

The Spatial Sense of Empire: Encountering Strangers with Simmel, Tocqueville and Martineau

THOMAS KEMPLE*

Kemple, T., 2012. The Spatial Sense of Empire: Encountering Strangers with Simmel, Tocqueville and Martineau. *Oñati Socio-legal Series* [online], 2 (7), 1-17. Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2004301>



Abstract

This essay takes Georg Simmel's conceptualization of space as a form of sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) in his 1908 masterpiece, *Sociology*, as a framework for critically re-reading two 19th century classics in the sociology of empire. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835/1940) is shown to illustrate Simmel's understanding of social-spatial boundaries by portraying the cultural and historical geography of America as an 'optic space' of racial (in)equality. Similarly, Harriett Martineau's study of morals and manners in *Society in America* (1837) exemplifies Simmel's ideas on social-spatial sensibilities with its attention to how everyday settings serve as a kind of 'acoustic space' of gendered (un)freedom. Drawing on related arguments by recent thinkers and critics, and rectifying the relative neglect of how socio-spatial dynamics are addressed in the texts of classical sociology, the essay examines a description in each work of a particular personal encounter with strangers which exemplifies how *the spatial sense of empire* disrupts assumptions that new-world democracy has superseded old-world colonialism. Considered as illustrations of Simmel's thesis concerning the spatial orders of society, the 'traveling and anecdotal theories' of Martineau and Tocqueville provide 'sociological allegories' designed to instruct reading publics on how law, empire, and social mores constitute bounded fields of struggle within the contact zones of modern empire.

Key words

Sociology; Law; History; Ethnography; space; gender; race; class; United States; Europe

Resumen

Este artículo toma la conceptualización del espacio como una forma de asociación (*Vergesellschaftung*) de Georg Simmel, en su obra maestra de 1908, *Sociology*, como un marco en el que hacer un análisis crítico de dos clásicos del siglo XIX de la sociología del imperio. Se toma la obra de Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835/1940), para ilustrar el concepto que Simmel tenía de los límites socio-espaciales, retratando la geografía cultural e histórica de América, como un

Paper presented at the workshop *Law's Imperial Fields*, held in the International Institute for the Sociology of Law, Oñati, Spain, 23-24 June 2010, and coordinated by Renisa Mawani and Julian Go.
* Sociology, University of British Columbia, 6303 N. W. Marine Drive, Vancouver, B. C. V6T 1Z1 CANADA.
kemple@interchange.ubc.ca

“espacio óptico” de (des)igualdad racial. De forma similar, el estudio que Harriett Martineau realiza de la moral y las costumbres en *Society in America* (1837), ejemplifica las ideas de Simmel sobre las sensibilidades socio-espaciales, con su teoría sobre cómo los escenarios cotidianos son una especie de “espacio acústico” de (falta de) libertad de género. A partir de argumentos relacionados de pensadores y críticos recientes, y rectificando la negligencia relativa sobre cómo se abordan las dinámicas socio-espaciales en los textos clásicos de sociología, este artículo analiza en cada obra una descripción de un encuentro personal particular con extraños, que ejemplifica cómo el *sentido espacial del imperio* altera las asunciones de que la nueva democracia del mundo ha superado al antiguo colonialismo. Las “teorías de viaje y anécdotas” de Martineau y Tocqueville, consideradas ilustraciones de las tesis de Simmel en relación a los órdenes espaciales de la sociedad, ofrecen “alegorías sociológicas” diseñadas para instruir al público lector sobre cómo derecho, imperio y costumbres sociales constituyen ámbitos limitados de lucha en las zonas de contacto del imperio moderno.

Palabras clave

Sociología; derecho; historia; etnografía; espacio; género; raza; clase; Estados Unidos; Europa

Table of contents

1. Strangers in America.....	4
2. Acoustic and Optical Spaces of Empire.....	6
3. The Borders of Post-Colonial Contact.....	12
Acknowledgement.....	15
Notes.....	15
Bibliography.....	16

Interaction [*Wechselwirkung*] between human beings is felt – apart from everything else it is -- also as space-filling. If a number of individuals live within certain spatial boundaries and are isolated from one another, so that they immediately fill their own place with their own substance and activity, then the space between them is empty space, or practically speaking: nothing. But the moment they enter into reciprocal relations, the space between them seems filled and animated. Naturally this rests on the double meaning of the term 'between': a relationship *between* two elements, which in the last analysis consists of an immanent movement or modification within each of the elements, comes to be conceived of as taking place between them in the sense of in a spatial intervention [*Dazwischeneintreten*]. Whatever errors this double meaning might otherwise lead to, it nevertheless has deeper significance in a sociological case: the merely functional reciprocity, whose contents remain within each of its personal carriers, effectively realizes itself here also as the correspondence between existing spaces, and always finds itself actually located *between* both points in space in which each designates the one for the other from the place filled by each alone (Simmel 1992 [1908], p. 689; 2009 [1908], p. 45; 1997 [1903], pp. 37-138; translation modified).

1. Strangers in America

Recent declarations that America has now entered a phase of 'post-imperial' foreign policy (Zakaria 2009) should not let us forget that the building of independent nation-states and colonial empires typically involves the rediscovery, modification, or invention of legal and local regimes of sovereign order and territorial rule. From the war of independence in 1776 to the end of the civil war in 1865, civil and intellectual discourse about 'America' tended to draw upon a peculiar combination of philosophical idealism and pragmatic realism concerning the prospects of securing legitimate rule on the continent. In a factual and historical sense, the United States was a 'post-colonial' country in that it was no longer a part of the British empire, and yet at the same time it was also engaged in or considering its own imperial projects. The early settlers, revolutionaries, and founding fathers were not just compelled to address the socio-legal problem of how to establish authority over an indefinite, growing, and mobile population, including indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved or subjugated groups; they also had to solve the socio-spatial problem of how to secure the boundaries of this seemingly infinite and richly endowed territory, some of it contested by other national powers and most of it supposedly 'empty' and uninhabited. In the words of *The Federalist* (1788), 'the natural limit of a democracy is that distance from the central point which will but just permit the most remote citizens to assemble as often as their public functions demand' (quoted in Simmel 2009 [2008], p. 586, 1997 [1903], p. 159). At stake then was how to reconcile the social significance of space (within the limits of density and emptiness) with the spatial determinations of social fields (between the extremes of proximity and distance). In practical and political terms, the constitution of democratic society in America involved cultivating the private interests of citizens while marking the public borders of empire.

