



# Georg Simmel: Explaining what Goes on in Society Today

Horst Jürgen Helle

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## Article abstract

*In the following pages I hope to transfer my enthusiasm for the sociology of Georg Simmel to my readers. My hope is powered by something of a calling to pass on the message so central his writing and thinking that it can be condensed into one simple statement: Using his approach to culture, politics, and society translates the statement “you are wrong!” to “I see, that is how you look at it!” Thus, the blunt definition of the other person as being in error becomes an acknowledgment of a new insight. Based largely on Simmel's original writings an overall view of his approach, I try to present empowering the reader how topical his thinking is in light of some alarming social and political developments world wide in society today. This simple conversion from one view of a difference of opinion to another has an obvious potential of conflict reduction, and that is why it is “advertised” here.*

HORST J. HELLE

*Georg Simmel: Explaining what Goes on in Society Today*

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## **1. Conflict Resolution and the Quest for Truth**

Sociology has from its start contributed to emphasizing as well as criticizing conflict. Simmel himself clarifies in his lecture on competition (Simmel, 1903: 1009- 1023) that social change relies on conflict, and that accordingly the alternative cannot be complete absence of conflict in some state of eternal peace versus fierce fighting among antagonistic groups of humans. Instead the alternative we must work with as sociologists is the choice between different types of conflict. Since the human condition appears to confront us with the presence of controversy in one form or another, it behooves us to search for the most humane and most

advanced type of conflict.<sup>1</sup> Simmel's work is about this search, and it can be summarized – see above – as the transition from the statement “you are wrong!” to the insight “I see, that is how you look at it!”

The significance of that can only be clarified by means of illustrations: For instance, the world-wide refugee crisis has brought populations together to live inside one common terrain who for centuries were inhabitants each of their own geographical area (Helle, 1985: 425- 427). There were in the past the Christian nations in Europe and America, versus the Muslim populations in Northern Africa, the Near East, Pakistan and other countries. The recent failed executive order of the President of the United States to bar all Muslims from entering America can be seen as an attempt to restore that state of affairs of the past.

Leaving the issue of religious diversity out of consideration for a while, waves of migration are nothing new to the West. *The Chicago School of Sociology* was decidedly influenced by Simmel's thinking – Robert E. Park had been Simmel's student in Berlin – and has performed high quality research and championed numerous publications on problems of migration between 1900 and 1930.<sup>2</sup> The text by Simmel significantly influencing that phase of academic activities about conflicting cultures was his *Excursus on the Stranger* (GSG 11: 764- 771). In two places of that famous piece Simmel mentions the Jew as the Stranger, but his theoretical analysis is quite general and in no way intended to deal with any specific religious background, but instead with the confrontation of cultures provoking the issue of “what is the truth.”

Simmel is frequently referred to as the founder of the interactionist school of sociology. Following that approach, reality

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Helle, 2008: 945-978.

<sup>2</sup> See Barbano, 1998: 37-45.

is constructed in the process of interaction and thus is created, modified and restored in conjunction of what goes on between persons (Levine, 1985: 201f). As humans meet, they commonly experience a combination of closeness and distance. It is to Simmel a specific combination of those two components of experience which leads to the socially constructed reality of strangeness: The stranger is not a stranger because of qualities that may be inherent in him or her, but because of being socially defined as foreign, alien, or strange. The result of attaching that label to the newcomer is to Simmel a new and specific form of interaction: Being in contact with a stranger.

As sociologists in France, Italy, and Germany prepare to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Simmel's death (he died in 1918) the European continent looks back at nearly two millennia of Christian culture. In everyday life as well as in scholarship for centuries Islam has not been a topic of interest. Apart from a few insignificant passages in the work of Max Weber, traditional sociology of religion remained quiet – and ignorant – about Muslim religion. As a member of that trade and as a teacher of the sociology of religion the writer of these lines must confess that until a few decades ago he never saw any problem in that, nor – as far as I can remember – did anybody else among the colleagues.

Narrowed in scope to the context of Christianity I used to teach my students in the pre-mass-migration past that the question if Jesus has risen from the dead cannot be debated in sociology because it is a matter of faith, and sociology – or for that matter, any other branch of scholarship – has no business commenting, let alone passing judgment on matters of faith. The crucifixion and death on the cross, however, I taught to be a historical fact not needing any confirmation by any religious body. I now know that, in teaching that, I was in error. I know today, that to the believing Muslim, Jesus was one of Allah's prophets, and God would under no condition

permit his prophet to be tortured and killed. Accordingly, Jesus was saved in a miraculous way, and another person who looked like him was put in his place and executed. Jesus, however, was elevated to heaven unharmed (Helle, 2019: 99- 108). I tried this version on one of my elementary school age offspring with the foreseeable result, that the little Catholic girl rather preferred the Muslim version of the story.

