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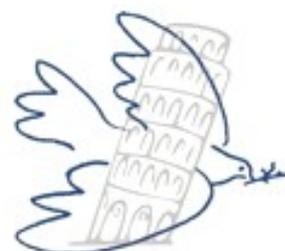
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Georg Simmel and the Synthesizing Effects of Competition

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Georg Simmel and the Synthesizing Effects of Competition *Some Reflections on the Connection of Life and Work*

Claudius Härpfer *

Abstract

In 1903 Simmel published his short study on the sociology of the competition, after the competition for the succession to the important chair of Georg von Gizicky in Berlin at the end of the years '90. On that situation he was defeated by Max Dessoir, a doctoral student of Wilhelm Dilthey, the latter in stark contrast to Moritz Lazarus, Simmel's teacher. So the competitive episode was part of a larger conflict. The article attempts to place Simmel's study on competition against the background of the biographical vicissitudes of its author. First, it traces the sociological nature of competition, which differs from conventional conflict in its triadic form, after it shows that if oriented to a common goal, competition has a socializing effect on the social circle of competitors. A concept that, in fact, seems to arise from the personal story that involved Simmel, given that the competition mentioned improved the condition of all the contenders involved and on the other hand, had a society-forming effect.

Nel 1903 Simmel pubblicò il suo breve studio sulla sociologia della competizione, dopo che il concorso per la successione alla importante cattedra di Georg von Gizicky a Berlino alla fine degli anni '90. In quella circostanza fu sconfitto da Max Dessoir, un allievo di Wilhelm Dilthey, quest'ultimo in forte contrasto con Moritz Lazarus, maestro di Simmel. Quindi l'episodio competitivo faceva parte di un conflitto più ampio. L'articolo tenta di collocare lo studio di Simmel sulla competizione sullo sfondo della vicenda biografica del suo autore. Per primo traccia la natura sociologica della competizione, che differisce dal conflitto convenzionale nella sua forma triadica; poi mostra che se orientata a un obiettivo comune, la competizione ha un effetto socializzante sulla cerchia sociale dei concorrenti. Un concetto che, appunto, sembra nascere dalla vicenda personale che coinvolse Simmel, dato che la competizione menzionata migliorò la condizione di tutti i contendenti coinvolti e per altro verso ebbe l'effetto di amalgamare i partecipanti alla medesima cerchia sociale.

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Keywords / Parole chiave

Georg Simmel, competition, triads, conflict, biography
Simmel, competizione, triade, conflitto, biografia

Introduction

Although Georg Simmel is a sociological classic of the first order, relatively little is known about his life, since all his personal documents were lost in the 1940s (Kramme 1992; Rammstedt 2004; Simmel 2005a, 1023-1029). Nevertheless, it is possible - with all due caution - to observe here and there a connection between his life and work. The sociologist and philosopher of life and culture reflected on his everyday experiences in his studies and events in his life influenced his choice of topics. For example, it was surely no coincidence that he wrote a paper on the psychology of women in the year he married (Simmel 1890) or that he – who spent most of his life in Berlin – reflected on modern city life (Simmel 1903a). This relationship between life and work also applies for his “Sociology of Competition” (Simmel 1903b) first published in the *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* in 1903. Simmel then incorporated it in his unfinished treatise on conflict, which first appeared in 1904 in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Simmel 1904) when he revised it in the course of writing his *Sociology* of 1908 (Simmel 2009; cf. Simmel 1992). As part of the treatise on conflict, it has been translated by Kurt H. Wolff and available to the English-speaking world since 1955 (Simmel 1955). This text was highly influential not least due to Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Coser 1956) and conflict became one of the Simmel-inspired “key themes of American sociology” at that time (Pyythinen 2018, 168). In the current discourse on the sociology of competition, however, Simmel is only rarely mentioned (cf. e.g. Werron 2010; 2014; 2015).

Competition is, of course, an important form of modern life and – given the relevance of the concept in economics since the 17th century – to concern himself with it seemed obvious in the aftermath of his *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel 1978). Then again, prior to the study's publication Simmel had been the losing candidate in an important competition for an associate professorship in Berlin. His writings reveal that he began to deal with the phenomenon of competition at that time and his biographical situation sheds new light on some of the statements in that specific text. Below I will first outline the essence of Simmel's theory of competition with its triadic structure that has a synthesizing effect for the social circle in which the competition takes place. I will then endeavour to apply these concepts to the period in Simmel's life when he

developed these ideas.

