



## How Is Society Possible?

Frank J. Lechner

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Article abstract

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FRANK J. LECHNER

*How Is Society Possible?*

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Abstract. *This paper questions the adequacy of Georg Simmel's answer to the question, how is society possible? Treating his essay on the question as a contribution to his overall sociology, it argues that the "a priori" he identifies add little to the general understanding of social forms, are neither necessary nor sufficient to make society possible as a coherent mental construct, and play at best a modest role in Simmel's own analysis of forms. Taking a step beyond Simmel's essay, the paper briefly suggests that, if a Simmelian "epistemological" grounding is to remain relevant to the broader interactionist tradition, conditions for the possibility of society as interaction order should include schemas pertaining to social Wechselwirkung.*

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In the first chapter of his *Soziologie*, Georg Simmel (1992a [1908]) famously presents two brilliant insights. Slightly revising an earlier proposal (Simmel, 1992b [1894]), he first argues that sociology can be a distinctive social science if it focuses on what is "purely" social in social life—the regular ways in which people join together and exercise some effect on each other. Treating sociology as the study of everything human, of anything that happens in society, would simply make it a general social science that sums up what other disciplines already cover; concentrating on the motives and goals of individuals as they deal with others would turn sociology into a kind of applied psychology. By studying "social forms," the patterned ways in which two or more actors engage in *Wechselwirkung*, or interaction broadly conceived, to accomplish *Vergesellschaftung*, or "becoming society" in some coherent way, sociology takes on a special and important task, illuminating a dimension of human experience not adequately studied before. By demarcating the discipline this way, Simmel properly states "the problem of sociology" as a feasible agenda. But then, well into the chapter and

with only a brief segue, Simmel somewhat unexpectedly inserts a section announced as an “*Exkurs*” on a question not previously broached: “How Is Society Possible?” [henceforth HISP]. Here Simmel offers what must have felt to him like a second discovery. Whereas the intellect of observers forms objective coherence in nature by applying certain categories to subjective sense perceptions, in society the participants themselves synthesize the elements of their experience into coherence, into an awareness of forming a unit(y) with others. The conscious connection comes from within. Thus it also makes sense to look for conditions “within,” for the epistemic capacities of participants, to explain how society is possible as the consciousness of unity or relationship with others. Simmel answers his Kantian question in Kantian fashion by identifying three “a priori” that shape our consciousness of being-social: we are able to see others (and ourselves) as role players, as individuals with more than a social identity, and as placed in an already-existing structure. Even if we cannot grasp the “unity” of society in the abstract—and Simmel says we typically don’t—these a priori nonetheless underlie any sense we have of becoming a unit, of developing a relationship, with another who yet remains separate as an individual in her own right. They make society possible as a representation, a mental construct.

Though Simmel’s approach to the demarcation problem did not take hold, either then or later, it has received respectful attention over the years, preserving his status as a classic articulating a special vision (Lukes, 2021). While HISP also did not inspire much subsequent research, it has long been viewed as a prime example of Simmel’s genius and recent scholarship reflects renewed appreciation. Horst Helle affirms that Simmel shows how our “mental constructs create a unity . . . not only within the individual but also as the immediate reality [he] calls society,” thanks to certain “cognitive processes” we “must have undergone” (Helle, 2012: 82). Gregor Fitzi calls HISP “the final product and the most significant effort of theoretical synthesis in Simmel’s whole sociological research programme,” which provides a “social epistemology”

explaining the “formal knowledge structures that are necessarily present to make possible the processes of sociation” (Fitzzi, 2019: 60, 62). Uta Gerhardt argues that HISP is actually the “core” [*Herzstück*] of Simmel’s sociology and delivers the “key” to understanding society and *Vergesellschaftung* as such, by offering in the a priori an epistemological foundation for his program of systematic social analysis (Gerhardt, 2011: 87-9). In her view, HISP not only helps to clarify the “problem” of sociology, it also shapes the chapters that follow in the book, where the various forms show how one can explain the dynamic of society on the basis of the a priori (ibid.).

If we assume, with these Simmel interpreters, that he at least plausibly answers the question he raised, the next step is to ask: *how well* does he answer it? At the risk of retrospective mind-reading, Simmel himself likely would not have objected to it: he presented his overall *Soziologie* as a tentative effort subject to future revision, and in HISP makes no definite claims to having answered his question definitively—he describes his discussion of the a priori as an effort to “sketch” an “example” of an epistemic theory of society (Simmel, 1992a: 47/Wolff, 1959: 342; all subsequent Simmel citations to these two sources, unless indicated otherwise). But his many critics appear not to have taken that next step. Perhaps surprisingly, while some have referred to “weaknesses” in its argument and its “elastic” use of concepts (Krähnke, 2018: 114), HISP has yet to receive the serious critique it deserves. As a contribution to such a critique, I argue in this paper that Simmel’s answer falls short in several ways. First, on its own “transcendental” terms, HISP does not demonstrate that the a priori are both necessary and sufficient to “make society possible.” I suggest that two of the a priori overlap to the point of being equivalent, one cannot work in the way Simmel required, and more are needed to conceive of the other as co-operator in becoming a “with” (to invoke Erving Goffman’s terminology). Second, assuming with the authors cited above that HISP *also* aims to facilitate sociological analysis as spelled out in Simmel’s demarcation proposal, I argue

