Georg Simmel “The Problem of Sociology”

Outline and Notes by Dan Ryan (danryan@mills.edu)

Source: Simmel’s major work Soziologie published in 1908.

1. **DEF:** society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction. What is Simmel’s “definition” of society? What does this tell you about his “ontological” assumptions? Is society a thing for Simmel or an event?
2. What does Simmel mean by “unity” (23.7ff) – reciprocity of effects - mutual interaction - *Wechselwirkung*?
3. Simmel says that sociation or unity exists to different degrees. What does he mean? Can you give some examples?
   - getting together for a walk
   - founding a family
   - citizenship
   - relations “until further notice”
   - being fellow guests in a hotel
4. An important distinction for Simmel here is between CONTENT and FORM. He talks about CONTENT being “everything present in individuals” – drives, purposes, inclinations, interests – and says these are not themselves social. What are they then? When do they “become” social for Simmel? “when they transform mere aggregation” into “specific forms of being with and for one another”
5. All social phenomena or processes consist of FORM + CONTENT
6. DJR: There is something different between a room with four chairs, a room with four cows and a room with four people.
7. If we were to describe what we might call the “strong Simmelian” perspective about sociology, what would it be? That the only thing that can be a special science of society is the study of social forms.
8. What is Simmel’s “test” for whether something ought to be the subject of a society of science? (25.9-26.2) Show that the form can be observed in quite dissimilar contents and that the contents can be realized in dissimilar forms. Cf. geometric forms and logical forms and their respective contents.
9. On p. 27.6 Simmel writes of a “hypostatization of a mere abstraction” right after saying that there is no such thing as society. Explain.
10. Is Simmel advocating a “geometry of society”? How do the ideas on p. 28 support or refute such an approach?
11. List some of the forms that Simmel mentions in this short section:
   - formation of parties
   - imitation
   - competition
   - formation of classes and circles
   - secondary subdivisions
   - superordination and subordination
   - growth and role of hierarchies
   - bearing of common hostility to the inner solidarity of a group
   - joining for common tasks, common feeling, common ways of thinking
   - self adornment for others
   - representation of groups by individuals
   - significance of the nonpartisan
   - role of the poor
   - numerical determinations of group elements
• first among equals and the third who laughs
• intersection of circles in individuals
• significance of the secret for groups
• the stranger

12. Don’t worry about whether any given instance matches the form exactly. That’s not the point (30.3)
13. Methodological challenge. Consider his medieval guild master example. He draws the form out, but points out that this is not an automatic process. Whereas mathematician can assume forms, sociologist cannot: “isolation of truly pure sociation out of the complex total phenomenon cannot be forced by logical means.” (31.8)
   DJR: cf. Husserl’s problem describing the phenomenological reduction
14. On pp. 32-4 we get a working out of what is the psychological and what is the sociological. For our purposes the important thing is to appreciate the fact that Simmel allows that there are interesting psychological processes going on, but that the purely sociological questions are those listed on the top of p. 34. A clear understanding of the last two pages probably means you understand this article.