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Simmel's multi-level approach to conflict

Horst J. Helle *

Abstract

To Simmel it is neither realistic nor desirable to strive for a utopia of eternal peace. Humans can only collaborate and develop if some form of conflict among them prevails. Accordingly, they should invent and institutionalize the *most humane type of conflict*. Rather than subduing each other in war and submit the defeated partner to death or slavery, they ought to *compete* peacefully and thus provoke each other to higher levels of culture and performance. This Simmel applies to three levels: 1) The world views created by religion, art, and scholarship each depict the universe as a whole; they cannot replace each other, they cannot reasonable be in conflict, but they can and should compete. 2) Human groups alien to each other cannot enforce unification but should communicate via an exchange of strangers, reduce differences by competing, and eventually become more and more similar. 3) Businesses, offering goods and services on a market, should compete to gain the approval of the customer and thus perform a non-violent type of conflict in commerce to the advantage of those who pay them money. A summary at the end shows what the three levels have in common.

Per Simmel non è realistico né desiderabile lottare per un'utopia di pace eterna. Gli esseri umani possono collaborare e svilupparsi solo se intrattengono una qualche forma di conflitto tra loro. Di conseguenza, dovrebbero inventare e istituzionalizzare il *tipo più umano di conflitto*. Invece di combattersi in guerra e piegare l'avversario sconfitto alla morte o alla schiavitù, dovrebbero *competere* pacificamente e quindi rivaleggiare a livelli superiori di cultura e prestazioni. Quest'approccio al conflitto Simmel lo applica a tre livelli: 1) Le visioni del mondo create da religione, arte e cultura descrivono ciascuna l'universo come un tutto; non possono sostituirsi a vicenda, non possono ragionevolmente essere in conflitto, ma possono e dovrebbero competere. 2) I gruppi estranei l'uno all'altro non possono *imporre* a se stessi di unirsi, dovrebbero invece entrare in comunicazione mediante interscambi, ridurre le differenze attraverso la competizione e col tempo diventare sempre più simili. 3) Le imprese, che offrono beni e servizi sul mercato, dovrebbero mettersi in competizione per guadagnare il gradimento del cliente e quindi cercare a suo vantaggio un tipo di concorrenza commerciale non violenta. Un riepilogo finale mostra ciò che i tre livelli hanno in comune.

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1. Levels of conflict

The ideal of eternal peace and brotherly kindness among all humans is widespread and has many followers. To Simmel that notion is perhaps a beautiful dream, but not a realistic assessment of what goes on in society. Conflict – as most other phenomena in culture and society – is ambivalent with negative as well as positive potentials. It is commonly associated with war, rebellion and other forms of unrest. Simmel would be the last person to defend those ugly ways in which men and women deal with each other. But conflict is also needed, according to Simmel, because it *motivates people to individualize* by improving each other and themselves, provided it is practiced in a cultured form of fairness as e.g. in a scholarly competition or in sports.

To illustrate his point Simmel refers to those, who enjoy fighting; he mentions “the psychologist who recognizes in fighting the manifestation of irrepressible drives” (Simmel 1903, 1009), but, more importantly, he directs our attention to “the sociologist for whom a group that simply harmoniously attracts its members to a center would be nothing more than an ‘association,’ not only empirically unreal, but also lacking any genuine life process” (ibid). Simmel’s position thus leans in the direction that there needs to be some form of conflict for there to be a “genuine life process”. He bolsters up this somewhat striking point of view with observations from art, using Dante’s (1265–1321) *Divina Commedia* and Raphael’s (1483–1520) *Disputa* to illustrate his point as follows:

The society of saints whom Dante beholds in the rose of paradise may conduct itself in such a way, but it is also devoid of any change and development; while, on the other hand, the holy assembly of the Church Fathers in Raphael’s *Disputa* presents itself, if not as engaged in actual fighting, at least as comprising considerable differences of attitudes and orientations, from which springs all of the vibrancy and the real organic coherence of that gathering (Simmel 1903, 1009).

Making the “holy assembly of the Church Fathers” the example of conflicting interaction and reminding us that their goal was to better understand the meaning of the sacrament, raises the ethical level of competition. By introducing this powerful image, Simmel clearly changes the argument from the question of whether there ought to be peace or conflict, to the more specific question of *what type of conflict* should there be? Conflict in one form or another must be accepted and encouraged, because without it human interaction would be “not only empirically unreal, but also lacking any genuine life process” (ibid.)