that HISP does not fully succeed because it misses the *Wechsel* in *Wechselwirkung* and because the possibility of society as explained in HISP cannot account for *Vergesellschaftung* as process. Borrowing from other scholars, I suggest, for purposes of illustration, that cognitive a priori needed to understand the “immediate reality” of society as displayed in actual forms-as-practiced should include conceptions of reciprocation, sequencing, and accounting. Third, in a variation on familiar criticism questioning the coherence of *Soziologie*, I argue that Simmel’s own analysis does not rely on the a priori and that in several cases it would be difficult to show in principle that they ground the forming of the forms. Without trying to frame this argument as some sort of refutation of Fitzi and Gerhardt, I nonetheless propose that Simmel is less successful than they imply.

### **The argument in context: Simmel and his commentators**

Over the years, Simmel’s sociology has had plenty of critics. Emile Durkheim was among the first. Only a short time after inviting Simmel to contribute to his own journal, he issued strong objections: Simmel’s proposal for demarcating sociology failed because it lacked an objective “rule,” the “loosely used metaphors” of form and content could not in fact be separated, and “We see no connections among the issues he suggests as objects of sociological inquiry” (Durkheim, 1981: 1058). In a long critique that appeared just before the publication of the *Soziologie*, Othmar Spann challenged Simmel’s “psychologistic” conception of society, which ineffectively uses the unexplained notion of *Wechselwirkung* to account for complex forms that somehow arise from the lawful operation of their parts (Spann, 1907: 189ff.). In somewhat testy footnotes to his translation of an essay by Simmel in 1909, Albion Small registered several “exceptions,” for example that the special science of forms risks producing abstractions that capture merely the “ghost” of human experience, would serve best as a tributary to the “more final” science of process, and in any case does not comprise Simmel’s actual agenda, which includes analysis of “more

fundamental” motives and interests (in Simmel, 1909). In commentary that long remained unpublished, even Simmel’s admiring friend Max Weber took issue with his “unacceptable” methodology, his unreliable results, and his “strange” mode of exposition (Weber, 1972: 158). Soon after Simmel’s death, his former student Siegfried Kracauer argued that his terminology was unsatisfactory, for example because ceremonies already count as “formal” conduct, and that Simmel had no way to provide an overall picture that relates rather disparate forms to each other (Kracauer, 1922: 108-10). Suspicions of mere formalism and of incoherence lingered. Pitirim Sorokin attacked Simmel’s view of sociology as “a purely scholastic and dead science, a kind of almost useless catalogue of human relations” (cited in Tenbruck, 1959: 74). Nicholas Timasheff combined two standard objections in saying that “Few would agree today with Simmel’s insistence upon confining sociology to the study of social forms—and Simmel himself was a conspicuous offender of this principle” (cited in Tenbruck, 1959: 62). Donald Levine, who championed Simmel’s cause for many years, commented on his inconsistent treatment of the concept of culture, eventuating in a major late shift in perspective (Levine 2008). Though otherwise sympathetic to Simmel, even David Frisby noted that his “theory of society—and some conception of his sociological project as a coherent whole—has always been hard to extract from his works” (2002: 137).

This tradition of criticism, which started during Simmel’s lifetime, includes too many voices to be easily dismissed. Some of what they have said, for example about coherence, is relevant to the analysis below. Yet with few exceptions, the older criticism does not probe deeply into actual texts. In the more recent literature, the critical review of different aspects of the *große Soziologie* by Hartmann Tyrell and colleagues (Tyrell et al., 2011) stands out. But overall, Simmel’s book has not attracted the kind of critical literature that surrounds, say, Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* or Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*. Weber (1972) himself already noted this lacuna, and Donald Levine (1971: lxi) confirmed decades later that much

remained to be done to achieve full “critical understanding” on par with other classics. At least in English, Simmel also has not received responses like the critical intellectual biographies by Lukes (1973) on Durkheim or Stedman Jones (2016) on Marx. Recent literature on Simmel, moreover, has a mostly positive thrust, focusing on explication and interpretation. Handbooks tend to mine Simmel’s work for intellectual riches (Kemple and Pyythinen, 2017); sociologists stress the “actuality” of Simmel’s program (Fitzi, 2021) or his contribution to new directions (Pyythinen, 2018); Simmel enjoys a still-growing reputation as an insightful student of modernity (Dahme and Rammstedt, 1984) and a great modernist philosopher (Goodstein 2017); and in general, interpreters constructively seek to extract “messages” from Simmel (Helle, 2012). A review of Simmel’s influence in the last several decades also strikes a positive note, tracing his impact across a variety of subfields (Bročić and Silver, 2021). Current Simmel experts like their man, and they would like their colleagues to like him too. But while this approach avoids the needless polemics that have occasionally disfigured discussion of other classics, it also limits sustained critical attention that can keep old texts vital in current debate. But as Peter Baehr has stressed, to survive as a classic, a text “must be subjected to continual critical engagement” (Baehr 2002: 184).

