Georg Simmel's Sociology of Individuality

Simmel's construction of what constitutes society (itself and as the subject of sociological inquiry) positions interaction or "sociation" above the amalgamation of individualized identities in a way that engages much of the theory we have read this semester. Similarly to Durkheim, Simmel is deeply preoccupied with the relationship between the individual and society. However, while for the former the organizing concept may be "solidarity," for the latter it would probably be "individuality." For Simmel, the fundamental problems of modern life stem from "the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (324). It is in this framework that we will attempt to address some of his wide-ranging theoretical concerns.

Simmel begins by placing the idea of knowledge production in a specific Kantian philosophical context. He elucidates Kant's connection between man's ego and the way it constructs categories of definition and inquiry (in the context of both nature and history), particularly the fact of its embeddedness in what it purports to describe (4). Simmel constructs Kant's critique of knowledge production as liberatory, arguing that we have won independence from nature through creative thought, and proposes that we must now do the same with regard to history. It is in the spirit of "preserv[ation] of the freedom of the human spirit" over historicism, through creativity, that he constructs his inquiry into society (5).

Simmel privileges the relation between man and society as the substance of society itself. Following, Kant, Simmel distinguishes nature from society as a means of defining society: nature is constituted by the observing subject exclusively (7), whereas society as an entity is produced not through some subjective catalogue of elements (for it needs no observer), but rather through the elements themselves (men), as "conscious and
synthesizing units" (7). In Simmel's estimation, society consists of the units of consciousness, which simultaneously interpret and produce it (9), through organizational mechanisms that generalize on the basis of group identity (11). These social "generalizations" house many of the important relational elements of sociality, those between individuals, the individual and his group, and the individual and outsiders (14-17). The fact of sociation puts the individual in a "dual position," of being "contained in sociation and confronted by it" (17). In this sense, society is the spaces between man and generalization, and their interrelationship.

His fashioning of the sociological problem likewise focuses on these interrelationships between man and society, identifying interaction between men as the site of inquiry, their impulses and purposes in unity (23). For Simmel, the process of sociation or interaction transforms "the mere isolated aggregation of individuals into specific forms of being," which are the object of study (24). He privileges this aspect of society over all others, and thus his construction of the sociological project focuses on the composition of social interactions between men and men, and men and groups.

Simmel applies this individual/formal dichotomy to an analysis of the human condition within the bounds of the modern metropolis. Humans are creatures who maintain "dependence upon difference" (325), yet the effect of a metropolis is to dull an individual's perception of the qualitative differences within the physical world. Metropolitan life is characterized by "punctuality, calculability, and exactness" (328) and is conducive to a "blasé outlook" (329) which is typified by the "incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy" (329) and, as noted, "an indifference toward the distinctions between things" (329).

Further, within the modern city, individuals carry around a kind of "concealed aversion" (332) toward other individuals, which leads to distance between human beings and, ultimately, to a unique and unprecedented variety of personal freedom. In short, as compared to the socially constructed small town citizen, the urban citizen exists in a state of social deregulation that might fall under Durkheim's rubric of anomie.

With regard to the historical circumstances that have given rise to this particular form of individual freedom, Simmel notes, "[i]t is not our task to complain or condone but only to understand" (339). While he does not "judge" the contemporary
manifestation of the form/content distinction, however, Simmel does maintain that forms have the tendency to become a "handicap" (351) for personal relations. He writes that there is a constant friction between the reality of social life and the forms that both guide it and are guided by it. While forms are temporary, and are replaced over time, they do not necessarily evolve to precise compatibility with contemporary social relations. There is always, for instance, the potential for archaic forms, which have proven to be too narrow within a modern context, to be supplanted by new forms which are now too wide (e.g. overly constrictive elements of a political constitution which are altered to allow for excessive freedom (352)).

Simmel concludes with the idea that, though forms have always been erected and demolished over time, contemporary humans are waging a distinctive battle against form in abstracto. He writes: "At present, we are experiencing a new phase of the old struggle—no longer a struggle of a contemporary form, filled with life, against an old, lifeless one, but a struggle of life against the form as such, against the principle of form" (377). In this environment, those forms which do exist are built up and demolished with an unprecedented rapidity. Yet Simmel concludes with the rumination that perhaps this rejection of form, this morass of formlessness, is "itself the appropriate form for contemporary life" (393).

