

Coser Paper to the Transatlantic Voyages, International Congress of Sociology. University of Nancy, France May 31 – jun 1, 2007

Feiwei Kupferberg  
Malmö University, Sweden  
[Feiwei.Kupferberg@lut.ma.se](mailto:Feiwei.Kupferberg@lut.ma.se)

## Hidden Impacts of a Cultural Migration: Traces of Lewis Coser's Transatlantic Experiences in his Sociological Work

Lewis Coser (1913 – 2003) was one of the most eminent and internationally known American sociologists. His doctoral dissertation, *The Functions of social conflict*, published in 1956 has been one of the most bestselling modern sociological classics in the postwar era. He wrote numerous books on various topics such as social conflicts, the history of sociological theory, political sociology, the sociology of knowledge and intellectuals, literature and sociology, the sociology of book-publishing. He was also a highly productive book reviewer, served as a president of the American sociological association and was a co-founder of the left-wing, socialist journal *Dissent* together with his close friend, the literary critic Irving Howe. Less known perhaps is one of Coser's last books, *Refugee scholars in America. Their impact and their experiences* that was published in 1984. In this book Coser suggests a model and some interesting hypotheses on what cultural migration does for a sociologist's intellectual élan, style and interests. In this paper I will try to test his model by applying it on his own life and intellectual contributions.

### Biography and identity

As Bourdieu suggests the idea that a person has a stable or authentic identity or social self is to some degree an illusion. The only thing stable or predictable in a person's life is that person's name. Unfortunately this iron sociological "law" does not apply to Lewis A. Coser, who had his name changed twice. When he was born in November 1913 in Berlin by a protestant mother and a Jewish father, he was baptized as Ludwig Alfred Cohen (or possibly Cohn). For some reasons, his father who was moving in the higher industrial and financial circles decided to anglicize the family name and hence Ludwig Alfred Cohen was transformed into Ludwig Alfred Coser. The second transformation took place as Ludwig Alfred Cohen managed to enter the shores of America as a refugee in 1941. There he was advised by the immigration authorities to change his first name from Ludwig to Lewis. He was allowed though to retain his middle name, Alfred, but never used in offensively but always presented himself as Lewis A. Coser. So A. became everyone's guess or people just didn't care, after all it was only a middle name.

But identities are more than a name. Identity is many things. For the young Ludwig in Berlin it was mainly politics. He became an ardent Marxist. One of the necrologies written after his death in 2003 suggests though that his choice of politics was really a way to cope with a family which was split in the middle: "His father was a wealthy Jewish industrialist, his mother an upper-class Protestant. These differences seemed to have produced a contentious family-and to have set the stage for a life in which conflict and ambivalence were a leitmotif. Lew upped the ante of contention by embracing radical politics-further roiling his relationship with his father, becoming something of a celebrity in left-wing circles in his early youth, and accordingly having to flee Germany in 1933 to escape the attentions of the Nazis. He went to Paris, where he seems to have lived from hand to mouth, insecure economically yet immersed in the incredibly rich political and intellectual culture of the inter-war years. I remember his anecdotes of figures like Nicolai Bukharin and Arthur Koestler, Marcel Mauss, and many others"

Having solved the political issue by migrating to another country, Coser never again actively engaged in organized politics. Instead he now invested his energies in seeking a vocation. It seems that his original plan was to become a doctorate of literature, having studied the topic at Sorbonne. In an interview he graciously gave me as I visited Coser at his summer house at Cope Cod in 1984, he suggested that the reason he changed his professional plans was that the professor at Sorbonne to whom he presented his suggested topic, which aimed at comparing literature in several countries, proclaimed, *mais ce n'est pas littérature, vous et sociologue*. Coser chuckled as he told this story and explained to me that this was the reason why he eventually became what he became, a household name in sociology. Goffman in his works talks of the important difference between "personal identity" that is how we see ourselves and "social identity" that is how others see us. What happened in this critical situation was that the two didn't fit. Coser accepted the verdict and adapted his personal identity to the sociological identity he had just acquired.