As an acknowledged classic, deemed worthy of a complete English translation a century after its first appearance (Simmel, 2009), Simmel’s work deserves such engagement. Beyond intrinsic merit and continued influence, a presentist argument also justifies its reconsideration. In 1979, Paul Rock (1979) treated Simmel as a key figure in the tradition of “interactionism”; Donald Levine later reiterated the point, stressing that Simmel laid out “epistemic principles” to treat interaction as an emergent phenomenon *sui generis* (1989: 14); Gregory Smith (1989) drew a still more direct line from Simmel to Goffman as prime students of the formal patterning of the interaction order; and even Jörg Bergmann (2011), though skeptical about Simmel’s relevance to microsociology in general, affirmed that parts of Simmel’s legacy continued to be

cashied in by interactionists from Goffman onward. If we thus view Simmel not as a unique fount of insights but as a contributor to a tradition within sociology, it is worth asking whether or how he can still help to advance that tradition.

The presentist rationale does not equate Simmel's project with that tradition. The connection is in fact contested. Warning against a misunderstanding that follows from translating *Wechselwirkung* as "interaction," Hartmann Tyrell argues that Simmel does not privilege person-to-person interaction as "foundational" in *Vergesellschaftung*, and instead is interested in any *Wechselwirkung* between "elements" even if not comprised of actual people (Tyrell, 2011: 32-4). Drawing on Simmel's rather relaxed use of the term "form" in a variety of cases and examples, Hans-Peter Müller (2018: 43-4) suggests that he refers to mechanisms determining the direction of social life (like super/subordination), to social groups or abstract collectivities (involving size and self-maintenance), to "types" (like the stranger), and to institutions (like a hereditary office)—a broader agenda than we now associate with interactionism. Simmel himself casts a fairly wide net from the outset, mentioning "hierarchies, corporations, competitions, marriage, friendship, societal customs, monocacy, and polycacy" as examples of forms to be studied (1992a: 23/Wolff, 1959: 319). But Simmel also clearly gives priority to actual human beings interacting: "A collection of human beings . . . becomes a society only when the vitality of [their] contents attains the form of reciprocal influence; only when one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another is a mere spatial aggregation or temporal succession transformed into society" (19/315). In sociology, the concept of form involves real human beings as well: it is their "content," their "*Lebensinhalt*" (ibid.), that gets formed into something more. Going beyond interaction to treat *Wechselwirkung* as involving any interdependence of any sort of elements, à la Tyrell, would make Simmel's formal demarcation proposal rather amorphous—and the point of the proposal is to direct attention to the social element in actual social life. Without trying to settle the



larger debate about Simmel in relation to interactionism, for the purpose of analyzing HISP that relation is clear and important: Simmel's own a priori, and the additions suggested below, are conditions for "syntheses" carried out by actual actors in their consciousness. As Simmel's first line on the first a priori puts it, "The picture [*Bild*] of another man that a man [*Mensch*] gains through personal contact is based on certain distortions" (47/342). Insofar as they help to understand the possibility of real *Vergesellschaftung*, through "personal contact," the a priori apply to forms involving actual actors engaging each other.

### The a priori

So how *is* society possible? Having laid out his key insight as summarized above, Simmel first proposes that in viewing another person as related to us, we cannot capture her full individuality, but rather think of her in terms of a general category—not to equate her with a "type" but to integrate the particular, observable fragments of her personality into something more coherent (1992a: 48/Wolff, 1959: 343). Thus, "We see the other not simply as an individual but as a colleague or comrade or fellow party member" (50/344). Due to such simplifying assumptions that "arise from some common basis of life," we "look to one another as if through a veil" (49/344). To make social relations possible, we necessarily "distort" the picture of the other. Following Simmel's main examples—colleague, comrade, etc.—let us call this, with Gerhardt (2011: 106), the "role a priori" (cf. Müller, 2018: 42; Krähnke, 2018: 113), where "role" is taken broadly to designate any social types or categories. As a first cognitive condition for representing our involvement with the other, this makes good sense: only certain aspects of her personality and conduct are relevant to us as her partner in interaction, and we select them on the basis of a relevance criterion. Each such involvement, and therefore social forms in general, excludes other possibilities, and the representation of "society" as ordered a certain way depends on such exclusions. But note that Simmel does not specify how the selection occurs in fact, how

particular people get fit to particular roles, apart from suggesting that it somehow stems from an otherwise unrepresented “common basis of life.”

Simmel introduces the second “category under which the individual views himself and others [*gegenseitig*, i.e., mutually, says the original] and which transforms all of them into empirical society” with the proposition that “every element of the group is not only a societal part but, in addition, something else” (50-1/345). The way we are involved in any interaction depends on the way we are not, on what we hold back. In the picture we construct of relating to the other, the “non-social imponderables” come into play to add “nuance”—or more than nuance, for example because a relationship with the stranger depends on her particular way of also being outside of it (51/346). In application, this a priori varies: in some cases, as in relating to a romantic partner, the non-social dimension fades; in other cases, such as exchange in the money economy, only the “objective” performance matters and much non-social “coloration” gets left out. As a characterization of our variable involvement in “society,” this again makes good sense, but it appears to follow logically from the first a priori. If I view you selectively, through a veil, leaving out much that is not relevant to the way we relate, then I necessarily assume that there is more to you than I include in my representation. The veil of the role a priori allows some rays to get through but blocks others. Hence what Gerhardt calls the “individuality a priori” complements the first and may in fact be functionally equivalent: whereas the role a priori refers to what we do select, the second a priori refers to what gets left out—but these appear to comprise one epistemic operation.

