

# Reviews

**Robert Wuthnow, *American Misfits and the Making of Middle-Class Respectability*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. 339 pages. ISBN: 978-0-691-17686-4.**

What does it mean to be respectable? This broad question, set in the American middle-class context during the 19th century and up to the Great Depression, is what Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, addresses in his book about “American Misfits.”

In order to illuminate the complexities and never-ending negotiations when drawing boundaries between “us,” respectable insiders, and “them,” less respectable outsiders, Wuthnow tells stories about hucksters, lunatics, fanatics, immigrant congregations, rich people, and naughty children. Each chapter — rather essay — has its own character.

The chapter on hucksters deals with people without fixed belonging, oscillating as buyers and sellers between rural farms and city markets. The chapter on lunacy digs, in great detail, into one case of mental illness. The chapter on fanaticism is about drawing “the delicate line between fanaticism and acceptable religious behavior” (119) in a time when fanaticism was, as it still is, defined as refusal to discuss arguments and as “shouting, dancing, ranting, hearing divine voices, and engaging in violence” (128). In the chapter on immigrant congregations an interesting analysis is conducted on how social and symbolic cohesion and boundaries shape ethnic identities. Two German Baptist immigrant families in Wisconsin and Illinois, respectively, serve as examples. The chapter on wealth displays the super-rich as a small minority separated from the “common people” or the “forgotten man.” It shows that not only “reds” but also business people were under attack, not least after World War I. The chapter on naughty children, finally, cites moral-based children’s books and reproduces stories about wicked boys telling lies and drowning kittens. The chapters thus offer variety at the same time as they all more or less display Wuthnow’s exper-

tise in the sociology of religion.

Wuthnow's final words are that "it is far easier to say what we are against than what we are for," which in the US case means that "[c]riticizing, castigating, stereotyping, finding fault with, and excluding those who were different was not simply the problem with which the Americanization had to deal; it was part and parcel of the Americanization process itself" (266).

A couple of comments come to mind. I am not sure if they are always objections because I am not sure about Wuthnow's positions even after having read his 339 pages on the matter. Firstly, the title of the book seems a bit over- and underextended. Can millionaires and religious immigrants really be labelled misfits? Are common people or forgotten men congruent with the middle class?

Secondly, I somewhat doubt (although my impression is rooted in Scandinavian soil) that there are huge differences in the perception of what is virtuous and respectable between farmers, workers and middle class people over the last centuries. If anything, the virtues among farmers and workers may have been more robust and less complex compared to the middle class, which is faltering between behaviors within the upper class and among the common people.

Thirdly. Perceptions about what is respectable and decent behavior will, as Wuthnow over and over demonstrates, vary somewhat due to historical cultural, religious and social circumstances. Sometimes even realignments may occur. In Scandinavia, a hundred years ago, religious people were insiders and atheists misfits; today it is rather the other way around. However, isn't there normally a core of virtues (resembling some of the Ten Commandments) transcending time and place?

To explain, in each case, how and why boundaries between better and worse are drawn is indeed a complex task, but the fact that these boundaries are difficult to draw does not mean that they should not in some cases be drawn. A distinction must however be made between the categories people are born into and the behavior they display. Wuthnow is of course right when he writes that "othering is likely to be directed toward groups that are already in the minority because of race, ethnicity, and national origin" (263) and that this othering is wrong. Many of the distinctions people make between themselves and others are also petty and motivated by narrow-minded vested interest. At the same time, some behaviors should rightly be regarded with suspicion and counteracted. Fanatics, not willing to argue their case and prone to violence, should not be respected. It may be that

when “we” respect “them,” they do not respect us, but only see our respect as a sign of weakness and repay it with contempt. A naughty kid, drowning kittens for the pleasure of causing suffering and death to an innocent creature, displays a lack of empathy which should cause people to be on their watch for him or her in the future. One day he/she may enjoy bullying colleagues or even tormenting people in concentration camps. A notorious liar should be exorcised since this kind of behavior undermines the trust that is necessary for people to be able to live together.

An ambition to relativize all conventional knowledge about good and bad and true and false may lead to disaster. If there are no boundaries between “us” and “them,” when they are showing indecent or erratic behavior, any civilization may be overtaken by such traits. History has taught, and the present demonstrates, that being respectful towards fanatics, bullies and liars may result in political leaders who are just that: fanatics, bullies and liars. Wuthnow rightly complains about American politics escalating into “name calling, rumor mongering, and character assassination” (259). Bad manners in everyday and political life will undoubtedly interact.

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**Francesca de Lucia, *Italian American Cultural Fictions: From Diaspora to Globalization*. Transatlantic Aesthetics and Cultures Vol. 7. Bern: Peter Lang 2017. 182 pages. ISBN: 978-0343-2567-7.**

In *Italian American Cultural Fictions: From Diaspora to Globalization* (2017), Francesca de Lucia offers a rich overview of the Italian American presence in the literature and culture of the United States. In addition to the book’s scholarly value, its conciseness and ambitious chronological scope make it not only a sophisticated academic text, but also a useful book for survey courses on Italian American literature. Through a careful analysis of novels, films, memoirs, and newspaper articles, de Lucia traces the ways in which Italian American cultural fictions – and the identitarian narratives that find expression within them – evolve from a notion of “emblematic” ethnicity to one of “latent” ethnicity, two terms that de Lucia contributes to the conceptual vocabulary of Italian American Studies. The volume also places a valuable emphasis on cultural narratives of Italian Americanness, such as, for example, the deification of the Italian immigrant along Chris-