Here I want to consider how these social-spatial issues are taken up as an intellectual and sociological problem in two classic texts which address the early history of the United States from the standpoint of traveling outsiders. Harriet Martineau's *Society in America*, first published in two volumes in 1837, and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, first published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, can be called the first historical sociologies of modern empire. Anticipating arguments made by intellectuals writing in the next generation and addressing issues which are of increasing concern to sociologists today (Go 2009), each asks how the new republic can sustain its authority over an unfathomably vast expanse of territory. In various ways, they consider whether legitimacy can be established through such traditional means as the exercise of military coercion or the threat of force, or instead through distinctively modern measures, especially the peaceful

application of the juridical principle of popular sovereignty. Each questions whether the legal right to *individual property* can provide an adequate basis for *social order*, but in a way which does not transform social equality into the tyranny of the majority (Tocqueville's primary interest), or which does not sacrifice personal freedom to the collective power of public opinion (Martineau's main concern). These works may be considered contributions to the as yet unprofessionalized field of sociology not only insofar as they employ broad conceptual categories to describe and classify social life, from everyday morals and manners to professional politics and economic processes. They are also inaugural texts of 'the sociological imagination' insofar as they deploy empirical methods of ethnographic observation and cross-cultural comparison with the aim of explaining how the micro-dynamics of personal milieus and individual encounters are tied to the macro-politics of structural relations and historical forces (Kemple and Mawani 2009). For both Martineau and Tocqueville, the prospect of establishing a democratic society in America poses a political and cultural *problem* which is also a critical and intellectual *puzzle*.

In what follows I sketch a thought experiment – a kind of virtual test in two-dimensional space – in an attempt to identify how some of the socio-spatial coordinates of post-colonial America are addressed in each of these accounts. I take Georg Simmel's pioneering conception of space as a 'form of sociation' (*Vergesellschaftung*) in Chapter 9 of his 1908 masterpiece, *Sociology*, as an analytical framework for conducting a fresh reading of these 19th century classics in the historical sociology of empire.¹ Simmel has been overlooked as perhaps the first thinker to thematize space and place explicitly as a problem for sociology (cf. Gieryn 2000). At the same time, his approach is useful for recovering the relatively neglected spatial dimension of other classical works, such as the ones by Martineau and Tocqueville considered here. Simmel's novel thesis is that *the social qualities of spatial forms* -- which he examines in terms of territorial exclusivity, physical boundedness, material fixity, relative distantiation, and geographic mobility – are dependent upon, rather than the primary causes of, *the spatial determinations of social groups* – including the ways in which social spaces are organized, regulated, standardized and unified, or how they are depopulated or presumed to be 'empty'. Taking the establishment of kingdoms, domains, realms, or empires (*Reiche*) as his initial illustration, he argues that social life is spatialized through 'interactions' (*Wechselwirkungen*, literally: 'reciprocal effects') *between* groups and individuals. This 'betweenness' can be understood the dual sense of both filling space through social conduct or personal interaction and clearing a spatial location through the demarcation or opening up of social fields, an insight which is echoed by later sociologists of space (Simmel 1997 [1903], pp. 137-138, 2009 [1908], pp. 543-545, Lefebvre 1991, Augé 1995, Bourdieu 1998, see the epigraph above).

