

From *The Marxist Revolution: How Chico, Harpo, Groucho, and Zeppo Changed the Way we Laugh*, by Eddie Tafoya. Copyright 2021.

Chapter Seven

The Zeppo Problem

The ending of the Marxes' 1932 film *Horse Feathers* presents an enigma, one that echoes through their body of work. Here, we see the college widow, Connie Bailey (Thelma Todd), in a white veil and wedding dress as she stands before a minister who recites typical wedding vows. Next to her, in top hats and tuxedos, are four men, three of whom are clearly Chico, Harpo, and Groucho, and the implication is that they are the groomsmen. The identity of a fourth man is indeterminate, since his face and most of his body are obscured behind Todd. When the minister asks the bride if she takes "this man to be her lawful wedded husband," she responds with the expected "I do." When he asks, "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?" Chico, Groucho, and Harpo, in unison say, "We do." Instantly, Harpo pushes the mysterious man out of the frame, as he and the two others dog-pile on the bride.

Since 1932, Marx Brothers fans and commentators alike have puzzled over this scene, wondering about that fourth person, asking whether it is indeed Zeppo.¹ On the one hand, Zeppo's inclusion might be appropriate because throughout the film we see him courting Todd to the point of serenading her as he serves her breakfast in bed. Clearly, she is more attracted to and has a closer relationship with him than to any of the others, even if she is only manipulating him at the behest of a gangster (David Landau). On the other hand, his inclusion in this scene would be rather disturbing, since in the film he plays Groucho's son, and, as Renata Jackson has

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pointed out, “having father and son marry the same woman, along with two other men, might have pushed the lampooning of the ‘honorable estate’ of matrimony just a little too far,” (30) even for absurdity-loving Marx Brothers fans.

Even with the mystery unsolved (or perhaps especially because it remains unsolved), this scene exemplifies what we can call the Zeppo Problem, that is, determining the significance of the youngest Marx Brother’s contributions to the corpus. And there can be no mistake about it: how, when, and whether Zeppo added anything to the films is indeed a problem. Marx associate Morrie Ryskind, a writer who contributed to *Animal Crackers*, *The Cocoanuts*, and *A Night at the Opera*, once commented that there

just wasn’t any way to squeeze another comedic personality into an act that already had Groucho, Harpo, and Chico. Zeppo couldn’t sing or dance or play a musical instrument, and although he was the best looking of the brothers he still fell short of matinee-idol status. So with all those avenues closed to him, there wasn’t anything left for him except to play the straight man. [George S. Kaufman] and I tried our best to invent some business that would more fully incorporate him into the act. (Ryskind 64, qtd. in Ellis 19)

Film scholar Lance Deurfahrd has posed other questions on the matter, asking: is Zeppo “part of the fraternity? Do we count him in?” He comments that “[t]hough every bit as eponymous as his celebrated brethren, Zeppo seems adopted. Groucho’s cigar is more important to the Marx effect—has greater family resemblance, so to speak—than does Zeppo” (125-126).

While we can be sure that Zeppo is an outlier, there is a question about how many different ways he was an outlier and whether his inclusion did more for the act than his exclusion. Zeppo indeed stood apart from his brothers in many ways. The most obvious is his outward appearance. While a costume-party goer might easily find ways to masquerade as Groucho, Chico, or Harpo, dressing up as Zeppo would pose a challenge, since there is nothing distinctive about the way he looks. Then there are the facts that Zeppo was the only one of the brothers born in the twentieth century, that he did not join the team until it was earning rave

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reviews in vaudeville and getting ready to make the leap to Broadway, that he was the only one who did not get his moniker during that pivotal 1914 card game with vaudevillian Art Fisher (Kanfer 46), was the only brother to be cast as the romantic interest in any of their films, got virtually no laughs, seldom interacted with Chico and Harpo, and had noticeably fewer screen minutes than the others. According to Paul Hagl, who provides a detailed account, in the Paramount films that run for a total of six hours and forty-four minutes, Zeppo appears for a total of forty-nine minutes and fifty-five seconds, or about 12 percent of the time.² Furthermore, these films include long stretches during which Zeppo is noticeably absent, such as when the brothers invade the college classroom in *Horse Feathers* or dress like Groucho in *Duck Soup*.

