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States of ambivalence: Recovering the concept of 'the Stranger' in International Relations

Felix Berenskötter[1] and Nicola Nymalm[2]*

[1]Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS University of London, United Kingdom and [2]Department of Military Studies, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden
*Corresponding author. Email: nicola.nymalm@fhs.se

Abstract

This article revisits and revives the concept of 'the Stranger' in theorising international relations by discussing how this figure appears and what role it plays in the politics of (collective) identity. It shows that this concept is central to poststructuralist logic discussing the political production of discourses of danger and to scholarship on ontological security but remains subdued in their analytical narratives. Making the concept of the Stranger explicit is important, we argue, because it directs attention to ambivalence as a source of anxiety and grasps the unsettling experiences that political strategies of conquest or conversion, including practices of securitisation, respond to. Against this backdrop, the article provides a nuanced reading of the Stanger as a form of otherness that captures ambiguity as a threat to modern conceptions of identity, and outlines three scenarios of how it may be encountered in interstate relations: the phenomenon of 'rising powers' from the perspective of the hegemon, the dissolution of enmity (overcoming an antagonistic relationship), and the dissolution of friendship (close allies drifting apart). Aware that recovering the concept is not simply an academic exercise but may feed into how the term is used in political discourse and how practitioners deal with 'strange encounters', we conclude by pointing to alternative readings of the Stranger/strangeness and the value of doing so.

Keywords: Stranger; Identity; Otherness; Difference; Ambivalence; Security; Threat

Introduction

This article revisits and revives the concept of 'the Stranger' and 'strangeness' in theorising international relations by discussing how this figure appears and what role it plays in the politics of (collective) identity. In a seminal article published two decades ago, Jef Huysmans introduced the Stranger to International Relations (IR) scholarship in the context of a discussion of the meaning of 'security' and the politics surrounding it.[1] The field of IR has since seen a burgeoning literature on securitisation that critically explores state practices in which 'Others' are represented as threats to construct and strengthen a sense of collective identity. However, exceptions aside,[2] Huysmans's pointer to the Stranger within that process has not been picked up. Although in his article this

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[1]Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean?: From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

[2]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; M. L. deRaismes Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger: Ontological security and the Boston Marathon bombing', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 126–43; Orit Gazit, 'Van Gennep meets ontological (in)security: A processual approach to ontological security in migration', *International Studies Review*, 21:4 (2019), pp. 572–97.

figure appears more as a byline in the effort of reading 'security' as a thick signifier, Huysmans argues that the Stranger, understood as a figure representing ambiguity and triggering feelings of ambivalence, is a key concept in the modern logic of (in)security.[3] Our article recovers this insight and places it at the centre of attention. It takes a careful look at the concept of the Stranger and its analytical value for understanding International Relations, focusing primarily on how states may see each other as strangers, which thus far is missing from the literature.

The article differentiates between a sociological and a phenomenological perspective, reading the Stranger either as a figure that defies familiar categories, such as friend or enemy, or strangeness as an uncanny experience more generally, as some*thing* that evades known forms of relating on which stable identities rely. The epistemological discomfort this generates poses a threat to modern conceptions of identity. As such, we argue, the concept of the Stranger/strangeness is central to the theoretical logic of the security/identity nexus found in poststructuralist and ontological security scholarship, yet it is only sporadically discussed. Reinserting this concept fills a gap in their theoretical narratives by capturing 'the threat' to identity through a distinct analytical category that goes beyond the common reference to 'difference/the Other'. To demonstrate the analytical value of this angle the article looks at different scenarios of how strangers are encountered in interstate relations: the phenomenon of 'rising powers', attempts to overcome antagonism, and enduring tensions between friends. We argue that viewing these examples through the 'Stranger' lens not only provides a better understanding of political strategies devised in response to encountering the Stranger/strangeness. It also opens a conceptual and political terrain through which these strategies can be called into question and alternatives devised. As such, the article ends with a reflexive move on the ethics of reading the Stranger as a threat to identity. Noting that this account is grounded in a particular understanding of 'identity', more precisely what it means for 'identity' to be secure, we point to alternative readings that see living with ambivalence as something productive and positive, and that encourage us to understand the Stranger/strangeness as a 'normal' feature of the human condition.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first part carves out the missing concept in poststructuralist and ontological security scholarship; the second part introduces the Stranger as a category of the Other or form of otherness that captures ambiguity as a threat to modern conceptions of identity; the third part outlines scenarios in which the Stranger emerges/is encountered in interstate relations; and the conclusion points to alternative readings of 'strangeness' and the political value of doing so.

The conceptual gap

To prepare the ground for recovering the concept of the Stranger as a useful analytical category, we review the logic of the identity/security nexus in two prominent and overlapping streams of IR scholarship, poststructuralism, and the literature on ontological security. These two approaches broadly understand identity as having a sense of Self established in a relationship with Other(s) and generally emphasise the socially constructed nature of this configuration. They take as a given the processual character of identity formation, whereby an evolving being gains a sense of Self through ongoing practices of identification, and note the fragility of all identities. Both literatures tend to focus on how a sense of (collective) Self is established and secured by identifying against a (collective) Other in a move that closes down the fragile nature of identity. Pointing to the political nature of such constructions,[4] their objective is to

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[3]Huysmans, 'Security!', p. 241; see also Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[4]Discussions of what an identity 'is' and how we should think about threats to 'it' are therefore not simply academic musings about ontology. Rather, as Brubaker and Cooper remind, identity functions as both a category of analysis and a category of political practice, which has ethical implications for how scholars treat the term. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29:1 (2000), pp. 1–47.

explain and (critically) expose state practices designed to construct and 'secure' an identity, which logically implies a condition in which this identity is insecure. However, as the following seeks to show, within their analytical story neither approach offers a distinct concept that generates this insecurity.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralists ground the constitutive character of Self/Other relationships in the view that 'identity' is constituted through 'difference'.[5] While they emphasise that this constitution is a political process, hence its outcome is not predetermined, philosophically it is said to reside in a logic of differentiation 'we cannot escape'.[6] For poststructuralists the logic of differentiation is expressed in a process of othering, that is, in the production of an 'Other'. The logic is encapsulated in William Connolly's phrase 'identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty'.[7] This suggests a two-step process or, at least, a distinction between, first, the requirement of difference for the constitution of *being* and, second, the conversion of this difference into otherness to secure a sense of *self-certainty*. Yet, in assuming self-certainty as an overriding desire/goal of being, the nuance collapses into a reading that sees othering as central to the process of identity formation. Moreover, while the logic does not specify what form the Self–Other relationship takes, Connolly speaks of a temptation to define the Other as 'evil', echoed in David Campbell's claim that 'because we cannot escape the logic of differentiation, we are often tempted by the logic of defilement' that results in the 'demonization of the other'.[8] Much of poststructuralist IR scholarship adopted this assumption and focused on the political conversion of difference into a form of negative identification.[9]

Connolly explains this temptation with the paradoxical argument that the Other both constitutes the Self *and* poses a threat to it. This duality rests on the understanding that, in the act of associating difference with the Other, difference is seen as external to the Self and kept at a distance. It becomes a property of the Other. Yet this externalisation only works if differentiation and the image of the Other is controlled by the Self. Once the Other is understood to have agency, it also has the power to call into question the asserted difference and the Self-identity resting on it. This renders the constitution of the Self 'a slippery, insecure experience, dependent on its ability to define difference and vulnerable to the tendency of entities it would so define to counter, resist, overturn, or subvert definitions applied to them'.[10] Acts of the Other that expose the separation as artificial and disturb the Self's act of differentiation can undermine the idea of the Self as certain, clear, and coherent entity. They can create 'doubts' by revealing difference *within* the Self, thereby

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[5] William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); David Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). The discussion mainly draws on the two works by Connolly and Campbell, as these are influential and frequent references among IR poststructuralists and useful representatives for our purpose. See also Jutta Weldes et al. (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[6] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 81. The 'identity/difference' relationship and its logical justification finds prominent expression in Hegelian dialectic; see Philip T. Grier (ed.), *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007). The basic understanding is that a Self grasps 'itself' as a unit through an act of differentiation in which it delineates itself from that which it is not, by constituting that which is deemed different as Other.