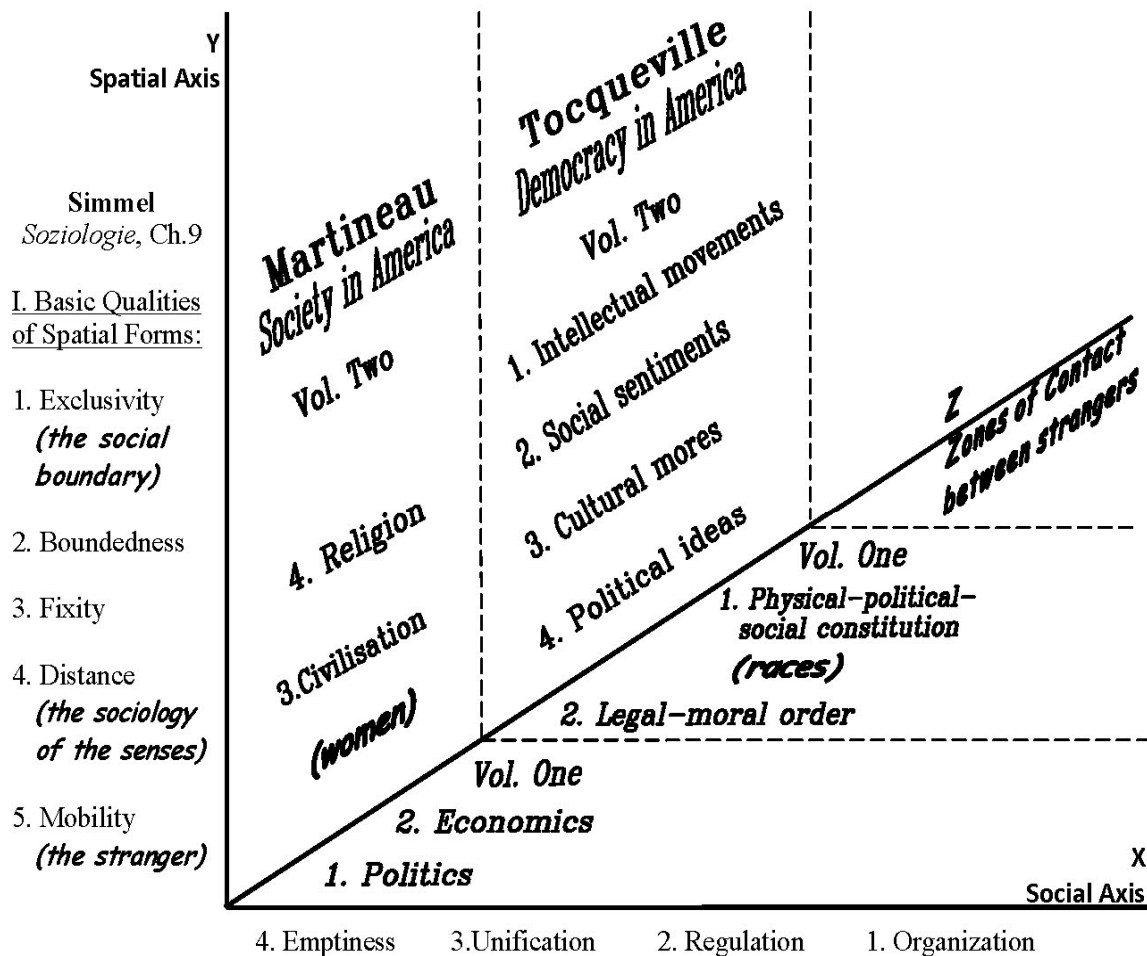
To illustrate this idea, I show how Martineau and Tocqueville draw attention to certain features of 'the stranger' (which Simmel famously elaborates on in a famous excursus inserted between the two main sections of the chapter on space) by adopting the stance of the first-person witness and intellectual observer of the foreign yet oddly familiar social spaces of a 'post-colonial' American empire. In contrast to conventional treatments of these classic works by Martineau and Tocqueville as general sketches of the manners, mores, principles and practices of democratic society in America, I focus instead on how each develops a detailed comparative and ethnographic account of how social space is produced and ordered within particular historical, geographical and cultural contexts (cf. Lefebvre 1991). These texts have a common subject-matter, namely, the political, economic, social, cultural and economic conditions of the North American continent in the 1830s, with Martineau tending to emphasize intimate and personal relationships in terms of the micro-dynamics of class, gender, and race, and Tocqueville placing more stress on the macro-institutional forces and organizational features which shape the fates of institutions and citizens within a broadly international frame. Despite this obvious

basis for reading the two texts together, few commentators have examined the similarities between them with respect to their standpoint and style, especially in adopting a first-person perspective while making larger claims to intellectual objectivity. Likewise, little has been noted about their common approach and methodology, particularly in developing general arguments with reference to anecdotal evidence and incidental observations (cf. Hill 2001). Both writers develop 'auto-ethnographic' narratives of their views and impressions as foreign outsiders while at the same time attempting to convey both critical judgments and impartial insights.

Where Martineau writes as a bourgeois feminist and socialist reformer for a popular English readership, Tocqueville writes as an aristocratic and 'liberal' conservative for a French readership composed mainly of political and intellectual elites. Exemplifying Simmel's profile of 'the stranger' as one who (in contrast to the nomad or wanderer) 'comes today and stays tomorrow' (1971 [1908], 2009 [1908], pp. 601-604), Martineau and Tocqueville also reflexively account for their own generic position as participant observers who are both remote from and near to the people they are writing about, that is, as passing outsiders who are both excluded from and drawn into the entanglements and commitments of established insiders. As visitors to a land once colonized or claimed by their fellow countrymen, Martineau and Tocqueville occupy an ambiguous standpoint as 'strangers in America', in the sense that their specific and general observations are formulated from a position which can be located between detachment and involvement, and insofar as their 'sense of space' is marked simultaneously by distance and proximity. Echoing a point made by Simmel regarding the discretion of the traveler and the tactful reserve of the foreigner, Tocqueville and Martineau note that locals often convey truths, anecdotes, and opinions 'in fireside confidence' or in the secrecy of the drawing room which would not otherwise be divulged to friends or announced openly (Simmel 2009 [1908], p. 590, pp. 602-603, Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 20; and Martineau 1981 [1837], p. 55). As these texts demonstrate in an exemplary way, such sentimental confidences and flashes of insight allow the intellectual to speak in the personal voice of both reason and passion while at the same time appealing to the general interests and imagination of a reading public.

2. Acoustic and Optical Spaces of Empire

In **Figure 1**, I attempt to locate in an approximate way the general concepts which Martineau and Tocqueville use to organize their particular perceptions and impressions of America within the X/Y axis implied by Simmel's ideas on 'the spatial orders of society'. Simmel's schema suggests that the institutional features of a society -- such as the standard and organized legal regime of territorial rule at the municipal, state, and federal levels -- are the basis for the specific intellectual, moral, and sentimental qualities of a people, such as freedom, equality, and solidarity, especially insofar these values are manifested in particular social situations and circumstances. Across a range of intimate and impersonal settings, social and spatial relations converge to form *zones of contact between strangers*, which I have depicted here as a virtual third dimension along the Z-axis. In order to illustrate how the legal and moral order of empire in post-colonial America is manifested in ways that implicate both settled insiders and traveling outsiders who enter its borders, below I examine two passages in these texts which depict how encounters between and among individual members of classes, races, genders, and generations take place within these contact zones.