Simmel also delves into an in-depth examination of individuality as such as a basis for understanding the social world. Using the conceptual tool of reciprocity (the meaning of a thing only emerges through interaction with other things, and does not exist intrinsically), Simmel explains the relation between the individual and society through the construct of social circles. He emphasizes interaction between and among individuals and groups, and is interested, like Marx, in a qualitative, full development of individuality.

As individuals, we are "surrounded by concentric circles of special interests" (261). Simmel uses the family as an example of the sociological duality of all social circles—the family is an extension of one's own personality (selfhood), as well as a complex within which the individual distinguishes himself (antithesis) (263). Each social circle (except for the largest one) has thus a double meaning: both as an entity with an individual character, and as a higher order complex that can include both lower order
complexes and individual members (265). The dynamic that characterizes the relationship between the individual and society is determined by the correlation between three levels distinguished by their magnitude—the individual element, the narrower and the wider circle (265).

The individuation of collectivities and the indeterminacy of the collective individuality are key to understanding not only the relation between the individual and society, but also the fluidity of any given society. As a group expands and there is more competition for livelihood within it, there is also more and more internal differentiation and specialization (Durkheim's "division of labor"). In other words, individuality increases as the social circle encompassing the individual expands (252). Furthermore, differentiation and individualization loosen the individual's bonds with the narrow circle and builds new ones with the larger (256). Simultaneously, intensified individualization within the group is accompanied by the decreased individualization of the group as a whole (259).

The connection between individuality and social circles lies in the dynamic between the three levels, as the first and the third levels are oriented toward one another and against the middle part, (267) a process which Simmel explains through the psychology of distance. In contrast to Durkheim, Simmel does not draw strong boundaries between sociology and psychology (insofar as he defines the object as sociology in terms of the distinction between forms and contents in the social realm (xxiv)).

Simmel also looks closely at several specific forms of social interaction, including exchange and conflict. Exchange, which involves some sort of reciprocity, characterizes most interactions, including many of those that appear "unilateral" (43). Exchange functions through sacrifice and gain, and is the precondition of value, which can exist only relatively. This aspect of relativity is important for Simmel because it provides a basis for understanding society as "a supra-singular structure which is nonetheless not abstract" (69). Only through exchange can individual people or objects transcend their singularity in the lived world of interaction.

Simmel sees exchange as a concept with which to organize and understand the "naturally given rhythm of our existence" (44); in acknowledging a natural reality that
exists prior to the imposed form of exchange, Simmel unsettles his own theoretical
category. In his meditation on conflict as a necessary part of a dualistic social process,
Simmel again draws attention to the question of content preceding form (79). For a
theorist like Marx, such a tension in his logical progression would undermine the entire
construct; for Simmel, whose task seems more to uncover the complexities of social
interaction rather than to establish a unified, encompassing theory of society, this tension
adds depth.

For Simmel, conflict as a social form is best understood as "sociologically
positive," in that it involves an interaction of people or groups, however antagonistic
(71). As such, conflict is inseparable from harmony in many individual-level interactions
as well as in the context of the social whole (72, 77), particularly in urban life, as
discussed above (76).

This brief look at Simmel's theoretical orientation raised some questions about
Simmel as an individual thinker and about his work in the context of a larger body of
sociology: how does Simmel's construction of society and the sociological method
compare to Durkheim's? Does Simmel truly privilege form over content in his
construction of the sociological project? How does he differentiate the utility of each?
There is a tension in Simmel's use of the formal construct of "epochs" in his historical
arguments to illustrate various claims: if, as Simmel maintains, forms "contradict the
essence of life itself" (392), if we really must be wary of the ability of form to embody
individual interactions, then shouldn't we also be wary of argumentative evidence derived
solely from formal concepts? Unlike Durkheim, Simmel appears to see society as
primarily a collection of individuals connected through their relations, thus not a reality
or social fact of its own. Preoccupied with individuality, he only cursorily addresses that
which binds societies together. How would he define solidarity, and what place would he
ascribe to it?