

Theories of the Stranger

Debates on Cosmopolitanism,
Identity and Cross-Cultural Encounters

Vince Marotta



Theories of the Stranger

‘Vince Marotta’s exploration of the idea of the stranger in the social sciences is a tour de force. Its critical insights combine to make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the multiple ways the term has been and continues to be used, while pointing us in analytically productive directions.’

Peter Kivisto, Augustana College, U.S.A and
St. Petersburg State University, Russia

‘Marotta presents a meticulous analysis of concepts of the stranger from Simmel’s classical statement through ideas of the “marginal man” and cosmopolitanism to the emerging debate on the “cyborg” and “posthumanism”. This is essential reading for those interested in the history of a key idea in social theory.’

Stephen Castles, University of Sydney, Australia

In our global, multicultural world, how we understand and relate to those who are different from us has become central to the politics of immigration in Western societies. Who we are and how we perceive ourselves are closely associated with those who are different and strange. This book explores the pivotal role played by ‘the stranger’ in social theory, examining the different conceptualisations of the stranger found in the social sciences and shedding light on the ways in which these discourses can contribute to an analysis of cross-cultural interaction and cultural hybridity. Engaging with the work of Simmel, Park and Bauman and arguing for the need for greater theoretical clarity, *Theories of the Stranger* connects conceptual questions with debates surrounding identity politics, multiculturalism, online ethnicities and cross-cultural dialogue. As such, this rigorous, conceptual re-examination of the stranger will appeal to scholars across the social sciences with interests in social theory and the theoretical foundations of discourses relating to migration, cosmopolitanism, globalisation and multiculturalism.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 Theories of the stranger	9
3 The death of the ‘classical stranger’?	23
4 Georg Simmel, the stranger and the sociology of knowledge	32
5 Civilisation, culture and the ‘marginal man’	46
6 The hybrid of modernity	60
7 The cosmopolitan stranger: mark II	79
8 The multicultural civil sphere and the universality of binary codes	91
9 The cyborg stranger and posthumanism	106
10 Conclusion: Intercultural knowledge and the ‘professional stranger’	120
<i>Index</i>	130

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Although this book is a theoretical exploration of the idea of the stranger, it is steeped in my personal experiences of migration that was instigated by my parents so many years ago. I would like to dedicate this book to my late parents Stella and Giuseppe, who were strangers to Australia but gave their children the opportunities that were not available in Naples in the early 1960s. Thank you, Mum and Dad.

1 Introduction

The forces of decolonialisation, the global movement of refugees entering Europe, North America, and Oceania, but also various parts of Asia and the Middle East, and the rise of the global international student market have meant that cities and various regional centres across the globe have become sites of ‘super diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007). The ‘cultural stranger’ is now a familiar sight, at least for some sections of the host community. Although the observation that we live in a ‘world of strangers’ is not a new, *who* these strangers are has altered. The idea that we live in a ‘world of strangers’ was popularised by US sociologists trying to comprehend the social and cultural changes caused by rapid urbanisation after World War II (Lofland, 1973; Meyer, 1951). The strangers that were increasingly present in US cities were both immigrants and those moving from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North. Living in a ‘world of strangers’ has changed in a global, transnational and multicultural world. In social theory and sociology and cultural studies, this empirical change has been reflected in a greater focus on issues to do with the construction of identity, Otherness and the role of social and cultural boundaries. These theoretical and conceptual concerns are not necessarily a navel-gazing exercise; they are partly a reaction to, and a reflection of, the complex and contradictory empirical realities of global and transnational processes. For example, such paradoxical processes are found in the political cultures of many Western countries where popular nationalist movements and centre-right parties, expressing anti-immigration and Islamophobic views, coexist with human rights activists, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and community organisations espousing a more inclusionary political culture. Thus, whereas this book contributes to a conceptual discussion of the stranger in social and cultural thought, it is engaging and responding to the realities of living with strangers and supports the view that theory and practice are not mutually exclusive.