II. Spatial Determinations of Social Groups

Figure 1: The Social-Spatial Coordinates of (Post-)Colonial America

By self-consciously adopting the relatively mobile stance of 'the stranger' in the course of their travels through America, Martineau and Tocqueville employ methods of ethnographic observation and techniques of autoethnographic writing which exemplify Simmel's conception of 'the sociology of the senses', his novel idea that social spaces are perceived through varying degrees of proximity and distance (as developed in the second excursus of the chapter on 'space' in *Sociology*; see Simmel 2009 [1908], pp. 70-583; 1997 [1907]). If sight provides a sensory basis for the experience of stability and disengagement in social life, he argues, hearing seems to be more attuned to the subtle fluctuations of committed and intimate social relations. Although these senses operate relatively autonomously, they are coordinated through a kind of division of labour, and 'are nevertheless constructed for mutual supplementation, for ascertaining the lasting and plastic nature of the human being by the eye and the more delicately undulating utterances by the ear' (Simmel 1997 [1907], p. 115, 2009 [1908], p. 575). With these distinctions in mind, we might say that where Tocqueville writes in the first person as an *eye-witness*, attempting to commit to paper a precise picture of what 'I saw', Martineau tends to report from her own standpoint on her impressions as an *ear-witness*, attempting to convey the flowing stream of what 'I was told' (cf. Geertz 1988). If *Democracy in America* can be described as a sprawling panoramic portrait of the emerging American empire viewed as optical space, *Society in America* can be called a minor concerto expressing how this new world resonates within localized settings experienced as acoustic space. In terms later popularized by Marshall McLuhan, 'acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses; whereas "rational" or "pictorial" space is

uniform, sequential and continuous, and creates a closed world' (McLuhan 1969, p. 59). To be sure, the difference in this case is more a matter of degree or approach than of kind, with Tocqueville striving to project an overall picture connecting the details of an emerging social totality, and Martineau beginning from her own sense of interconnected wholes (such as 'religion', 'civilization', 'politics', 'economics') before attempting to distinguish their various parts and peculiarities. Generally speaking, we can say each text is constructed to serve as a kind of conduit for the transmission of textually mediated sensory perceptions through which sentiments and mores, ideas and theories *travel* between persons, places, and periods, a point I return to in my concluding remarks (cf. Said 1983).

What I am calling their 'spatial sense of empire' is most obviously and paradoxically pronounced in the case of Martineau. Not only was she unable to taste or smell, but as she concedes early on in *Society in America*, 'I laboured under only one peculiar disadvantage, that I am aware of; but one that is incalculable. I mean my deafness' (Martineau 1981 [1837], p. 54). With the aid of 'a trumpet of remarkable fidelity', however, she can confidently attest to 'the accuracy of my information', and even considers this liability an advantage to the extent she has been able 'gain more in *têtes-à-têtes* than is given to people in general conversation', and insofar as the need for closeness often evokes 'a feeling of ease and privacy' for speaker and listener alike (cf. Deegan 2001). In the methodological treatise she wrote in preparation for the trip to America (but published a year later), *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, Martineau characterizes her investigative method as a kind of 'cooperative work' of mutual observation, the objective of which is to foster reciprocal understanding and to facilitate 'conversation between classes' (Martineau 1989 [1838], p. 48). Her position as a woman in particular provides a privileged point of entry into dimensions of social life which might otherwise go unnoticed by male travelers:

I am sure, I have seen more of domestic life than could possibly be exhibited to any gentleman traveling through the country. The nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people: and, as for public and professional affairs, -- those may always gain full information upon such matters, who really feel an interest in them, -- be they men or women (Martineau 1981 [1837], p. 53).

In fact, Martineau's journey took her well beyond the bedrooms and boarding houses of the private sphere, as she was frequently invited into the government buildings, prisons, hospitals, factories, farms, intellectual foundations and other official institutions of American public life. Her concern was therefore as much with describing the everyday morals and manners of *society* in America as with systematically examining its theory and practice of institutionalized democracy (Vetter 2008).

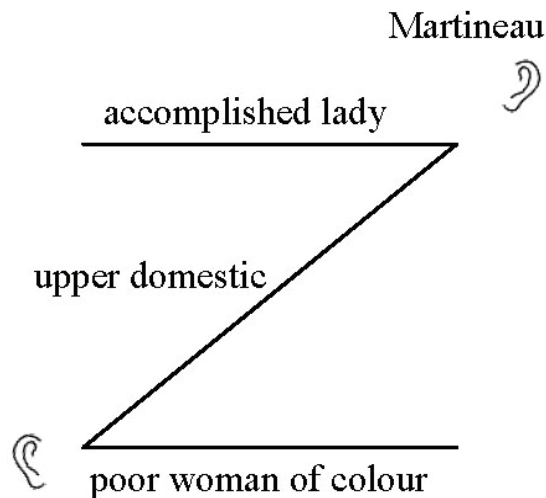
At one point in her narrative Martineau describes an incident in which the kitchen provides the setting for cross-racial conflicts and inter-class struggles which were otherwise more audibly being played out on the national stage. In this account, racial and class tensions take place within a private homosocial milieu of women whose political non-existence is relativized by the public non-citizenship (whether official or unofficial) of people of colour. In her discussion of 'Women', an often anthologized chapter from Part III of *Society in America* on 'Civilization', Martineau describes a domestic disagreement reported to her by 'a highly accomplished lady' who felt compelled to mediate a dispute in her household between 'an upper domestic' and 'a poor woman of colour':

A lady, highly accomplished and very literary, told me that she had lately been left entirely without help, in a country village where there was little hope of being speedily able to procure any [...]. I heard an anecdote from this lady which struck me. She was in the habit of employing, when she wanted extra help, a poor woman of colour, to do kitchen-work. The domestics had always appeared on perfectly good terms with this woman till, one day, when there was to be an evening party,

the upper domestic declined waiting on the company; giving as a reason that she was offended at being required to sit down to table with the coloured woman. Her mistress gently rebuked her pride, saying 'If you are above waiting on my company, my family are not. You will see my daughter carry the tea-tray, and my niece the cake.' The girl repented, and besought to be allowed to wait; but her assistance was declined; at which she cried heartily. The next day, she was very humble, and her mistress reasoned with her, quite successfully. The lady made one concession in silence. She had the coloured woman come after dinner, instead of before (Martineau 1981 [1837], pp. 302-303).