[7] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 64.

[8] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 8; Campbell, *Writing Security*, pp. 71, 81.

[9] Bahar Rumelili, *Constructing Regional Community and Order in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 33. Thus, largely ignoring or not explicitly fleshing out degrees, or types, of otherness and, in consequence, a variety of ways in which identity/difference plays out.

[10] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 64.

injuring or defeating what the Self has come to see as its true identity.[11] Connolly calls this the 'paradox of difference': a configuration in which the Other is (i) necessary to create and sustain a particular sense of Self *and* (ii) a threat to the same because it simultaneously reminds the Self of the impossibility of a completely sutured identity.[12] Unwilling to tolerate this threat, the Self deals with this paradox, Connolly argues, by declaring the Other 'evil' or one of its surrogates. Through such a move, it tries to banish the Other into the realm of the unreasonable and unacceptable, to delegitimise the difference the Other embodies as an alternative mode of being and to curb its ability to disturb 'the integrity and certainty' of the asserted identity.[13]

In poststructuralist IR scholarship, this paradoxical Self–Other relationship tends to recede into the background, however, and with it the conceptualisation of the threat to 'identity'. This is especially the case for empirical work that critically analyses the political construction of threat images. For instance, one of the most influential such works, Campbell's (1998) study of how US foreign policy represents others as 'dangerous', largely takes the conversion of difference into otherness for granted and subsumes the threat under the category of the negative Other. It fails to highlight the crucial point that in poststructuralist logic *a political discourse about threats* and *a threat to 'identity'* are fundamentally different things, indeed the former is a means to eliminate the latter. It thereby also obscures that the threat stems not from difference *as such*, but from a difference that creates 'doubts', from an Other that 'exposes sore spots in one's identity'.[14] What is not spelled out is how doubts are created, what a sore spot is and how it is exposed. We only get occasional references, for instance when Connolly speaks of the need to suppress 'the play of ambiguity' or notes that '[t]o the modernist … the political danger resides … in the hell of an infinite openness', or when Campbell writes in passing of 'the need to discipline and contain … ambiguity and contingency'.[15] There is little beyond these hints, however; there is no exploration of the notion that threats reside in the ambiguity and contingency of 'identity/difference' and no attempt to grasp this notion with a distinct concept.

The poststructuralist neglect of conceptualising threats to identity and offering a distinct analytical category for it can be attributed to the approach's analytical-normative agenda shaped by a critical-reflexive stance. The concern is that articulating ambiguity and contingency as threatening and giving it an ontology would naturalise both it and the associated referent object, modern conceptions of identity. It could even provide a justification for the strategies devised in response – the very techniques of governance whose political and violent nature poststructuralists seek to expose and deconstruct. While this is a sensible position, we hope to show that more is gained from both an analytical and a critical-ethical standpoint that makes explicit what is implicit.

Ontological security theory

Scholarship on ontological security takes a socio-psychological approach to describe how 'identity' – a stable sense of Self – is constructed and how this affects political behaviour and relations. Broadly speaking, ontological security designates a cognitive and emotional state of being that values certainty, ensuing in a quest for stability, predictability, and control; it is an experience of 'oneself as a whole' and knowing one's place in social space and time.[16] Drawing on Anthony Giddens and

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[11]Ibid., pp. ix, 66; see also Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After*, p. 234.

[12]Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 66.

[13]Ibid., p. ix.

[14]Ibid., p. 8.

[15]Ibid., pp. 54, 61; Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 64.

[16]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), p. 342; Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008); Stuart Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity: The insecuritization of Britain's Muslims', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:2 (2012), pp. 219–35; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity',

R. D. Laing, the IR literature generally highlights two factors providing this certainty and establishing a stable sense of Self, routine practices and narratives. These function as coping mechanisms for situating the Self in a contingent and complex world by providing a sufficient degree of certainty, discussed variably in terms of consistency, coherence, and continuity. These two mechanisms loosely correspond with two angles that can be seen as two ends of a spectrum along which the quest for ontological security is analysed.[17] The first angle places more emphasis on the psychological dimension and discusses how a sense of stability of a body politic, such as the state, is generated internally, that is, it reads ontological security as largely self-organised.[18] The second angle focuses on the external dimension and analyses how ontological security is gained in social relationships, that is, in interaction with external others. In the latter dimension, some echo the poststructuralist emphasis on negative/antagonistic relationships,[19] whereas others argue that a stable sense of Self is generated in relationships where the Self identifies positively with an Other.[20]

While often incorporating poststructuralist insights, the ontological security literature offers a more direct engagement with conceptions of threats to 'identity' in conditions of modernity.[21] In fact, the concept of ontological security was originally introduced by Laing to discuss the psychological phenomenon of ontological *in*security.[22] Discussing the nature of this insecurity, the IR literature has picked up the highlights via Giddens: if ontological security is about having a sense of certainty about being in the world, then insecurity is tied to 'deep uncertainty'[23] or, more precisely, a feeling of existential anxiety, expressed variably as discomfort, stress, shame, and feeling overwhelmed.[24] But is there a general concept for that which stirs up these emotions, that trigger what the psychologist Erik Erikson called an 'identity crisis'?

Logically speaking, anxiety emerges when the mechanisms that keep it at bay weaken or disappear, which exposes the Self to a world of contingency and meaninglessness and creates an acute problem of orientation. The nature of the threat thus depends on the particular social configuration, narratives, and practices, which provide a stable sense of Self. When it comes to discussing the circumstances exposing the instability of these anxiety controlling mechanisms, IR scholarship tends to resort to familiar concepts such as 'critical situations',[25] 'crisis',[26] 'disruption',[27] 'rapid change' attributed to the 'destabilizing force of globalization',[28] 'dissonance' between

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Cooperation and Conflict, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47; Bahar Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation: The pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18:1 (2013), pp. 52–74.

[17]Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'An introduction to the special issue: Ontological securities in world politics', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 3–11.

[18]Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

[19]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians', *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 809–33.

[20]Felix Berenskoetter, 'Friends, there are no friends? An intimate reframing of the international', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 647–76; Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'.

[21]For a critique, see, for example, Chris Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique: The limits of ontological security', *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 369–86.

[22]R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010 [orig. pub. 1960]).

[23]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 345.

[24]Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), ch. 2. Anxiety is a background sentiment that never disappears entirely but even in a state of ontological security exists on a low level, so the threat is that which generates a 'heightened sense of anxiety'. See also Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90.

[25]Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

[26]Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity'.

[27]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[28]Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'.

pertinent behavioural norms, narratives, and practices,[29] and processes of 'desecuritization'.[30] While the focus on disruptive moments and dissonant processes makes sense, the notion that anything destabilising a stable sense of Self is a threat verges on tautology. Scholars have supplemented this by referring to alienation, or homelessness.[31] The most precious pointer comes from Catarina Kinnvall, who mentions the 'abject other' and, quoting Huysmans, links this to the 'stranger' as a 'disordering' Other that expresses 'the possibility of chaos'.[32] More recently, Orit Gazi picked this up to argue that a migrant 'crossing over' into a territory claimed by a bounded society can be perceived as a stranger that 'desanctifies' the world the receiving society has established for itself.[33] Such pointers are exceptions, however, as the literature generally operates without a distinct concept that captures the threat to ontological security. This hole is bypassed by focusing on the political effort of eliminating instability, that is, of maintaining or restoring a configuration that provides a stable sense of Self. Shining light on the strategies employed by political actors to avert or resolve a state of ontological insecurity is important, yet it must be complemented by a more refined conceptual understanding of what generates anxiety. Picking up Kinnvall's cue, the following takes on that task.