Studies that address the stranger rarely dedicate much space to unpacking its various meanings and, at times, have added to the conceptual confusions surrounding the category. Is it a figure or a process? Does it allude to a hermeneutical condition or a societal condition? Is it an existential or ontological condition? Does it constitute difference, or does it blur differences? What does the signifier ‘stranger’ signify? Does it have a referent, or has it become a floating signifier? These questions cannot be adequately addressed without providing a systematic account of the various permutations of the stranger and their interconnection. My

2 Introduction

assessment of the stranger draws on a methodological approach that focuses on the role of ideas in conceptualising the social world. Specifically, I will be critically drawing on a field of studies known as the History of Ideas. This does not mean that my approach shuns a materialist understanding; rather in some cases conceptions of the stranger are embedded in preexisting and interconnected economic and political relations, for example, racial and gender relations.

The stranger and the History of Ideas

In 1966 the sociologist Robert A. Nisbet published an influential study identifying the key sociological ideas (Nisbet, 1966), at least those sociological ideas that had originated in Europe and North America. Following the work of Arthur O. Lovejoy, Nisbet called them ‘unit-ideas in sociology’. Such ideas, argues Nisbet, must have generality in that they are discernible across influential minds of a particular age. They need to have continuity in that they are observable across the early as well as the late phases of the period under study. Such ideas also must be distinctive in that they must participate in what makes a discipline different from other disciplines. Finally, unit ideas in sociology have to be searchlights that light up a part of the sociological landscape (Nisbet, 1966, pp. 5–6). Nisbet designates five unit-ideas in sociology: *community*, *authority*, *status*, *the sacred* and *alienation*. For Nisbet, the idea of the stranger was not seen as germane to Western sociology. This is surprising considering that Western sociology and its understanding of European modernity is intrinsically connected to processes of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation of the colonial Other (Bhambra, 2014, p. 3). Nonetheless, the idea of alienation resonates, for Nisbet, with estrangement because alienation ‘is a historical perspective within which man is seen as estranged, anomic, and rootless when cut off from ties of community and moral purpose’ (1966, p. 6). This strangeness signifies an existential experience of homelessness. Another study outlines core dichotomies that have become fundamental to sociological understanding (Jenks, 1998, p. 4). These core dichotomies, according to Jenks, are relevant to understanding contemporary issues, such as the politics and identities of different genders and sexual orientations, and in articulating the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups and beliefs (1998, p. 3). Some of the contents of the book include structure/agency, culture/nature, local/global, subject/object, sex/gender and race/ethnicity. Binary thinking, for Jenks, seems to be how we understand the world, and if identities and beliefs of others are important to making sense of the contemporary world, then it seems odd that the binary of us/them or insider/outsider was not included. The works of Nisbet and Jenks do not address the role of the stranger in sociological thought nor how it has contributed to a particular worldview. Whereas the stranger remains marginal to their analysis, the category of the stranger has become central to many recent studies (see Amin, 2012; Simpson, 2013). What is missing in these recent accounts, however, is a systematic and rigorous assessment of the different theoretical approaches and the multiple constructions of the stranger found in social and cultural thought.

Nisbet's approach and the examination of the unit-ideas or core dichotomies of sociology can be contextualised within a body of thought known as the 'History of Ideas'. Arthur O. Lovejoy, known as the father of this approach, attempted to make intellectual history a self-conscious endeavour. There have been recent attempts to reformulate and reconceptualise the practice of intellectual history, and I will critically situate theories of the stranger within this body of work.

To categorise the History of Ideas as a discipline is problematic, but according to Lovejoy, it is possible to identify a common research agenda. The discipline has its own objectives, program and research procedures, and its own institutional locus (*The Journal of the History of Ideas*). In Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1933), he outlines some of these ideas and conceptual tools underlying the History of Ideas. By embracing these procedures and concepts, Lovejoy maintains that one can better locate the prominent ideas of a single philosopher or a whole epoch of thinking. The writer or the particular period under study may not explicitly express these ideas and concerns; nonetheless, Lovejoy contends that certain ideas are unconsciously present.