What makes this incident so striking for Martineau -- and by extension her readers -- is how social and ideological struggles of broadly political and economic importance rapidly unfold on an intensely local and deeply personal scale. The status hierarchy between kitchen-workers, which is initially grounded in the fact that one is regularly employed and thus more established in the household than the other who is on temporary hire, is eventually upset by the offensive idea that white and black servants might be expected to eat at the same table, a circumstance which is forced by the extraordinary occasion of an evening party. The situation is brought to a crisis when the upper domestic refuses to work, so that family members of the household are called upon to perform tasks normally reserved for servants. The conflict is only resolved when the lady of the house reestablishes the class relationship she maintains with her domestic employees, while at the same time making a 'silent concession' which reconfirms everyone's place in the racial hierarchy.

Just as striking as the content of this story is the form in which it is expressed: namely, as an informal rendering of an incident conveyed as a secret, a personal confidence, or even a piece of gossip, and thus as an 'anecdote' the significance of which is not immediately apparent. Though an incident like this might otherwise be passed over in silence as self-evident and so remain 'un-published' (in the etymological meaning of '*an-ektota*'), by remarking on it in print Martineau exposes the hidden connection of these unspoken private thoughts or implied bits of common sense to their social meaning and public significance. Depicting what can be called Martineau's 'anecdotal theory' (Gallop 2002), **Figure 2** maps this particular contact zone between members of races and classes who co-habit the domestic domain of American empire as an acoustic space. In Simmel's terms, this social space is 'bounded' by the statuses of women whose social positions and economic functions are demarcated by contrasting degrees of commitment and relative belonging (Simmel 2009 [1908], p. 553). Within these confines, the confidential anecdote passed from the lady to the ear of Martineau simultaneously retraces and amplifies the hierarchical yet zig-zagging movement of vocal insubordination and silent submission between the domestic and the woman of colour. Mediating these conflicting relationships are the apparently trivial domestic objects of kitchen tables, tea-trays, and cakes, not to mention Martineau's ear-trumpet, and their motivating circumstance consists in the fact that this literary lady and her daughter had already learned by necessity to make do without paid assistance. In the passage I have elided, for instance, they report baking their own bread for six weeks, and so could therefore 'now testify that bread might always be good, notwithstanding changes of weather, and all the excuses commonly given'. As Martineau argues repeatedly *Society in America*, beneath the official declaration of the right of everyone to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' is the tacit and unquestioned understanding that some individuals will be more able and willing to act on this principle of self-sufficiency and autonomy than others.

An evening party in a country village**Figure 2: Acoustic Space of Encounter**

Elsewhere in the text Martineau remarks with ironic perplexity on 'the absolutely peculiar' custom among negroes of '*refusing* to eat before whites', and she comments approvingly on the relative absence of 'the *insolence* of class to class' which is so common in England (1981[1837], p. 89, 259; my emphasis). Although critical discussions of slavery, women, and poverty are recurring leitmotifs of her account, she is less concerned with how these problems exemplify social inequalities or 'the tenacity of rank' than with how they expose the contradictions of personal *freedom* and the stigma of social dependence, which have a long genealogy in American social and political thought (see Fraser and Gordon 1997). By contrast, Tocqueville's emphasis in *Democracy in American* is more on addressing the other side of this cultural dilemma, as he explicitly states in his most central and celebrated thesis: 'the love of *equality* is more ardent and tenacious in America than love of liberty' (1969 [1840], p. 403; my emphasis). To recall Simmel's sociology of the senses once again (2009 [1908], p. 75), we might say that where Martineau is mainly concerned with the 'surfacing and submerging expressions' of freedom and constraint as they are registered through the momentary impressions of the ear, Tocqueville focuses more on the 'permanently plastic nature' of equality and difference as it is perceived from the visual perspective of the eye, as he acknowledges early on in his account: 'I admit that I saw in America more than America; it was the shape of democracy itself which I which I sought, its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions; I wanted to understand it so as at least to know what we have to fear or hope therefrom' (Tocqueville 1969 [1935], p. 19). To avoid merely reproducing the picture of America which he brought with him from France, he eventually learned how to refine the portrait he presented to his countrymen by cultivating a technique of observation which begins from the microscopic magnification of detailed insights and ends with the synoptic comprehension of a televisual overview, as he states in his conclusion:

Each object will stand out less distinctly, but the general lines will be clearer. I shall be like the traveler who has gone out beyond the wall of some vast city and gone up a neighbouring hill; as he goes farther off, he loses sight of the men he has just left behind; the houses merge and the public squares cannot be seen; the roads are hard to distinguish; but the city's outline is easier to see and for the first time he grasps its shape (Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 408).

For Tocqueville, this method of *seeing sociologically* entails not just surveying the political, legal, penal, commercial, and industrial institutions of America from a distant height, but also descending once again to scrutinize the particularities of

ordinary life in the homes, communities, remote settlements, and civil associations of the new republic, where mutual cooperation and personal initiative are supposed to serve both social equality and individual self-interest.

In one of the relatively rare passages in *Democracy in America* which can be compared to Martineau's many 'anecdotes' (in contrast to the travel diaries he kept on his journey, which abound with such incidents; see Tocqueville 1960 [1831-32], and Hill 2001, pp. 69-72), Tocqueville describes how an apparently idyllic scene of freedom, solidarity, and tranquility within an exclusively feminine milieu erupts into cross-racial rivalry and status conflict. His first-hand impressions of this incident are presented in the text as part of the preamble to a discussion of 'Some Considerations Concerning the Present State and Probable Future of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States', a 90 page chapter which concludes the second part of the first volume on the legal, political, and moral order of popular sovereignty in the United States:

I remember that, passing through the forests that still cover the state of Alabama, I came one day to the log cabin of a pioneer. I did not wish to enter the American dwelling, but went to rest a little beside a spring not far off in the forest. While I was there, an Indian woman came up (we were in the neighbourhood of the Creek territory); she was holding by the hand a little girl of five or six who, I supposed, must have been the pioneer's daughter. A negro woman followed her [...]. All three came and sat down by the edge of the spring, and the young savage, taking the child in her arms, lavished upon her such fine caresses as mothers give; the Negro, too, sought by a thousand innocent wiles, to attract the little Creole's attention. The latter showed by her slightest movements a sense of superiority which contrasted strangely with her weakness and her age, as if she received the attentions of her companions with a sort of condescension. Crouched down in front of the mistress, anticipating her every desire, the Negro woman seemed equally divided between almost maternal affection and servile fear, whereas even in the effusions of her tenderness, the savage woman looked free, proud, and almost fierce (Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 320).