In the 1982 stage show *Groucho: A Life in Revue*, co-written by Groucho's son, Arthur, Groucho says that Zeppo was the funniest of the brothers offstage, but that he "was a turkey onstage" (*Groucho*) and Groucho himself commented that "without Zeppo we're twice as good" (Mitchell 175). The disassociation was so pronounced that when Groucho accepted his Academy Award for Lifetime achievement in 1974, he mentioned Harpo, Chico, and Margaret Dumont, but not his youngest brother ("Honorary").

Furthermore, Zeppo was the only one to make his fortune outside of show business. Unlike his movie star siblings and Gummo, who was a theatrical agent, Zeppo was also an engineer and inventor. Louvish tells how, after leaving the act, Zeppo

[r]ecalling his old love of tinkering with vehicles and machines . . . joined up with a machinist from RKO studios . . . to form an engineering company, manufacturing coupling devices for aircraft. Little is known of this wartime enterprise, but it was said that one of their devices was used to hold the first atomic bombs in place, an ultimate Marxism that is beyond irony. (360)

His success in this arena is well-documented. In 1969 the youngest Marx Brother "patented a cardiac alarm wristwatch" that was so ahead of its time that even into the twenty-first century

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“many sport watches incorporate similar technology to help athletes train in their optimal heart rate zones” (Jemmett). He also designed a “[v]apor delivery pad for distributing moist heat” (Greenfield), an early version of the heating pad.

The argument can be made that even though he was, at least in the biological sense, a brother just as much as Harpo or Gummo, the circumstances of his show business career never allowed Zeppo a chance to shine on his own. In his 2003 article from *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Allen W. Ellis tells how Zeppo “never felt comfortable in the act that he had not helped to develop.” In a 1929 interview published in *Theatre Magazine*, Zeppo says he always felt like the “fifth wheel” and that he was “pushed into show business” (qtd. in Ellis 16). In the documentary film *The Marx Brothers in a Nutshell*, Gummo’s son Bob says that Zeppo resented that “he wasn’t allowed to be funny” (*Nutshell*).

And the man born Herbert Manfred Marx eventually decided he had to address the problem directly. After the brothers finished *Duck Soup* and before they began work on *A Night at the Opera*, he resigned from the troupe. In a letter to Groucho, he wrote “I’m sick and tired of being the stooge. You know that anybody else would have done as well as I . . . I have only stayed in the act until now because I knew that you, Chico and Harpo wanted me to.” Groucho responded that he was unhappy with the news, writing that “It’s going to complicate things terribly for us, particularly on sleeper jumps . . . In the old days there were four of us, then we could split up peacefully, two to a berth. Now we’re three, and there’s bound to be bad feelings” (qtd. in Louvish 277).

Zeppo’s words of resignation, however, illustrate quite a bit about the act, his role in it, and even the Marxes’ effect on the national consciousness. During a time when families were struggling through the Great Depression, anti-ethnic tensions were on the rise stateside, and

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threats of fascism were intensifying in Europe, the brothers continued to invert power paradigms even away from the stage and screen. In their world, it was the handsome brother, the straight-looking, well-kempt, presentable, and “normal” member who could most easily pass for Anglo-Saxon who had become the “stooge.” Like their Dadaist contemporaries, the brothers had taken Western rationality with its intelligence, logic, and sophistication and turned it on its head. Renata Jackson points out how, to both the Marx Brothers and the absurdist art movement, “verbal nonsense, buffoonery and [jokes] reign supreme . . . [and] challenged the established values” (R. Jackson 39).

But let us not overlook another fact that hides in plain sight: as a Marx Brother, Zeppo was, by definition, a misfit in a comedy team of misfits. Sometimes, in fact, Zeppo’s screen presence reveals the subtle ways in which he, oxymoronically enough, does belong to the group of outsiders because he often has no trouble being ensconced in their antics. Consider, for example, his role in the famous “Freedonia’s Going to War” scene from *Duck Soup*, an undisputed high point in Marx Brothers’ history. Here, he finds himself at the center of the action, dancing alongside Chico, Harpo, and Groucho, strumming a banjo, and rapping on soldiers’ helmets with xylophone mallets. He even croons out “How we’ll cry for Firefly if Firefly should die,” one of the number’s most distinctive lines. Then, in the film’s final battle scene, he is very much a part of the action, even though he only gets laughs with jokes that include the others.

