

SP: Some have argued that we are second-class citizens but citizens nonetheless. I think this is mistaken.

It is true that citizenship is not a single bundle, and we may have some items and lack others. But "classes" of citizenship belong to the past.

Modern democratic citizenship does not include the idea of classes; it is an egalitarian concept. In egalitarian societies, the dividing line is less one of classes than it is of "in or out." I do not believe that those who deny us rights and responsibilities are seeking to make us second-class citizens; they would like to deny us membership altogether.

TM: I was very moved by your concept of lesbian and gay people as "strangers." Can you explain what you mean by this?

SP: I use the term "strangers" to describe the situation of people who find themselves not simply "outside" a community nor "inside" as full members but rather as figures of ambivalence or ambiguity. They may have been raised within a community and believe themselves to be part of that community, until they find for some reason that others think of them as outside it.

Or others may think of them as in it but not "really" not like "us." They live in a space that is partly acknowledgment, partly willful ignorance, partly rejection, and in that space the balance among these may shift with startling rapidity. Strangers may forget, or not know, that they are strangers until they are hit with an insult, a law or an assault or simply with a cultural event that assumes they don't exist.

One of my favorites was Ross Perot's remark in 1992 that if he became president he would not appoint any gay or lesbian people to his Cabinet because "the American people wouldn't like it." It just never occurred to him that many Americans are gay or lesbian.

This is not an incidental remark. When a group is rhetorically opposed to "the American people" or when America is characterized in a way that many of us will find impossible to join, we are being constructed as strangers once again.

TM: How does this affect how we relate to one another within the lesbian and gay community?

SP: Always, as we steer through these straits, we are tempted to abandon the weakest or most different or those who truly threaten the dominant culture. As with all strangers wrestling with inclusion, those of us who come close to achieving normality tend to buy it by breaking solidarity with those who most personify our difference.

For gays and lesbians, this has meant rejecting bisexuals and transgendered people. This rejection allows us to say that we're really stable, fixed in our identities, and that our gender identities are just as normal as those of heterosexuals, so including us won't really disrupt the status quo.

Now I want to say that I don't believe this failure is due to the personal flaws of any given leader or group. Social scientists have noted this phenomenon of "secondary marginalization" for decades, across groups that we might call strangers.

It is, I think, part of being a stranger that there is no "right answer." There are plenty of wrong ones, but there is no answer for strangeness short of the transformation of the dominant culture.

TM: As a gay American in a seven-year relationship with an Australian man and facing the likelihood that we will have to leave

the United States next year because gay relationships are not given immigration rights reserved only for heterosexual couples, I certainly can say that at best I see myself as a third-class pseudo-citizen of my country.

SP: Your experience is a perfect example of how a citizenship structured on the assumption of heterosexuality works to make noncitizens out of queers. Those who would tell you that you are a citizen regardless of whether a particular law acknowledges your relationship have not seriously faced the way that citizenship shapes our daily lives.

The refusal to recognize your relationship is only one step removed from the [Immigration and Naturalization Service] policy, effective until recently, that considered homosexuality per se a bar to immigration. When such a basic element of cultural life and meaning is denied to some, they become outsiders even while they seem to be within.

TM: How do the battles over gay marriage, military service and immigration for binational gay couples provide stark examples of this "stranger" condition?

SP: The battles over marriage in this country and in others have been important both for our lives and for what they reveal about the assumptions of modern democratic states. Those who would deny us marriage outright live in a world of singular values, where there is one way to live and those who would deviate should be punished or pitied.

But more interesting is the "liberal" response that offers civil partnership but not marriage. In Norway, gays and lesbians may register their partnerships, but they cannot be wedded in a state church or adopt children.

Some in the U.S. have suggested similar distinctions. These proposals bow to our desire to be united as adults, but they continue to exclude us from broader understandings of kinship, and they deny the sanction of religion.

They treat us, in short, like contracting adults. You contract for yardwork, I contract for partnership; it's all the same. But don't go messing with my marriage and my kids!

Proposals for civil partnerships leave us as strangers. We might have legal rights that are largely the same as heterosexual married people, but we will still be denied cultural equality.

Heterosexuals do not live their lives waiting to be called into strangeness by some passerby on the street who calls them disgusting. They do not have to "manage their identities," in Erving Goffman's phrase, as we do. And if queers think that a marriage license will change that for them, they're in for a rude awakening.

German Jews in the 1920s were full citizens, but that did not make them unrecognizable. Their strangeness was both a gift and a wound. So is ours.

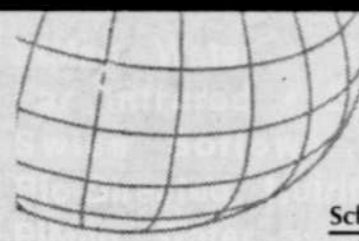
TM: Do you think we always will be "strangers" in our country? What might hasten this process? Are you hopeful that our condition might improve?

SP: I don't frankly know whether or when our condition may improve. Visibility is a huge step, and we've gained rights and changed the culture in the last 40 years in ways that no one would have thought possible in 1960.

But have we really chipped away at patriarchy or at American phallic pride? I'm not sure. ☐

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