

## Topic Page: [Simmel, Georg \(1858 - 1918\)](#)

Summary Article: **Simmel, Georg**

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Georg Simmel is considered one of the founders of sociology, and his contribution to the origins and development of urban studies is increasingly recognized as pivotal and fundamentally significant. The scope and range of Simmel's work spans over 20 volumes and some 300 essays and encompasses not only sociology and urban analysis but also philosophy, literature, art, aesthetics, social psychology, and cultural analysis.

### **Early Years**

Simmel was born the youngest of seven children on March 1, 1858, in what would become the very center of Berlin, at the corner of Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. His father, a prosperous Jewish businessman, was a partner in a chocolate factory; he had converted to Christianity and died when Simmel was young. A friend of the family, Julius Freedlander, the owner of a music publishing house, was appointed the boy's guardian and subsequently helped him through his studies and bequeathed him a substantial legacy.

After graduating from the *Gymnasium*, Simmel began his studies at Berlin University in 1876 where he initially studied history and philosophy with some of the most important academic figures of the day. His initial doctorate, titled "Psychological and Ethnographic Studies on Music," was rejected and he subsequently received his doctorate in philosophy in 1881 (this time titled "Description and Assessment of Kant's Various Views on the Nature of Matter") by which time his field of knowledge extended across a variety of disciplines. He was awarded his *Habilitation* in January 1885, which allowed him to become a *Privatdozent* (an unpaid lecturer dependent on student fees). However, whether Simmel suffered from incipient anti-Semitism or the jealousy of academic colleagues, he remained a *Privatdozent* for 15 years until 1901 when, at the age of 43, he was finally awarded the honorary title of *Ausserordentlicher Professor*. Despite being recognized as an eminent intellectual with an international reputation (in Europe as well as the United States) and with an extensive list of publications, Simmel struggled to gain a senior academic promotion at one of the German universities.

Although rejected by the academic authorities and some of his colleagues, Simmel was not entirely the outsider he is, at times, portrayed. He was not only a very popular lecturer, giving public as well as academic lectures, but, along with his wife Gertrude (a philosopher in her own right, who published under the pseudonym Marie-Luise Enckendorf), whom he married in 1890, he participated fully in the social, intellectual, and cultural life of the capital, which included philosophers, sociologists, writers, poets, artists, critics, and journalists. Simmel was, along with Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies, a cofounder in 1909 of the German Society for Sociology. Those who studied under, and were influenced by, Simmel during his time in Berlin included Robert Park, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin. Simmel finally received a full professorship at the University of Strasbourg in 1914 but, because of the outbreak of war, was limited in his lecturing opportunities. He died of cancer of the liver on September 28, 1918.

### **Urbanization and Social Interaction**

The investigation of apparently mundane, everyday interactions and the subjective experience of them as well as their cultural manifestations were a fundamental part of Simmel's formal sociology and his

conception of society as a “web of interactions.” In his various writings Simmel's focus is on the minutiae of everyday life (individuality, identity, sociability, games, conversation, flirtation, social gatherings, the family, mealtimes, rendezvous, etc.), and it is the city of modernity that provides a plethora of opportunities for their investigating.

Simmel's sociology of the city, and in particular his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” was an attempt to describe and explain the effects of the social processes of urbanization on modern individuals. Simmel sought to explore the fleeting, transitory, and fragmented nature of modern metropolitan existence and was thus fundamentally interested in investigating the consequences of urban modernity on the inner emotional life of individuals. In this famous essay Simmel presents the city as a web of interactions, a complex labyrinth of interwoven social relations in which the individual is constantly bombarded with images, signs, sights, sounds, smells, experiences, and other people. He emphasized the speed, variety, quality, and quantity of sensory and social experiences and interactions in urban life that mark a key distinction between urban and rural life. The sheer size of the city and the numbers of people who live in it mean that individuals must protect themselves against this “intensification of nervous stimulation.” He argues that what develops are forms of psychological defense mechanisms or stratagems that are necessary to survive such an onslaught. Simmel suggests that individuals engage in a process of intellectualization in which they use their head rather than their heart in their interactions with others. The city forces us to repress our emotional involvement with others and instead to use formal, more logical criteria in our interactions with others. To explain this Simmel points to a contradictory aspect of city life: a physical and spatial proximity to hundreds or thousands of other individuals yet at a social distance from those same individuals. Simmel thus explores the idea that modern cities generate conditions that predispose individuals to be reserved in their relationships with one another.

