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Georg Simmel and Formal Sociology

Sociology, as conceived by G.Simmel, did not pretend to usurp the subject matter of economics [1], ethics, psychology, or historiography; rather, it concentrated on the forms of interactions that underlie political, economic, religious, and sexual behavior. In Simmel's perspective a host of otherwise distinct human phenomena might be properly understood by reference to the same formal concept [8].

G.Simmel is best known as a microsociologist who played a significant role in the development of small-group research. Simmel's basic approach can be described as «methodological relationism», because he operates on the principle that everything interacts in some way with everything else. His essay on *fashion* [13], for example,

notes that fashion is a form of social relationship that allows those who wish to conform to do so while also providing the norm from which individualistic people can deviate. Within the fashion process, people take on a variety of social roles that play off the decisions and actions of others. On a more general level, people are influenced by both objective culture (the things that people produce) and individual culture (the capacity of individuals to produce, absorb, and control elements of objective culture). Simmel believed that people possess creative capacities (more-life) that enable them to produce objective culture that transcends them. But objective culture (more-than-life) comes to stand in irreconcilable opposition to the creative forces that have produced it in the first place [12; 2].

Georg Simmel (gā'ôrk zîm'ə) (born March 1, 1858, Berlin, Ger. – died Sept. 26, 1918, Strassburg, France) was the youngest of seven children. His father died when Simmel was still young, and a family friend was appointed his guardian. Simmel's father, a successful businessman, left him with a sizable inheritance, which would set him up for life as a scholar. Simmel studied history and philosophy at the University of Berlin and received his doctorate in 1881 [3; 4].

G.Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our understanding of patterns or forms of social interaction. Simmel made clear that one of his primary interests was association among conscious actors and that his intent was to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem trivial at some times but crucially important at others. One of Simmel's dominant concerns was the form rather than the content of social interaction. From Simmel's point of view, the sociologist's task is to impose a limited number of forms on social reality, extracting commonalities that are found in a wide array of specific interactions.

One of the main focuses of Simmel's historical and philosophical sociology is the cultural level of social reality, which he called objective culture. In Simmel's view, people produce culture, but because of their ability to reify social reality, the cultural world and the social world come to have lives of their own and increasingly dominate the actors who created them. G.Simmel identified a number of components of objective culture, including tools, transportation, technology, the arts, language, the intellectual sphere, conventional wisdom, religious dogma, philosophical systems, legal systems, moral codes, and ideals. The absolute size of objective culture increases with modernization. The number of different components of the cultural realm also grows [12; 6].

Simmel's insistence on the forms of social interaction as the domain peculiar to sociological inquiry was his decisive response to those historians and other representatives of the humanities who denied that a science of society could ever come to grips with the novelty, the irreversibility, and the uniqueness of historical phenomena.

G.Simmel agreed that particular historical events are unique: the murder of Caesar, the accession of Henry VIII, the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo are all events located at a particular moment in time and having a nonrecurrent significance. The sociologist does not contribute to knowledge about the individual actions of a King John, or a King Louis, or a King Henry, but he can illuminate the ways in which all of them were constrained in their actions by the institution of kingship. The sociologist is concerned with King John, not with King John. On a more abstract level, he may not even be concerned with the institution of kingship, but rather with the processes of conflict and cooperation, of subordination and superordination, of centralization and decentralization, which constitute the building blocks for the larger institutional structure.

To Simmel, the forms found in social reality are never pure: every social phenomenon contains a multiplicity of formal elements. Cooperation and conflict, subordination and superordination, intimacy and distance all may be operative in a marital relationship or in a bureaucratic structure [8].

Simmel's insistence on abstracting from concrete content and concentrating on the forms of social life has led to the labeling of his approach as formal sociology. However, his distinction between the form and the content of social phenomena is not always as clear as we should like. He gave variant definitions of these concepts, and his treatment of particular topics reveals some obvious inconsistencies. *Formal sociology* isolates form from the heterogeneity of content of human sociation. It attempts to show that however diverse the interests and purposes that give rise to specific associations among men, the social forms of interaction in which these interests and purposes are realized may be identical [8; 5].

Simmel's interest in creativity is manifest in his discussions of the diverse forms of social interaction, the ability of actors to create social structures, and the disastrous effects those structures have on the creativity of individuals. All of Simmel's discussions of the forms of interaction imply that actors must be consciously oriented to one another. Simmel also has a sense of individual conscience and of the fact that the norms and values of society become internalized in individual consciousness. In addition, G.Simmel has a conception of people's ability to confront themselves mentally, to set themselves apart from their own actions, which is very similar to the views of George Herbert Mead [12; 10].

G.Simmel constructed a gallery of social types to complement his inventory of social forms. Along with «the stranger», he describes in great phenomenological detail such diverse types as «the mediator», «the poor», «the adventurer», «the man in the middle», and «the renegade». G.Simmel conceives of each particular social type as being cast by the specifiable reactions and expectations of others. The type becomes what he is through his relations with others who assign him a particular position and expect him to behave in specific ways. His characteristics are seen as attributes of the social structure. For example, «the stranger», in Simmel's terminology, is not just a wanderer «who comes today and goes tomorrow», having no specific structural position.

On the contrary, he is a «person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is fixed within a particular spatial group. But his position is determined by the fact that he does not belong to it from the beginning, and that he may leave again. *The stranger* is «an element of the group itself» while not being fully part of it. He therefore is assigned a role that no other members of the group can play [9; 11].

Society: exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction (interaction is the key to everything with G.Simmel), which arises on the basis of certain drives or for the sake of certain purposes. Unity (or sociation) in the empirical sense constitutes the interaction of elements (ie. individuals in the case of society).

Individuals are the loci of all historical reality, but the materials of life are not social unless they promote interaction. This follows since only this sociation can transform a mere aggregation of isolated individuals into specific forms of being with and for one another.

In terms of Simmel's famous form/content dichotomy: any social phenomenon is composed of two elements which in reality are inseparable (distinction is only analytical): 1) Content: the interest, purpose, or motive of the phenomenon or interaction; 2) Form: the mode of interaction among individuals through/in the shape of which the specific content achieves social reality.

G.Simmel conceives sociology as the science of social forms (in a sense affording form analytic primary over content – although in reality they are inseparable). He makes use of a helpful analogy of geometry as the study of forms (ie. shapes) which may exist in an unlimited variety of physical materials. G.Simmel believes that sociology should leave the examination of the content of societal interaction to other sciences (such as psychology or economy) in the way that geometry leaves content analysis to the physical sciences [7].

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