This 'tableau' of American frontier life serves as a kind of set-piece for the contrasting generic portraits which follow of 'the three races' inhabiting North America: the Indians, who have been 'destroyed by famine, not just displaced by conquest'; the Negroes, who have been subjugated under a 'spiritualized despotism and violence'; and the Europeans, for whom 'the whole of life is treated like a game of chance, a time of revolution, or the day of battle' (334, 361, 404). In this scene, and especially in the passage I have elided, these racial stereotypes are figured in character sketches of the absent pioneer who inhabits the remote forests of an unclaimed territory; the obsequiously fawning Negro, who is 'dressed in European clothes almost in shreds'; and most tellingly, the ferociously independent Indian woman, whose exotic appearance conveyed a 'sort of barbarous luxury', with 'metal rings hurling from her nostrils and ears', and 'little glass beads [falling] freely from her shoulders', which Tocqueville presumes to be symbolic tokens of her virginity (Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 320). The condescending demeanour of the 'little Creole girl' with regard to these two women seems to magnify how cross-racial encounters and alliances take place in the between-space of disputed lands on the edges of the American republic, where class inequalities appear to be minimized even as intergenerational struggles and intra-gender anxieties are intensified (Mawani 2009).

By the edge of a spring near a log cabin

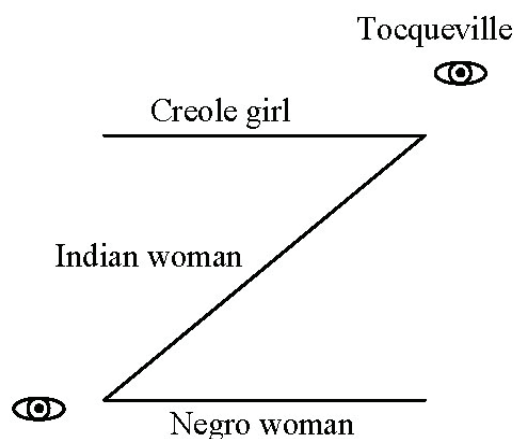


Figure 3: Optical Space of Encounter

As Tocqueville suggests with his obsessive attention to the exoticizing details of Indian woman's dress, although he wished to avoid entering into (*pénétrer*) the private compound of the pioneer's log cabin, he could hardly avoid drawing closer to this 'scene (*spectacle*)' all the while 'contemplating [it] in silence'. Nevertheless, his position as an unobtrusive outsider and impartial eye-witness is compromised at the moment when the Indian woman catches his gaze: 'for she got up abruptly, pushed the child away from her, almost roughly, and giving me an angry look, plunged into the forest' (*ibid.*). In contrast to the scenario Martineau describes, in which the entrance of an outsider of the lowest rank (black and female) disturbs an inter-personal hierarchy based on relations of duty and dignity (between employer and employee), here it is the intrusive presence of a foreign observer of a higher rank (white and male) which disturbs the social order (between subordinate racial groups), as in the hierarchically organized contact zone depicted in **Figure 3**. The exchange of glances between Tocqueville and the Indian woman marks off an optical space in which the presence of the stranger is perceived as a threat to the independence of an established insider, for whom personal honour may appear to be more important than maternal affection, at least from the perspective of a passing observer. Although in Volume Two Tocqueville remarks that 'in America, a woman loses her independence forever in the bonds of matrimony', in this instance he is more concerned with the status hierarchy of the races than with the subordinate position of women to men: 'here a bond of affection united oppressors and oppressed, and nature bringing them close together made the immense gap formed by prejudice and by laws yet more striking' (Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 592, p. 320). As Simmel might put it, the spatial proximity of races living in the same territory, or even co-habiting the same domestic space, can have the effect of heightening social attraction and repulsion. And as such cultural sensibilities become heightened through intensified social interactions, 'we become not only near-sighted but altogether near-sensed' (Simmel 2009 [1908], p. 578, pp. 615-620). Although personal ties of affection and duty between racially divided groups may appear to realize the laws of a land where the principle of equality between individuals is a condition of citizenship, in this instance such intimate bonds also exhibit the interpersonal conflicts and intrapsychic chains of racial power and ethnic privilege which characterize the larger society.

3. The Borders of Post-Colonial Contact

Unlike Simmel's meandering yet carefully ordered writings, which typically take his native Berlin as an object of analysis, these books by Martineau and Tocqueville can be said to exemplify the project of 'traveling theory', a style of comparative thinking and critical consciousness which Edward W. Said has characterized as 'a

sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating or situating theory' (Said 1983, pp. 241-242). These texts go beyond simply recording the observations of journeys undertaken by foreigners at particular places and times: from 1834 to 1836 in the case of Martineau, and from 1831 to 1833 for Tocqueville, each covering an impressive expanse of states and territories. They are also framed as responses to the theory and practice of revolution emerging from England and France in the preceding century, and to the colonial policies and projects which these countries were then undertaking in North Africa and South Asia. These two 'America' books, each covering over 800 pages and two volumes, thus provide a kind of 'map' for tracing the uneven spread of modern European ideas about freedom and equality as they are transferred from one setting to another, and for measuring varying distances between the formulation of these ideal principles and their translation into actual practice. At the same time, these texts are designed to teach a kind of 'lesson' to readers back home, either by popularizing insights from the new social sciences (a project Martineau had begun in her translation of Comte's 'positive philosophy' and her best-selling *Illustrations of Political Economy*) or by taking these ideas as a basis to predict historical trends and to outline political responses (as Tocqueville does here and in his other travel writings, and again later in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*).²