[T]here are explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits*, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation. It is the beliefs which are so much a matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, the ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness, that often are most decisive of the character of a philosopher's doctrine, and still oftener of the dominant intellectual tendencies of an age.

(Lovejoy, 1933, p. 7)

Lovejoy categorises these epochal tendencies as 'unit-ideas' and contends that they seem to be working just below the surface of consciousness. In some cases Lovejoy's description of these 'unit-ideas' assumes some totalising perspective in which the 'total life-history of individual ideas' are mapped out to identify the alliances and interplay with other ideas' (1938, p. 9). Such an approach, according to Lovejoy, develops a 'fresh perspective' and provides greater intelligibility over a social reality that 'sometimes appears dull, unrelated, and more or less incomprehensible' (1938, pp. 9–10). For Lovejoy, the History of Ideas 'has its own reason for being', and this reason is self-knowledge – in the sense not only of seeking truth but also of analysing error. The historian of ideas succumbs to our need to interpret and reflect; in other words, the discipline exemplifies the 'quest for intelligibility' inherent in the human condition (Lovejoy, 1933, pp. 22–3). Lovejoy implies that underlying the work of scholars are unexpressed and unintended ideas that extend beyond their time and space. More recently, Hausheer argues that this field of knowledge attempts to 'trace the birth and development of some ruling concepts of civilisation and culture through long periods of mental change' and to 'lay bare the origins and nature . . . of often implicit, deeply embedded, formative ideas, concepts and categories . . . by means by which we order and interpret a major part of our experience' (2013, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii). Informing the

4 Introduction

History of Ideas is a belief in the existence of grand narratives that explain the origins of key ideas and thus provide intelligibility of our messy social world.

Lovejoy's approach has been criticised because it ignores context. The 'contextualist method' insists that our ideas constitute a response to more immediate circumstances and that we should, in consequence, study not texts in themselves but rather the context of other happenings which explains them. This critique is evident in Skinner's assessment of the History of Ideas (Skinner, 1969). Unlike Lovejoy, Skinner identifies the meaning of the text with the intentions of its author and argues that it is difficult to 'credit a writer a meaning he could not have intended to convey, since that meaning was not available to him' (1969, p. 9). More specifically, Skinner argues that the major problem with Lovejoy's approach 'is that the doctrine to be investigated so readily becomes hypostatized into an entity' (Skinner, 1969, p. 10). As a consequence,

[T]he historian duly sets out in quest of the idea he has characterized, he is very readily led to speak as if the fully developed form of the doctrine was always in some sense immanent in history, even if various thinkers failed to 'hit upon' it, even if it 'dropped from sight' at various times, even if an entire era failed to 'rise to a consciousness' of it.

(Skinner, 1969, p. 10)

In conclusion, what Lovejoy characterises as the 'quest for intelligibility', Skinner pejoratively labels as a 'mythology of coherence' (1969, p. 16). Historians of Ideas may be imparting or imposing an intelligibility and consciousness that is not present.

In addition, Lovejoy's approach adopts a reflective theory of language that has been pervasive since the early twentieth century. This view of language assumes that it is 'an essentially transparent medium for the expression of ideas and emotions or the description of the external world' (Jay, 1982, p. 86). Lovejoy's 'unit-idea' is premised on the view that the scholars and writers expressing these ideas are detached from the public, intersubjective world. The focus is on the text that, through language, expresses certain key ideas. Yet, with the linguistic turn came a problematisation of this conventional paradigm of language. Furthermore, Lovejoy does not reduce meaning to intention, and for Lovejoy, understanding, in particular identifying and interpreting the 'unit-ideas', is a one-way process. It is the historian of ideas who is able to identify and locate these ideas that are inaccessible to the writer. It is difficult however to detach oneself from one's historicity, and thus it is impossible to locate the underlying meaning of a text or epoch from a perspective outside history because interpretation is dialogical. In contrast to Lovejoy, understanding is an intersubjective process rather than a distanced analysis, and as Jay writes, 'human beings are thrown into a world already linguistically permeated and language is prior to humanity and speaks through it' (1982, p. 94).