A certain ambiguity also creeps into the analysis. At the outset, HISP refers to the conditions for becoming-conscious of constituting a unit with the other—the “society” that they make possible is a representation. Yet in discussing the second a priori Simmel at times shifts away from society-as-representation and refers instead to the “a priori of empirical social life” and to a society that is “a structure which consists of beings which stand inside and

outside of it” (53/347). Between a society and “its component individuals,” Simmel says, “a relation may exist as if between two parties” (53/348). The empirical reality of a structure consisting of beings and of a relationship between two parties is more than a mere *Bild*, and the a priori therefore is no longer just a “category under which the individual views himself and others.” That also leaves unclear in what way, beyond the minimal awareness that my counterpart is more-than-social, the individuality a priori is in fact necessary to enable me to construe a coherent picture of our tie. Toward the end of this discussion, Simmel himself simply reasserts that we are “capable of constructing the notion of society” from the idea of “potentially autonomous” beings, and that this capacity in turn “constitutes an a priori of empirical society” (56-7/351). I return below to the “empirical” role of the “notion.”

Before stating the third a priori in the final section of HISP, Simmel again appears to depart from his initial focus on society-as-representation. Society, he says, “is a structure of unequal elements” (57/351). It “may be conceived as a purely objective system of contents and actions”—here Simmel seems to refer to what we as observers, rather than participants, may “conceive”—but its elements are individually “heterogeneous,” making for a “web of qualitatively differentiated phenomena” (57-8/352). Bureaucracy offers a useful analogy, though ordinary society is not as “ideal” or planned: it exists as a “certain order of positions” in which new entrants, each with her own talents, find a suitable place (58/352). With Gerhardt we can call this the “structure a priori,” though Simmel himself stresses the notion of “harmony.” A certain fit between our individuality and the “place” that ideally belongs to us *and* actually exists serves as a “precondition of the individual’s social life” (59/353). The notion of vocation illustrates the point: society offers to the individual a place that in principle can be filled by many others, but can nevertheless be taken by the individual “on the basis of an inner calling, a qualification felt to be intimately personal” (60/354). The “fundamental category” that turns “individual consciousness” into a “social element” here is the notion of an

“objective totality” that makes room for “individual life processes,” which in turn “become necessary links in the life of the whole” (61/355). But as the examples of bureaucracy and vocation illustrate, Simmel offers more than a “category.” He is saying that we become social in fact by finding our place in the structure of positions, a sociality that still allows for “individual” contributions. He does not explain why a conception of society-as-objective or of social involvement as fit-with-a-position is necessary to form a *Bild* of relationships as a unit, the original aim of HISP. Put differently, the text provides only weak support for the strong thesis that my understanding of the way my or your “individual life process” fits into some “objective totality” is a condition for seeing us as socialized into a unit. Even assuming we have the capacity in principle, its use would seem even more variable than the individuality a priori—feasible in a bureaucratic setting, less so in a friendship group. In what sense the notion of positional fit is a general, a priori-style condition therefore remains unclear.

Perhaps surprisingly, for an essay ostensibly focused on the possibility of society, HISP pays a lot of attention to the individual and individuality. Barely a paragraph goes by without invoking the individual; introducing the third a priori, for example, Simmel quickly elaborates on the “unequal elements” in the structure of society by stressing the “innate qualities” and “decisive experiences” that make for “uniqueness and irreplaceability” in the individual’s interaction with others (57/351). The primacy of the individual, indeed a certain anxiety about her unique autonomy, haunts the possibility of society. Society is possible, one could summarize, by virtue of the mental molding of complex individuals that at the same time recognizes their obdurate, unsocialized individuality. The “very basis of representation” lies in “the feeling of the existing ego” that is “unconditional and unshakeable,” which extends to the fact-of-you [*Tatsache des Du*], the other-as-real herself, as in some sense independent of representation (44-5/339). While analytically he does not favor one over the other, Simmel thus “comes at” society from the standpoint of the individual, with her unformed,

“unconditional” feeling and “innate” qualities. Partly for that reason, his a priori all pertain to the molding of individuals into parts of social units or relationships. But exactly what is social about those units? In what sense do the a priori enable us to conceptualize what you and I do together, *gegenseitig*, what we bring about as a “third” phenomenon? Though Simmel is obviously very attuned to the “thirdness” of interaction—not my thing, not your thing, but our new thing—he does not provide categories that in principle enable participants to represent to themselves that sociality as such, its in-betweenness or the “*Zwischen*” (Tyrell, 2011: 33). The a priori are not very relational.

