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reconnecting and healing this fragmented population. In sum, this very readable and timely case study is relevant to a variety of audiences with interests in contemporary cultural and national identity-formation processes and issues for which conventional theoretical approaches are inadequate or irrelevant.

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance, by **Eviatar Zerubavel**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 199 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199366613.

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Books by Eviatar Zerubavel are almost impossible to review because they achieve perfectly what they attempt. And yet they must be reviewed, because what they attempt is consistently scintillating.

The challenge is to connect Zerubavel's work to what most of the rest of us do. Again and again the reader is reminded of Simmel, who was *sui generis* and yet was quintessentially a sociologist. Simmel called his work a sociology of "forms," Zerubavel calls what he does "cognitive sociology"; and while both labels fit, neither instructs how to bridge the gains in knowledge they provide, which are delivered at a universal level, to the vast majority of sociological studies, which are of people, or relationships, located in time and space.

With *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance*, a volume that can be read as a decade-delayed companion to *The Elephant in the Room*, Zerubavel is exploring and demonstrating the duality of foreground and background that constitutes virtually all moments of social life. At times he backs away from universalizing, but I think that, with a few exceptions, he concedes too much limitation to what he has found: his contribution to social ontology is especially useful. The text, which has an endnote tying almost every sentence to someone else's related insight, is organized to grasp the seemingly infinite number of previously segregated ways that academic researchers, philosophers, musicians, painters, game

players—seemingly everyone who ever lived—have noted that an experience, whether understood as occurring within social life, psychologically (as a moment of perception or cognition), aesthetically (as craft knowledge), or physiologically (rods and cones in vision), has a "hidden" aspect, background, or periphery on or within which the foreground or main focal phenomenon is constructed.

To convey the flavor, here are some more or less randomly selected tidbits. You can if you wish attend to the rhythm of your breathing, but usually you dis-attend to it in order to attend to something else. If you want to present your work as clearly artistic, you represent the spaces between the things that people attend to, like the shapes between buildings in the New York City skyline, inviting viewers to awaken to what they have always but never seen. Sometimes the backup singers get attention, but not usually, even though the overall effect depends crucially on them. If you want to survive as a potential prey or be a well-nourished predator, you had better stick to a landscape that blurs the visual boundaries of your body in color and form. Having lived a good part of my life around conversation analysts, I tend to recognize, as they do all the time, how people are unwittingly led to a background (i.e., not said to be noticed as such) image by drawing out a metaphor from the foreground of a just-prior utterance. My all-time favorite is a federal prosecutor in Miami announcing to the news media that, for his office, the conviction of major drug dealers was "a real shot in the arm."

Now, as to those exceptions. Some forms of meditation, OK. Maybe some religious, aesthetic, and erotic experiences, which Zerubavel, in a stimulating way, just touches on. (There we go again). But near the end he concedes too much, suggesting that we're just socialized to regard some things as in the foreground, others in the background: "we do not really have to choose between selective attention and open awareness, since they actually complement each other." Well, no. Notwithstanding the rare moments in which one is tempted to drop actively shaping behavior and be taken to a consciousness that merges background and foreground, we do have to choose. Analytically, foreground

and background complement each other, but in the living of social life, one has to make something foreground, something background in order to interact socially—that is, in order to get others to appreciate what you are doing and, on that basis, respond. The relationship of foreground and background is Simmelian: a dualistic dialectic, a reversible tension of opposites that constitutes the moment's experience. (In the vast literature reviewed in this book, one missing reference is to Michael Polanyi's "personal knowledge," which would have made it not so easy for Zerubavel to drop the topic of social ontology after only a few paragraphs.) Part of every moment of social life is doing the work of keeping some things out of focal mind, so that they may serve as the framing, context, or background of what we bring into focus. We can vary, by person and over time, in what we make focal, but there's always a splitting that is constitutive of the moment's experience. But to appreciate that fully, you probably need data that locate people in space-time configured social interaction.

A few paragraphs in, you realize that all sorts of people, everywhere, turn what was background into foreground—that is, they find things "hidden in plain sight." Now, the fact that everyone already knows what

an author is claiming might be thought to detract from the value of his or her text, but in this case, quite the contrary. The point is, no one has grasped that everyone, in ways that differ by their preoccupations, has grasped the point. Parents reading a "Where's Waldo?" book with a child mistakenly assume they are only reading an odd book with a child, rather than taking on the occasional but universal task of finding things hidden in plain sight. How bizarre! The fact that people always in some respect live lives experienced as unique, or think they are doing something unconnected with what everyone else always is doing, is another matter . . . but just the sort of matter that Zerubavel leads you to, which is why his books work so well. His texts culminate a period in which, apparently, he has maniacally foregrounded a particular issue so that he sees it everywhere. In the case of this indirectly autobiographical book, what he discovers is yet another way that we as sociologists can foreground what members of society generally experience as background. He then enables his readers to extend his contribution everywhere, including along never-before-contemplated paths. That the train of thoughts he launches leads on and on makes this 93 pages of text a big book.