1. The triadic structure of competition and its synthesizing effects

Especially in the wake of works by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the concept of competition was broadly discussed in the social sciences in the 19th century. Simmel occupies a special position in this discourse (cf. Rammstedt 1976), since he does not see competition as part of the struggle for existence and scarce goods, but rather views it as a form of indirect conflict (Simmel 2009, 258; cf. Simmel 1992, 323). “The pure form of the competitive context is above all not offensive and defensive – for the simple reason that the prize for the contest is not held by one of the opponents.” The person who struggles with another “to acquire that person’s money or spouse or reputation proceeds in altogether different forms, with a completely different method, than when one *competes* with another”. While in other types of conflict defeating the opponent “is the price of victory itself”, in the case of competition Simmel sees two other combinations. In the first, “the defeat of the competitor is the temporally first necessity, because this defeat in itself just does not yet mean anything, but the goal of the whole action is reached only through the presentation in itself of value entirely independent from that fight.” To illustrate this, Simmel uses the example of a tradesman who brings his competitor into discredit and has not yet gained anything. The second type differs even more from other forms of conflict. Here, “the conflict generally consists only in each of the contenders striving for the goal for oneself, without expending any effort on the opponent” (Simmel 2009, 258-259; cf. Simmel 1992, 323-324). Examples could be a runner who tries to run as fast as he can or a tradesman who lowers the prices for his goods.

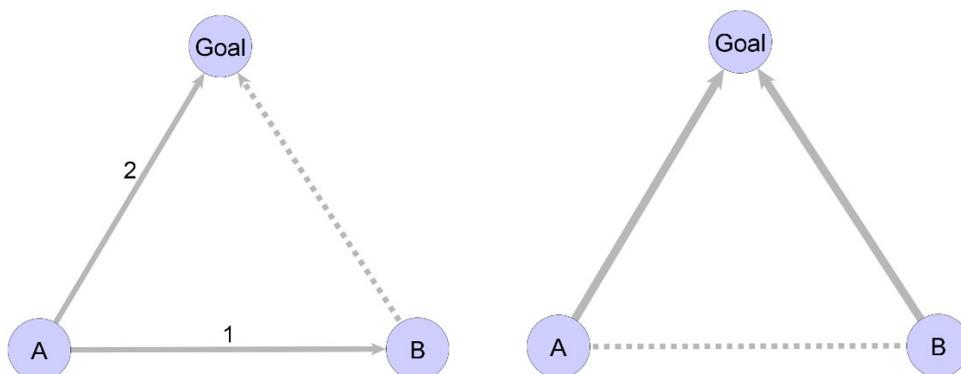


Figure 1: The two types of competition

In contrast to one man fighting against another, in both forms of competition we always have a triadic structure. This has a number of consequences. In his

study on the quantitative determination of the group, Simmel addresses the peculiarities of triadic relationships.

Where three elements – A, B, and C – form a community, the direct relationship, for example, between A and B, is supplemented by an indirect one through their common relationship to C. This is a form-sociological enrichment, that each two elements, besides being bound by the direct and shortest line, is also yet bound by a refracted one; points at which they can find no immediate contact are created in interaction with the third member to whom each has a different perspective and unites each in the unity of the third personality; divisiveness that the participants cannot straighten out themselves are repaired by the third member or by its being dealt with in an encompassing whole (Simmel 2009, 93; cf. Simmel 1992, 114-115).

The third element, however, does not necessarily have to strengthen the direct link between the other two but instead can also disrupt it. In his study, Simmel developed forms of triadic relationships in which the third element pursues different goals that can go in one direction or the other, be it that the third element is an impartial mediator, acts as the ‘tertius gaudens’ or plays the two competitors off against each other in order to dominate them (Simmel 2009, 101-128; cf. Simmel 1992, 125-159).