Since 1933 numerous commentators and biographers have offered various explanations and excuses for the youngest Marx Brother—more often trying to explain his inclusion in the act rather than his eventual egress. Actor, director, comedian, writer, and Groucho associate David Steinberg offers the observation that, “There was some spirit that existed between the four Marx

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Brothers that wasn't there with the three of them" (*Nutshell*). Eyles seems to want to make an excuse, writing that "Zeppo . . . is not so interesting, but he is worth having all the awkwardness just because he is one of the family. He deserves a place and the family solidarity his presence expresses is rather likeable" (10). One of very few moments of unqualified praise comes from Ellis, who asks why their five earliest films were the Marxes' funniest and immediately provides a response: "Is it so outrageous to suggest that the answer is that Zeppo was in them?" (25).

It is important to note that Zeppo did not come to the act empty-handed. In fact, there is room for speculation that he could have been a star on par with his brothers had the professional circumstances been a little different. Adamson and others tell how, when *Animal Crackers* was in its Broadway run and an appendectomy forced Groucho to the sidelines, Zeppo stepped into the lead role of Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding. He tells how one night, "Groucho sat in the audience while recuperating and discovered . . . that his baby brother could match him point for point in delivery, if not originality" (Adamson 39). Ellis, meanwhile, writes that Zeppo's performance was so effective that it made "Groucho recover all the quicker" since "the brothers were not above professional jealousy" (19). Zeppo later spoke of the experience, saying that some of Groucho's friends "didn't even realize it was me" playing the part and that "I knew I could do it. And this frustrated me even more, because I knew I could get laughs, but I wasn't allowed to with the Marx Brothers" (qtd. in Kanfer 139).

This all suggests that Zeppo and his contributions should not be dismissed too easily, just as relegating him to the role as a straight man would be oversimplifying the matter. We could even go so far as to say that dismissing what he added to the group is to misunderstand the potent social commentary that is the Marxist corpus. Ellis, for example, notes a distinctive role that Zeppo plays in the early films, how he was "one of the group, yet not one of the group" and

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therefore serves as a link between the other brothers and the audience. Another way of looking at the same matter is to take note of how Zeppo operates when the spotlight is not on him, which is most of the time he is on-screen. To draw an analogy from the world of basketball, we could say that Zeppo is most effective at “moving without the ball,” a function that is often the key to an effective play.

There is plenty of evidence for this. Consider, for example, a sequence that comes a little more than three-quarters of the way through *Animal Crackers*. Here, we see Groucho in the guise of African explorer Jeffrey T. Spaulding engaging in a conversation with Mrs. Rittenhouse (Dumont), who informs him that she has called the police because a painting has been stolen. Incensed for some unknown and illogical reason, Groucho launches into one of his most hostile moments. He summons his secretary, Jamison (Zeppo), and dictates a letter:

Groucho: Honorable Charles H. Hungadunga, care of Hungadunga, Hungadunga, Hungadunga, Hungadunga, and McCormack. Semicolon.

Zeppo: How do you spell “semicolon”?

Groucho: All right, make it a comma. Honorable Charles H. Hungadunga, care of Hungadunga . . . and McCormack. Gentlemen, question mark. (clears his throat).

Zeppo: Do you want (clears his throat) in the letter?

Groucho: No, put that in an envelope. (Continuing the dictation) Now then. In re yours of the fifth inst, yours to hand and beg to rep, brackets, that we have gone over the ground carefully and we seem to believe, i.e., to wit, e.g., in lieu, that despite all our precautionary measures, which have been involved, we seem to believe that it is hardly necessary for us to proceed unless we receive an ipso facto that is not negligible at this moment. Quotes, unquotes, and quotes. Hoping this finds you, I beg to remain.

Zeppo: Finds him where?

Groucho: Let him worry about that. Don't be so inquisitive. Sneak!

Zeppo: Hoping this finds you, I beg to remain.

Groucho: Now, read me the letter.

Zeppo: “Honorable Charles H. Hungadunga, care of Hungadunga, Hungadunga, Hungadunga, and McCormack.”

Groucho: You've left out a Hungadunga. You left out the main one, too. Thought you could slip one over on me, didn't you?