Rather than adhering strictly to scholarly conventions of objectivity and value-freedom which prevail today, intellectuals like Martineau and Tocqueville are not just concerned with accurately narrating what they heard from other people or faithfully describing what they saw, but also with presenting a kind of 'sociological allegory' which conveys moral judgments or makes political arguments (cf. Chakrabarty 2000, Bilgrami 2006). By this I mean that their aim is not only to provide literal descriptions or verifiable accounts of how other people live elsewhere, but also to offer cautionary tales and critical lessons within a more symbolic register about how things could or ought to be otherwise. Although Martineau and Tocqueville insist on providing analytically precise observations rather than only opinionated views of what they have witnessed in America, they also evoke anger and awe, praise and condemnation over what they understand to be the hypocritical discrepancy between the realities and the promises of life in the new world. Martineau, for instance, aims 'to compare the existing state of society in America with the principles on which it is professedly founded [in order] to enable my readers to judge for themselves, better than I can for them, what my testimony is worth' (Martineau 1981 [1837], pp. 48-49). At the same time, she is quick to express her own outrage over the dependent status of women and the 'deadly sin' of slavery, concluding that 'the civilization and the morals of the Americans fall short of their own principles' (Martineau 1981 [1837], p. 356). Tocqueville too attempts to secure the trust of his readers by declaring that his empirical insights should be granted priority over his critical conclusions: 'I do not know if I have succeeded in making what I saw in America intelligible, but I am sure that I sincerely wished to do so and that I never, unless unconsciously, fitted the facts to opinions instead of subjecting opinions to facts' (Tocqueville 1969 [1835], p. 19). To a significant degree, however, his facts are conveyed through comparisons which have the cumulative effect of condemning the aristocratic arrogance of Europe in light of the egalitarian promise of American democracy, where power 'does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it' (Tocqueville 1969 [1940], p. 692; cf. LaCapra 2000). In short, in projecting a light from the past onto our present, the texts of Tocqueville and Martineau provide a kind of counter-model of the sociological imagination by carefully crafting rhetorical arguments, anecdotal accounts, and philosophical speculations designed as much to illuminate and enlighten readers as much as to persuade and mobilize them.

Society in America and *Democracy in America* can also be read as sociological allegories in a more conventional sense insofar as they offer interpretive commentary on the inaugural events and founding documents of the American

republic, as well as critical evaluations of the failure to live up its animating ideals in practice. To support her conclusion that the primary problem of American society consists in its 'deficiency of moral independence', Martineau (1981 [1835], p. 73, 357) argues that *The Declaration of Independence* professes the novel legal principle of universal liberty which present-day mores and manners have yet to realize practically, in America and elsewhere. Likewise, Tocqueville states his conviction that *The Constitution of the United States* provides an enduring model for any country wishing to break down 'the high immovable walls of aristocracy' into 'innumerable, constantly moving, almost invisible threads' which operate more by cajoling than by coercing citizens, but cautions that a democratic majority can exert its own kind of tyranny (Tocqueville 1969 [1940], p. 692, 643; cf. Arendt 1963). For each writer, the source of the political strength of America, which combines the cultural sublime of popular ideals of peace and security with the economic strategy of ruthless exploitation and primitive accumulation, is also the basis for its vulnerability as an aspiring imperial and global power (cf. O'Neill 2002, Harvey 2006).

By making the public or private spaces of social life audible and visible, these texts teach lessons about how the official regime of American empire, with its legal promise of freedom and equality, often rests on the silent and unseen reinforcement of old cultural and social boundaries, or on the subtle assertion of new divisions. Here it is Simmel who teaches us how the ethical problem of the rights and responsibilities of social membership involve a 'spatial sense' of the almost imperceptible demarcations which both separate and connect foreign and familiar worlds:

Each border [*Grenze*] is a psychological, or more precisely, a sociological occurrence. But through its investment as a line in space this reciprocal relationship achieves clarity and security through its positive and negative aspects. Admittedly, this clarity and security often also involve a hardening that is usually denied as long as the contact and separation of forces and laws have not been projected into a perceptible shape and therefore always seem to remain '*in status nascens*' (Simmel 2007 [1908], p. 54, 2009 [1908], p. 552).

Despite its unfathomable vastness and apparent emptiness, the social-cultural space of early America appears to intellectuals like Tocqueville and Martineau as a landscape animated by a dense collection of ideas and mores, populated by diverse groups with intersecting perceptions and practices, and socially ordered by cross-cutting borders characterized by varying degrees of solidity. For them, America is not simply a colonial frontier for capitalist vanguards and scientific explorers, or a neutral territory awaiting imperial eyes and ears to claim it as their own; above all it is a contact zone of transcultural encounters, a social space 'where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Pratt 2008, p. 7). Far from designating mere *terrae vacuae*, non-places which 'create neither singular identity nor relations, only solitude and similitude' (Augé 1995, p. 103), 'America' is the exemplary proper name for that open and 'empty space which is itself revealed as a vehicle and expression of sociological interaction' (Simmel 2009 [1908], p. 620, cf. Gieryn 2000). The intellectual domain of 'post-colonial' America is a place of thought and movement, but one which serves as a practical reminder that the work of sustaining sociable spaces of freedom and equality sometimes takes place at the thresholds of sensibility, and along the inner and outer edges of empire.

Acknowledgement

This essay was previously published in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* 11 (4) 2011, as part of a special issue edited by Patrick Baehrt. I am grateful to the journal and issue editors and to SAGE for permission to reprint it here. I also thank Renisa Mawani, Julian Go and the participants of the workshop on "Law's Imperial Fields" held in Oñati, Spain, for their interest in my diagrams (here redrawn with the expert help of Rachael Sullivan), and especially for their critical comments regarding my symptomatic ellipses.