What might such categories look like? A comment above hints at one possible addition. To apply the role a priori—simply put, to typify the other in terms of a role—requires a selection criterion, a way to decide which aspects of the other’s involvement with me count as her relevant role; Simmel himself suggests it arises from a “common basis of life.” To turn that quasi-empirical comment into a proper epistemic precondition we could relate the role a priori to a concept engrained in the broader interactionist tradition, namely the “definition of the situation.” Society is possible if and only if participants are capable of identifying the situation that brings them together, the possibilities it excludes and the expectations it entails, as an imagined “common basis of life.” Of course, as we know from long experience, how such definitions work in practice, how well they are aligned among interaction partners, and how real they are in their consequences are all complicated issues. But adding it as a quasi-Kantian postulate fits the intuitions that guide the interactionist tradition. A second addition draws on an insight common to interpretive and other strands in sociology. To view the other as “with” us, to view the social unit as a joint accomplishment, she cannot just sit there across from us, embodying a role or at peace with a position in society, but must mean something to us and demand something of us. We must be able to view her as collaborator, a destination of our actions that is in turn meaningfully oriented toward us, actively responding to our moves in a way that

in principle calls for further moves. We might combine this meaningful mutual orientation and double contingency in social action by saying that society is possible if and only if participants can represent the other as partner. The point here is not to prove the validity of such additional a prioris as cognitive preconditions, though they have considerable backing in the literature, but to suggest by example that an adequate “epistemic” answer to Simmel’s question requires more than the sorts of a prioris he supplies.

### **HISP in relation to the problem of sociology**

Does the answer to the basic question help to address the “problem of sociology”? Strictly speaking, Simmel did not need HISP to “solve” that problem. In a Kantian sense, it sufficed to formulate the problem correctly, as a feasible agenda focused on a distinct dimension of experience and relying on coherent organizing categories, and thereby to “prove” that sociology so demarcated could be a proper science in its own right (Rammstedt, 2009: 21-2). Yet the very placement of HISP as part of chapter 1 and several statements in HISP itself point to a close connection, already noted above: Simmel apparently viewed the a prioris as part of the foundation of “pure” sociology, in the sense that they do not just enable us to create a picture of our social connection with others, but facilitate the very process of associating, of *Vergesellschaftung*. Our capacity to construct the “notion” of society, on the basis of the three a prioris, in turn “constitutes an a priori of empirical society.” As Krähnke summarizes, society is possible only because individuals recognize and address each other as members of society on the basis of the a prioris (2018: 113)—society not just in the sense of an imagined construct but also as an active process of construction. Other commentators stress the link as well. Gerhardt even suggests that it is the very point of Simmel’s book to provide an “epistemological” foundation for a “*geisteswissenschaftliche*” sociology, showing how the a prioris make possible society and our knowledge thereof *and* how they actually work in forms of

*Vergesellschaftung*—the central object identified in “the problem of sociology” (Gerhardt, 2011: 86-7). Viewed from that angle, HISP is essential in carrying out the agenda.

That agenda, as noted, focuses on the study of society understood as “a number of individuals enter[ing] into interaction” or *Wechselwirkung*, in which “one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another” (17-9/314-5). In principle, these interactions build a certain unity or coherence among the participants, what Simmel calls *Vergesellschaftung*, and that generic form of socializing individuals into a joint endeavor in turn takes many specific forms—the sum of which makes up “society” for sociology to study (18-23/314-9). The agenda covers large processes like the formation of parties or classes, but it particularly zeroes in on “microscopic-molecular processes within human material,” ranging from the way “people look at one another or are jealous of one another” to expressing gratitude for an altruistic act or asking someone for directions (33/327). Momentary or permanent, ephemeral or serious, such interactions spin and interweave threads that may be dropped, taken up again, or displaced entirely (33/328). Of course, these forms and threads raise many questions. But Simmel segues to HISP by suggesting that epistemology as a philosophical domain adjacent to sociology provides the “presuppositions of concrete research” by showing “the a priori condition” that makes possible “the empirical structure of the individual [*Einzelnen*] in so far as he is a social being,” and society “as an objective form of subjective minds” (39-41/333-5). The text thus justifies the way Krähnke, Gerhardt, and Fitzl link HISP to Problem, i.e., the first part of chapter 1 in *Soziologie*.

In effect, from their interpretations and Simmel’s text we can derive two distinguishable claims, a general and a more specific one: first, that the operation, and therefore our understanding, of social forms depends in general on cognitive preconditions that socialize subjective minds to make them available for interaction; and second, that the specific a prioris laid out in HISP actually provide an adequate epistemological foundation for sociological analysis.