Finally, one of the central problems of Lovejoy's approach to intellectual history is its emphasis on continuity rather than difference. This critique is clearly

expressed, according to Poster (1982), in Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Unlike the intellectual historian who provides a clear and coherent narrative of the move from the Renaissance to the Reformation, from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, then to Realism and so on, Foucault's approach 'remains at one site, digging in all directions, unearthing the specificities of a particular discourse' (Poster, 1982, p. 145).

In certain respects the present study is 'unearthing the specificities' of the stranger and does not assume a perfect coherence within or between different theories of the stranger; my approach adopts the attitude of a presumption rather than an expectation of coherence (Bevir, 1997, pp. 168, 183). In contrast to the traditional approach to intellectual history, I take a more dialectical stance and argue that this presumption of coherence needs to be integrated with a presumption of difference. For example, Bevir asserts that adopting the conceptual priority of coherence means 'that a norm of coherence governs the process of interpretation' but one that is still able to ascertain inconsistencies (1997, p. 183). In light of 'post-structuralist' critiques, this position is still problematic. Underlying Bevir's norm of coherence is an essentialist view of identity. He argues that if one assumes a norm of coherence then one should also assume that individuals have stable identities (1997, p. 184). Bevir ignores recent critiques of intellectual history and assumes that a unified and sovereign subject operates beyond the restrictions of language and culture. In contrast, my examination of the theories of the stranger implies that these discourses cannot be detached from political and cultural contexts; consequently, scholars who contribute to these discourses represent particular worldviews that affect their conceptual and cultural horizons. As an interpreter I cannot avoid the intellectual climate within which I am immersed; thus the focus of this study may tell as much about my own interests and theoretical predispositions than the worldviews of those writers who contribute to the different permutations of the stranger.

Although the conceptual framework adopted here owes its intellectual debt to Lovejoy, it is influenced by recent reinterpretations of intellectual history where continuity and difference are dialectically interwoven. Although I want to establish the idea of the stranger as a key explanatory concept within the social sciences, I do not accept the intellectually conservative position of the History of Ideas. Focusing on ideas does not mean I want to limit 'the meaning of words to "original" or even "essential" meanings' or claim that, "'Tracings" inevitably lead to origins that then determine the trajectories in usage and meaning to the present' (Agnew, 2014, p. 312). In other words, there is no original meaning to the stranger that can be located in a specific period or thinker. Any reference to the 'classical stranger' assumes an 'origin' to the stranger which then determines how later generations of thinkers conform to or depart from this authentic version. In contrast, *Theories of Strangers* will demonstrate that the very existence of a 'classical stranger' is questionable.

While I make a strong claim that within social and cultural thought, different theories on the stranger exist, I do not assume that these theories are unified and unproblematic nor that we can locate an original 'classical stranger'. I accept

6 Introduction

Agnew's view that 'many of the ideas whose genealogies we are most anxious to trace never simply sprang into being fully formed' (2014, p. 313). Subsequently, I critically examine how the idea of the stranger is constructed within these theories using the work of Simmel, Park and Bauman as reference points to illustrate both its coherence and diversity. To treat these writers as a point of reference for any discussion of the stranger is not to fall into the trap of ordinary thinking. Rather I draw on these thinkers to shed light on the inherent contradictions within the discourse on the stranger.

To demonstrate the diverse, contradictory and multilayered dimension to the stranger, Chapter 1 will provide a systematic description and analysis of the stranger in contemporary social thought. The intention is not to provide a genealogy of the stranger but to extrapolate key themes and characteristics emerging from the theories of the stranger. I identify psychoanalytic, phenomenological/sociological, existential and postcolonial approaches. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and the chapter aims to demonstrate these overlaps and to make explicit what has been implicit and, at times, unacknowledged in discussions of the stranger. Whereas the objective of the chapter is conceptual clarity, this only emerges through the recognition that the stranger is a contradictory and slippery category. The allusive nature of the stranger as an idea, is exemplified by my critique of the so-called existence and demise of the 'classical stranger' in a diverse, mobile, transnational and global world. As Chapter 2 outlines and critiques, what has replaced it is the universalisation of the stranger (universalisation thesis).