In this scene, each of the characters operates in a reality that is quite different from the other two. As usual, Dumont is her uptight self, easily shocked and scandalized by the most

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innocuous infractions. Groucho, meanwhile, is illogical and animated, so much so that at one point he takes such a powerful swing at Zeppo with his walking stick that he loses his balance. Finally, there is Zeppo, in the role of “secretary,” a word that means, etymologically speaking, someone who is “entrusted with a secret.” Not only can he communicate with Groucho in his own language, but he understands the message and prepares it for transmittal. As the “keeper of the secrets,” Zeppo’s role is to decode the gobbledygook for the rest of us, something he does with aplomb. The gravity and calmness he gives the matter also provides an effective contrast to Groucho’s wild energy, which only enhances the joke.

The scene is reprised, although in abbreviated form, in *Duck Soup*, three years later. Here, as he is preparing to leave his inaugural ball, Groucho, as President Rufus T. Firefly, summons his secretary, Bob Roland (Zeppo). The conversation ensues:

Groucho: Take a letter.

Zeppo: To who?

Groucho: To my dentist. (Dictating the letter): “Dear Dentist. Enclosed find a check for five hundred dollars.” Send it off immediately.

Zeppo: I’ll, uhm, I’ll have to enclose a check for five hundred dollars.

Groucho: You do, and I’ll fire you.

Here, it is not only the same joke set-up but also the same dynamics that come into play. The unhinged Groucho lives in a world of strained logic and morality, to say the least. Zeppo, like the rest of us, lives in a world where most people, and especially government officials, should stand by their word. And Zeppo, as Duerfahrd has pointed out, “exists only at the fringes of Groucho’s semiotic world. He commits the error of wanting to act, to send. Paradoxically, it is his wish to carry out this useful function that almost makes him lose his job” (127).

Later in the same film, when Freedonia is in the thick of battle, Zeppo brings Groucho a “message from the front,” and as he hands over the envelope, Groucho says haughtily, “Oh, I’m sick of messages from the front. Don’t we ever get a message from the side?” Groucho glances at

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the missive and then, as if reading it is too much trouble, asks, “What is it?” Zeppo says, “General Smith reports a gas attack and he wants to know what to do.” Groucho responds, “Tell him to take a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in half a glass of water,” a command that Zeppo apparently follows immediately and without question.

Similarly, in *Horse Feathers*, Zeppo plays Frank Wagstaff, a student at Huxley College and the son of the newly installed president, Quincy Adams Wagstaff. Here, he becomes the voice of the student body as he explains to his father that the college has not had a winning football team in years and having a good football team requires good football players.

All this shows that Zeppo’s function is to occupy some liminal space in the brothers’ world as they violate border after border: he is a member of the family, but not necessarily of the fraternity. He is handsome, but not handsome enough. He is zany, but only off-screen. He is a stooge, but only in the brothers’ inverted world. And he functions as the go-between. He is, like the mysterious tuxedoed man in *Horse Feathers*’ final scene, an essential element that is shoved out to the fringes.

Such a role is hardly small potatoes. In fact, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the youngest Marx brother still has a long and honored legacy with Zeppoesque characters finding their way onto American films and television shows. Sometimes, these characters fade into the scenery because they too are so ordinary they become little more than background texture. Sometimes they disappear from the screen for long stretches if not altogether.

Then there are times when their banalities make them stand out.

Ellis points out how the character of Marilyn Munster, the pretty blonde niece in a family of benign monsters in the 1960s sitcom *The Munsters* is part of this legacy because she is the

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typical, perhaps even the hypertypical, young woman of the Cold War era. Similarly, Ellis notes, in the 1984 film *Ghostbusters*, writers Dan Ackroyd and Harold Ramis “added the more-or-less ‘normal’ presence of Winston Zeddemore (Zeppomore?) to contrast the antics of the other three Ghostbusters” (Ellis 22). He lists several other examples of the phenomenon, including the eponymous characters of the 1970s sitcoms *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show*, Eddie Albert’s Oliver Wendell Douglas from the sitcom *Green Acres*, and Adam Cartwright from the NBC western drama *Bonanza*. One of the most famous installments of the 1990s supernatural television drama *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Ellis notes, is titled “The Zeppo.” In it, Xander, the “normal” member of the group of vampire fighters is told that he is a “useless part of the group . . . the Zeppo.” Also, The Rutles, comedian Eric Idle’s satirical rock group based on the Beatles, at one time was said to have included a member named Leppo who couldn’t play the guitar and was all but forgotten (Ellis 23).