Since Simmel teaches us to ask, what type of conflict we should encourage; the discussion must distinguish between levels of conflict. Culture must help humans to find more humane forms of interacting with each other once it has been accepted that the ideal of the *pax hominibus* is not a realistic option. Building on this model of reasoning, Simmel sees a gradual transition within the stages of cultural evolution: Early rigidity analogous to instincts is followed by more freedom of choice. Competition, therefore, becomes gradually more and more important, because “to the extent to which slavery, the mechanical taking control of the human being, ceases, the necessity arises to win him over via his soul” (ibid, 1013).

The more the individual is liberated from traditionalistic external control, the more he or she becomes – in David Riesman’s terminology – *inner directed*, (Riesman, D. et al. 1965), the more the person must be *subjected to competition* to guarantee continued contributing toward the community and to avoid being out of control altogether. The details will be spelled out here below. We present Simmel’s conflict theory along the following three levels:

- 1) The *world views* created by *religion*, *art*, and *scholarship* each depict the universe as a whole; they cannot reasonably conflict with the goal of one *replacing* the other, but they can *compete*.
- 2) Human groups alien to each other cannot enforce unification but should communicate via an exchange of strangers, reduce differences during competition, and eventually become more and more similar and thus can cooperate peacefully.
- 3) Businesses, offering goods and services in competition on a market, have the goal to gain the approval of the customer and thus perform a

service as a non-violent type of conflict to the advantage of their customer.

2. Religion, art, and scholarship

One of the lasting achievements of Simmel's method is the introduction of the tool of *form* as part of his theory of knowledge. Unfortunately, that concept has frequently been misunderstood. Simmel's *form* is *a way of looking at things*, or a *perspective*. Simmel was well versed in the work of Spinoza and knew of course Spinoza's characteristic way of dealing with Descartes' dichotomy of *cogitatio* and *extensio*. Descartes used that to divide what there was to know in the world of ideas (*cogitatio*) on the one hand, and the world of objects one can measure because they have a certain size, an *extensio*, on the other. While for Descartes these terms referred to what were to him two separate worlds, to Spinoza they were merely two different ways of looking at the one and undivided world. *Cogitatio* and *extensio* thus became *forms* in Simmel's sense. The world is one and undivided, but humans have the option of bringing all there is to know either in the *form* of *cogitatio* or in that of *extensio*. As a result, the world appears to be falling apart into two worlds, a world of ideas and a world of things, depending on the perspective we take in looking at it. This is of course not merely undesirable but even erroneous to Simmel.

Simmel's concept of *form* depends on the dichotomy of *form and content*. As an illustration we look at the following biblical text about a dream. Joseph is not well-liked among his brothers because their father seems to love him more than his siblings. Against this background Joseph tells his brothers about a dream, in which they all work in the field together. They were cutting and reaping grain together and binding the harvest into sheaves to let it dry. But Joseph's sheaf stood up and remained upright, while the sheaves of his brothers stood around it in a circle and bowed to it (Genesis 37, 7).

Far from first laughing it off as „just a dream” and then ignoring it, his brothers get very angry about what Joseph dreamed because they interpret it as a prediction of things to happen in the future, namely that someday Joseph will rule over them. This is precisely what Simmel means with form and content: The content of the dream was wide open for interpretation, but the brothers put that content in the form of giving them a *preview of the future*. The scene of the

brothers harvesting grain together and everything that happens in Joseph's dream is the *content*. By itself it is not very meaningful, it requires interpretation. Attaching a certain *form* to the *content*, or – as Erving Goffman (1974) call is – *framing* it, means looking at it as relevant for action.