Enter the Stranger

To grasp the missing element that lingers in the logic of both poststructuralist and ontological security scholarship, we turn attention to the insights that anxiety as *in*security is incited by *ambivalence*. Broadly speaking, ambivalence describes the simultaneous coexistence of opposed/conflicting feelings, thoughts, and desires and, thus, a torn or confused being unable to make a choice. It is a feeling that emerges when, to use Connolly's turn of phrase, the Self faces a difference that creates doubts, when a being is uncertain about how to evaluate and navigate this world/relationship. As Zygmunt Bauman put it, it is an unsettling experience in which the Self is 'unable to read the situation properly', creating a feeling of 'acute discomfort'.[34] It is not quite facing a meaningless world, but one where meanings conflict and have lost their clarity and become ambiguous, generating a state of disorientation. Bauman illustrates this by juxtaposing ambivalence[35] with order. Whereas order enables the Self to comfortably 'name things' and place them into 'familiar categories', ambivalence is characterised by 'the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category' and therefore 'disorder'. The indeterminacy and unpredictability that comes with it poses a threat to the modern mind, that is, to conceptions of Self and Other anchored in clearly defined ideas of political order, linear developments, and in the belief that we can *know* Self and Other. Ambivalence is not only confusing and discomforting, but 'carries a sense of danger'.[36] Stripping the world of its familiarity and turning it into a grey area, it presents the Self with a world it does not 'know' or understand and turns into anxiety, or 'epistemological fear'.[37]

We follow Bauman and Huysmans in locating the emergence of ambivalence in the Self's encounter with a Stranger and the experience of strangeness. The Stranger/strangeness is an analytical category that captures something that does not fit familiar structures and categories of meaning, does not correspond with expected or known behaviour and blurs the established distinction between Self and Other. It highlights the unfamiliar, the unknown, the 'uncanny', the atmosphere of 'something is not quite right'. Richard Kearney points out that the Stranger has been used for pretty much everything that is uncanny and is often associated with the notion of the foreigner, the alien, and the invader.[38] While usually understood as a *figure*, a particular kind or type of Other(ness), it is important to note that strangeness is not a permanent attribute or definite property of the Other, but always emerges in a particular social context or relationship. It can also be an *experience* the Self perceives to be strange, which may or may not be the result of a social interaction and, hence, may not be directly associated with a Other. Akin to the spectrum found in ontological security scholarship, we thus read the Stranger as a figure that embodies strange relationships and experiences, and which thus can be read from a sociological and from a phenomenological/psychoanalytical angle.

The sociological approach

The sociological approach operates with the concept of the Stranger first introduced by Georg Simmel. For Simmel, it emerges in the image of 'the potential wanderer' who 'has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going'.[39] It is a person who simultaneously is and is not part of a 'familiar setting', whose position within a group is 'determined … by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it which do not and cannot stem from the group itself'.[40] Simmel's discussion can be seen as offering two slightly different conceptualisations of the Stranger, namely the 'newcomer' and the 'marginal'.[41] It is easy to see how the two may be conflated in that the newcomer may be marginalised by society because it does not 'fit' (by, for instance, not confirming to typical scripts of action). The reading of the Stranger as 'the marginal' is prevalent in the literature, yet for the present purpose that is not helpful as it moves the analytical focus to practices of discrimination. Although the notion of 'the wanderer' needs to be adjusted when speaking about relations between states, for now it is preferable, as it does not presuppose marginalisation as the political strategy of dealing with the Stranger.[42]

Simmel's key insight is that the Stranger is someone or something that does not quite fit the 'in-group' but also is not an outsider. Rather, its distinct quality lies in defying binary distinctions between 'ingroup' and 'outgroup'. Jef Huysmans captures the core feature of this figure when describing strangers as 'insiders/outsiders. They articulate ambivalence and therefore challenge the (modern) ordering activity which relies on reducing ambiguity and uncertainty by categorizing elements … they do not fit the categories.'[43] In contrast to an Other – the enemy or the friend – with whom a familiar relationship can be established and practiced, the Stranger is not clearly classifiable and thus cannot be dealt with and related to in self-evident terms. Thus, the 'Stranger' is a category used for an Other that is not merely deemed different but

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[38]Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[39]Georg Simmel, 'The Stranger', *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, Vol. 4 (New York: Free Press, 1950 [orig. pub. 1908]), p. 402.

[40]Ibid., see also Alfred Schütz, 'The Stranger: An essay in social psychology', in A. Schütz (ed.), *Collected Papers II* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971 [orig. pub. 1944]), pp. 91–105.

[41]S. Dale McLemore, 'Simmel's "Stranger": A critique of the concept', *Pacific Sociological Review*, 13:2 (1970), pp. 86–94.

[42]Simmel's account has been criticised as implying that social relations are defined primarily in terms of membership, and that anyone who does not confirm to the norms of a particular society is automatically classified as a stranger; see Vince Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the sociology of knowledge', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33:6 (2012), pp. 675–89. This conflates the concept with the political practice of stigmatisation.

[43]Huysmans, 'Security!', p. 241.

that blurs boundaries and appears to exist in a state of 'in-between', a position also captured in the concept of liminality.[44] Victor Turner's original formulation of the liminal as a figure going through a social transition that is, hence, 'neither here nor there', is a classic example of an Other that does not fit a given social structure and its established categories. To the extent that the liminal – understood as both a space and an actor within it – exposes the limits and contradictions of a given social structure,[45] the Stranger can be seen as a liminal figure, as one form that liminality can take.[46]

Yet, we suggest the Stranger also is a distinct concept. Rather than defined by its position in between two socially recognised categories and, thus, by being in a phase of transition or passage, we read the Stranger as a specific/concrete form of Otherness, as some*body* that is simultaneously both near and close to the Self. This builds on Simmel, for whom one unique feature of the Stranger is that 'it embodies that synthesis of nearness and distance' and is thus someone who is in close contact but not 'organically connected'.[47] While present in the sense that it cannot be ignored, the Stranger also appears 'out of place'. Here it is useful to differentiate the Stranger as understood in this article from the notion of the *distant* stranger, a background figure making a regular appearance in our lives, which we see and tacitly acknowledge, perhaps even expect to be there. As such, it is not entirely unknown. However, the distant stranger *remains* at a distance. It forms the familiar backdrop of our world with which we do not engage intimately and do not (intend to) build a close relationship with. In other words, we do not really know or care much about the distant stranger, and its presence does not invoke a feeling of discomfort. The world of interstate relations can illustrate this point: in a general sense, governments are aware of the presence of all the other states on the planet and 'know about' them in terms of their factual existence: their geographical location, population, form of government, head of state, etc. They are categorised and recognised as foreign, in the sense that they are clearly located outside state borders, and relations among them are formally organised through the norm of sovereignty and a diplomatic code of practice. For the most part, these states appear as distant strangers, as others we know something about and don't expect to go away, yet which we don't feel particularly close to.

The analytical category of the Stranger advanced here lacks distance. It is its closeness that brings into relief the ambivalent nature of the Other and gives it the power to unsettle the Self. Hence, the Stranger is not anybody but some particular body we perceive to be out of place.[48] How we understand closeness and, in particular, the synthesis of nearness and distance noted by Simmel thus is a crucial question. One suggestion is to read it as a constellation in which 'those who are physically close are socially and culturally distant'.[49] While this works for studying the perception of migrants who physically enter a new social space,[50] conceptual adjustment is needed for a world of more or less geographically fixed units, such as states, and where newcomers are rare. Broadly put, in this article, closeness/distance refers to the location of the Other in

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[44]Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Maria Mälksoo, 'The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 481–94; Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger'. Two additional related concepts that gained some prominence in IR are hybridity and queerness.

[45]Iver B. Neumann, 'Introduction to the forum on liminality', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 473–9; Bahar Rumelili, 'Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 495–508.

[46]Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger'; Gazit, 'Van Gennep meets ontological (in)security'.

[47]Simmel, 'The Stranger', p. 404.

[48]"The stranger here is not somebody we do not recognise, but somebody that we recognise as a stranger, somebody we know as not knowing, rather than somebody we simply do not know.' Sara Ahmed, 'Who knows? Knowing strangers and strangerness', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15:31 (2000), pp. 49–68.

[49]Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the sociology of knowledge', p. 107; see also Mervyn Horgan, 'Strangers and strangeship', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33:6 (2012), pp. 607–22.