Certainly, more examples of this tradition abound, such as the title character of the popular sitcom from the 1970s and 1980s, *Barney Miller*. In the show, Miller is consistently a steady and reasoned voice, and therefore the “normal” and least funny presence in a police squad room filled with decidedly ethnic and eccentric detectives, arrestees, witnesses, victims, and visitors. And, like the youngest Marx, he frequently finds himself separated from the group. While the detectives’ work space—the arena where most of the action takes place—is a squad room filled with desks, file cabinets, and debris on the floor and even includes a jail cell, Miller has his own sphere of middle-class normality, an office with a couch, pictures of his family, and potted plants. Similarly, Khloé Kardashian, the younger sister of socialite and reality TV star Kim Kardashian, adds a Zeppoesque quality to the E! Cable Network show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and is very much the link between the audience and other characters because she

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does not possess the exotic good looks that are the family signature. Comedian Amy Schumer expresses as much in her October 2015 appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, when she shows dismay at Khloé losing weight and making herself more attractive. Schumer cries out that “Khloé was ours” (Schumer). Likewise, Ariel Winter’s character of Alex Dunphy in the sitcom *Modern Family* is smart, attractive, sensible, and mature in a family populated with exaggerated personalities, and, by virtue of all this, is a lonely pariah. In an episode early in the show’s second season, Alex’s parents return home after an evening out and find the teenager sitting on the floor in the living room, distraught and alone. She turns to her parents and says, “I have no friends” (“Strangers”). Clearly, the Dunphys live in the Marxist world, one where the smart, attractive, focused, and conscientious sibling is the outcast.

In the hit 1990s television show, *Seinfeld*, the character of Elaine Benes also shows distinctly Zeppoesque characteristics. She is the only “normal”-looking member of her foursome in that she is attractive (but not matinee-idol-attractive) whose clothing usually looks freshly pressed. She has no exaggerated physical characteristics to compete with Seinfeld’s prominent teeth and bug eyes, Kramer’s hair, or George’s whiny voice, short stature, bald head, and crippling insecurities. She is also the character whom we see consistently working at a regular nine-to-five job and, in these capacities, always as a go-between. When the series begins, she is a book editor, and therefore metaphorically sits on the border between the author and the publisher and the author and the reading public. Once she loses that job, she works as a liaison and assistant to Mr. Pitt, a publishing executive, largely serving as the mediator between him and the outside world. By the end of the show, she is a writer and editor of the catalogue for J. Peterman, a company that sells clothing, furniture, and fashion accessories and therefore she represents the contact point between the business and its customers.

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Although a successful stand-up comedian, Jerry sacrifices very little for his art and profession. When George is at his office while working as an executive for the New York Yankees baseball team, he spends most of his time figuring out ways to avoid work, such as when he improvises a bed under his desk so he can nap during the workday.³ Although Kramer once worked at a bagel shop,⁴ how he gets the money to pay rent and buy food is a mystery. Only Elaine lives in the normal world of deadlines, timeclocks, everyday workplace relationships, and where a commitment to do something comes with the expectation that it will be done. Even though she gets plenty of laughs on the show, she is also quite effective when she is not the focus of attention, when she is “moving without the ball,” and, through subtle gestures and expressions, amplifies the comedy. Consider, for example, the scene from Episode Eleven of Season Three, when Seinfeld and Elaine are at the desk of a car rental and the clerk informs him that that they do not have a car for him even though he had reserved one.⁵ Elaine accentuates the tension and enhances the comedy with the subtlest of glances and facial expressions.

When we take into account Zeppo’s long legacy, we stumble upon yet another obvious question.

If he is “one of the group but not of the group,” and considering his liminal status and the company he keeps, what is Zeppo’s character’s ethnicity? If Harpo represents the Irish immigrant, Chico the Italian, and Groucho the Eastern European Jew, what is Zeppo? Matthew Daube has provided one answer, suggesting that Zeppo and Gummo were there to represent “straight men,” characters who were “thoroughly heterosexual, WASP-ish, and practically indistinguishable from other contemporary white male youth leads” and therefore they “represent white America” (Daube 19, 22).