But such social categorizations are not necessarily more stable than personal ones. Before Coser could make the switch from literary man to sociological man, the war interfered. Coser had to go through the harrowing or even traumatic experience of being detained in a camp. Somehow he managed though to get a visa to the United States and in 1941 he was able to embark a boat in Portugal across the Atlantic to life and freedom.

There is a burgeoning literature on this exile from Germany and Austria of people who managed to escape from certain death. The numbers are staggering, the literature that I went through as I spent a year at the Center for German and European studies at Berkeley in 1997/98 suggests that there might be as much as 300,000 German Jews who fled the Nazis, which means that a majority of German and probably also Austrian Jews actually survived Hitler. They or their descendants are hence still alive. This can be compared with Poland, where the Jewish part of my own family happened to live. Here perhaps ten percent managed to survive, mainly by doing as my father did, escaping to the Soviet Union.

As the situation became increasingly desperate, the generous policies of USA for entrance permits were abandoned and those who came too late were turned down by the American authorities. A special effort was made though for intellectual people, scholars, artists, writers etc. Special relief organizations were hastily set up and emissaries were sent to France in order to help these entrapped intellectuals to get through the bureaucratic barriers. Some never made it. One of them was Walter Benjamin. He committed suicide on the border between Spain and France because the Spanish guard's did not want to let the refugees pass. The next day they changed their mind and let the people through, but then he was already dead, a victim of the insanity that spread its deadly poison in Europe in those years.

Coser safely arrived at the American shore though, was admitted and started to look for the woman in a private relief organization who had got him his visa and literally saved his life. They became husband and wife and remained married until Rose Laub Coser's death in the mid nineties, some ten years after I visited the lovely old couple. She made wonderful sandwiches which I gobbled while talking to Coser, I even took a swim in the pool on the encouragement of Coser, and we never stopped talking. I noticed from the very start not only that he was a very tall and handsome man, but that his English still bore a heavy German accent, perhaps with a touch of elegant French pronunciations, after all he had lived eight years of his life in France.

Although the literary professor at Sorbonne had categorized this young man as a sociologist, this counted little in America who had its own ways of recognizing merits and skills. It seems that Coser and his wife, who had actually also escaped from Germany, she had arrived two years earlier, had a rough start. Coser worked among other things as a cloak room attendant, a packer in a store and a translator of military booklets. Somehow both he and his wife eventually managed to get a doctorate in sociology at Columbia University. Coser's

advisor was Robert Merton and having published his book on Simmel's theory on social conflict, Coser's academic career took off. Coser taught at several universities, including the General College of the University of Chicago as well as the University of California-Berkeley. He founded the sociology department at Brandeis University and taught there for more than 15 years before joining the sociology department at the State University of New York-Stony Brook, where he remained until his retirement. In 1987 the Cosers retired to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Lewis Coser was Professor Emeritus, first at Boston College and then at Boston University.

### Sociological works

How did Coser's European background as well as his experience of cultural migration influence his sociological work? What traces of Coser's transatlantic experience can be found?

