

Stranger

(Routledge Encyclopedia of Social Theory)

The concept of the stranger has to be distinguished from the concept of alterity which formulates the otherness we experience in relation to any other human being. The stranger is a social role category we find in the historical semantics of nearly all human societies. This near universality of the semantics of the stranger makes it a very interesting subject for the comparative study of social structures of human societies. The semantics of the stranger is in many societies closely related to patterns of hostility and hospitality, as the stranger may function as enemy or as guest and often as both in an oscillatory movement.

Five diverging patterns of dealing with strangers can be distinguished in historical terms. First, there were societies which were incapable of recognizing strangers as strangers. In being confronted with them they easily classified strangers as ancestors or gods or other figures provided for in their world view; but the irritation in dealing with unexpected foreign persons which may function as a pragmatic criterion of the experience of strangeness did not arise in these societies. Secondly, there are societies which recognize strangers but concentrate all their reactions on eliminating the fact of strangeness. They either kill or expel strangers or integrate them by cleansing rites and adoption to kinship which divests them of all outer signs of strangeness. A third pattern was developed by the stratified social systems which determined a greater part of the social history of the last few thousand years. Stratified societies were the first to offer strangers a plurality of possible statuses, corresponding with the diversified social structures of the stratified societies themselves. There were now inner and outer strangers; tolerated, privileged and subjugated strangers (Gilissen 1958); occupations and societal enclaves that were reserved for strangers and prohibited for locals; strangers filled status gaps (Rinder 1958) and communication gaps which are characteristic of stratified systems. In nineteenth- and twentieth century modernity a fourth and again radically simplified pattern arose together with the genesis of the nation state. Instead of a plurality of statuses, binary classifications now appeared, aiming at distinguishing local inhabitants who were conceived fully-fledged members of the nation-state from strangers who had no such claims to membership. But, parallel to the rise of the nation state, a fifth and most contemporaneous pattern already became visible. In urban, cosmopolitan settings it was early to be perceived that social intercourse mostly involves interacting with people who are strangers. Therefore, we have to do with the universalization of the stranger and this implies that the strangeness of the other comes to be seen as a normal everyday occurrence, whereby it loses its irritat-

ing, disturbing character. The same condition is sometimes called the disappearance of the stranger or his/her invisibility.

It is a significant fact about the genesis of the discipline of sociology around a hundred years ago that it was closely intertwined with the last two patterns of the societal relevance of the stranger. The major figures of the classical sociology of the stranger which was formulated between 1890 and 1945 – Simmel, Michels, Park and Schütz among many others (Stichweh 1992) – were either focussed on the nation-state circumstance or on the urban, cosmopolitan variant or on both. After World War II the subject loses its central place in social theory, only to reappear in much more fragmented variants.

The first major treatment of the sociology of the stranger after World War II – Benjamin Nelson's "From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood" from 1949 (revised 1969) - belongs to a much more macrohistorical variant and may function as a prelude to an adequate study of the stranger in presentday world society. It makes use of the formula of "universal otherhood", and in looking at natural rights theories from seventeenth century Europe it goes one further step in deciphering the paradoxical structures of modern attitudes towards strangers. Looking at Alberico Gentili Nelson speaks of "calculated benevolence" towards other persons – and this may be related to numerous kindred formulations of our universalized attitudes towards other persons: "civil inattention" (Goffman); "commonplace folk" (Shaler); "disciplined individuality" (Elias); "detached concern" (Fox). Each of these attitudes towards others as strangers is obviously paradoxical: We are indifferent towards other persons in the world and there is no longer a need to dissolve or institutionalize strangeness as role category. We are used to it. But we have a minimal sympathy and minimal interest towards other persons as members of a common humanity and we treat them as individuals. From this one may derive a paradoxical oscillation between these two poles of generalized attitudes towards other persons – and, of course, there is always a potential path from indifference toward neglect and hostility.

References:

Fox, R.C. (1959) Experiment Perilous. Physicians and Patients Facing the Unknown. New York: Free Press.

Gilissen, J. (ed.) (1958) L'Étranger, 2 Vols. Bruxelles: Éditions de la librairie encyclopédique.

Goffman, E. (1972) Relations in Public. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Michels, R. (1925) 'Materialien zu einer Sociologie des Fremden', Jahrbuch für Soziologie 1, 296-317.

Nelson, B. [1949] (1969) The Idea of Usury. From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Park, R.E. (1964) Race and Culture. New York: Free Press.

Rinder, I.D. (1958) 'Strangers in the Land. Social Relations in the Status Gap', Social Problems 6, 253-260.

Schütz, A. (1944) 'The Stranger', American Journal of Sociology, 49, 499-507.

Shaler, N.S. (1904) The Neighbor. The Natural History of Human Contacts. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Simmel, G. (1908) 'Exkurs über den Fremden', in Soziologie. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

Stichweh, R. (1992) 'Der Fremde. Zur Evolution der Weltgesellschaft', Rechtshistorisches Journal 11, 295-316.

Rudolf Stichweh [927 words]