[50]Gazit, 'Van Gennep meets ontological (in)security'.

the system of knowledge, or idea of order, that is salient for the conception of Self. Closeness is understood as how important the Other is in supporting this system of knowledge/idea of order that the Self identifies with and has invested in (materially, ideationally, emotionally); the Other appears distant when it cannot be confidently placed in this in this order, when it has turned into something unfamiliar. While states do not wander around, they may change their internal configuration and their (external) practices, and so may encounter each other 'anew' as strangers in the sense that they – their representatives and publics – suddenly have difficulty determining how to relate to each other politically. An encounter with a state as Stranger is thus understood here as a moment, or series of moments of severe 'social disorientation',[51] where seemingly established relations in which a states' identity is embedded turns liminal, or queer. As such, it signifies not a first time meeting, but a *change* in a particular Self–Other relationship through, for instance, unexpected, or previously not experienced behaviour that appears 'odd' and 'out of place'. While it requires action/agency on the part of the Other, it is the Self's expectations and perception of the Other's move, its inability to make sense of them through familiar categories, that renders the Other strange.

For modern Selves closely attached to the order unsettled by the Stranger, the appearance is deeply disturbing. Perceived as an embodiment of liminality, it unsettles a familiar role and representation and requires a new sense making effort.[52] Bauman describes it in dramatic terms: 'the arrival of a Stranger has the impact of an earthquake … [it] shatters the rock on which the security of daily life rests'.[53] This is captured, for instance, in Cynthia Weber's playful discussion of how US governments struggled to relate to Cuba after Fidel Castro took power. Seen through a gender lens, Weber argues that Castro's hypermasculinity and the US perception of him as an ambivalent figure disturbed their established image of Cuba as a close feminine Other. He turned Cuba into a Stranger that disoriented the relationship and, with it, the American sense of Self, prompting attempts to (re)turn it into something the US government could control and, thus, know.[54] In disturbing both the existing order and the activity of ordering, the Stranger threatens not only a particular relationship but 'the very possibility of sociation … because [it] is neither friend not enemy; and because [it] may be both'.[55] Posing a challenge to the very principle of determinacy,[56] it reminds of the fragility of the common sense and, thus, the fallibility of the known world. For those who have anchored their identities in this world, Bauman argues, 'it is best not to meet strangers at all'.[57]

The phenomenological approach

The phenomenological reading, often with connections to psychoanalysis, takes a slightly different approach by holding that we construct our conception of Self through knowledge gained from unique experiences. Whereas the sociological angle holds that ontological security is created and maintained through the social order in which relationships are embedded, the phenomenological angle emphasises that the Self tries to establish ontological security internally, by making sense of its own experiences through the creation of a coherent, consistent, and clear account of being in time and space. From this perspective, the Stranger is a subjective 'limit-experience for humans

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[51]Chris Rumford, *The Globalization of Strangeness* (New York: Springer, 2013).

[52]Rumelili, 'Liminal identities', p. 500; Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[53]Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 10.

[54]Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a 'Post-Phallic' Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ch. 2. Another classic example is war veterans returning 'home' to their families yet unable to fully 'rejoin' their previous lives and relationships due to the experiences made in war. For an analysis of attempts to stage this homecoming as a harmonious encounter that blends out the estrangement, see Steele, 'Welcome home!'.

[55]Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 55.

[56]Huysmans, 'Security!', p. 241.

[57]Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 62.

trying to identify themselves'.[58] It is expressed in the feeling of 'not-being-at-home … a mood that comes neither from the inside, nor the outside … a mood that arises at the threshold'.[59] The strange is thus not simply an Other that unexpectedly wanders into our world and unsettles it with its unfamiliar character or behaviour. Rather, it is an experience of the crossing of the familiar and the unfamiliar within the world we thought we knew, generating a feeling that Freud termed 'the uncanny'.

This feeling can be generated by an event.[60] The terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States can be seen as a prominent example of such a 'strange' event.[61] The event, especially the destruction of the Twin Towers in Manhattan on a beautiful autumn day, felt strange – 'out of this world' – to most Americans, not only because of its sudden, unimaginable, horrifying nature. The attacks also generated an ambivalent, uncanny atmosphere by piercing the belief in the United States as an omnipotent, confident, and unassailable place with a feeling of extreme vulnerability. For most observers, the ambivalence was enhanced by witnessing this 'unbelievable' event only through television images, blurring the line between fiction and reality.[62] Slightly different, the terror attack on the Boston marathon 12 years later, in October 2013, was a strange experience for US commentators because of the ambivalent 'identity' of the two attackers. As shown by M. L. deRaismes Combes, the two attackers defied the 'evil foreigner' category by being both Chechen-born Muslims and 'normal' American teenagers. Thus, they did not fit the familiar dichotomy of the 'war on terror' discourse the American public had become accustomed to, which located terrorists in faraway and 'unfree' places. Their status as 'ambiguous insiders/outsiders' created anxiety in the US public by exposing the possibility that future perpetrators may be 'hidden amongst us'.[63]

This highlights a crucial aspect of the phenomenological angle, namely its reading of the strange experience as the subconscious recognition of our own 'strangeness'. Combining existentialist philosophy with Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis, the emphasis is on the Self as a construct of our psyche. Whether these simplified constructs take the form of a mental image, a biographical narrative, or habitual practices, they cannot capture the complexity of human beings or, indeed, society. If anything they are designed to paper over and exclude much of it. On occasions when these hidden or oppressed features come through, we experience the limits of knowing ourselves and, thereby, encounter the Stranger within ourselves.[64] Such experiences of the uncanny are not reducible to a particular social interaction in which an external Other behaves in unfamiliar/unexpected ways. Rather, this angle emphasises the appearance of strangeness as an encounter with the contradictions and feelings of ambivalence in how we organise our being in the world internally, exposing our limited ability to know ourselves and facing the 'irreducible strangeness of being human'.[65] Although the representation of this strangeness may have a relational component in that the uncanny experience can take the form of an imagined 'abject-Other',[66] an external Other that, to us, embodies strange qualities yet is in fact an unconscious external expression of our own (oppressed) internal strangeness.[67] One might see the

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[58]Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, p. 3.

[59]Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (eds), *Phenomenologies of The Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 4.

[60]See also Lundborg's discussion of the 'pure event'; Tom Lundborg, *Politics of the Event: Time, Movement, Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 9.

[61]Chris Rumford, 'Social policy beyond fear: The globalization of strangeness, the "war on terror", and "spaces of wonder"', *Social Policy & Administration*, 42:6 (2008), p. 632.

[62]The responsibility for the 9/11 attacks was quickly attributed to an external 'evil' Other represented by Osama bin Laden; this personification was to bring clarity to why the event had occurred and how to respond to it. The event itself was uncanny.

[63]Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger', pp. 138–9.

[64]Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[65]William J. Richardson, 'Heidegger and the strangeness of being', in Kearney and Semonovitch (eds), *Phenomenologies of The Stranger*, p. 166. For a critique, see Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the sociology of knowledge', p. 588.

[66]Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*; Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism', p. 757.

[67]Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, pp. 35, 72ff.

creation of such an abject-Other, an external figure of the Stranger, as a move to banish internal strangeness, an act of separation designed to exclude it from the Self reminiscent of Connolly's account of the paradox of difference, or simply as a subjective projection to make the experience of internal strangeness tangible. Either way, the phenomenological/psychological angle complements the sociological one by highlighting that strangeness is a feeling generated by experiences that undermine the illusion of there being a coherent, consistent and clear conception of Self that can be fully known.

In sum, the concept of the Stranger/strangeness serves as a heuristic lens that directs attention to ambivalence as a source of anxiety and, as such, ontological insecurity for modern conceptions of identity. Operating with the assumption of identity as a social construct, the concept points to an unexpected experience that renders this identity unfamiliar, that defies existing categorisations and does not 'fit in'. It is a type of liminality/liminal Other that embodies an uncomfortable synthesis of nearness and distance, of something being close but 'out of place' and which, as a consequence, the Self does not know how to relate to. It thus unsettles not only the present by reminding of the fragile configuration in which identities are embedded in the here and now, but also raises the spectre of 'future strangeness among us'.[68]

Encountering the Stranger in interstate relations: Three scenarios

The remainder of the article outlines some scenarios of strangers/strangeness appearing in interstate relations. Specifically, it looks at three common configurations and processes in which states may come to see other states as strange: the phenomenon of 'rising powers' from the perspective of the hegemon, the dissolution of enmity (overcoming an antagonistic relationship), and the dissolution of friendship (close allies drifting apart). In our reading, all three configurations are characterised by an Other that occupies a central place in the meaning system of the Self (making it 'close') and then moves into a place that is unfamiliar (making it 'distant'), which renders the relationship ambivalent and unsettles the Self. The focus on relations between states is prompted by Bauman's astute observation that the state 'is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies' and strives to 'keep the stranger at a mental distance' to assert an identity.[69] Both poststructuralists and ontological security scholarship have highlighted efforts by the state in addressing threats to state/national identity through practices such as securitisation.[70] While such reactions to the encounter – mobilising familiar representations that cast the Other/the relationship in knowable and relatable terms – are well documented, the illustrations here direct attention to where and how the Stranger might emerge in the first place.