In the process of reality construction in *interaction in everyday life*, a variety of *forms* is available to the individual and to his or her associates. Those forms are applied of course on various levels of generality. On the most general level, Simmel identifies *art*, *religion*, *scholarship* (or science) and, surprisingly also *reality* as the forms of the highest level. What is meant by *reality* as a high-level form can be illustrated as follows: Erving Goffman (1922-1982), whom some sociologist call “the Simmel of the twentieth century” wrote his book *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974) very much in the continuity of Simmel's ideas. There Goffman uses short descriptions of events like the following to illustrate the intended theoretical tool:

Somewhere in London a pedestrian is surprised by three men running at top speed. Next the pedestrian observes that the men are being chased by the police. Spontaneously our pedestrian raises his walking stick and with it hits one of the fleeing criminals over the head. The man struck in that fashion collapses and is then taken to a hospital. This very spontaneous pedestrian did not know that he had become witness to a movie scene and that in front of the running cameras the chase after criminals was being *merely enacted*. Upon his release from the hospital, the actor reports that he considers what happened “an occupational hazard”. He will have insurance coverage because he received the injury while doing his job. (Goffman 1974, 311).

From the perspective of the injured actor the scene was the dramatization of a chase, but he got hit over the head because one pedestrian misinterpreted it as *reality*. Many jokes occur in everyday life for the same reason: Someone erroneously defines an event as *reality* which was intended merely as a joke, an art performance or similar factious alternative.

To Simmel, there is *only the one reality* that applies to everything, and that undivided whole can be seen from the perspective of art, or of religion, or of scholarship, or simply as real. This has the interesting consequence that the results arrived at by looking at the world from those high-level perspectives cannot contradict each other. Accordingly, to Simmel it is utterly senseless, for instance, for religion and scholarship or science to behave as if one of them

could prove that the other is in error! The composer will not tell the poet: You do not need to write a poem about this, because I have already composed a melody for it. According to Simmel, the world views created by religion, art, and scholarship each depict the universe as a whole; they cannot replace each other, they cannot reasonably be in conflict, but they can *compete* peacefully while producing more and more cultured *forms* each in their own way.

3. Competition among strangers

Simmel's multi-level approach to conflict gives sociologists of today the tools they need for dealing with the problem of persons from different culture background confronting each other as *strangers*. In this context it is particularly obvious that the ideal of the *pax hominibus* is not a realistic point of departure for dealing with the political tension many countries face in connection with the *refugee crisis*.

Simmel believes that groups alien to each other cannot *enforce* unification but should enter communication via an exchange of strangers. Using his evolutionary approach to social change, he shows how the separate populations can reduce differences while competing, and how they eventually become more and more similar as the result of peacefully trying to outperform each other.

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 visitors, and how hospitality toward them could be rewarded by learning new techniques and ways of life previously unfamiliar to the hosts (Helle 2018, 11ff.).

Simmel writes about *The Stranger*:

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 he who was distant is now close by" (Simmel 1908: 685).

The Stranger is the person from a foreign area who has become close because he arrived and stays, even though he or she could just as well leave again. We refer here to the famous *Excursus on the Stranger* from Simmel's voluminous book *Soziologie* (Simmel 1908). The piece he inserted there as *excursus* 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 quantitative aspect of migration: If 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 but "strange" 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, rather, what goes on between persons cannot simply be deduced from who they are individually.

Instead to Simmel *social 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 so familiar to any student of juvenile delinquency, that group qualities cannot reliably be explained by pointing to characteristic of individual members: By themselves each young person is well behaved and reasonable, but if in their group they have the potential of producing criminal behavior together.

It is against this background that Simmel describes *The Stranger*, not as a person representing strangeness, but instead as a *participant of a strange relationship*; or similarly, he sees 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.

Unfortunately, there is reason to assume 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. Certain events are defined as real and true that form the very foundation of an entire culture. 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, threatens the continued existence of the collective, religious or otherwise, and that explains the enormous potential for conflict.

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, can do that.

Those very large groups 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 by the writer of these lines – because the resulting conditions would be bearable only to the intellectual elite, who in their global orientation are correctly seen as the allies of invading *Strangers*. What tends to aggravate matters is the fact that too few people have command of 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 based on shared *individualization*. 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. in a sedentary culture before modernization, 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 carrying a different passport, does not belong here, can 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 different populations.

As contact and exchange between individuals from the two groups increases, Simmel sees a process getting started which initiates social change *in both*. 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 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 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, this is indeed what happens, whether the people involved like it or not (Simmel 1908: 711).

