosophy of life which Simmel represents,' Schaefer concludes, are 'only too obviously different from our German Christian-classical education.' This education, and Germany and Christianity more generally, must be protected. Schaefer's conclusion follows logically from these polluting constructions: 'There are more desirable . . . occupants for Heidelberg's second chair.'

In Coser's later argument, it is notable that he actually accepts some of the bare bones empirical phenomena that Schaefer describes. He categorizes them, however, in sharply contrasting ways. The first sentence of his concluding paragraph illustrates this approach in a particularly revealing way.

Simmel, the marginal man, the stranger, presented his academic peers not with a methodical and painstakingly elaborate system, but a series of often-disorderly insights, testifying to amazing powers of perception. (Coser, 1965: 36-7)

Following the social structural emphasis of Simmel himself, Coser emphasizes the rational basis for Simmel's unconventional style. Given his subordinate position in the German university and the opportunity structures available to him, Coser tells us, it should not seem surprising that Simmel chose to offer lectures that were open to the paying public rather than academic seminars, and general intellectual essays rather than systematic philosophy, for 'while the popular teacher may incur the displeasure of peers, he may in exchange gain the approval of other role partners, his lecture public or audience'.

Do we not have here some warranty to assume that, hurt and rebuffed as he may have been by the lack of recognition within the academy, Simmel came to rely increasingly on the approval of his lecture audience and hence to accentuate in his written style as well as in his oral delivery those characteristics that brought applause? (Coser, 1965: 34)

Yet, while Coser believes Simmel's choice was an eminently sensible one, he (Coser, 1965: 33) also believes it to have been 'a major structural

basis for the possible disturbance' of the 'stable role-set' expected of German university scholars. The problem is that an audience, as compared to seminar students, 'does not necessarily judge the lecturer in terms of his systematic and methodological gathering of evidence and his disciplined pursuit of painstaking research'. Instead, the lecturer is judged by 'the brilliance of his performance, the novelty of his ideas, and the ability to fascinate' (*ibid.*). My argument is that, by emphasizing social structure as cause, Coser is not only making an empirical-theoretical claim; he is, at the same time, challenging the stereotyped categories of degradation that were used to justify Simmel's subordination. At the same time, he is using the antonyms of these categories to supply Simmel with more praiseworthy qualities in turn. In fact, Coser suggests not only that Simmel's desire to lecture was rational – a key evaluative term in discursive conflicts over strangeness – but that his lecturing style must be seen not as self-indulgent or ostentatious, but as an example of conscientiousness. 'All contemporary accounts' of his lecturing, Coser (1965: 33) writes, 'agree that Simmel lived up to such audience expectations superlatively.'

In sustaining this counter-discourse, Coser also challenges the categories Schaefer used to describe Simmel's audience. Rather than civilizational, racial, or gender characteristics, he stresses intellectual and cosmopolitan ones. Acknowledging that many of those attending Simmel's lectures were outsiders to professional sociology, he describes their origins in terms that stress their intelligence and dignity. Students 'came from the most varied disciplines' and 'unattached intellectuals' from 'the world of publishing, journalism, and the arts'. It is a true that a 'goodly number of members of "society"' attended, but they did so because they were 'in search of intellectual stimulation', not titillation. In fact, Coser describes Simmel's academic performances as anything but demonstrations of deviance and marginality. He suggests, to the contrary, that Simmel participated fully in the public life of Wilhelminian Germany: 'It is no exaggeration to say that many of Simmel's lectures were public events and often described as such in the newspapers' (Coser, 1965: 33).