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Such a notion, however, presents certain problems. If this were the case, why would Zeppo need to go through such great pains to sneak into his own country as he does in *Monkey Business*? Why would he end up fighting alongside the others during the climax of *Duck Soup*? If he is indeed an immigrant rather than the typical American WASP, the question hardly changes. Throughout American history, immigrants who are “WASP-ish” have been most easily welcomed into the United States. Ian Haney Lopez, the Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at the University of California at Berkeley, has noted that throughout American history, to “be unfit for naturalization—that is, to be non-White—implied a certain degeneracy of intellect, morals, self-restraint, and political values; to be suited for citizenship—to be White—suggested moral maturity, self-assurance, personal independence, and political sophistication” (12). In this regard, Zeppo seems rather qualified to be among the chosen few who would most easily be allowed U.S. citizenship. If this is the case, why would he associate and identify with the ragtag clique, especially when they exclude and dismiss him so often? Even if he is an immigrant, he is clearly a handsome, well-attired, even-tempered, straight man who can pass for Anglo-Saxon, and therefore should have been on the upper deck of the steamship in *Monkey Business* from the opening scene. Besides, that, as an immigrant “white man” intent on getting into the country, his association with Chico, Harpo, and Groucho would compromise, rather than enhance, his chances of entry.

Zeppo, therefore, like his brothers, must represent someone who is not welcomed in the United States. We may assume the reasons the other brothers’ characters might be rejected since, no matter what they do, they cannot join the Protestant Elite. When it comes to Zeppo, however, we cannot know his motivation for sneaking into the country unless we know his backstory, something the films never provide for any of the characters. Consequently, there seems to be

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only one plausible answer: Zeppo represents the unwelcome non-Protestant Other who roams among us unnoticed, and by doing so also represents a long, storied, and complex tradition in American history.

Consequently, his very presence in the team—and in *Monkey Business* especially—gives the films a harder edge and adds immeasurably to the potent social commentary.

Consider, for instance, the frequent examples of Zeppoesque parallels in real life. Sometimes, the so-called “undesirables” the brothers represent carry physical markings that identify them as such, outward signs that for Chico, Harpo, and Groucho serve as their signatures. Quite often, however, they don’t. While this is often true of second- and third-generation members of immigrant families, it is nevertheless quite prominent among the children of immigrants—stars like Walt Disney, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Joan Rivers, Raquel Welch, Martin Sheen, Renee Zellweger, Louis C.K., and Alexis Biedel are among some of the most notable examples. While comedians like Jackie Mason, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen might display and even celebrate their Jewishness, other celebrities like Goldie Hawn, Jake and Maggie Gyllenhall, Mila Kunis, James Caan, Jennifer Connelly, Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson, Natalie Portman, and Mike Wallace—to name a scant few—all have Jewish parentage but are difficult to classify by phenotype, diction, or dress alone. Or else consider the long list of celebrities whose African American heritage remains obscured if not hidden, entertainers like Broadway star Carole Channing, socialite Nicole Ritchie, actor Jennifer Beals, and action-adventure star Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. Appearances alone simply do not always provide enough information about the tribe a person might belong to.

Other times, one’s hidden “outsider” status is not a matter of physical appearance or ethnicity. Sometimes, it is a matter of sexual preference, political leanings, or religion. While

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identifying the flamboyant man who wears a feather boa, shiny red skin-tight leather pants, and glitter eye make-up as gay might be easy, the great majority of gays and lesbians in America draw very little attention to their sexual orientation while in their neighborhoods, workplaces, or supermarkets. The same can be said of the great majority of American Muslims who choose not to don the hijab, the burka, khimar, or the thobe. Communists and socialists, likewise, are virtually impossible to identify the great majority of the time, as are practitioners of Scientology, paganism, or Unitarianism.

The Zeppo problem, therefore, brings with it certain complicating factors and thus reveals a great deal about the national consciousness. The most cursory survey of American culture shows that since its very founding, the country has always managed to find a particular group to be suspicious of, a group whose mere existence raises questions about perceived “internal threats.” As though an invisible gun points in one direction for a few years and then in another a few years after that, Americans have frequently been on the lookout for suspected “subversive” or “dangerous” misfits hiding among the ranks. In the 1920s and then again in the 1950s and 1960s it was the Communists whom, the nation feared, surreptitiously trod through our workplaces, college campuses, and supermarkets. This fear soon grew into paranoia and citizens worried about “reds under the bed,”⁶ a fear the Marxes played with on several occasions, such as in *The Cocoanuts* when Harpo hides under the bed of the conspirator Penelope (Kay Francis) and in *Duck Soup*, when Chico and Harpo, both dressed as Groucho, end up under Dumont’s bed.