Notes

1. Although Simmel's style has been called an exercise in sociological *impressionism*, *bricolage*, or *flânerie*, his social theory is decidedly *systematic* in its ambition, structure, and scope (Frisby 1985; Weinstein and Weinstein 1993; Kemple 2007). This point is often lost in the selective, sporadic, and incomplete character of existing English translations. 'Space and the Spatial Orders of Society', the penultimate chapter of *Sociology*, has only recently been translated into English in its entirety (see Simmel 2009 [2008], pp. 43-620), while previous translations were based on partial selections or earlier versions (Simmel 1997 [1903, 1907], 1971 [1908], 2007 [1908]; the passage I quote in my epigraph, the excurses, and the second part of the 1908 chapter were all added to the earlier 1903 version). Figure 1, presented in the next section, displays the outline of the whole argument (along the X/Y axes), including the three 'excurses'-- on the social boundary, the sociology of the senses, and the stranger -- which Simmel inserted into the first of the chapter's two main sections, and which I use to organize the three parts of my argument. Few if any readers of Simmel's famous piece on 'The Stranger' in English (Simmel 1971 [1908]) have noted its function as part of a broader discussion of the sociology of space, specifically the problem of 'mobility', or that it serves as a hinge between the two main sections of the chapter (unfortunately, the roman numeral II marking the second section has been inadvertently omitted in the new translation). The present essay is one in a series of thought-experiments in which I plan to test the ten key concepts which are the focus of the chapters of *Sociology* with respect to a variety of 'sociological' thinkers in Europe and North America writing between 1789 and 1939.

2. Martineau and Tocqueville are early contributors to a distinctive genre of European travel writing which aimed to convey a critical consciousness and enlightened view of modern life from a comparative and historical perspective. Later authors would experiment with a variety of serious or sarcastic literary styles in reporting on their American journeys, such as Charles Dickens and Frances Trollope, or combine fiction with social satire, as in Ferdinand Kürnberger's *Der Amerikamüde* (The Man Weary of America) or Franz Kafka's posthumous *Amerika* (originally titled *Der Verschollene*, 'The Missing Person'). In both the earlier and more recent travel writing, an *autobiographical voice* typically interprets the ethnographic present through an *allegorical understanding* of an actual past, but in light of an anticipated future, as I note in these concluding comments (see Pratt 2008). The present essay is likewise marked by the material circumstances which constitute the beaten paths of imperial travel routes, from Canada, where it was first conceived and eventually completed, by way of Germany and Spain, where I first wrote and then presented an earlier draft.

Bibliography

- Arendt, H., 1963. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.
- Augé, M., 1995. *Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bilgrami, A., 2006. Occidentalism: the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment. *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 19, 3591-3603.
- Bourdieu, P., 1998. Social Space and the Genesis of Classes. In: *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D., 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Deegan, M. J., 2001. Making Lemonade: Harriet Martineau on Being Deaf. In: M. R. Hill, S. Hoecker-Drysdale, eds. *Harriett Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Fraser, N., and Gordon, L., 1997. A Genealogy of Dependency. In: *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Post-Socialist' condition*. London: Routledge.
- Frisby, D., 1985. *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gallop, J., 2002. *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Geertz, C., 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford University Press.
- Gieryn, T., 2000. A Space for Place in Sociology. *American Review of Sociology*, 26, 463-96.
- Go, J., 2009. The "New" Sociology of Empire and Colonialism. *Sociology Compass*, 3, 1-14.
- Harvey, D., 2006. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London: Verso.
- Hill, M. R., 2001. A Methodological Comparison of Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-1840). In: M. R. Hill, S. Hoecker-Drysdale, eds. *Harriet Martineau: theoretical and methodological perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Kemple, T. M., 2007. Allosociology: An Introduction to Simmel's Social Theory of the Limit. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24 (7-8), 1-19.
- Kemple, T. M., and Mawani, R., 2009. The Sociological Imagination and its Imperial Shadows. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (7-8), 228-249.
- LaCapra, D., 2000. *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, and French Studies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lefebvre, H., 1991. *The Production of Space*. Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. London: Blackwell.
- Martineau, H., 1981. *Society in America*, Two Volumes [1837]. Seymour Martin Lipset ed., abrg., intro. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Martineau, H., 1989. *How To Observe Morals and Manners* [1838]. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Mawani, R., 2009. *Colonial Proximities: Cross-Racial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

- McLuhan, M., 1969. The Playboy Interview. *Playboy Magazine*, March issue, 53-74, 158.
- O'Neill, J., 2002. Empire versus Empire: A Post-Communist Manifesto. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19 (4), 195-210.
- Pratt, M. -L., 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Said, E. W., 1983. *Traveling Theory. The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Simmel, G., 1971. The Stranger [1908]. In: Donald N. Levine, edtr. *Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, G., 1992. *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* [1908]. Otthein Rammstedt hrg. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel, G., 1997. The Sociology of the Senses [1907], The Sociology of Space[1903]. In: D. Frisby, M. Featherstone, eds. *Simmel on Culture*. London: SAGE.
- Simmel, G., 2007. The Social Boundary [1908]. Ulrich Teucher, Thomas M. Kemple trans. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24 (7-8), 53-56.
- Simmel, G., 2009. *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Two Volumes. Anthony J. Blasi, Anton K. Jacobs, Mathew Kanjiranthinkal trans. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Tocqueville, A., 1960. *Journey to America* [1831-1832]. J. P. Meyer ed., George Lawrence trans. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Tocqueville, A., 1969. *Democracy in America*, Volume One [1835], Volume Two [1840]. J. P. Meyer ed., George Lawrence trans. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co.
- Vetter, L. P., 2008. Harriet Martineau on the Theory and Practice of Democracy in America. *Political Theory*, 36 (3), 425-455.
- Weinstein, D., and Micheal A. W., 1993. Georg Simmel: Sociological Flâneur / Bricoleur. *Postmodern(ized) Simmel*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Zakaria, F., 2009. The Post-Imperial Presidency: Realism and Idealism in the Age of Obama. *Newsweek*, December 14, 36-40.