To take the first claim first, do social forms in general depend on cognitive a priori that socialize individuals as members-in-principle? One reason for doubt follows from Simmel's particular way of framing the formation of forms, in keeping with a feature of HISP noted above: individuals exist, out there, unsocialized, with their subjective minds wrapped up in their own "unconditional" goals and desires; to make forms work, they must learn to see themselves and others as social beings pursuing those goals and desires jointly; and by virtue of certain categorizing capacities they in fact do slot themselves and others into regular, if sometimes momentary or ephemeral, ways of collaborating with others. That participants in interaction must see themselves *as* participants in order to participate seems unexceptionable. Nonetheless, like HISP itself, the framing in Problem again assumes the primacy of the individual and poses the problem of order as one that involves the socializing of beings that stand outside society. But Simmel does not justify this framing. It would be hard to do so in a way that is consistent with his general perspectivism, i.e., the assumption that the organization of human experience depends on the application of and selection by a certain perspective, an act of abstraction from a certain "standpoint." But he declares the "individual existences" that are singled out from one standpoint among others to be at the same time the "true bearers of conditions" (29/325). Beyond any standpoint or perspective, these individual existences include given, uncategorized, unconditionally subjective experiences. Besides thus noting a certain inconsistency in Simmel's procedure—everything depends on analytical abstraction, except the really real individual—a different strand in the interactionist tradition might object that participants are always already socialized, and that therefore the a priori, even as a conceptual move to identify conditions-in-principle, do not capture the "knowledge structures" at work in social construction. Instead of stating such a priori as "transcendental" conditions in consciousness, a different account of orderliness could rely on the methods applied by participants to bring it about, as in Goffman and Garfinkel, without assuming that it is the unsocialized "subject" that creates the problem of order in



the first place. And even on its own terms, the Kantian approach may not go far enough in the sense that the formation of forms would seem to depend not just on categories that socialize subjective souls but also on a conception of form as such. At the risk of near-tautology, one could say that society is possible if actors can imagine the possibility of society—not just if individuals view themselves as socialized members but if they can envision the more-than-individual as such, the member-of-what. They need the category of the social.

Assuming for the sake of argument that the general claim is persuasive in spite of these reasons for doubt, do Simmel's particular a prioris suffice? To summarize in a formula, society is possible according to Simmel, first as consciousness of unity-with-others, then as a matter of actual coherence in joint activity, if and insofar as individuals conceive themselves and others as role-players with distinct identities who find a partial fit with the structure of the social whole, whatever it may be in any instance. The discussion of HISP above already raised doubts about the formula, since the second a priori does not add much to the first, the third is not a "category" under which the individual views herself and the other, and all three lack a relational quality in any case. Though linking Problem to HISP, Simmel himself does not supply an argument making the case for the specific linkage, showing that these three a prioris, by enabling a certain kind of consciousness, help specifically in producing coherence in "empirical society," in particular instances of *Wechselwirkung* and *Vergesellschaftung*. Several examples in chapter 1 would not seem to involve all three a prioris—in asking for directions, the fit of the other with a structure of unequal elements is immaterial to me and her, in forming a party you and I need not consider what we do in our private lives as non-members, and so on. That all three a prioris come into play in all interactive forms is therefore an unproven assumption. There is reason to doubt that they can take us far in any case. At best they provide a bare minimum to make possible some social involvement by somewhat socialized individuals. But they tell us nothing about how

it is possible for these individuals to interact, and in particular, to interact in the regular, reproducible ways indicated by the concept of form. To build on previous points about the missing “relational” and “social” quality in the a priori, none of them makes possible sustained engagement in *Wechselwirkung* as an interactive process. To make society possible “empirically,” as real coherence achieved via *Vergesellschaftung*, i.e., *Gesellschaft* as the sum of forms, requires a priori that enable participants to view themselves not merely as fitting role players, or even as partners in defining a situation, but as mutually involved, actively relating and relatable collaborators in a structured, joint process. Society is possible if and only if certain a priori or “knowledge structures” facilitate a cognitive rendering of interaction and process.

What might those look like? Taking a step beyond the definition of the situation and the partnership a priori suggested above, we could supplement Simmel with categories that have emerged in later literature. Adapting Gouldner’s analysis of the “norm” of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), we could suggest that any form of interaction presupposes a capacity for reciprocation: a categorical understanding of move and response, of double contingency executed as a balance of reciprocated gestures. Or to invoke a term from conversation analysis, to interact at all we must know our “turn.” The notion of form further implies that turns unfold in regular fashion, step by step. To make that unfolding possible requires a capacity for sequencing: a categorical understanding of the proper order of steps, of the arc of interaction as a structure in time. Of course, things might go wrong, and the form might wobble. To make society possible as an ongoing enterprise, maintaining forms as forms, requires a capacity for mutual accountability: a categorical understanding of account-giving in relation to the demands of form and a grasp of the sort of remedial action it entails. Supplementing Simmel, these reciprocation, sequencing, and accounting a priori facilitate orderly interaction by structuring active mutual orientation, time management, and course corrections. They are eminently social and relational. They address

interaction as process. They lend themselves to the kind of formal analysis Simmel envisioned. More clearly than Simmel's a prioris, they are involved in a wide variety of concrete *Wechselwirkungen*.