On a more general level one is impressed by the enormous productivity but also intellectual breadth of his scholarly interests. It seems he wrote up to a thousand books, articles and not the least book reviews. He especially loved the latter since it gave him the opportunity to embrace a new topic which he had not studied before. Many of the necrologues by colleagues after his death emphasize the enormous erudition of the man. He was more a generalist than a specialist, dipping into numerous topics, somewhat reminding one of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. But whereas the intellectual breadth and generalist bent of the latter seems to have originated mostly in a class journey, from the lower middle class to a top position in academic life, in Coser's case the transatlantic journey seems to be the motivating factor. This transatlantic journey as we have seen contained within itself a professional move, from literature to sociology which started in France but was only completed in USA after a long period of trial. This prolonged journey into the chosen vocation I think has much to say in explaining why Coser did not settle down and become a specialist in social conflicts which his first major book seemed to destine him to. Having spent so much time to become what he wanted to be, Coser's hunger for more intellectual stimulation made it impossible for him to settle down and become an ordinary professor. The usual strategy of an academic, try to become an or perhaps the authority on a given area, someone everyone else refers to, was not enough, having waited for so long for professional fulfilment, Coser wanted more. This hypothesis is verified by the fact that at the year he finished writing his dissertation, 1954, was also the year that he and his colleague Irving Howe started the intellectual magazine, Dissent. Here Coser got an outlet not so much for his political self, he stopped mixing with politics already in 1933 and was not going to start again, but his intellectual, generalist self.

The second noticeable trait in Coser's work is a strange split in his identity. He always kept the political leftwing, socialist, critical side of himself and his more sociological scientific side, apart and never mixed the two. Whereas in writers like Adorno or Marcuse, the political and academic aspect of their work are always their simultaneously and visible in their academic work itself, written for academic audiences, it seems as if Coser preferred to keep those things apart. Part of the reason, as already suggested, might be his alienation from his Marxist beliefs during his Berlin years. Coser embraced the dominant liberal-conservative creed in America to a larger degree and with less reservations than those German intellectuals that were associated with or identified with "critical theory" or the "Frankfurt school." As noted by some commentators, his socialism was more of an ethical than a political kind. Here he resembles other intellectual refugees from Germany such as Erich Fromm, who introduced the writings of the young, humanistic Marx and downplayed the political, revolutionary Marx who was a bitter enemy to the capitalist system as such and not only some of its

dehumanizing effects. Nevertheless, although he was less alienated than some exiled refugees (Adorno and Horkheimer eventually returned to West Germany because of this alienation, Brecht accepted the offer to return to East Germany and Heinrich Mann was going to but never made it in time) there is a streak of alienation in Coser's sociological works as well, although they might be difficult to trace.

Thus it seems that the very choice of topic for his dissertation, Simmel and the Function of social conflict, was a mild kind of protest towards the dominant figure of American sociology Talcott Parsons. In Parson's theory, beginning with *The Structure of Social Action* social conflicts had no place, the focus was on consensus or social order and conflicts were seen as pathological. One of the main points of Coser's book *The Functions of Social Conflicts* was to emphasize that conflicts had several positive social functions. Coser argued - with [Georg Simmel](#) - that conflict might serve to solidify a loosely structured group. In a [society](#) that seems to be disintegrating, conflict with another society, inter-group conflict, may restore the integrative core.

Conflicts within a society, intra-group conflict, can bring some ordinarily isolated individuals into an active role. This could be illustrated by protest over the [Vietnam War](#) which motivated many young people to take vigorous roles in American [political](#) life for the first time.

Conflicts also serve a [communication](#) function. Prior to conflict, groups may be unsure of their adversary's position, but as a result of conflict, positions and boundaries between groups often become clarified, leaving individuals better able to decide on a proper course of action in relation to their adversary.

Not all conflicts were positive. Thus Coser emphasized that conflicts along the same cleavages intensify the severity of the conflict. Cross-cutting cleavages tend to dissipate the severity of the conflict. Internal conflicts in which the contending parties no longer share the basic values upon which the legitimacy of the social system rests threaten to disrupt the structure.

But suppressing conflicts could in itself lead to much more disruptive conflicts in the end. Thus closely knit groups in which there exists a high frequency of interaction and high personality involvement of the members have a tendency to suppress conflict. While they provide frequent occasions for hostility (since both sentiments of love and hatred are intensified through frequency of interaction), the acting out of such feelings is sensed as a danger to such intimate relationships, and hence there is a tendency to suppress rather than to allow expression of hostile feelings. In close-knit groups, feelings of hostility tend, therefore, to accumulate and hence to intensify. If conflict breaks out in a group that has consistently tried to prevent expression of hostile feelings, it will be particularly intense for two reasons: First, because the conflict does not merely aim at resolving the immediate issue which led to its outbreak; all accumulated grievances which were denied expression previously are apt to emerge at this occasion. Second, because the total personality involvement of the group members makes for mobilization of all sentiments in the conduct of the struggle.