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 them all. Thus, the traditional solidarity based on subjecting to the demands for conformity, is replaced by a modern-type solidarity based on the individual uniqueness shared by all. 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 encounter each other who differ from each other in significant characteristics: All members of Group A are like each other in certain respects, but if compared with Group B they turn out to be clearly different from those. (Simmel 1908: 710). 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, life style, and a positive attitude toward uniformity in getting dressed.

2) Second stage: An increase in the number of group members (Simmel, *ibid.*) 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 within their group and on joining force among its members. In its place they gradually move toward an alternative type of solidarity based on being different and on seeing in that an added chance to cooperate.

3) Third stage: What one may want to call a trans-group-solidarity makes more and more people realize that – no matter from which group they originated – they share what is *fundamentally human*. As a result, more and more individuals recognize a) that there exists only a limited number of options available to them as humans, options how to behave ethically and successfully, and b) that the other individual, even though he or she may have individualized following a distinctly different path, 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 and a new basis for consensus and solidarity emerges.

It is remarkable to note how crucial aspects of theory building are condensed in Simmel's three texts on a) The Stranger, on b) Individualization (Simmel 1908: 709ff.), and on c) Competition (Simmel 1903), and how they merge in his approach toward change and modernization. The arriving *Stranger* encountering what is described here as the first stage is, so to speak, the precursor of individualization. He is the proto-type of the non-conformist, and at the same time the propagandist for shared characteristics of all 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. Typically, no one listens to him in his own country. What do *prophet* and *Stranger* have to offer that triggers such ambivalent reactions?

The Stranger's presence alone ushers in new and unheard-of ways of life. The persons welcoming his or her arrival with reservations may not have a clear view of what to expect in the medium and in the long run. The newcomer 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 live like their forebears and enjoy a familiar life in peace and quiet.

The very group for which ancestors gave their lives, the group that awarded identity to friends and family becomes irrelevant. Finally, globalization compels everyone to become a Stranger, and be willing to migrate, and 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 soon, may nevertheless have a sense, that it is *The Stranger* who ushers in all this and more. How then, can we in good faith expect all our contemporaries to happily welcome the Stranger?

The widening of the range of opportunities for the native initiated by the mere presence of *The Stranger* is realized only at the expense of consensus, solidarity, and inner unity of the respective group. The effects of that ominous alternative are to be felt in both groups: Their membership becomes more and more individualized, and the condition of being *The Stranger* applies to everyone. As a result, the two groups become more and more similar, and because of that it does not make any difference any more, which group the individual belongs to.

That is, however, experienced in various ways: While some see that trend as *liberating* them, others feel *threatened* by it. *The former group* will see in *The Stranger* the person with whom they can identify, because he or she too has emancipated from the guardianship of traditional superiors, as the migrant was compelled to do. *The latter group* will serve as a recruiting base for persons with anti-migration sentiments. Men and women who do not want to move in the direction of *modernization by individualization* seek for closeness with like-minded persons who conjointly pull back into the seemingly more secure membership in conventional groups with traditional religious or political ideologies defining them.

This trend can be extrapolated in the direction of two antagonistic social "classes:" One of them has become globalized and enjoys the potential of finding like-minded individualized persons anywhere in this world who share the impetus of cultivating their personal uniqueness. The other "class" feeling attacked by the specter of a globalized humanity and fear the implied threat levelled by more and more Strangers against the reliability and trustworthiness of familiar religious and political ideas.

Simmel's *Excursus on the Stranger* has inspired many sociologists to follow his approach to social change. As then president of the German Sociological Society, Stephan Lessenich gave a talk referring to Simmel to the attendees of the 38th Convention of that association in Bamberg, Germany, on September 26, 2016. He started, as Simmel did, by asking what it is that makes the

foreigner appear strange to us: It is not the way he or she looks, eats and drinks, not even what *Strangers* think or believe, but the sheer fact that they are suddenly there.

Accordingly, what is strange about them is not that they come and go soon after, but, as Simmel also wrote, that they come and stay. We like to live with those who have always been there, who were there even before we arrived on the scene. For *somebody* to show up, after we had already been there for quite some time, is a novel experience to us; it is moreover not fitting, and it is rather annoying. Well, what does not fit will be made to fit. The newcomer must adjust to the natives. But if that happens rather quickly, then even that causes opposition: This stranger simply pretends to be one of us, he or she fakes the native ways, and that is not acceptable. In any case, the arrival of the outsider signals change, and – as Lessenich jokingly points out – nobody has really asked us, if we want change.