Simmel then is concerned with the impact of the city on the individual or how the individual is formed within and by an urban world. The increased rhythm of life—and “the rapid and unbroken change in external and internal stimuli” that is the everyday experience of life in the modern metropolis—leads concomitantly to the creation of a self-preserving blasé, urban-metropolitan personality. The blasé personality is an attempt to preserve identity, integrity, and individuality in the face of such an assault on the senses, on experience, and on the increased opportunities offered in the city. This sensual experience is, in part, a consequence of the potential and possibility that we have come to understand as being characteristic of the city in modernity.

### **Concept of the Stranger**

In this sense Simmel's insight is that we are all, in modern urban societies, strangers. For Simmel the *stranger* is a social typification that he uses as a means to explore the interactions of being both close to and remote from others, from strangers that are always on the edge or margins of our consciousness, our experience, and our understanding of predominantly urban forms and experiences of modern, social interactions. Simmel explicitly identifies the stranger as a figure that epitomizes a state of being in-between (between coming and going, being known and unknown, of belonging or being detached, of familiarity and impersonality, etc.) that reflects aspects of his spatial and urban analysis (that of nearness and remoteness, of fixity and mobility, inside and outside, etc.). Simmel applies an analysis that reflects the need to conceptualize fundamental qualities of space in order to characterize social forms that he views as indicative of urban modernity. Thus he considers how the concentration and density of large numbers of people in the new spaces of urban modernity provided

the possibility for the emergence of crowds in novel and potentially dangerous space. That is, an assembled crowd can be impulsive, enthusiastic, and susceptible to manipulation that is related to the sense of freedom of being anonymous as well as reciprocally the sense of belonging, of being immersed in and part of, a larger social collectivity or mass.

## **Philosophy of Money**

For Simmel, what was also fundamental and indicative of modernity was the creation and experience of the mature money economy. This is rooted in his analytical perspective on the importance of everyday life, which is expressed, experienced, and determined in and through the interactions and spaces of urban modernity. It is not the sphere of production that Simmel focuses on but that of the sphere of circulation, exchange and consumption, of individuals as customers as well as commodities, which are concentrated in the metropolis. This is because it is in the metropolis that the money economy and the reification of the social world of objects and of people have their greatest impact upon individuals. In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel documents the increasing reification of social relationships through the medium of money and the concomitant decline of subjective culture at the expense of an increasingly objective culture dominated by monetary transactions.

Simmel also identified spaces of circulation and exchange as increasingly characteristic of the mature money economy of urban modernity. Whether in the new spaces created for consumption, such as the department store, or the increasingly fleeting and fragmented relationships that occurred in everyday transactions, money was the medium through and in which the increasing movement and circulation of people, goods, and services was accomplished. It was the medium and the means by which the structuring of the space of the city and one's experience of it was increasingly organized. Money is a leveler that flattens everything to a single dimension such that anything can be bought and sold, including people, and this for Simmel found its expression and concentration most acutely in the modern metropolis as the location for the mature money economy. Simmel is thus concerned with providing examples to establish the effect or consequences of money as an end to human values. These include what for Simmel were “two processes that are almost endemic to a money culture—cynicism and a blasé attitude.”

Cynicism is induced when both the highest and the lowest aspects of social life are for sale, reduced to a common denominator—money. This leveling of everything leads to the cynical attitude that everything has its price and everything can be bought and sold. Cynicism is thus born out of an indifference to the evaluation of things. The blasé attitude, by contrast, arises out of indifference to the nature of things themselves, as the money economy induces the view that all things are of an equally dull and gray hue, not worth getting excited about. The blasé personality has lost completely the ability to make value judgments about all that is on offer for purchase and thus seeks compensation in a craving for excitement, for extremes of impressions, speed, and stimulation.

The increasingly impersonal relations among people take place within larger networks of social circles and are based on specific roles rather than the qualities of the individuals themselves. Instead of dealing with individuals with their own personalities, identities, biographies, and so forth, people are increasingly likely to deal solely with positions—the delivery person, the shop assistant, bus driver, ticket seller, and so on—regardless of who occupies those positions. In the modern division of labor characteristic of the money economy, there is the paradoxical situation that while people grow more dependent on other positions for their survival, they know less about the individuals that occupy these positions. The

specific individual becomes increasingly insignificant. People thus become interchangeable parts. Money becomes the means by which any emotional or personal relationship is detached from the individuals involved in the exchange of goods or services that constitutes an increasingly larger part of social relationships.