We see this encounter as a process, something that happens gradually, rather than a sudden occurrence. Starting point in all three configurations is a familiar relationship between two states that contains particular self-understandings with corresponding sets of expectations in which the Self has invested its identity. This becomes unsettled through acts that are unfamiliar, that deviate from and, perhaps, violate expectations and that are neither accidental nor deemed 'wrong' by the Other, yet which make no sense to the Self, leaving it puzzled and confused. Diagnosing behaviour/a relationship as strange is not the analytical privilege of the observer; the uncanny encounter is perceived and felt by political actors themselves, be it in subjective (phenomenological angle) or intersubjective (sociological angle) terms. That said, encounters can be subtle and ignored for a while precisely because they are disturbing, coming to the forefront only in particular moments. In addition, feelings of unsettledness and heightened anxiety are difficult to trace empirically, not least because they rarely are publicly aired and often are mitigated quickly.

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[68]Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger', p. 130.

[69]Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, pp. 63, 67.

[70]The state understood as a political unit claiming a collective identity represented by government officials and governed through institutions.

These are serious methodological challenges, and we do not have the ambition here to tackle them and measure facets of strangeness and degrees of ontological insecurity in each configuration. The modest aim is to point to processes where, we think, the conceptual lens can be fruitfully applied, starting with a more detailed empirical illustration and then outlining the logic by which the Stranger emerges in the other two configurations.

Encounters with 'rising powers'

The first scenario shows an Other that defies the expectations of the hegemon, leading up to the political decision to securitise it. Hierarchical configurations of international relations are often characterised by the (self-defined) superior power expecting that different others can and should be socialised into its world. Even prior to the post-Cold War triumphalism epitomised by Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the 'end of history', Western actors have long exhibited the expectation that others can become 'more like us'. Supported by the confidence that a liberal international order is the best model for organising social relations, the view that others can or must change and adapt to 'the world of the Self' is perhaps most pronounced in liberal/progressivist narratives of development, democratisation, and human rights.[71] As Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney have shown, difference is subsumed under the existing order through either assimilation or conquest, with key concepts such as 'liberal peace' and 'global governance' expressing 'the desire for the eventual homogenization of difference into "sameness"'.[72] The Other's capacity for change is propelled through 'the West' and geared towards its (particular) path of development and subjectivity.[73] While the belief that there is one (universal) developmental trajectory, which rational actors will recognise and learn to adopt, offers a comfortable frame for dealing with difference, it also contains the seed for encountering strangers.

From the position of the American hegemon and other actors invested in and benefiting most from the 'liberal international order',[74] in the last decades strangers have appeared in the form of so-called 'rising powers'. Broadly understood as states with large populations undergoing significant economic growth, 'rising powers' is not a clear-cut category, and already the different acronyms created for slightly varying groupings of states – BRICS, IBSA, BASIC, etc. – illustrate both the attempt to capture and familiarise them and the difficulty of doing so. Still, the liberal view was that 'rising powers' were gradually, but inevitably, developing into something similar to the Western Self. Over the past two decades, however, the confidence that rising powers will integrate into the liberal international order, and that this is the only trajectory for successful development, has been shaken. Increasingly, Western academics and policymakers 'wonder what kind of great power they will become … and discuss how [to] "manage' their rise"'.[75] Rising powers are (coming) close to the hegemon by virtue of challenging existing hierarchies and statuses. Once they behave in unfamiliar ways, namely by (i) questioning/disturbing the order of things and hence the boundaries that maintain the certainty of identities embedded within that order, and by (ii) offering alternatives that do not fit familiar categories, they appear as strangers to established power(s), and to the hegemon in particular. Whereas traditional IR scholarship uses the label of

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[71]See, for example, Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 48.

[72]Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 11, 48, 94f.

[73]L. M. H. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire Between Asia and the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 81; Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2012), p. 59.

[74]A shortcut for a complex system of governance purportedly resting on liberal principles.

[75]Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'The role of beliefs in identifying rising powers', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9:2 (2016), p. 211.

'revisionist powers' to capture deviance and challenges to the hegemon,[76] the lens of the Stranger provides a different understanding of how the hegemon perceives and is threatened by the rising power.

Western debates regarding two East Asian rising powers, Japan from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, and China since then, serve as illustrations.[77] Regardless of their different starting points and political relations to the US, their 'rise' was initially welcomed as it was expected to adhere to the liberal democratic capitalist trajectory, until taking a 'strange' turn. The US occupation of Japan after the Second World War, coupled with Japan's political 're-education', became a strategic alliance and created a close political relationship. Whereas the hierarchy within the security relationship remained stable, Japan became stronger economically. It was quickly considered part of the Western developed economies in terms of the OECD world, that is, part of the liberal order championed by the US, and as such 'validating' the US economic model. In other words, Japan was widely seen on course of becoming 'more like us'. However, soon Japan's economic growth started to look strange to the US: A growing trade deficit and indebtedness on the US-side triggered a debate on Japan's ability to economically 'outcompete' the US, which unsettled the familiar identities of the latter as 'Number One' and of Japan as the junior partner.[78] Furthermore, the line of argumentation emerged in the US that Japan was more 'different' than previously assumed, in terms of deviating from the principles of free trade and market capitalism.[79] Its commitment to the liberal order, and the hierarchy within it, seemed ambivalent. New labels such as the 'developmental state' or 'comparative capitalism' were created to define and familiarise Japan in relation to existing economic theory.[80] In the end, the view took hold in the US that Japan was not on course to become (more) like the American Self after all. Instead, the Japanese economy came to be seen as 'different, closed and threatening', which some explained by a 'culture' incompatible with 'the West'.[81] Japan was considered a 'non-Western and non-liberal society'[82] that could not participate in the Western liberal economic order without losing its 'Japanese character'.[83] Thus, not only was 'rising Japan' seen as potentially overtaking and replacing the US as an economic power, it also seemed to follow its own path, challenging both the US *and* the (geo)political order it stood for. A *Pax Japonica* – again a novel yet knowable category – was pictured as a neomercantilist order in contrast to *Pax Americana*.

It is against this backdrop of a 'strange' Japan that was neither fitting in nor staying at a distance that we must see the US move to redefine the trade relationship by securitising Japan into an economic adversary as an aim to achieve certainty by eliminating ambiguity/ambivalence.[84] References to Japanese 'economic warfare' became widespread,[85] and in the 1980s the American public considered Japan's economy to be more threatening than the Soviet Union's

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[76]Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm, 'Morality and progress: IR narratives on international revisionism and the status quo', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:4 (2019), pp. 407–28.

[77]On the parallels between the two, see also Nicola Nymalm, *From 'Japan Problem' to 'China Threat'? Rising Powers in US Economic Discourse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[78]Japan become the largest deficit trading partner in 1982, and major (worldwide) creditor in 1985.

[79]Nicola Nymalm, 'The economics of identity: Is China the new "Japan problem" for the United States?', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:4 (2019), pp. 909–33.

[80]Chalmers A. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford University Press, 1982); Chalmers A. Johnson, 'Comparative capitalism: The Japanese difference', *California Management Review*, 35:4 (1993), pp. 51–67.

[81]Robert M. Uriu, *Clinton and Japan: The Impact of Revisionism on U.S. Trade Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 17.

[82]Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 391.

[83]Zoltán I. Búzás, 'Race and International Politics: How Racial Prejudice Can Shape Discord and Cooperation among Great Powers' (PhD dissertation: The Ohio State University, 2012), p. 241.