Regardless of whether he or she wanted that or not, by leaving the familiar former native environment that was their home prior to migration, *The Stranger* changed him- or herself. At this point Lessenich reminds us, that being able to change, being flexible and willing to adjust to novel challenges, is precisely what is expected and required by the labor markets and other contexts in our late phase of modernization. In a dialogue between natives, one of them trying to explain to the other why a new job and a new apartment, possibly even a new intimate relationship was on the agenda, the words may be used: *I wanted some change*. Here we can find a point of entry for diagnosing inner conflict: We would deep inside much prefer to remain who we are, or – as Lessenich puts it – who we *think* we are.

These deliberations bring us to the fate of the refugee in late modern active society. The conditions of “late modernity” require precisely the characteristics so typical of *The Stranger*: Initiative and innovation, mobility and willingness to change, activity and flexibility designate what is much in demand in the placement ads, and it is what drives the postmodern labor market. The moving individual is much in demand. The person willing to try something new, the entrepreneur, big or small, shapes the role model of our time: To embrace what is novel, to invest in the future, to face risks, those are the qualities which the locals as well as the natives know to be in demand today.

Against this background, so convincingly sketched by Lessenich, recent political debates about migration and refugees must cause raised eyebrows: In principle the refugees who courageously leave behind all they had and are willing – and usually also compelled – to start a new life, match the locally desired requirements of mobility and flexibility quite closely. Then, why cannot the natives welcome *The Strangers* as the embodiments of what is expected of everyone, native or newcomer? Is it because the refugee represents those principles like seeking change and taking risks in a *more convincing way* than the native, and because *that* makes the latter fear for him or her to be the more credible innovator? Is that the real reason why the foreigners are accused of taking away job opportunities? Or is it peaceful competition with the stranger that assures a society of making progress?

4. Businesses compete for the approval of the customer

Even though competition in the world of economics is the most familiar application of Simmel's multi-level approach to conflict, it will be presented here at the end. It is obvious to Simmel, that businesses, offering goods and services on a market, should compete to gain the approval of the customer and thus perform a non-violent type of conflict to the advantage of the latter. It is therefore Simmel's intention in his article on competition, to "demonstrate how fighting is woven into the web of social life, how it is a particular manner of interaction influencing the unity of society" (Simmel 1903, page 1009).

Simmel describes two different types of conflict:

He who fights with another in order to gain that person's money, spouse, or reputation conducts his actions in a different form, using a totally different tactic, from that of him who competes with another for making the money of an audience flow into his own pockets, for winning the favor of a woman, for making himself more famous by his deeds and words (ibid.).

He who damages or even destroys his adversary on purpose and directly, is not competing, rather his direct attack would *deprive him of a potential competitor*. Competition is thus an *indirect form of fighting*.

Next Simmel distinguishes between two types of competition in general. The first is different from any direct confrontation in that it does not suffice to be the

winner, to decide the confrontation in one's own favor. What matters is in addition to win the *approval of the customer* or other audience to the struggle between the competitors:

Competition of this kind is distinctly colored by the fact that the outcome of the fight in no way fulfils the purpose of the fight, as would apply to all those cases in which fighting is motivated by rage or revenge, punishment or victory as an idealistic end in itself (ibid.)

The second type of competition may be one step further removed from direct fighting. Here no one aims any force or energy against his opponent but tries to deploy his best possible performance while – on the surface – ignoring the competing party. Maximizing one's efforts is motivated, however, by

the mutual awareness of the opponent's performance; and yet, if observed from the outside, seems to proceed as if there were no adversary present in this world, but merely the goal... One fights the opponent without turning against him – without touching him, so to speak (ibid.).

Already in these opening remarks Simmel chooses his illustrations from different venues of social life: from commerce of course – and that was to be expected – but also from erotic interaction (two men competing for the attention of a woman), from religion (two denominations competing for membership of the faithful), and from the physical performance in sports. What competitive activities in these various areas of human activities have in common is the *transformation of intentions of the potentially selfish individual into some common good*:

In this manner, subjective antagonistic impulses induce us to realize objective values, and victory in the fight is not really the success of that fight, but rather precisely the realization of certain values that lie beyond fighting (ibid: 1011).