All sociology aside, for the average Christian this is first an incredible story. That is so despite the fact, that the result according to which Christ is believed to be in heaven is a view shared by Muslims and Christians alike. Yet the difference in faith on how he got there is so enormous, that any attempt at finding common ground will merely lead to the scandalous suggestion that it does not matter. Are we then faced here with a situation in which our transition from the statement “you are wrong!” to the insight “I see, that is how you look at it!” does not work, not even for the sociologist? Faced with the two versions of the crucifixion the missionary, no matter which side he or she if on, cannot avoid having to say, “you are wrong!”

Christians and Muslims sharing their views on the last day of Jesus on this earth cannot come up with anything other than the conviction “you are wrong!” by saying that, or worse, acting it out aggressively. Faced with this grim interim result, can we hope for any help from Simmel? The sociologist of religion inspired by the work of Simmel has the option of concluding: “That is way you must look at it, because your religion teaches you to do so!” If you do not believe that Jesus died on the cross, you cannot be a Christian, if, on the other hand, you do believe that Jesus died on the cross, you cannot be a Muslim! Thus, content of faith serves as a badge of membership in a religious collective. The authority of that consensus hinges on the fact that the content is the truth to its members, because they agree on that.

And we learn from Simmel that there are types of knowledge that have no other basis for rendering them reliably true than the consensus of a very large body of persons. That is of course the case not only in matters of religion. In recent remarks about the so-called “base” of President Trump it has been surmised that those followers of his, will remain “faithful” to him, no matter what he does, because believing in Trump is so to speak the badge of membership in the political consensus-group in question. This is of course the area where, at least to the intellectual, politics border on tragedy.

Be that as it may, the rules of conducting scholarship require for the sociologist who deals with contents of faith, world view, or similar non-empirical ideas to forego any attempt at proving or disproving the veracity of those contents. The scholar can, and should, of course test the inner consistency of components of a system of beliefs to detect any inner contradiction that may exist. But beyond such an immanent critique based merely on inner criteria extracted from the collectivity under study itself, he or she as sociologist has no business evaluating the faith of other people. This simply is what is meant by value-free scholarship. Yet, how can sociology, following Simmel, answer the question of “what is the truth”? How can we avoid becoming cynical, and concluding in the tradition of relativism that “it does not really matter”?

As interactionist sociologists we can only try to connect what we find in the heads of persons with the memberships they have acquired in the present or the past and distinguish between different types of content. In the case of that type of knowledge usually identified with the natural sciences, isolated individuals can prove or disprove the veracity of what is offered as truth on their own in a laboratory or by similar experimentation.

However, any truth that has religious or similar non-empirical character can only be “proven” to be real, reliable, and often also

unchangeable, by being confirmed in the consensus among the membership of a church, a party, a nation, or – in the past – the working class. While it is not allowed for the sociologist to ask, which if those contents of “knowledge” are true, he or she is not only permitted but even under obligation, to study and evaluate the behavior that finds its legitimating motive in those “convictions.”

As long as I wear the hat of the academic doing his or her research, I cannot try to argue if in their religious convictions Christians or Muslims are right or wrong, just as the physician working in a hospital is not allowed to ask if the patient under treatment deserves being healed. But the medical doctor is evaluated by how effective he or she is in helping patients of recover from whatever ailment besets them. And Simmel deserves to be judged by what his sociology contributed to anticipating, ameliorating, and advancing cultures and society on their way toward modernity.

## **2. The Stranger: Invader or Innovator?**

If indeed issues concerning the religion of Islam are much more present in academic discourse today than they were three or four decades ago, it is of course the result of the world-wide migration of refugees confessing that faith (Helle, 2019: 17ff). In his text on *The Stranger* Simmel does not begin his analysis with the *refugee* but instead with the idea of *wandering*, pointing out how the freedom to change location creates an advantage over being fixed to a given geographical local, and how *The Stranger* combines both, being free to wander with being fixed in one place. Simmel is also aware that in many ancient cultures the foreign visitor was protected by a law securing certain rights for guests, and how hospitality toward them could be rewarded by learning new techniques and ways of life previously unfamiliar to the hosts.

Simmel writes: “The combination of closeness and distance present in every relationship between humans has reached here (in the case of the stranger) a special constellation which can be

summarized as follows: the distance as part of the relationship means that the close person is far away, and being strange means that what he who was distant is now close by.” (GSG 11: 685). The Stranger is the person from a foreign area who has become close because he arrived and stays, even though he could just as well leave again.