Hence, the closer the group, the more intense the conflict. Where members participate with their total personality and conflicts are suppressed, the conflict, if it breaks out nevertheless, is likely to threaten the very roots of the relationship.

In groups comprising individuals who participate only segmentally, conflict is less likely to be disruptive. Such groups are likely to experience a multiplicity of conflicts. This in itself tends to constitute a check against the breakdown of consensus: the energies of group members are mobilized in many directions and hence will not concentrate on *one* conflict cutting through the group. Moreover, where occasions for hostility are not permitted to accumulate and conflict is allowed to occur wherever a resolution of tension seems to be indicated, such a conflict is likely to remain focused primarily on the condition which led to its outbreak and not to revive blocked hostility; in this way the conflict is limited to "the facts of the case." One may venture to say that multiplicity of conflicts stands in inverse relation to their intensity.

### Marginality and innovation

The Social functions of conflict, although it to some degree repeats points made already by Simmel is a highly innovative work which predates by decades several of the main theories advanced among pioneer peace researchers such as Galtung. The latter's theory of structural imbalance as well as the theory of controlling conflicts by crosscutting them, is clearly inspired by Coser's work. Coser was not the only European emigrant who did indeed contribute with highly original or innovative work, in fact there were so many who did likewise – Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Horney in psychology and psychoanalysis, Karl Deutsch, Hans Morgenthau, Leo Strauss and Anna Arendt in political science and philosophy, Kurt Lewin in social psychology, Paul Lazarsfeld and Alfred Schutz in sociology, Ludwig von Mises, Albert Hirschman and Karl Polanyi in economics and economic history. Roman Jakobson, Erwin Panofsky, and Erich Auerbach in arts and the humanities – there seemed to be a sociological pattern here.

Although Coser's book *Refugee Scholars in America* is largely descriptive, he does seem to try to explain this pattern. His main hypothesis seems to be that the innovative contributions of these scholars came about because of their cultural background in European intellectual life. This background caused a certain mental distance between the Europeans and the American intellectuals or a certain estrangement from dominant culture, which allowed these intellectuals to see society somewhat from the outside. Hence they were able to adopt what Simmel called the more objective attitude of the stranger. Their position as outsiders made them critical to certain things in society which also made it possible for them to see certain things or question certain assumptions that nativeborn Americans took for granted.

This is emphasized in the following proposition: "The refugees could deprovincialize the American mind and upgrade American culture largely because they remained marginal. This made it possible for them to throw a novel and more searching light on American society and scholarship than was usually the case with those born and bred in the pieties of their tradition. Steeped in the historical and critical traditions that often clashed with the presentmindedness and optimism that pervaded so much of American culture, from the vantage point of their status as marginal scholars they exercised their privilege to think otherwise and so to become salutary disturbers of America's intellectual peace."

What Coser suggests is that some degree of dissent from its intellectuals is actually functional and healthy for a society. Since no societies are perfect, there are always things that can be improved and refugee scholars are in an excellent position to locate and diagnose those wrongs because of their background in a different type of culture and experience. Although this discovery is based on standard scientific procedure, comparison of a number of cases

within a selected, relatively homogenous sample, one cannot abstract from the particular type of personal experience that made Coser sensitive to this hypotheses. Although the hypothesis in its more general form was already present in Simmel's work, the essay "the Stranger" finding this hypothesis relevant and applying it to a certain empirical reality has to come from somewhere and here the particular transatlantic experience of Simmel was probably crucial.

