

Simmel, Modernism and Phenomenology

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David Frisby, in his book *Fragments of Modernity*, calls Georg Simmel "the first sociologist of Modernism." Frisby maintains that Modernism manifests the three qualities of the transitory, the momentary, and the contingent. These attributes discussed initially in an essay by Charles Baudelaire can also be found in the reflections of Simmel.

To Simmel, modernity reached its apex in Europe in the last decade of the 19th Century. It can be seen as individuals emerged from within the web of interacting social forms. It differs from previous times in five ways:

- (1) Urbanism: In Germany, at least, more people are living in cities than on the farm, in small towns, or in villages;
- (2) Psychological fragmentation: the lives of Europeans are no longer unified by church, locale, or community;
- (3) Fortuitous interaction: One chooses one's friends or acquaintances, not by tradition, deliberation, or place, but by whoever happens to come one's way;
- (4) Restlessness: No relation or status is even semipermanent: friendship, marriage, vocation, and avocation are unstable and fragile;
- (5) Ambiguity: No interpersonal or personal attitude has any one basic meaning, but instead, is subject to endless interpretations and reinterpretation.

H.J. Becker has said that Simmel has "elevated the social reality of the present into scientific consciousness." To accomplish this, Simmel requires a clarification of terms such as "consciousness," "psychologies," "intentionality," "constitution," "reduction," "essence," and "imaginative variation." Simmel was not a phenomenologist but he did utilize many themes which belong to that movement. These terms attain

a flexibility in Simmel which they never had to Husserl. To Simmel, the position from which to survey the phenomena of modernity is as a stranger-participant, not as a removed spectator.

Modern society at least in Germany must inevitably oppress the individual. The many disparate forces of turn-of-the-century modern urban society inevitably result in psychological fragmentation. There is in that society no longer a universal faith, religious, secular or national. Simmel says that "civil rights, the deepest problems of modern life, derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture and of the technique of life." The personality of the individual today (that is, 1900) has been bequeathed the goal of rational autonomy by the enlightenment but is denied the power to accomplish this goal. Each individual is comparable to every other and distinctions are not encouraged. Emotional life has been flattened yet intensified by the continuous bombardment.

Human relations have become fortuitous. One's friends, one's neighbors and one's acquaintances are acquired by whim. Even family members come and go. Most such relations are formal, reserved, and emotionally cold. Those with whom one works and with whom one recreates determine the limits of one's knowledge of other human beings. Reaching out to others is blunted. Few deep exchanges develop and human interconnections become increasingly superficial and functional. Touching, literally or symbolically, is increasingly confined to one's family or to fleeting instances of eroticism. There is an unrelenting hardness that attempts to protect the self of all costs.

The mood of modern man is restless and frustrated. Simmel writes in *The Sociology of Religion*: "The most capacious and far-reaching collision between society and individual . . . occurs in the general form of the individual life." This form, however, paradoxically takes on the properties of its opposite: Formlessness. Without durable experiences of love, faith and gratitude, a pervasive atmosphere of alienation occurs. Almost every individual in modern society is therefore a "stranger."

Intellectually, modernity is characterized by ambiguity. There are no stable premises, conclusions or method of thinking. Meanings are always fluid and every situation, problem or issue is subject to endless reflection. There are no recognized intellectual authorities in any area. Scientists and technologists present insurmountable arguments, but these arguments are relegated to irrelevancies in regard to the individual's

personal life. Simmel, fascinated by the small and intimate in dyads and triads, found little hope for rejoicing.

Simmel knew and corresponded with Edmund Husserl, with whom he had many affinities. Husserl was born in 1859; Simmel, one year earlier. Both are of Jewish extraction although technically converts to Protestantism. Husserl and Simmel attended the University of Berlin at the same time. There is, however, no evidence that they knew each other during this period. Both were pursuing new approaches to methodological studies in philosophy.

Husserl first used the word "phenomenology" in 1901. Simmel knew of this movement; he actually refers to "the phenomenological structure of society" in 1908. The letters between these two seminal thinkers do not clarify the issues of unilateral or mutual influence. Any parallels or borrowings must therefore be largely inferential.