[84]On outright racism in US discourse on Japan, see, for instance, Búzás, 'Race and International Politics'.

[85]Richard Leaver, 'Restructuring in the global economy: From Pax Americana to Pax Nipponica?', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 14:4 (1989), p. 431.

military.[86] In the early 1990s the Clinton administration finally categorised Japan as 'too different' to deal with according to the principles of free trade,[87] and securitisation was supported by an openly confrontational trade policy adopted by the US. However, in trade negotiations this strategy proved to be unsuccessful, and it was quietly buried as the 'Japan problem' seemingly solved itself when the Japanese economy and trade deficit declined substantially in the mid-to-late 1990s. At the same time, the US deficit and attention shifted to 'rising China'.

When China began to reform and open up its economy in the 1980s, Western governments and analysts assumed or even predicted that this would ultimately lead to political liberalisation as well – hence, China would become 'more like us'. Thus, as in the case of Japan, China's rapid economic development was initially welcomed and supported by the US. Yet, when China replaced Japan as the US' largest creditor in 2000, and largest deficit trading partner in 2008, there seemed again to be something strange about this 'rising power'. How was it possible for China to prosper economically at unprecedented level, even seemingly outperforming the US, while not converging towards the levels of political liberalisation that capitalism was supposed to bring?[88] Additionally, China established itself as an actor both within the institutions of the liberal international order (such as the WTO) and learned to use them to its advantage. It has also started to invest in alternative institutions such as the New Development Bank or the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank. In the eyes of the West, this makes China an unfamiliar actor on the world stage, which defies existing categories and poses a particular problem for the self image of the US as the hegemon in, and 'supreme orderer' of the international system, as well as for the activity of ordering itself. By its deviance and refusing to become entirely 'like us', China exposes an ambiguity that is not supposed to be possible.[89] Attempts to deal with this include classifying China's political and economic model into novel yet knowable categories, such as 'illiberal capitalism', 'authoritarian capitalism', or by capturing it under the notion of a 'Beijing consensus', akin to the 'Washington consensus' of the 1990s.[90]

From a Western perspective, the question is whether this (still) signifies a transitional stage that will eventually turn China into a recognisable member of the liberal world order, or whether China is set to move along an alternative, unfamiliar path. The latter impression establishes its strangeness and prompted a move to make China knowable through securitisation.[91] This move is facilitated by the readily available frame of strategic (military) rivalry in the region, with realist voices having long employed the image of China as a rival/enemy as well as portraying the relationship in antagonistic terms.[92] This lens now appears to (re)gain in strength among

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[86]Due to their military alliance, spillovers into the security realm were more or less successfully prevented. But see Thomas U. Berger, 'From sword to chrysanthemum: Japan's culture of anti-militarism', *International Security*, 17:4 (1993), pp. 119–50 for an overview on debates whether Japan's economic growth would lead into it becoming a military power. Rather extreme renditions of this possibility were discussed in publications such as George Friedman and Meredith Lebard, *The Coming War With Japan* (New York: St Martins Press, 1991); Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 147

[87]In fact, Japan was blamed for leaving the US no other choice than to resort to protectionist measures.

[88]The thought behind this assumed interconnectedness can be summarised as 'liberal theory of history'. See Nicola Nymalm, 'The end of the "liberal theory of history"? Dissecting the US Congress' discourse on China's currency policy', *International Political Sociology*, 7:4 (2013), pp. 388–405. It was declared 'outdated' by Vice President Pence in October 2018. The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', available at: {https://www.white-house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf} accessed 25 March 2018.

[89]Nymalm, 'The economics of identity'.

[90]See, for example, Gideon Rachman, 'Illiberal capitalism', *Financial Times* (2008), available at: {http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/16f67dba-be6e-11dc-9932-0000779fd2ac.html} accessed 6 July 2010; Stefan A. Halper, *The Beijing Consensus* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[91]On the securitisation or othering of China, see, for example, Chengxin Pan, 'The "China Threat" in American self-imagination: The discursive construction of other as power politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 29:3 (2004), pp. 305–31; L. H. M. Ling, 'Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist dialectics and the "China threat"', *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 549–68; Oliver Turner, '"Threatening" China and US security: The international politics of identity', *Review of International Studies*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 903–24.

[92]In fact, the realist lens itself is part of the discourse that 'manages' difference by turning it into enmity.

Western analysts and practitioners, with an observable shift in the China discourse from accommodation to 'a more realistic'[93] if not confrontational approach underway.[94] Many of the current assessments echo the sentiment that 'we got China wrong in the past' but purportedly now know 'the truth': China is not becoming more like us, it is not 'passing' but staying close, which is why 'we' need an 'adequate' approach. The strangeness of China is managed by turning it into a threat. Even if this knowledge presents an unpleasant relationship, it is one that 'we' can prepare for.

Losing enemies and struggling with friends

Whereas the previous section illustrated the emergence of strangers coming 'too close' in unfamiliar ways, disturbing the hegemon's expectations and knowledge claims, this section discusses how strangers can appear when familiar relations of enmity or friendship break down. Point of departure is a stable relationship in which both sides clearly recognise each other as either enemies or friends and have embedded their conception(s) of Self within the relationship of enmity or friendship, correspondingly. The enemy and the friend are significant Others that are close to the Self and serve as an anxiety stabilising mechanism; they give meaning to their respective relationships and the world(s) organised through them. Yet, when enmities end and friendships become fraught, the significant Other turns into a stranger.

The end of conflict, including war, is not readily understood as (setting in motion) a process of estrangement; indeed the notion that the disappearance of the enemy may present a threat to state identity seems paradoxical. Yet while ending a relationship of enmity and building peace appears desirable and a sensible political choice, it is difficult for former adversaries to find new ways of relating to each other. Processes of conflict resolution and reconciliation, in which two actors decide to overcome a shared history of violent conflict and work towards building a positive relationship, are laborious and not always successful precisely because it requires renegotiating conceptions of Self and Other.[95] Understanding this as a process of estrangement highlights the unsettling nature of this process. It resonates with Jennifer Mitzen's argument that a states' identity may become attached to the enemy-Other and embed its ontological security in a relationship of conflict, which logically makes ending this relationship a threat to this identity.[96] Taking this further, Bahar Rumelili and colleagues explore how conflict resolution inevitably involves entering a state of heightened anxiety because the former enemy-Other is removed from the security realm and its status becomes ambiguous, generating what Rumelili calls 'peace anxieties'.[97]

This liminal phase often invites a fallback into familiar role images, that is, a resecuritisation of the Other as a known 'object of fear'.[98] The relationship between the United States and Russia over the last three decades is an example in this regard. Although the end of the Cold War prompted a seemingly clear role distribution of 'winner' and 'loser', both sides struggled to make sense of the new relationship and their state identities within it. Whereas the challenge this posed to Russian identity is perhaps more apparent,[99] successive US governments also had difficulties grasping the new constellation, especially once Russia's experiment with embracing liberal order failed. The ambivalence showed in shifting attitudes towards Russia under

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[93]European Commission, 'EU-China – A Strategic Outlook: Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council', available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf} accessed 29 June 2019.

[94]The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America'.

[95]Herbert C. Kelman, 'Reconciliation as identity change: A social-psychological perspective', in Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov (ed.) *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 111–24.

[96]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[97]Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*.

[98]Ibid., p. 16.

[99]Zarakol, *After Defeat*, ch. 5.

George W. Bush's war on terror,[100] leaving commentators in Washington to wonder 'who lost Russia'[101] and describe relations as 'confusing',[102] in unsuccessful attempts by the Obama administration to 'reset' the relationship without a clear sense of what that meant,[103] to the current split in Washington, with President Trump expressing admiration for Putin's authoritarianism and much of Congress drifting back into familiar antagonisms as a way to (re)turn Russia into a knowable Other.[104]

Taking a careful look at estrangement in conflict resolution not only helps to understand the hurdles faced by the parties involved and the lure of familiar representations. It also asks analysts to consider how parties (could) deal with anxieties in ways that brings about positive change, that is, to see estrangement as the phase through which reconciliation becomes possible.[105] Take, for instance, (West) German efforts to establish 'normal' or even 'friendly' relations with states like Israel, France, and Poland since the end of the Second World War. While generally recognised as examples of successful reconciliation,[106] the analytical lens advanced here directs attention to the liminal nature of the process of transforming perpetrator and victim into partners. It points to the recurrence of strange encounters underneath the political discourses of 'normalisation' not simply to explain tensions and setbacks in processes of reconciliation, but to highlight how political actors can use the opening provided by ambiguity to introduce and push alternative frames and identities.