Simmel sees here advantages for the community, in which the conflict occurs, advantages that only competition can generate. If the conflict is of a different nature, and if “the prize to be won in the fight is originally in the hands of one of the two parties” (ibid.) rather than within the domain of the customer or another kind of audience, society is left with “only what remains after subtracting the weaker power from the stronger” (ibid.).

Simmel expands on the idea that activities undertaken by an individual for purely subjective reasons have the potential of resulting in objective advantages for society. This is, however, not merely a confirmation of the invisible hand which Adam Smith saw at work behind the selfish actions of individuals, it is for Simmel a philosophical principle of a much more general scope. In fact, Simmel illustrates his point by referring to examples from religion, “erotic pleasure” (ibid.), and scholarship. In each of these domains individualistic interests have the potential of resulting in an increase of the common good. “Scholarship, for instance, is a content of the objective culture, and as such a self-sufficient end of social evolution, realized by means of individual curiosity and drive for new insights” (ibid.).

All these advantages can only be achieved provided *conflict occurs in the specific form of competition*. That means, as Simmel has explained before, that “the goal of competition between parties in society is nearly always to attain the approval of one or many third persons” (ibid: 1012). This is achieved in part by

this incredible effect of socializing people: it compels the competitor, who finds his fellow competitor at his side and only as a result of that really starts competing, to approach and appeal to the potential customer, to connect to him, to find out his weaknesses and strengths and to adapt to them, to find or to build all imaginable bridges that might tie the producer’s existence and performance to the potential customer. [...]. The antagonistic tension against the competitor sharpens the merchant’s sense for the inclinations of the public into an almost clairvoyant instinct for coming changes in taste, in fashion, in interests (ibid.).

It is the socializing effect of competition that educates people to be good competitors and thereby to be the producers of valuable services for society “through artfully multiplied opportunities to make connections and gain approval” (ibid: 1012f.).

Simmel’s article becomes more specifically sociological when he suggests that “the... structure of social circles differs from one to another, according to the degree and type of competition they permit” (ibid: 1014). Competition is frowned upon in associations that are based on a shared origin, like the family. While “children may compete for the love... of their parents” such occurrences would be peripheral and normally “not be related to the principle of family life. This principle is rather that of organic life; organic relationships, however, are ends in

themselves: they do not point beyond themselves to an external goal for which family members would have to compete” (ibid.)

“The other sociological type that excludes competition is exemplified by the religious congregation” (ibid.) There competing is superfluous, because, “at least according to Christian thinking, there is room for all in God’s mansion” (ibid.). Simmel here admits, however, that under certain religious conditions people may “compete for one particular prize... Success is indeed tied to some kind of previous performance, but the difference in success is unrelated to the difference in performance” (ibid.).

Simmel risks the shocking comparison between the struggle for salvation and gambling: “The *chosen* as the result of religious predestination or the *winner* in gambling will not be hated by him who was defeated, rather he will be envied; due to the mutual independence of their performance both are separated by more distance and by *a priori* indifference toward each other than is the case if they compete in business or in sports” (ibid: 1015). In this context it is also an additional argument in favor of competition, because in the absence of competition “envy and embitterment will prevail” (ibid.).

It is striking, not only how frequent reference is made in this article on competition to *religious* phenomena, but even more so that Simmel deals with competition as a topic in some of his writings in the *sociology of religion*. This is the case in Simmel’s article *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* (Simmel 1898) and, on a less optimistic note about competition, in his monograph *Religion* (Simmel 1912) both available in English (Simmel 1997):

Asking members to forego competition entirely occurs in those cases where the socialist principle of a unified organization of all labor and the more or less communist rule of equality of all labor contracts become a reality (ibid: 1016).

Because competition is based on the “principle of individualism” and motivated by the self-interest of the competitor, it is difficult to coordinate it with the social interest common to all... Therefore, competition cannot be confronted and contradicted by making it face off with the principle of a solely dominating social interest, but rather by looking for alternative techniques that may be derived from the social interest, and which we may call socialism in the narrower sense (ibid.).