The differences between Husserl and Simmel are striking. Husserl came to the study of philosophy from mathematics and logic; Simmel, from the disciplines of history and psychology. Simmel's education was initially neo-Kantian, from which he moved toward Nietzsche and Bergson. Husserl takes a Kantian direction only in his later works, as Simmel was abandoning this orientation. More significantly, Husserl was striving for a solid foundation for philosophy. He wished to make it rigorously, but non-empirically, scientific. Simmel, on the other hand, consistently saw a difference between philosophy and science, and always envisioned philosophy as free from any fixed mode. This meant, for him, to emancipate philosophy from the confinements of science and mathematics. The early Husserl, at least, was an optimist with abounding faith in the rational tradition of Europe. Simmel, never too optimistic, adopted a pessimism concerning the cultural decline of Europe during the last few years of his life. The work of Simmel is, in part, "speculative," whereas Husserl remains a "descriptive" philosopher. Husserl shares with the positivists a deep distrust of metaphysics; Simmel, rather than disparaging this discipline, was very much attracted to its never-ending tasks. Husserl has a plodding compulsive style whereas Simmel's writing is markedly impulsive. Lastly, the division of subject and object is retained by Simmel, whereas Husserl contends that his procedures overcome this dichotomy.

Despite his differences with Husserl, Georg Simmel may be considered a kind of phenomenologist. He clearly uses phenomenological description as a preliminary method to explicate certain types of social

phenomena; he explores this method again as an investigative tool in the intellectual disciplines of sociology, economics, and history. As has been previously asserted, he is an implicit explorer and user of such phenomenological themes as intentionality, reduction, and constitution. Husserl and Simmel share several methodological principles. First, both begin their investigation with descriptions of the "life-world." Second, each has as his goal to expose "Wesen" essences or forms. Third, both require distance to facilitate reflection. And fourth, each holds the changes of history in abeyance in order to examine phenomena *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Simmel begins many essays by isolating some essential type of human experience; he then describes these experiences, analyzes them, and finally makes certain conclusions about them. This procedure demands "a certain retreat from the phenomenon . . . a transforming . . . which renounces the mere reflection of what is given in nature, in order to regain, from a higher point of view, more fully and more deeply its reality." His so-called formal sociology outlines the configurations of associations exemplified as a result of this method. Simmel has produced studies of "prostitution," of "fashion," of the "nobility," of the "adventurer," of the "miser," and of the "poor." His book *The Philosophy of Money* examines various kinds of exchange, monetary evaluation, and consumption of goods and products. Mere observation is not enough. He asserts: "No sense perception . . . can directly assure us of a reality."

Simmel's works in sociology explore the eidetics of leadership, submission, and conflict. He has also written papers on handles, architectural ruins, historic heroes. In each of these studies, Simmel summarizes the marks of the phenomena in question in such a way that the reader can recognize the phenomena under varying conditions and in a number of historical situations. In identifying and exploring the limits of a particular area of experience, Simmel makes use of the techniques of "imaginative variation." He writes:

For us the essence . . . observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and transitory. It seems impossible for any phenomenon to escape this reduction to that which is significant and eternal.

Simmel's own searches are neither conclusive nor exhaustive. Just as students attending his lectures, his readers are expected to participate in and fulfill his suggestions. The relation of the person within the forms of association invites the reader to explore his own history as that reader attempts to assimilate and to adjust within the cultural forms. Simmel respects the particularity of content, but he believes that the forms of association may be shared.

In "The Stranger" (1908), Simmel illustrates his descriptive technique. He intermingles an account of those qualities which characterize the stranger with illustrations of this universal eidetic structure. The stranger to any group can be a dreamer, a gambler, an artist or a criminal. He sometimes belongs to the group but he is basically an outsider. The experiences to him involve risk, adventures, and threats from those who maintain a routine course. During ordinary humdrum moments, the outsider is temporarily accepted, only to be cast out again when a crisis occurs. One stranger can share with another but remains even a loner while sharing. Companions in strangeness can comprise a subgroup within the larger one. To Simmel, this is in most cases a small unit.