The increasing influence and dominance of objective over subjective culture characteristic of urban modernity and of money is addressed by Simmel in essays on fashion, adornment, and style. This analysis reveals the increasing importance and role of capitalism in metropolitan modernity. Seen as the compromise between the desire for stasis and the desire for change, fashion allows one to follow others and to mark oneself off from them as a member of a particular class or group. In societies where there is little differentiation, fashions change slowly: In modern societies where there is a danger of obliteration of the individual, fashion becomes much more important. Fashion is necessarily transitory and always carries with it a strong sense of being in the here and now. Being fashionable and demonstrating publicly a sense of style can be a statement about both status and value. There is thus a paradoxical juxtaposition of the desire to make oneself and one's social environment more pleasing while at the same time receiving recognition for doing so: altruism in wishing to please opposed by the desire to distinguish oneself from others. People want to be recognized as different individuals yet at the same time to feel part of a group, an in-crowd, with status and value.

The concentration and density of people and services, of production and consumption, of transportation and communication, all of which become concentrated and located in the city, create a rhythm and pace of life in the city that is often viewed as a characteristic feature. Simmel's exploration of micro-sociological phenomena takes place within the everyday life and spaces of the city of modernity and the sometimes negative consequences of this for the human condition. Simmel suggests a need also for spaces and places where the rapid circulatory system of the city operates at a slower tempo, allowing an albeit temporary withdrawal from the pressure and strains of work time and the domination of experiences mediated by money. Simmel therefore also explores as a necessary correlate and extension, the need sometimes to escape from this overwhelming intensification of interactions and the sensory stimulation of an increasingly objectified culture, as he describes in his essays "The Alpine Journey" and "The Adventure."

Simmel's early contribution to the social theory of space as a fundamental feature of the analysis of modernity raises important factors for the analysis and understanding of both the city of modernity and the consequences for human social interaction. His essay "Sociology of Space" is an early contribution to the social theory of space which, in keeping with his conception of society as reciprocal interaction, presents his five aspects of space (exclusivity, boundaries, fixity, mobility, proximity-distance), as a means for investigating the significance of space for social forms. These provide important insights into the manner in which space shapes and is shaped by the forms of social interactions that occur within it. Social forms affect and are affected by, the spatial conditions in which they occur; therefore many "forms of sociation" can only be understood by a consideration of their spatial context. This is a dynamic symbiotic relationship between social construction and environmental, that is geographical, determinism, which has significance for subjective experience as well as the structural and spatial organization of the city as a whole or specific spatial forms within it, whether they are streets, squares, buildings, or places and spaces of consumption and of leisure and recreation.

Simmel's five aspects of space therefore suggest conceptual avenues for the development of the analysis of such specific spatial forms and people's subjective experience and use of them within the

metropolis; in other words, how social relations and interactions are molded, shaped, and given form by the quality and arrangements of delimited and defined, organized, structured, and regulated urban spaces. But this is not a one-way street. Space, particularly forms of public and social space, accrues meaning, significance, and value through the forms of interaction and experiences, the popular activities and habitual usage that occur in and through them, and thus people mold or shape space by the way in which they use or abuse it.

## Legacy

Simmel's concern with the distinctive qualities that made the modern city a new phenomenon with consequences for the individual and for the organization, maintenance, and regulation of modern society was focused on everyday, microsociological phenomena. The city provided Simmel with the raw material for his theoretical analyses and investigations. In particular, Simmel's influence on American sociology (and the development of the Chicago School, biologically based metaphor of the human ecology model of urban development and competition in particular) is well documented. Simmel also explored the increasing reification, exchange, circulation, and consumption of social relations and interactions dominated by money, which is of continuing importance to contemporary urban and social analyses. The impersonality, cynicism, and blasé character of city life; the commodification and objectification of culture; fashion, style, and adornment as emblems or signs of identity and status; and social distance and spatial proximity to strangers are still important and relevant factors in the analysis of increasingly complex, mobile, and multicultural urban concentrations. Simmel's theory of modern society and of the city is therefore of continuing value and affinity not only to historical analyses of the development of cities of modernity but also to late or postmodern and contemporary studies of the consequences and experience of urban expansion throughout the world in an era of globalization.

## See also

Urban Sociology, Urban Theory

## Further Readings

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