In the 1980s, as news spread of the acquired immunodeficiency virus, a fear amplified when movie star Rock Hudson revealed he was dying of the disease, Americans for a while especially feared homosexuals, their influence, their undetected presence, and how they might be “infecting” the country. According to Larry O. Gostin, once Hudson “announced that he had

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AIDS and then died amid expressions of shock and recrimination,” the “messages of this era were not hopeful or uplifting, but rather bitter and divisory. It was a time when persons living with HIV/AIDS had little hope of an effective treatment and experienced stigma, rejection, and discrimination (Gostin xxv).

For years after the attacks of the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001, Americans were looking out for Muslims—the radical terrorist as well as the civically minded and upstanding citizen—and for a while hate crimes against Muslims increased as much as seventeen-fold (Kuang). An article in *Time* magazine from June 2004 entitled “The Terrorist Next Door” discussed how then-attorney general John Ashcroft excited such fears in the United States by announcing that an “al-Qaeda-related group” preparing for a “massive attack inside the U.S.” was “90%” ready to carry out its plans, although he “acknowledged that officials had not picked up any specifics about a plot.” The attorney general was criticized for his “alarmist tone,” and one official questioned the credibility of the announcement, asking how, “[i]f you don't know who, what, where and when, how do you get to 90%?” Aides from the office later clarified the statement, saying that the point was to underscore how al-Qaeda was “likely to rely on operatives who can move easily into and around the U.S.” (Eisenberg). Suddenly, it was Muslims, not Communists, hiding under America’s metaphorical beds and roaming through cities without drawing any extra attention to themselves. And top U.S. law-enforcement officials were ready and willing to ratchet up the fears.

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the United States has experienced its own large-scale “Zeppo problem” that involves millions of children who, brought to the country illegally by their parents, were finally coming of age. Some of these have been dubbed as “DREAMERS” because they were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for

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Childhood Arrivals Act and its associated Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act or DREAM Act. For the most part, these immigrants grew up speaking unaccented English and dancing to the same music, wearing the same fashions, adopting the same hair styles, following the same fads, and watching the same movies and television shows as the children whose families had been in the country for multiple generations. They were, culturally speaking, very much everyday Americans in that they drew no extra attention to themselves. As they entered adulthood, many of them, however, were forced to deal with the consequences of their illegal status because they were denied simple things most Americans take for granted, such as federal student loan aid, voting rights, passports (AIC).⁷

By all outward appearances, they were like every other young American. Yet, if we look deeper into their personal and legal lives, we find that they are interlopers, pariahs, and intruders, the Zeppos of the early twenty-first century.⁸

If, as Epstein has argued, “Groucho’s mustache, glasses, and cigar are a sort of mask hiding his real self from outsiders and a sign of insecurity” about his being a fraud and “an outsider” who “didn’t belong in any social environment,” if “Harpo and Chico also wore masks to “disguise their true identity, sometimes grotesquely, to adapt to life in the Golden Land” (85), we could easily argue that Zeppo is very much part of this fraternity since he hides his status as the non-Protestant Other behind a mask of “ordinariness” or so-called “normality.”

This is Zeppo’s significance. As the Marx Brother whose hair stays combed, whose shirt stays starched even after two days in a wooden kippered herring barrel and whose double-breasted blazer never gets stained, as the interloper whose idiolect, accent, and phenotype draw no extra attention to themselves, as the outsider who dances at the party, attends college, and assumes bills should be paid when they are due and promised, as someone who works a steady

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job, serves as the go-between and the “keeper of secrets,” sometimes gets the girl, and can take outrageous gibberish and understand it, he is an essential part of the Marxist revolution.

As the undetectable and patently nonthreatening Other, he is—especially in an age when white, Anglo-Saxon Americans are quickly becoming a minority—like most Americans. His presence implicitly asks xenophobic America what we were so afraid in the first place.