The method used in "The Stranger" parallels some of the themes which Husserl later developed. These include intentionality, constitution, the possibility of a presuppositionless discipline, and reduction. It was Husserl, not Simmel, who explored the implications of and analyzed these topics in detail. To Husserl the primary obstacle is psychologism. Simmel agrees:

The essence of modernity as such is psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of motion.

Both authors, to overcome psychologism, advocate a discipline without presuppositions. Complete reduction, according to Simmel, is, however, impossible. He says: "The goal of being absolutely without presuppositions, though indicating a direction, is not an attainable goal of philosophical thinking." Simmel begins by assuming that the qualities which make for strangeness will emerge only as the phenomenon itself is examined. He does not bring data from some model external to these phenomena, but rather describes the qualities as they appear. Where

analogy is used in comparing the stranger with the dream, a love affair, or a game of chance, the analogs are simple. The most obvious general characteristics concerning the compared poles are utilized. There is no esoteric terminology, no technical concepts, and no specialized interpretations for clarifying strangeness as a phenomenon. Simmel's account is written for the non-specialist or rather the general reader.

Intentionality is implicit in Simmel's reflective account of the phenomenon of the stranger and in the teleology of that cluster of experiences. The intentional meaning of the experience is in terms of what the stranger points to, expects, or anticipates. It is, as Simmel says, "a consistent process which runs through the individual components of life." This pointing toward is related to the rhythm and antinomies of human life. Simmel tells us that "life in its immediacy feels the full strength of its current, most of all in its pointedness." And again he says, "all such life . . . thrusts itself out of life." Strangeness is a product of an "accent," that is, "a mood . . . limited to the immediacy of personal past." To Simmel, the stranger aims at, focuses upon, or intends life in a certain way. In one place, he characterizes this atmosphere as "absolute presentness—the sudden rearing of the life process to a point where both past and present are irrelevant." The stranger adopts neither a memorial nor a futuristic point-of-view. Intending or attempting to intend a part of life which is fixed, certain, or reliable but not his own is the life of the outsider.

The constitution of consciousness is also a concern of Simmel. He says, "the formative influence of the human mind is generally recognized." Constitution, for the stranger, is the process of arranging and rearranging the elements of experience to maximize the risk or threat of immediacy. Simmel says, "the content of the experience does not make the adventure." The stranger is a stranger only by virtue of a certain kind of experiential tension. Simmel asserts that this tension has a peculiar color, ardor, and rhythm, which transforms life's meaning. This transformation is supplied, in part, by the person who undergoes the experience and, in part, by the circumstances. "That form in which all psychic reality comes to consciousness which emerges as the history of every ego is itself a product of the creature Ego."

The basic question which Simmel asks is: "How is strangeness possible?" This is a phenomenological question. It asks, in effect: "What are the conditions needed for the stranger to appear?" In asking this, Simmel means both world events which allow the stranger's experience

to appear and also the kinds of categories in reflection which are required to register and to analyze this experience. Strangeness is not a content of consciousness but rather the order and shape of consciousness which allows strangeness to show itself. One is tempted to say that Simmel is calling the reader "back to the things themselves." Herein one sees the "other person generalized in some measure."

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to indicate some of Georg Simmel's sociological conclusions about modernity. They may be subsumed under the rubric of strangeness. A brief account of his essays of that title illustrates his suppositions about strangers and his method of investigating them. Both are phenomenological, the alienated, fragmented outsider in the metropolis and the reduced practices of that discipline. It is the contention of this paper that phenomenological principles are implicit in Simmel's work and can be seen without forcing or distortion. Although he died in 1918, before phenomenology had come of age, Simmel anticipated or paralleled that movement as well as some of its spinoffs and elaborations. He is not a systematic practitioner of Husserlian phenomenology. He may be something better—a phenomenologist for post-moderns. Modern life is to the individual stranger sporadic but perhaps reflection may understand it. To the post-modernists, both life and sociology with Simmel's phenomenology may become intelligible.