### **HISP and the analysis of forms**

How does HISP relate to the actual analysis in the later chapters of *Soziologie*? Simmel notoriously left it to his readers to make the connection(s) between chapter 1 and the rest of the book, at least in terms of the initial problematic or *Fragestellung*, and he did not explicitly claim that the a prioris would play a role in the chapters to come, a number of them probably drafted before he completed HISP. It is nonetheless reasonable for Gerhardt and others to claim that the a prioris are essential to show, in subsequent analysis, how various “structural processes” actually work (Gerhardt, 2011: 85). Yet looking for their role turns out to be challenging. Just as he might have found it too pedantic, as Tyrell puts it defensively (2011: 34), to invoke *Wechselwirkung* explicitly after making it the keynote of his program, Simmel also mostly avoided the a prioris later in the text except in a few instances—another lack of pedantry achieved at the cost of clarity. But the exceptions prove instructive.

Introducing the chapter on the secret and the secret society, Simmel notes that “The first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to know with whom one has to deal” (1992a: 383/Wolff, 1950: 307; all further references again to these sources unless indicated otherwise). Far from being an empty form, introducing ourselves to others at an opening encounter symbolizes “the mutual knowledge presupposed by every relationship”—it is “*ein zutreffendes Symbol jenes gegenseitigen Kenntnis, das ein Apriori jeder Beziehung ist*” (383/307-8). But rather than postulating this a priori as a mere condition for creating some kind of unified *Bild*, he quickly adds that “it would be worth a special investigation to find out the kind and degree of reciprocal knowledge required by various relations among people; to find out the general psychological assumptions, with which everybody approaches everybody else,” and so on (384/308)—here, the knowledge needed to form

relationships is variable and subject to investigation rather than static and determined by epistemological fiat. As in HISP, Simmel stresses that we can never know another person entirely and must use mental forms to construct some kind of unified picture of the other out of the fragments available to us, but unity “depends on the portion of him which our standpoint permits us to see” and the picture “interacts with [i.e., *steht . . . in Wechselwirkung mit*] the actual relation” (384-5/308-9). Here, the representation of the other as with-us is thus relative and dynamic. It is also dialectical: while the relation shapes the conception of the other, “the real interaction between the individuals is based upon the picture they acquire of one another” (385/309). He concludes this line of argument with a flourish that also brings back *Wechselwirkung* in its original sense: “In their alternation within sociological interaction [*Wechselwirkung*], they reveal interaction as one of the points where being and conceiving make their mysterious unity empirically felt” (385/309). While Simmel’s philosophical interest obviously lingers, here he has also given it a more dynamic, empirical twist. As these passages attest, HISP by itself cannot do justice to the role of knowledge in interaction—a task, to be sure, he did not explicitly promise to undertake. But Simmel brilliantly illuminates that role in his subsequent analysis by showing how what we do *not* know about the other affects the dynamic of a relationship.

Simmel also refers to an a priori condition of society in his *Exkurs* on faithfulness or loyalty [*Treue*] and gratitude. Once again, the discussion differs from HISP. Social relations preserve their structure, Simmel argues, even after the feeling or occasion that motivated them fades (1992a: 653/Wolff, 1950: 380). But how does this self-maintenance, this inertia without which society itself would crumble, happen? Faithfulness is the key affective factor, or as Simmel says, “faithfulness in the form of feeling,” a “psychic state directed toward the continuance of the relation as such” (654-5/381). And *this* psychic state Simmel now calls “one of the *a priori* conditions of society which alone make society possible (at least as we know it), in spite of the extraordinary differences of degree in

which this psychic state exists” (655/381; italics in original translation). By contrast with the properly transcendental a prioris proposed in HISP, not only does that state vary in intensity, it develops in and through a social process, analogous to induction. If a certain relation exists at one moment, feeling-by-induction infers from mere habitual togetherness that the same relation exists at a later moment (655/381-2). Rather than constituting some prior mental condition, loyalty develops out of the “external sociological situation,” which “appropriates the particular feelings that properly correspond to it, as it were, even though they did not justify the beginnings of the relationship”—a relationship that thus “develops its own faithfulness” (655-6/382). In fact, loyalty is the “sociological” affect par excellence, since it unifies the flux of vicissitudes in any relationship with the fixity of form as something felt within, enabling the constantly moving soul to incorporate itself into a supra-individual form of relation (658-60/384-7). As in the chapter on the secret, then, Simmel gives the a priori a much more dynamic, empirical twist. Strikingly, it becomes a “psychic state” that is in a sense mobilized by the situation or form in which it operates. Society creates, so to speak, the conditions for its own possibility.

Elsewhere in the *Soziologie*, the a prioris remain more implicit. Among Simmel interpreters, Uta Gerhardt has perhaps made the strongest case that they are nonetheless at work even where we cannot clearly detect them. Specifically, she argues that Simmel’s chapter on super- and subordination shows how he uses the a prioris to portray the types of forms and their variations (Gerhardt, 2011: 116). She claims, for example, that Simmel relies on the role and individuality a priori to suggest that in subordination under a person the ruler must involve his entire personality while subjects only enter with part of their personality—and the less of themselves they insert, the easier they are to control (Simmel, 1992a: 180-1; Gerhardt, 2011: 109-10). For the relevance of the a prioris to domination by a plurality, she jumps to the *Exkurs* about outvoting, suggesting that the first two a prioris interlock where Simmel says