Simmel associates with socialism something quite different from how the term is used by us a century later. He explains in detail that he means a general suppression of individual impulses and sees it most perfectly realized “among the civil servants of government or among the personnel of a factory” (ibid.). Discussing it under the label socialism, Simmel writes:

This socialist mode of production is nothing but a technique to achieve the material goals of happiness and of culture, of justice, and of perfection. It must yield to free competition wherever the latter appears to be the more practical and more appropriate means (ibid: 1016f.).

Devoid of any political or ideological point of departure, competition and socialism to Simmel are *alternative techniques of organization*. In a pragmatic way he wants them to prove themselves by demonstrating which of the two is more efficient in a historical and organizational context. In this way Simmel wants the two to compete for better results:

This has nothing to do with political party preference, but rather with the question of whether satisfying a need, creating a value, shall be entrusted to competition between individual energies or to the rational organization of such energies (Simmel 1903, 1017).

Simmel suggests a sober rather than an emotional approach toward socialism and “by admitting to the merely technical character of this social order, socialism is compelled to abandon its claim of being a self-justifying goal and arbiter of ultimate values, and thus ought to be put on the same level with individualistic competition” (ibid.). Kant and Nietzsche stand for the highest esteem for the peerless individual; they are the antipodes to the socialist state of mind. Simmel is obviously closer to them than he is to Marx.

Simmel moves from the question under which conditions competition should be eliminated to the empirical and political problem of accepting competition in principle but as it were purifying it by making certain tools and practices illegal. This brings him “to the formation of cartels... a point at which companies are organized no longer for fighting for a share of the market, but rather for supplying the market according to a joint plan” (ibid: 1019). Simmel points to the difference between the guilds and cartels. He mentions a simple criterion for outlawing certain agreements between competitors and argues that “achieving complete control of the market results in making the consumer dependent and,

as a consequence, in making competition as such superfluous” (ibid.).

Simmel expects governments and ethical imperatives to *purify competition* by extracting from it components that are not essential to it. He also expects them to contribute to modern society by leaving competition intact and by guaranteeing “its continues existence” (ibid.) It is Simmel’s considered opinion, that

society does not want to do without the advantages that competition between individuals entails for it, which by far exceed the disadvantages it incurs by the occasional annihilation of individuals during competition (ibid: 1020).

For competition to be able to function in society, it needs to be governed by prescriptions that originate from legal as well as moral sources. “From both sources, there spring imperatives that regulate human conduct toward one another, imperatives that are not social in the conventional sense of the word – yet they are sociological – and it is due to them that the whole of human nature finds its proper place in the ideal form of a thou shalt” (ibid: 1022). Here Simmel hints at a fundamental conviction of his that ties sociology to ethic. Reality, as experienced by humans, is necessarily socially constructed.

This can be understood against the background of his critique of Kant, particularly his rejection of the Kantian categorical imperative

Whatever advantages accrue to us at the expense of others, whether as the result of favors others grant us or of opportunities that open, of sheer coincidence or of a good fortune that we may experience as foreordained, we will take none of these with such good conscience as when what we have coming to us is simply the outcome of our own doing... This is probably one of the points at which the attitude toward competition presents itself as one of the decisive traits in modern life.

This sentence is the beginning of Simmel’s final paragraph in his 1903 lecture “Soziologie der Konkurrenz”, which summarizes and ends a well-organized discussion of competition as a peaceful form of conflict in commerce.

Summary: Comparison of the levels of conflict

On level one in this paper the alternative forms of a) *religion*, b) *art*, and c)

scholarship, and in a special way, also d) *reality*. are *alternative world views*. Simmel points out that it is against logic to assume that any one of those can contradict the other, because each must claim to *represent the whole* in its own way. They can compete in the path they select for achieving that each in their own way.

On level two being strange and appearing in everyday life as a stranger is a *form* which is ascribed to a person in social interaction. By competing, the strangers not only perform a service for the other members of society but in the process they themselves also change and advance. This creativity provides part of the flexibility needed for cultural and social *progress*.

On level three competition is observed, particularly in the world of business, where it is most well-known and generally accepted. Here too, Simmel adheres to his evolutionary thesis, that some type of conflict needs to be present in society. Modern humans live under the moral obligation to determine, develop and abide by the most cultured and advanced type of conflict.

All three levels imply the discouragement of complacency rooted in a misguided defense of a *status quo*. All three encourage the constant search for adequate solutions to the social problems that lead to conflicts.

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