However, this does not exhaust the significance of the third element in Simmel’s *Sociology*, since this is constitutive for the very existence of society (cf. e.g. Freund 1976, Bröckling 2010). Simmel also uses triadic patterns in his transcendental argument to justify the possibility of society. The first sociological a priori already establishes a triadic structure by supplementing one’s knowledge about the other person by relating him or her to a common circle to which he or she belongs (Simmel 2009, 43-45; cf. Simmel 1992, 47-50). In this way, the other person is associated with the qualities that the subject associates with the circle to which it ascribes the person. These can be uniting as well as dividing properties. Only through this triadic structure can society be formed, since it provides a certain stability over time and a certain tension between individuals. This brings the element of dynamics and synthesis into play.

If Simmel is especially interested in the second form of competition, where there is no direct contact between the two adversaries, this is because he considers this to be of enormous value for the social circle in its purest form. In this form, “the subjectivity of the end goal becomes most wonderfully intertwined in this form with the objectivity of the end result”. The parties and their conflicts become part of “a supra-individual unity of a material or social nature”. The competitors struggle against each other without directly opposing their

opponent. “Thus the subjective antagonistic incitement leads us to the realization of objective values”, whereas “the victory in the contest is not actually the result of a *fight*, but simply the realization of values that lie beyond the conflict” (Simmel 2009, 260; cf. Simmel 1992, 325).

While sociological approaches to competition emphasize very different aspects (cf. e.g. Mannheim 1929; von Wiese 1929) Simmel focuses on its tremendous society-forming effect. He even considers conflict in general not necessarily as dissociating, since the dissociating effect is the cause of the dispute but not the conflict as a social form itself (Simmel 2009, 227; cf. Simmel 1992, 284). Competition “forces the candidate, who has a competitor nearby and frequently only then becomes an actual competitor, to meet with and to approach other competitors, to combine with them, to explore their weaknesses and strengths and to adapt to them, to seek out or to construct all the bridges that could combine one’s own being and capacity with theirs” (Simmel 2009, 261; cf. Simmel 1992, 327). In other words, by participating in the competition the rivals form a social circle and by their actions develop more and more sociologically relevant characteristics. This results in an ever more precise definition of the social circle and finally the formation of norms and a common honour. Competition here differs from classic dispute in particular in that it is oriented towards a common goal. This is why it is already based on a set of applicable rules and has its synthesizing, society-forming effect.

Simmel refers to competition as “an interweaving of a thousand social threads by the concentration of consciousness on the desire and emotions and thinking of one’s fellow human beings, by the adapting of supply to demand, by the ingenious manifold possibilities of winning connection and favor” (Simmel 2009, 262; cf. Simmel 1992, 328). This terminology is reminiscent of the constant connecting and loosening of social threads through the interaction of the “atoms of society” as which he conceives individuals in his “The Problem of Sociology”, where they are reduced to being merely the location “where social threads link” (Simmel 2009, 33 & 20; cf. Simmel 1992, 33 & 14). This does, of course, highlight the problem that competition is one form of sociation among many, which takes place in small everyday situations as well as in large and lasting relationships. This naturally makes it difficult to analyse competition using Simmel’s theoretical approach. This said, a relatively long and important episode in Simmel’s life will be used below to illustrate the function of competition.

2. A competitive situation

The competitive situation that Simmel had to face in the mid-1890s concerned

the succession of Georg von Gizycki, who held an associate professorship in ethics at the university in Berlin until his sudden death in March 1895 (cf. Gerhardt et al. 1999, 125). The key facts regarding this matter were first made accessible in Köhnke's superb book about the young Simmel based on university records. They have meanwhile also been printed as excerpts in the 24th volume of the Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe (cf. Köhnke 1996, 360-379; Härpfer 2014, 143-150; Simmel 2016, 231-269). After the post left vacant by Paul Deussen in the philosophy department in Berlin had not been filled, it was to be expected that one of the four private lecturers in that department would be appointed as associate professor. Two of them were unsuitable. Simmel's serious rival was Max Dessoir, who habilitated in 1892 with a thesis on Nicolaus Tetens (Gerhardt et al. 1999, 238-242) and was a student of Wilhelm Dilthey, who supervised Dessoir's doctoral thesis on aesthetics. It was at this time that Simmel raised the question of competition in his works. In May 1896, Simmel anonymously expressed his opinion on the question regarding the private lecturers and lamented the numerical mismatch between private lecturers and professorships, saying that on the one hand this mismatch prevented qualified applicants from rising beyond the status of private lecturer, while on the other hand a "wild competition" for the professorships developed: a "scurrilous job hunt" that drove private lecturers to concentrate their "entire life interests" on the question of promotion (Simmel 2005b, 320).

