Group A Simmel Paper

This paper does a good job relating the basic ideas presented in the Simmel pieces. It is better on specifics of exchange, conflict and some other particular essays than on the more general approach running through the essays (which is more difficult to draw out). The discussion could be a bit more penetrating about the intent and implications of Simmel’s ideas, particularly about Simmel’s conception of forms. While it may make sense to characterize forms as enduring, neither stagnant nor permanent appear to be appropriate. Overall, the discussion appears to miss a real understanding of the way that Simmel conceived forms as characteristics of social relations that simultaneously transcend, structure, and are constituted by individual action. Relatedly, it is not clear what to make of your statement that “Simmel’s discussion of the interaction between the individual and society focuses primarily on the role of the individual.” The statement is a little vague (Simmel asks how individuality and society are each possible; he addresses interaction between individuals; does he address interaction between individuals and society?). It’s hard to relate this to Simmel’s emphasis on forms and relationships. Aren’t these basic building blocks for him, and aren’t they hard to square with saying he emphasizes individuals?

The paper’s attempt to compare Simmel with Durkheim is a good idea, but it stays at an elementary level. It would have been nice to see it taken further. It suggests that Simmel and Durkheim had some similar interests and there exists a minor resemblance between a couple ideas they had. It does not make much of an effort to assess how their questions, assumptions, forms of argument, critical theoretical assertions, or the like appear divergent, inconsistent, contrary, or complimentary. That is, how would they push sociology in different directions?

Group B Simmel Paper

This paper makes a reasonable effort to present Simmel’s basic ideas, and does a good job in many ways, but seems to get a bit lost in details. This is an issue particularly during the early part of the paper. What you say is generally right, but the specifics aren’t connected into a whole statement so much as listed. The attempt to expose the Kantian starting points of Simmel’s ideas is good, insofar as it points to the philosophical underpinnings of his work, but it ends up being a fairly vague allusion. What precisely does it reveal about Simmel’s perspective? After this, the discussion of Simmel’s ideas improves, but still suffers in some places from an inadequate distinction between what is telling—i.e., really significant—about Simmel’s ideas and what just happens to appear among them.

The efforts to achieve a critical or comparative perspective are uneven and mostly take the form of small snippets of ideas or questions. It is difficult to get far with this strategy. The passing comparison of Simmel and Marx relative to the issue of creating an integrated theory could, for example, be a bridge to some thoughtful commentary, rather than a fragmentary thought. Other brief critical references, including implicit comparison with Durkheim, vary. Some reflect good intuitions; others appear to be weaker or more superficial ideas. Either way, more systematic pursuit of them would be needed to really learn from them (or decide whether they really work). We both have the impressions (a) that you’ve read the work and (b) that you are intelligent, but not that you have quite put the intelligence to work analyzing the work. In general, one well-developed idea is considerably more effective that a bunch of undeveloped
thoughts, which tend inevitably to remain superficial. You might, accordingly, do well to summarize a general perspective and show how it is exemplified (for good or ill or a mixture of both) in one or two specific examples.

Both Simmel Papers

Both papers show that you are doing the reading better than they show you thinking through the implications of the readings. Both groups seem to be aiming for coverage more than depth. And in regard to accurate coverage, both papers suggest you have made considerable progress during the class. You are indeed hitting on important ideas in the work. But you would do well to include more of your own thinking about these ideas (even if this means reporting some disagreement among group members). Both papers would benefit from attempting more analysis of how the theory hangs together, how it works (as distinct from just what the theorist said). This might require a bit more internal organization to the papers. E.g.: Simmel had several main ideas; they are 1, 2, 3 . . . . We can see all of these are work in his essay on (your choice). They work like this, and bring out these aspects of the phenomenon he addresses. We thought him good on X, a bit poor on Y, and missing Z altogether. Or, you could try to characterize the principal questions underlying the work. What was Simmel trying to accomplish? How well did he achieve it? How do Simmel’s answers to these questions differ from alternative answers? How does the framing he gives to the questions shape the answers he produces? What arguments, data, or other “evidence” seem to make Simmel’s ideas compelling or useful? Of course, a major goal behind such an effort would be to achieve some plausible criticisms (or appreciations) of the arguments.