Once Coser has established not only the rationality of Simmel's motivation but the civil credentials of Simmel's audience, he employs these attributes to purify the polluting descriptions of the actual contents of Simmel's lectures, and to make a direct case for the brilliance and lucidity of Simmel himself. He does so by quoting from accounts offered by members of Simmel's audience (Coser, 1965: 33–4). These testimonies emphasize not Simmel's effort to titillate, but his intellectual 'passion', which 'was expressed not in words only, but also in gestures, movements, actions'. The emotional and imagistic quality of his speaking represented brilliance, not a lack of substantial ideas: 'His intensity of speech indicated a supreme tension of thought [which] sprang from lived concern.' The palpable identification of Simmel's audience with his person resulted not from some nefarious seduction or

elocutionary trick, but from the impression Simmel conveyed of a true intellectual at work.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AFFINITIES OF CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL THEORY

Coser has employed Simmel's structural theory of the stranger to show that Simmel was not himself strange. In characterizing his argument, he quotes a remark that makes this therapeutic ambition remarkably clear. He draws from the paradigmatic structural text of mid-century sociology, Robert Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure*: 'Social structures generate the circumstances in which infringement of social codes constitutes a "normal" (that is to say, an expectable) response' (Coser, 1965: 30). Referring to objective social structures has, then, the effect of normalizing actors. Because it allows them to be portrayed as rational, it is a particularly good tactic to employ in political debate. Political conservatives typically try to convict marginal groups of character flaws that make them responsible for their fate. Contemporary neoconservatives, whether in Europe, America, or Australia, employ this rhetorical device to absolve themselves of responsibility for impoverished racial minorities or immigrants. In doing so, they are evoking the same polarizing construction that, one century earlier, German (and other) conservatives facilely applied to Jews. On the left of the political spectrum, by contrast, society itself is convicted, not the individual self. The left reserves its polluting rhetorical structures for social elites. The anti-cultural bias of contemporary 'social structural' theory is perfectly fitted for this left-leaning ideological task (e.g. Wilson, 1987: 3–20).

My point in this essay has been to suggest that this very materiality is not an advantage but a flaw. Strangeness is, indeed, socially produced, and material circumstances are very much involved. But strangeness is also and always produced in culturally-mediated ways that draw upon the subjective, volitional motivations of the actors themselves. It is this volitional component, these elements of deeply experienced emotion and profoundly convincing belief, that make strangeness so much more awful and demonic an element of society than Simmel, much less our other sociological forefathers, allowed. Strangeness is produced by the conviction that the other is not fully human. This conviction makes it possible, sometimes even necessary to exclude him, and this exclusion can sometimes take a murderous form.

In one brief and anomalous paragraph in his original essay, Simmel (1950: 407) acknowledges that 'there is a kind of "strangeness" that rejects the very commonness based on something more general which embraces the parties'. The relation of the Greeks to the Barbarians is perhaps typical here, as are all cases in which it is precisely general attributes, felt to be specifically and purely human, that are disallowed to the other. Simmel rejects, however, the broader theoretical relevance of this situation. This

Greek conception of the stranger, he cautions, 'has no positive meaning.' The relation of the Barbarian to the Greek 'is not what is relevant here' because the Barbarian is not 'a member of the group itself'. This, however, would seem to be precisely the point. Strangers are, at one and the same time, members of a group and 'non-relations'. We who survived the 20th century, and not only those who were present at its beginnings, know this only too well.

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Notes

1. See, in this connection, the powerful epistemological critique of spatial arguments made by Nicholas Entrikin (1991), where he argues that abstract spatial position is transformed into concrete social place insofar as it is subject to cultural narration.
2. 'What makes certain people "strangers" and therefore vexing, unnerving, off-putting and otherwise a "problem", is their capacity to befog and eclipse the boundary lines . . . Mary Douglas taught us that what we perceive as uncleanness or dirt and busy ourselves scrubbing and wiping out is that anomaly or ambiguity "which must not be included if the pattern is to be maintained" . . . The stranger is hateful and feared as is the slimy, and for the same reasons . . . The same relativity principle which rules the constitution of sliminess regulates the constitution of resented strangers.' (Bauman, 2001: 208–11)
3. For the argument that 'movement intellectuals' define the meaning-structures that make social movements move, see Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jameson (1991).
4. For further studies, conducted by myself and my students, see, e.g. Alexander, 1998, 2003; Edles, 1998; Jacobs, 2000; Magnuson, 1997; Smith, 1991, 1998.
5. The following quotations are from Said, 1978: 37–39.
6. The following quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from Kuisel, 1993: 11–13.
7. The following quotations are drawn from the reproduction of the English version of this letter in Schaefer, 1965: 37–39. The italics are mine.

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