that “all restless evolution of societal forms . . . is merely the ever renewed attempt at reconciling the individual’s unity and totality (which are inwardly oriented) with his social role (which is only a part of society and a contribution to it)” (1992a: 218/Wolff, 1950: 239; Gerhardt, 2011: 111). She further strains to read a *prioris* into Simmel’s arguments by suggesting that domination under a plurality invokes the first a *priori* in the sense that the rulers rule on behalf of the whole as a generalized type of citizen. Turning to domination under a principle, she points to one of Simmel’s statements as presenting a new mixture of the first two a *prioris*: “Many of these super-subordinations have changed in the sense that both superordinates and subordinates alike stand under an objective purpose; and it is only within this common relationship to the higher principle that the subordination of the one to the other continues to exist as a technical necessity” (241-2/263). Because that modern type of domination leaves subjects more degrees of freedom, she argues, the individuality a *priori* becomes the “carrier” of a new kind of “individualizing synthesis,” fostered not just by subordination to the rule of law but also by the ramifying intersection of social circles (Gerhardt, 2011: 113-5).

In none of these cases does Simmel himself bother to refer to the a *prioris*. And Gerhardt’s claims notwithstanding, the a *prioris* from HISP do not actually come into play even surreptitiously. For example, in HISP the role a *priori* had to do with typification of the other, which is not applicable to any of the three types of domination. Where Gerhardt points to a supposed new mixing of a *prioris*, for example in repositioning super- and subordinates under an objective principle, the text cited above shows no such thing. Conversely, all the points Simmel puts forth can easily be made—given sufficient genius—without any reliance on the a *prioris* at all. For example, the idea that minimal civic involvement, say in the form of professing allegiance to the Ruler, is correlated with ease of top-down control does not involve any assumptions about conditions for consciousness of unity in *Wechselwirkung*, and it can be evaluated by political sociologists without any recourse to

such epistemic assumptions. Similarly, Simmel's profound discussion of modern freedom and individualization proceeds from analysis of the forms of domination and especially of the intersection of circles, neither of which depends on a prioris. Thus, even the most specific argument for the use of HISP in *Soziologie*, which seeks support in at least some textual references, does not succeed.

Since this brief analysis does not cover the entire *Soziologie*, by itself it cannot show that HISP does not productively relate to any substantive part of it. But it does show that in the two places where Simmel ostensibly invokes a prioris his handling of them differs significantly from HISP, and that in the one place most specifically offered by a Simmel interpreter as proof of the role of a prioris, it is difficult to detect any such thing. Of course, as with secrecy and loyalty, the disconnect with HISP in the analysis of power does not detract from the quality of Simmel's substantive insights. But the point here is that their considerable value does not derive from any epistemic foundations that make society possible as practice, as a "socialization process." Turning the old complaint about the *Soziologie's* incoherence on its head, a contrarian sociologist might even be thankful that those supposed foundations, and the philosophical style of argumentation that goes with them, recede into the background and do not limit the fertility of Simmel's actual sociological thought.

## Conclusion

Even viewed as purely transcendental argument, HISP gives at best a partial answer to the question, how is society possible? Viewed in relation to the other parts of Simmel's sociology, that partial answer only modestly informs the general study of *Vergesellschaftung* and the specific analysis of various social forms. But if Simmel does not tell us satisfactorily how society is possible, he certainly does uncover a variety of societal possibilities. His question remains pertinent as well. Even in these post-Kantian times, even as students of interaction move in different directions, it is worth

asking what sort of knowledge participants need to have to interact effectively and achieve an interaction order—and further, what sorts of human capacities we must assume to understand their ability to acquire and apply such knowledge. Supplementing Simmel, and drawing on key ideas in the broader interactionist tradition, this paper has offered some suggestions for other a prioris involved in the structuring of interaction by participants, each focused more than Simmel’s own on the process of *Wechselwirkung/Vergesellschaftung* as such.

The seemingly “epistemological” question has been the subject of probing research in other fields that also takes steps beyond Simmel. For example, combining insights from anthropology and psychology, Michael Tomasello has argued that early in life children develop a capacity for “joint intentionality”—seeing the other as someone with goals of her own, able to know that my goals may be the same as hers, and inclined to engage in the common project of pursuing them together (Tomasello, 2014: 38). Such shared intentionality develops over time and undergirds interaction in which participants learn to coordinate perspectives—not just yours with mine, but both with an “objective” perspective (Tomasello 2018). In effect, Tomasello’s account of conditions for cooperative action thus combines the partner and definition of the situation a prioris suggested above. While joint intentionality and perspective coordination operate to some extent like Simmelian a prioris in that they help to make society possible in both an imagined *and* practical sense, they also become evolving and researchable human propensities rather than merely postulated epistemic conditions. Both in the interactionist tradition in sociology and in allied fields illustrated by this example, work along these lines promises to shed more empirical light on what makes society possible.

It is the mark of a classic that fresh knowledge does not spell oblivion. So it is with Simmel. Even as we better see the limits of his arguments and learn more about what makes society possible, his program, his questions, and especially his actual analyses of social forms continue to inspire.



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