To other points which are emphasized repeatedly in *Refugee Scholars in America* is that the reception of the host country is important but so is the attitude of the emigrant.

Regarding the first he argues that originality in itself does not explain or predict whether a scholar received social recognition measured by a successful career. His hypothesis is that for a European scholar to be able to succeed in the American system, they must be able to build on what was there already or to fill some kind of experienced gap or need "The refugees seem to have been most influential in areas of study where they filled a perceived need not previously met, or in fields in which they encountered an already established tradition to which they felt affinity so that they could build on already established tradition." (Coser, p. 9). This explains why for instance psychoanalysis and social psychology imported from Europe became such a hit, whereas general psychology was ignored. In the latter case the Americans had moved into a behaviorist direction and the European tradition, which had moved in an opposite, mentalistic orientation seemed to be outdated and useless.

But in order to succeed, Europeans also had to adapt to some degree. Their critical or marginal stance must not tip over to the extreme of arrogance. Europeans too could learn from the American experience. This was partly admitted by Adorno who praised the informality between teacher and student in American culture as a pleasant surprise and partially accepted the survey techniques that had been developed by American sociologists, as more advanced than in Europe. But the model case here was Paul Lazarsfeld, who was not above moving into market research. By combining the more advanced survey techniques of the Americans with the theoretically inspired and more interesting questions of the Europeans, Paul Lazarsfeld quickly established himself as authority in this particular area. He became the specialist Coser himself did not want to be, but was probably tempted to for prestige as well as economic reasons (such research could more easily attract large-scale funding).

The first of these two hypotheses clearly mirrors Coser's own experience. Simmel was not unknown by American sociologists. Park had followed Simmel's lectures in Berlin and brought him to Chicago where it became integrated into the Chicago School of Sociology. In the forties this school lost its previously dominant position in American sociology, Talcott Parsons' much more theoretical sociology, called structural functionalism prevailed. Interestingly Simmel is totally left out of *The Structure of Social Action*. Coser's contribution was thus opportune in a dual sense. First of all because it was mainly theoretical, second because it introduced a classical sociologist that Parsons had left out but that was not totally unknown. This certainly fits Coser's own criteria, that in order to succeed in a foreign country one should build on existing traditions but at the same time provide something that is felt as missing. Again the affinity between his own transatlantic experience and his theoretical contribution to theory of cultural migration is striking.

As to the second aspect, the question of attitude, there is a partial affinity in the sense that Coser. if one should judge by all the necrologues written by former American colleagues and students was a very sociable and amiable teacher who had little difficulty fitting into the American Academic culture. On the other hand, he was not Paul Lazarsfeld, he valued

remaining somewhat aloof from American culture, seeing this as an intellectual advantage that went beyond the question of the encounter of different types of professional competences. At the end of the introduction to *Refugee Scholars in America*, Coser once again returns to the intellectual advantage of the position of the stranger, referring clearly to Simmel's theory. He ends though with a very personal note which I only understood or rather noticed after having met him in person:

“The refugee intellectual found America, by and large willing to listen to their voices, although they were often held at a distance. Those among them who wished to make their home in America, therefore became acculturated relatively quickly. But only their sons and their daughters were likely to become fully assimilated. Strangers make learn to speak the language of their new community with considerable fluency, but they are unlikely to speak it with at least a slight accent, which remains the stigma of otherness.”

As I mentioned earlier, hearing Coser speak, was the biggest surprise, since I had always imagined him to be an American and nothing more or nothing less. I expect that students and professors who were not well acquainted with Coser's biography had the similar type of slight disappointment or embarrassment, something a person with Coser's background and life history must have noticed.

Perhaps this particular sensibility towards the “stigma of otherness” is what all intellectuals and scholars develop if their careers happen to be in another country in which they were born or raised from childhood experience. Maybe it is this special sensitivity that somehow is the core of the transatlantic experience that is the theme of this conference.