A portion of *Theories of Strangers* will establish the relevance and importance of the stranger to the social theory of Simmel, Park and Bauman. This is not to suggest that a definitive understanding of these scholars is possible by concentrating solely on their conception and use of the stranger; rather, this analysis illuminates a different perspective on their work that has been so far underexplored. While each chapter examines the multiplicity of the stranger in each thinker's oeuvre, it suggests that an in-between stranger underlies their work. This idea becomes increasingly important in the social sciences for theories of knowledge and intercultural knowledge. Chapter 3 first highlights the dialectical nature of Simmel's thought, second, the way in which he conceptualises the existence of a social actor who stands between two boundaries, and finally, his commitment to discovering a third possibility to the epistemological problems of his time. Throughout this analysis it is the stranger, both in its existential and sociological dimension, which features prominently in Simmel's account of new forms of knowledge. My analysis of Simmel also disrupts and problematises the very existence of the 'classical stranger' in his work thereby questioning the role it has played in the social sciences.

Chapter 4 emphasises Park's theoretical credentials, a fact often underestimated by scholars writing on Park. Park's social theory is informed by a particular conception of culture and civilisation, and his conceptualisation of strangerhood affects both his understanding of these terms and how they are interconnected. I explore, for example, how Park's famous notion of the 'marginal man' deepens

his understanding of the relationship between civilisation and culture. I demonstrate that, for Park, it is the marginal man that epitomises the social, cultural and economic modality of civilisation and that the emergence of the marginal man exposes some of the existing tensions within the sociology of knowledge and the ways to overcome what Park regards as the narrow and constricting views of both the culture of ‘whites’ and ‘Negros’.

Chapter 5 deals with the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman’s work has become the focal point for various debates on modernity, the Holocaust, globalisation and postmodern ethics, especially in Europe. Nonetheless, I suggest that Bauman’s sociology is partly a commentary on the sociology of strangerhood. Bauman’s conception of modernity as the ‘will-to-order’ leads him to an analysis of Otherness/strangerhood because modernity’s obsession with order requires the suppression and marginalisation of those who represent ambivalence. The stranger, as Bauman argues, is neither an enemy nor a friend. It is these ‘ambivalent people’ who upset the binary nature of knowledge, but as I argue, these ambivalent people are not necessarily associated with the stranger as Other.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8, apply some of these arguments and approaches to the stranger to specific topics such as cosmopolitanism, the nature of a multicultural civil sphere and the cyborg stranger. In each case we see that the debate about the role of the ‘classical stranger’ is foregrounded in conceptualisations of the cosmopolitan, the multicultural civil sphere and the cyborg and explore how the in-between stranger both enhances and diminishes these ideas. The last chapter revisits the connection between the sociology of knowledge and the in-between stranger, only this time to ponder the role of the latter in developing intercultural knowledge. Drawing on a body of work known as critical intercultural hermeneutics, I contemplate a more active and transformative role for the stranger as Other in cross-cultural encounters and the construction of intercultural knowledge.

The gendered nature of the stranger

Throughout my exploration of the stranger, there has been little work conducted on how the qualities of the stranger can be reconceptualised from a feminist perspective. Most of the work examined here assumes a gender-neutral and in some cases a gender-blind account of the stranger. Simmel, Park and Bauman make no attempt to distinguish the experience of women as strangers, whereas theories of the stranger have altogether ignored gender. It is not that women have not been studied as strangers or outsiders, rather what these studies adopt is an idea of the stranger that is already gender blind (Durbin, 2016; Prashizky and Remennick, 2012). In other words, they adopt a view of the ‘classical stranger’ that is already gendered. As a consequence, I will adopt the masculine pronoun when discussing the stranger, not because I want to exclude the experiences of women but to highlight the gender-blind approach adopted by various thinkers. There will be times however when the gendered dimension of the discourse on the stranger needs to be foregrounded to contest particular accounts of the stranger.

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