We refer here again to Simmel’s famous *Excursus on the Stranger* which has likely become his most frequently quoted text. In recent years *The Stranger* has become unexpectedly topical due to its relevance for studying and interpreting the refugee crisis. It is worth noting that there is an important qualitative aspect of migration: As long as foreigners arrive in small numbers, they may be welcome; but if more and more of them come, sooner or later they will be perceived as a threatening group, the more so the higher their quota in percentage of the local population.

The host population, due to little or no familiarity with the newly arriving aliens, tends to expect something of them that is not normal from a local perspective. The Strangers are frequently prejudged as being different. Consequently, seeing them from that perspective tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Experiences are extracted from any encounter with them that seem to serve as proof of their being strange by and of themselves. Simmel, however, does not merely look at what may be typical of this or that individual, but rather at specific qualities of the relationships they enter. Accordingly, to him social reality is not inherent in the person, and what goes on between persons cannot simply be deduced from who they are individually.

Instead to Simmel relationships have a primary reality of their own not to be derived from anything outside of them. That is also in the background of the observation, that group qualities cannot reliably be explained by pointing to characteristic of individual members. It is against this background that Simmel describes the stranger, not as a person representing strangeness, but instead of a participant of a strange relationship, or similarly, the poor person not as someone with a certain below-level income, but someone



who is dealt with by others as being poor. In addition, we can easily see that qualities are typically attributed to a relationship according to the needs of the attributor. Defining the new arrivals as outsiders tends to make the insiders feel good and strengthens their perception of being firmly imbedded in a collective of members who conjointly guarantee certain ideas as reliable and true by their consensus.

There is reason to assume as a hypothesis that the experienced threat toward familiar definitions of reality has the potential of causing the most emotional and fierce forms of conflict between a sedentary majority and a migrant minority culture. Above here we used the description of the death of Jesus as an illustration. In that context certain events are defined as real and true that form the very foundation of an entire culture. Should the leading elite of Christianity become convinced that we cannot be sure whether Jesus died on the cross, and besides, it does not really matter if he did, then clearly that would be the end of Christian culture as a lived reality. Thus “falling from the faith” is not only an event crucial in the life of the individual, but rather if it happens on a large scale, it becomes fatal for the existence of the collective, religious or otherwise.

Against this background the dynamic of refugees arriving in increasing numbers appears in a more dynamic light if seen from Simmel’s point of view. Non-empirical truths, as we find them in religious faith, in political conviction, in world views, in visions of a future of mankind etc. cannot be endowed with the weight of being real and true in any other way than by having the consensus of a large collective guarantee them. Only a church, or a nation, or a traditional region as part of a nation, or a people with a transcendental history, or similar collectives which always include the dead who have gone before the generation of the living and who frequently gave their lives in defending as true the very content under question. An isolated visitor entering the community of the bearers of the consensus cannot and will not change that. The same is true if a small number of aliens should arrive.

But if their number starts to exceed a critical threshold, they will no longer be tolerated: Either the sedentary group will force them to convert to their faith, or they will be expelled, or worse. This makes good sense sociologically, because The Stranger as a mass movement would question and eventually destroy the consensus and thereby the reality guarantee on which the shared “faith” depends.

That of course cannot be tolerated – from the point of view of the traditional culture, not of the writer of these lines – because the resulting conditions would be bearable only to the intellectual elite, which is correctly seen as the ally of invading Strangers. What tends to aggravate matters is the fact that too few people have command the sociological knowledge that would enable them to see through all this. Consequently, more superficial and banal topics will be proposed as reasons for political action: Securing jobs, rebuffing a threat to national security, defending ethical standards etc.

At this point of the discussion it seems as if Simmel leaves us with no hope. But that is not the case. To find a theoretical way out the impasse we must follow Simmel further, and replace the model confronting a majority population with a minority of strangers with a different model, in which two populations of equal size and power get into contact with each other. As a result, one of them can no longer experience the other as The Stranger, but now they are Strangers to each other, their relationship as it were has become reciprocal. This new approach works only provided we follow Simmel’s premise that there is an ongoing evolution of cultures and societies. It works also, provided we look at stages following each other in social change as Simmel does.