Finally, there is dissolution of friendship. As a relationship marked by positive collective identity, friendship between states, especially what Simon Koschut and Andrea Oelsner term 'normative friendship',[107] is an effective source of ontological security.[108] However, bonds of friendship – shared structures of meaning and the practical support friends provide to each other – not only empower, but also generate interdependence and make friends vulnerable to each other. Given the dialectic relationship between empowerment and vulnerability, the friend-turning-stranger is 'a threat against which no one can be completely secure'.[109] Indeed, one might argue that it poses a greater threat to a stable sense of Self than the enemy-turning-stranger.[110] While it is safe to assume that friendships dissolve unintentionally and, hence, that estrangement among friends is less common, as Simmel notes estrangement "easily enters even the most intimate relationships".[111] It does so when one side feels that the other behaves in unexpected ways and violates fundamental norms of friendship. Not all disputes turn friends into strangers, of course. Yet overly idealised images, dissonance over how to interpret the world, disagreements about ideas of order, behaviour that violates shared norms, lacking solidarity, breach of trust and unwillingness to take

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[100]Graham T. Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, Dimitri K. Simes, and Paul J. Saunders, 'Russia and U.S. National Interests: Why Should Americans Care?', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Center for the National Interest, 2011, available at: {https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/20057953} accessed 5 September 2020.

[101]Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, 'Who lost Russia (this time)? Vladimir Putin', The Washington Quarterly, 38:2 (2015), pp. 167–87.

[102]Joshua A. Tucker 'The confusing state of U.S.-Russia relations', Time Magazine (12 September 2013).

[103]The symbolic button brought by the US, which Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and US Secretary of State Clinton were to press together during a meeting in Geneva in 2009, had the word 'reset' misspelled in Russian: instead of 'reset' (pereza-gruzka) it said 'overload' (peregruzka).

[104]The 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy label Russia (and China) a 'revisionist power' that wants 'to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests'. See The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', p. 25.

[105]Rumelili (ed.), Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security, p. 17.

[106]Lily Gardner Feldman, Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

[107]Simon Koschut and Andrea Oelsner (eds), Friendship and International Relations (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[108]Felix Berenskoetter, 'Friendship, security, and power', in Koschut and Oelsner (eds), Friendship and International Relations, pp. 51–71.

[109]Jürgen Straub, 'Personal and collective identity: A conceptual analysis', in H. Friese (ed.), Identities: Time, Difference, and Boundaries (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), p. 62.

[110]Horst Hutter, Politics as Friendship (Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier Press, 1978), p. 12.

[111]Simmel quoted in Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the sociology of knowledge', p. 680.

on board the friend's criticism – all this creates an ambivalent atmosphere in which friends don't understand each other anymore, turning a familiar relationship into something surprisingly fragile.

Estrangement among friends tends to flare up in moments when the stakes are high. An example is Janice Bially Mattern's account of the 1956 Suez crisis, when Britain, together with France and Israel, militarily invaded the canal zone claimed by Egypt without informing the US government, which disapproved of the move and forced a ceasefire and Britain to withdraw.[112] This unsettled the friendship between the US and Britain by revealing absence of trust and a common interpretative and strategic framework, suggesting that 'the substance of core "shared" values was not at all shared'.[113] Bially-Mattern's analytical focus is on the linguistic act of repair, more precisely on the reproduction of an Anglo-American international order in which the US-British relationship and state identities were embedded, and the power dynamics of this reproduction. The discomfort the Suez crisis generated in London and Washington remains the subtext of her study, yet it is not difficult to insert the concept of the Stranger into her assessment of both sides accusing each other of not understanding 'reality', and of betrayal. It was an uncanny experience for the British self-image as an imperial power, yet only brought to the fore an ongoing process and a fundamental tension in US-British relations over their relative status/role within Western international order.[114]

Another example of an estrangement process is offered by contemporary relations between Germany and the US. Their friendship formed during the Cold War gradually became unsettled by, especially, deep disagreements over motivations for and conduct of US military interventions, with the incomprehension of each other's stance vividly on display in emotional clashes over the 2003 intervention in Iraq.[115] While one might argue that German resistance to Washington's plan reflected a new-found self-confidence,[116] it was preceded by a decade of grappling with US demands to become a more active military player, which stood in sharp contrast to the 'civilian power' identity Germany had built up *within* the transatlantic relationship. This dissonance fuelled feelings of ambivalence and anxiety over what it meant to be a good ally, further exacerbated by irritations in Berlin over US practices in the War on Terror.[117] If the estrangement process was slowed down by Chancellor Merkel's commitment to restore close relations and the Obama administration's conciliatory stance, ambivalence returned in full force with the election of Donald Trump as US President. Whereas Trump's German heritage made him appear 'close' on the surface, his political values and view of Germany as a free-rider in NATO and unfair trading partner, his embrace of nationalism and dismissal of multilateral projects created a conflict of norms that increased the distance in the relationship.[118] Trump's populist and racist tactics also put an uncomfortable spotlight on views and practices that German governments worked hard to eradicate domestically. The Merkel government responded by investing in alternative friendships in Europe that are more affirmative of Germany's self-image, and by continuing to mobilise familiar tropes[119] and celebrate shared values in the US. The latter approach has been welcomed within American society, especially by those feeling unsettled by their own government,[120]

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[112]Janice Bially Mattern, 'Why "soft power" isn't so soft: Representational force and the sociolinguistic construction of attraction in world politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33:3 (2005), pp. 583–612.

[113]Ibid., p. 371.

[114]W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991).

[115]Steven Szabo, *Parting Ways: The Crisis in German-American Relations* (Washington: The Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

[116]Dieter Dettke, 'The 2003 Iraq War as a turning point in German-American relations: Political leadership and alliance cohesion', *German Politics*, 27:2 (2018), pp. 158–73.

[117]Berenskoetter and Giegerich, 'From NATO to ESDP'.

[118]Moritz Koch, 'Fremder Freund Amerika', *Handelsblatt* (23 October 2017); Klaus Larres and Ruth Wittlinger (eds), *German-American Relations in the 21st Century: A Fragile Friendship* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[119]See: {https://wunderbartogether.org/leadership/about/} accessed 20 March 2020.

[120]Speech by Dr Angela Merkel on the occasion of the 368th Harvard University Commencement, 30 May 2019; Jefferson Chase, 'Americans like Angela Merkel, while Germans loathe Donald Trump', *Deutsche Welle*, available at: {https://www.dw.com/en/americans-like-angela-merkel-while-germans-loathe-donald-trump/a-42769570} accessed 6 September 2020.

reminding that ontological (in)security is not simply created between 'states' but has both a personal and a transnational dimension.

In lieu of conclusion: Strangeness, ethics and the human condition

This article recovered the Stranger as a figure embodying ambiguity/ambivalence, which unsettles attempts to represent and relate to the Other in familiar ways. Combining closeness and distance, the Stranger defies the expected and destabilises familiar knowledge of a world in which a sense of Self has been embedded. The article argued that this makes the Stranger/strangeness an important analytical concept for capturing the threat to modern formulations of identity. This serves as a corrective to treating difference *as such* as a threat to identity and directs attention to a subdued element in poststructuralist and ontological security scholarship, namely their assumption that political actors are driven by the desire to keep ambivalence at bay. The concept of the Stranger/strangeness thus adds to their explanatory logic by revealing what political strategies of conquest or conversion, including practices of securitisation, respond to. The three scenarios of how strangers/strangeness may be encountered in interstate relations add to how we understand the challenge rising powers pose to the hegemon; the difficulty of redefining relations after war; and the effect that tensions between close allies may have on their identities.

