

## THE CONTRADICTION IN SIMMEL'S FEAR

Marian G. Heaney  
De Paul University

**DEFINITIONS** In his paper, "The Conflict of Modern Culture", Simmel presented a dilemma which he perceived as afflicting society both then, and in the future. He defined society simply as two or more persons engaged in interaction. Society is constituted and realized by two elements: 1) an individual need, drive, motive, purpose, defined as the contents of interaction, and 2) a "...mode of interaction among individuals by which ... that content attains social reality." (Levine 1971 9)

The concept of form can be taken at the micro level between two persons, and also at the macro levels of society and culture. Form, according to Simmel is the foundation of society, and the channel through which society and culture progress.

"Life can manifest itself only in particular forms; yet owing to its essential restlessness, life constantly struggles against its own products which have become fixed, and do not move with it. This process manifests itself as the displacement of an old form by a new one. This constant change in the content of culture ... is the sign of the infinite fruitfulness of life. At the same time, it marks the deep contradiction between life's external flux and the objective validity ... of the forms through which it proceeds. It moves constantly between death and resurrection between resurrection and death. (Levine 376)

Simmel traces the idea of form through history and crystalizes it in the concept of a central idea which guides each epoch, from Greek classicism through the 19th Century. The difference between historic epochs and what Simmel observed occurring in society around him was "no longer a struggle of a contemporary form, filled

with life, against an old lifeless one, but a struggle of life against form as such against the principle of form. In contrast to earlier epochs whose cultures were guided by objective cultural ideals, Simmel saw modern culture as having no shared cultural ideal. He feared that there were no ideals at all (Levine 377-380).

Simmel was not opposed to cultural change. But he was opposed to, condemned, and feared the lack of foresight and potentially destructive power of contemporary social reformers. These, he said, "... are not really interested in working out an adequate replacement for the forms which they condemn. The destructive force of their criticism impedes the cultural process of obsolescence and reconstruction which would normally take place." (Levine 389)

Individuals can only interact with one another through form. The rebellion against form would ultimately result in a world full of anti-social individuals inclined towards each other as means to some end, rather than as ends in themselves. This is in direct opposition to Simmel's moral concept of society. He feared the destruction of form, and with it, the destruction of life, which can only manifest itself through form.

**BASIC QUESTIONS** Simmel's horror concerning the future of society was profound. Because he was an objective and compassionate observer of society, his fear cannot be easily ignored. Here we must pose certain questions. Has man done away with form? Do we live in a world of anti-social individuals? Why has Simmel's fear not been realized to the extent he envisioned? What was the foundation of Simmel's fear?

In "The Conflict of Modern Culture" Simmel culminates a lifelong philosophical struggle. He saw interaction as premised on one's possession of morality. Actions are of social significance only in relation to their effect on another

(Wolff 1950 90).

Simmel's fear may derive from the decline of ideal interaction, in which, by the Kantian axiom Simmel adhered to, individuals should always be treated as ends in themselves, and never merely as a means to an end (Wolff 72). Simmel's dilemma thus becomes apparent. Ideal types, while never fully realized, provide a standard against which to judge reality. In the metropolis, with its money economy, most interaction necessarily occurred on a secondary level, and social interaction in an ideal sense seemed to be disappearing.

**THE THREE ELEMENTS** Perhaps the strongest contradiction in Simmel's later fear stems from his earlier belief that man is inherently social by nature. Simmel said that society is made possible "... by the conditions which reside a priori in the elements themselves, through which they combine, in reality, into the synthesis reality." Regarding man's nature, "... That part of the individual which is not turned toward society and is not absorbed by it, does not simply lie beside its socially relevant part without having a relation to it. ... the fact that in certain respects the individual is not an element of society constitutes the positive condition for the possibility that in other respects, he is. The way in which he is sociated is determined or codetermined by the way which he is not. ... This extrasocial nature a man's temperament, fate, interests, worth as a personality ... intermixes his social nature with his non-social nature." (Levine 8-13)

This extrasocial nature is the essence of the individual which distinguishes each person from another. One's social nature appears to be the element that all persons have in common. This social nature provides for the fulfillment of social roles, and it provides the means for individuals

to know each other as individuals. The non-social element of a person's character can never be known by others, and it keeps man a stranger to himself.

Man is not simply a social animal or a non-social animal, but he is enmeshed in a duality where he is both, according to Simmel. Man's extra-social nature is not a peripheral characteristic, but the synthesizing element between man's other two inherent characteristics. Simmel also defines society as "... a structure which consists of beings who stand inside and outside of it at the same time. This fact forms the basis for one of the most important sociological phenomena, namely, that between a society and its component individuals a relation may exist as if between two parties." (Levine 15)

To be one with another is conditioned by the very significance of being separate from the other, whether the other is a general or a specific other, an object of subjective love or objective exchange -- whether the relation is social or non-social. A state of fusion into unity is possible because of a differentiation. While man's three inherent characteristics social, extra-social, and non-social are distinct from one another, one's existence depends on all three.

If interaction between men stopped, man's interaction with himself would also stop. Not only would men be treating each other as mere means to an end, and thus become alienated from each other, but in the process, man would begin to see and treat himself as a means to some impersonal end. Man would become alienated from himself. Given this theory, Simmel fears self-alienation, the extinction of the self, and the ensuing extinction of society.

While mankind may very well undergo a process where the only radical reality appears to be the self, the existence of man's inherent social characteristics testifies

to the fact that the ultimate radical reality is not the self. The inherently social element of man's nature is the thesis. The non-social element is its antithesis. Their integration or alienation is the synthesis. Just as being one with another is conditioned by the very fact that we are not one, so is an individual's possibility for individuality conditioned precisely by the fact that he is also everyman.

**CONCLUSION** Simmel's fear was not unfounded. However, our despair and hope exist not just side by side, but because of each other. If, in our despair, we are able to realize that its state is only possible because of our capacity for hope, then the death of the parts begins to give way to the life of the whole. Our capacity to destroy is coexistent with our ability to create. Perhaps it is one of our greatest challenges, never to confuse the two. Simmel's fear becomes powerful and full of terror because it neglects the reality of hope. Ironically, this neglect is the basis for the recognition of hope.

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(Continued from p 38)  
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Cumulation of knowledge was slightly more salient in proposals than in articles but this depended on the form of cumulation. The articles were more concerned with consolidation, while the proposals stressed combination. The student authors were more likely to combine theories by juxtaposition than be integration. Where students consolidated, they were more

likely to incorporate than to accommodate to the second theory. The differences do not support the assumption of greater professional proficiency of article authors.

The image of the graduate student emerges as rather diffuse in specifying goals, somewhat naive as regards academic gamesmanship in the social science community, and rather timid at mounting a debate. As a corrective the student should not be confined to the technical aspects, but should experience the social dynamics of the scientific community. This may call for reaching the right compromise between the entrepreneurial and the task force models of social research. Shall we work as individuals or shall we work in teams?

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