In the original stage, i.e. before modernization kicks in to affect Simmel’ theoretical model, each population is in control of its own territory. It awards its members identity in return for conformity. This is obviously a give and take: The individual receives the identity (passport etc.) from the collective, and in return the unified membership can expect and enforce conformity. The visitor from outside, apart from bearing a different passport, does not belong

here, is allowed to stay only under certain conditions and for a limited time, and in return is not expected to conform to what is imposed on the natives. The reliability and stability of this phase depends on the premise that there is no or merely limited contact between the two separate populations.

As contact and exchange between individuals from the two populations increases, Simmel sees a process getting started which initiates social change in both groups. William I. Thomas and other theorist in American sociology have elaborated on this idea. The formerly foreign groups start sending individual members into each other's territory, who at first will follow what Simmel has already described as the effects resulting from the presence of a Stranger. But competition forces both sides to emphasize unique specialties in order to become interesting and attractive to customers and thus, being pressured by modernization necessitates relaxing the insistence on conformity.

It turns out, moreover, that the number of workable alternatives in human behavior is limited, and the more individuals in both group search for novelty and uniqueness the more they give up what has been peculiar to their particular group of origin. Members of both groups individualize in similar or identical fashion, and as a result the traditional differences between Group A and Group B disappear. According to Simmel's theory of evolution and social change, this is indeed what happens, whether the people involved like it or not. It is, in Simmel's words the rapprochement of formerly separate social circles. Rather than migrants from one group entering the ranks of the other group as Strangers, individualization occurring in both groups makes Strangers of us all. Thus, the traditional solidarity on the basis of subjecting to the demands for conformity is replaced by a modern-type solidarity based on the individual uniqueness shared by all Lessenich, 2017: 160- 172). The importance of this segment in Simmel's theory-building justifies going back and repeating briefly a description of the stages of social evolution.

1) First stage: Two populations or large groups of people differ from each other in significant characteristics: All members of Group A are similar to each other in certain respects, but if compared with Group B they turn out to be clearly different from those. There is a generally accepted duty in each group, to cultivate a sense of solidarity within it. Also there is consensus to minimize personal idiosyncrasies and instead to emphasize whatever is agreed upon to represent one's own group as typical. This general tendency includes, among others, language use, lifestyle, and a positive attitude toward uniformity in getting dressed.

2) Second stage. An increase in the number of group members and in the density of the population of a given territory results in more competition. To gain advantages over other competitors in his or her own group, each member finds that there is a prize to be earned for cultivating individual traits over against the tradition of conformity. Since people not only compete within their respective groups, but the two groups compete as well, similar pressure toward individualization arises in Group A as it does in Group B. This compels both groups to sacrifice more and more their traditional emphasis on solidarity based on being alike and on joining force. In its place they gradually move toward an alternative type of solidarity based on being different and cooperative.

3) Third stage: What one may want to call a trans-group-solidarity makes more and more people realize that they share what is fundamentally human. As a result, more and more individuals recognize a) that there exists only a limited number of options humans have to behave ethically and successfully, and b) that in the other individual, even though he or she may have individualized following a distinctly different path, still ends up following an option that the observer can visualize him- or herself also having followed. As a result, as was stated above, in this third stage the traditional difference between Group A and Group B collapses.

It is remarkable to note how the aspects of Simmel's theory building as they are condensed in his texts on *The Stranger*, on *Individualization*, and on *Competition* merge in this approach

toward change and modernization. The arriving Stranger encountering what is described here as the first stage is the precursor of individualization. He is the proto-type of the non-conformist, and at the same time a propagandist for shared characteristics of all of human kind. In a religious context he can be compared to the proverbial prophet, who is experienced as anything but popular, and certainly not welcome. What does he have to offer that turns out to trigger such ambivalent reactions?

The Stranger's presence alone ushers in new and unheard-of ways of life. Those persons welcoming the arrival may not have a clear view of what to expect in the medium and in the long run. He brings new options, but at the expense of a loss of uniformity, of consensus, and of solidarity in the domain of the existing traditional in-group. What used to be peculiar to it, what used to be the basis there for pride and cultural continuity is put into question and is eventually lost or relegated to archives and to a museum. Competition enforces individualization, makes self-cultivation the condition for upward mobility, and puts a heavy burden on those, who simply wanted to enjoy a life in peace and quiet rather than becoming members of some kind of elite.

The very group for which ancestors gave their lives, the group that awarded identity to friends and family in return for their loyalty, becomes irrelevant. Instead, globalization compels everyone to become a *Stranger*, and to be willing to live and succeed anywhere on this globe. And many a contemporary, who has never heard about Simmel, and who has no notion, that these things may be going on now, or in the near future, may nevertheless have a pretty good sense, that it is *The Stranger* who ushers in all this and more things to come.

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