While the concept of the Stranger/strangeness thus has significant analytical value, from an ethical point of view advancing a reading of the Stranger as a *threat* is also problematic. Returning to the reservation among poststructuralists mentioned earlier, one may argue that it accepts the modern urge to eliminate the indeterminate or ambivalent and, thereby, turns the category of analysis into a category of political practice. That is, it risks linking up with a popular discourse that associates 'strangers' with 'danger', affirming a particular conception of 'identity' that rests on certainties, and justifying violent political practices against others seen as disturbing this certainty. This does not have to be so – consider the reading of estrangement as a process through which reconciliation becomes possible. Or, indeed, Simmel's view that the Stranger is a *peculiar* but not necessarily problematic feature of society. Thus, in support of the call for IR scholars to come to terms with the elusive,[121] we conclude by pointing to alternative readings of how strangeness may be approached and dealt with. This does not mean discarding the concept discussed in this article, but lifting it out of an analytical narrative that reads the Stranger/strangeness as a source of insecurity.

One way of doing so is redefining what it means for an identity to be (in)secure. In his 1998 article Huysmans already gestures in this direction by highlighting postmodern epistemologies as 'a window of opportunity for re-articulating how we mediate-constitute the relation between the determined and the undetermined'.[122] The call for treating strangeness as an opportunity for rethinking how identities are formed and changed ties in with a well-known agenda of critical scholarship, most clearly addressed in the feminist call to break down seemingly natural and highly problematic gender binaries and stereotypes, and more generally in the Derridian emphasis on the ethos of accepting undecidability and aporia. What Huysmans points to is that the concept of the Stranger/strangeness can – and, perhaps, should – serve as an effective ally in this task. Thus, rather than reducing possible ontologies to either enemies or friends, we might use the concept to open up conceptions of Self and Other and see the productive, integral role of ambivalence in the process of (collective) identity formation.[123] It would enable conversations with queer theory, scholarship on liminality and hybridity, and postcolonial and post-Western IR that reject 'the possibility of purity' and invite an engagement with

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[121]R. B. J. Walker, 'Man, citizen, and political judgement', *International Political Sociology*, 12:1 (2018), pp. 88–93.
[122]Huysmans, 'Security!', p. 246.
[123]See also Combes, 'Encountering the Stranger'.

'in-betweenness'[124] and 'the boundary zones and peripheries'[125] of international politics. It links up with what L. H. M. Ling termed 'Yin-Yang dialectics' to illustrate the co-implication as well as equal valence of Self and Other premised on a non-dualist subject-object relationship.[126] This epistemological shift opens the eye to ontologies in which in-betweenness and 'borders-as-capillaries'[127] are not seen as a problem and closed down, but considered normal and productive. It is an invitation to what John Cash calls 'dwelling in ambivalence'.[128]

Accepting and using the reality of ambiguity and in-betweenness, rather than trying to eliminate it, makes sense not only for ethical but practical reasons: after all, if political efforts to eliminate strangeness mobilise categories that provide the ground for strangers/strangeness to emerge in the first place, such efforts are bound to fail. Returning to one of the examples mentioned earlier, Ling and colleagues offer alternative prospects for US-China relations that include rethinking the status of 'hegemony' and its implied hierarchy, without ending up in 'binary scenarios of either a hegemonic challenge to the Western-dominant order or a linear integration into it'.[129] Such thinking does exist. In a 2018 article, two former Obama administration officials wrote in the light of failed expectations *vis-à-vis* China that a 'starting point for a better approach is a new degree of humility about the United States' ability to change China', neither seeking to isolate, weaken or transform it.[130] The Stranger lens suggests that such humility must go along with an acceptance of America's self-image as ambiguous. This is difficult, no doubt, and it is apparent that the Trump administration has not followed this path. Given the stakes, this makes it ever more important for scholars and practitioners to insist on alternative ways of thinking and acting based on the acceptance of strangeness. Processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation also benefit from this lens and its creative promise. Instead of pursuing a politics of closure, it asks political actors to accept the continuous negotiation of a liminal relationship that cannot escape memories of violence, while at the same time refusing to be solely defined by it, and to treat this ambivalence as a reservoir for learning.

Indeed, the call to recognise international relations as 'permanently liminal'[131] and ambiguity as *normal* culminates in the suggestion to read strangeness as a universal condition.[132] Chris Rumford has made this point perhaps most strongly when arguing that, in a globalised world, 'strangeness is a condition of the social and envelops us all', proposing the 'cosmopolitan stranger' as a new sociological figure.[133] This also offers an analytical inroad to phenomena of 'friendship among strangers'[134] and to read 'strangership' as a form of thin friendship.[135] In a final move, one might even say that a lens that recognises this reality does not require the Stranger

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[124]Chih-Yu Shih and Josuke Ikeda, 'International relations of post-hybridity: Dangers and potentials in non-synthetic cycles', *Globalizations*, 13:4 (2016), p. 456.

[125]Mälksöö, 'The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory', p. 483.

[126]Ling, 'Worlds beyond Westphalia', p. 560. From the psychoanalytical angle, scholars have emphasised the need to embrace internal strangeness or 'the internal Other' to be able to connect with others, for example, Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*. Research also suggests that in cultures influenced by Buddhist/Taoist philosophical traditions there is greater expectation of change and tolerance of contradiction in their self-conceptions than in Western cultures and societies. See Julie Spencer-Rodgers, Melissa J. Williams, and Kaiping Peng, 'Cultural differences in expectations of change and tolerance for contradiction: A decade of empirical research', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14:3 (2010), pp. 296–312.

[127]L. H. M. Ling et al., *India China: Rethinking Borders and Security* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

[128]John Cash, 'To dwell in ambivalence: On the promise and dilemmas of Beck's "the art of doubt"', in Anthony Elliott and Eric Hsu (eds), *The Consequences of Global Disasters* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 169–81.

[129]Chengxin Pan, 'Toward a new relational ontology in global politics: China's rise as holographic transition', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 18:3 (2018), p. 357.

[130]Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, 'The China reckoning', *Foreign Affairs*, 97:2 (2018), pp. 62, 70.

[131]Mälksöö, 'The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory', p. 487.

[132]Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the sociology of knowledge', p. 677.

[133]Chris Rumford, 'The strangeness of Europe', *Comparative European Politics*, 14:4 (2016), pp. 504–22; Rumford, *The Globalization of Strangeness*.

[134]Ling et al., *India China*, p. 7.

[135]Peter Mallory 'Friendship and strangeship: Rethinking political friendship through the work of Adam Smith', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33:6 (2012), pp. 591–605.

as a label to capture a particular kind of Other(ness). Given that the Stranger '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',[136] we might return to the critical stance that, to avoid naturalising this ideal, we should discard the category of the Stranger entirely.[137] Concluding with this counterpoint may seem strange given the effort of this article, but it serves to remind that the recovery of the Stranger as analytical category must not lead to its reification within a particular logic that narrows, even harms, possibilities of interaction.

Felix Berenskötter is Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in International Relations at SOAS University of London. His research interests include theorising world politics through concepts of identity, friendship, security, and power. Felix published widely on these topics and is currently writing a book on friendship and estrangement in international relations. Author's email: fb12@soas.ac.uk

Nicola Nymalm is Assistant Professor in War Studies at the Swedish Defence University (FHS), and Associate Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). Her research interests include relations between 'established' and 'emerging' powers drawing from critical approaches to IR, IPE, security, and military studies. She is the author of *From 'Japan Problem' to 'China Threat'?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), and her previous work has appeared in journals such as *International Political Sociology*; *International Studies Review*; and *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Author's email: nicola.nymalm@fhs.se

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[136]Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Rethinking strangeness: From structures in space to discourses in civil society', *Thesis Eleven*, 79:1 (2004), p. 89. In his critique of Simmel, Alexander argues that it is the discourse on strangeness that creates 'the strangeness of a [social] status', and not the other way around: pp. 92f, 102.

[137]Sara Ahmed, 'This other and other others', *Economy and Society*, 31:4 (2002), pp. 558–72; Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2013). According to Ahmed, even well-intended calls for 'welcoming the Stranger' through an ethics of hospitality (pp. 16, 150f.), or taking estrangement as universal condition (p. 93) do not solve the problem, as 'such a gesture still takes for granted the status of the stranger as a figure with both linguistic and bodily integrity' (p. 4).