A few years later in his "Sociology of Competition" and in the aftermath of the competitive situation in which he had found himself, he slightly sized down this "wild competition" in its scientific context and spoke of relative competition in the form of the second type mentioned above. Almost every competition "occasioned by ambition in the scientific realm manifests a conflict that is not directed against the opponent but towards the common goal" and so it happens that "it is assumed that the knowledge won by the victor is also gain and advancement for the loser" (Simmel 2009, 259; cf. Simmel 1992, 326). In the case of science, there is a "harmony of interests between the society and the individual", since for the individual "the entirety of the science at hand including the part of it worked on by the individual self is merely a means for the satisfaction of the individual's personal drive for knowledge" (Simmel 2009, 260-261; cf. Simmel 1992, 326-327).

Just as Simmel incorporated the competition, which – compared to his anonymous statements – had now been assessed more positively in general in 1903, in the chapter on conflict in 1908, this competitive situation in the mid-1890s was also burdensome because it took place within a larger conflict. Bored by Eduard Zeller's school philosophy, Simmel studied under the two outsiders in Berlin's philosophy department: Moritz Lazarus and Heymann

Steinthal, whom he considered his primary philosophical teachers. He wrote a (rejected) doctoral thesis on folk psychology and took his first steps in academic writing in their scientific journal, the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (Köhnke 1984; Härpfer 2014, 80-105). As a result of his affiliation to this social circle, Simmel was exposed to “suggestions of an unfavorable type” (Simmel 2009, 240; cf. Simmel 1992, 300) by Wilhelm Dilthey, because Dilthey and Lazarus had a common history.

Private scholar Lazarus, who at that time lived in Berlin, was one of Dilthey's most important teachers from 1855 onwards. Close friendship was followed by gradual estrangement and then a final breach over the subject of folk psychology as a science as propagated by Lazarus and Steinthal (Lessing 1985; Belke 1971, LIII-LXI). In 1864/65, Dilthey drafted a plan for a small book “contra Lazarum et Lazaristas, Millium etc.” that evolved over the years and is today regarded as preparatory work for his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey 1933b, 218; cf. Dilthey 1933a; Lessing 1985). What exactly happened during Simmel's first habilitation colloquium at the beginning of 1884, in which the young candidate was incapable of curbing his temperament and became “rough” (Simmel 2008, 21), can no longer be completely clarified today but certainly did the rest to consolidate Dilthey's opinion of him. In this case, the properties ascribed to Simmel due to his membership of a specific social circle were therefore confirmed by Dilthey in the course of their further contact. As Dilthey had been appointed in 1882 as successor of Rudolf Hermann Lotze to the chair of theoretical philosophy in Berlin (Gerhardt et al. 1999, 109-110), he was Simmel's superior as far as his employment was concerned.

Simmel reacted to Dilthey's lasting rejection by joining a social circle of better repute in about 1889: the circle around Gustav Schmoller. It was in Schmoller's seminar on national economics that Simmel began his studies which finally led to his *Philosophy of Money*, while Schmoller for his part paid closer attention to sociology (Dahme 1993). At the time, Schmoller had assumed a powerful position in science politics. He was chairman of the Association for Science Policy, editor of the important *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* and not least a good, long-standing friend and companion from common Strasbourg times of Friedrich Althoff, the ministerial official responsible for academic appointments in Prussia, and also his advisor (Brinkmann 1937, 115-119; Brocke 1980; Härpfer 2014, 116-138). Schmoller was also known for his committed support for his students (cf. Breysig 1962, 47-50).

Just as Schmoller advised Althoff in matters concerning national economy, Dilthey was also his advisor, but in this case in matters related to academic

appointments in the field of philosophy (cf. Dilthey 2015). Schmolter and Dilthey knew each other at the latest since the late 1860s and had similar interests (Brinkmann 1937, 75; Hintze 1928), as is reflected not least in Schmolter's joint review of Carl Menger's *Investigations of the Method of Social Sciences and Economics in Particular* and Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Schmolter 1883). That historical economist Schmolter did not act to relieve the tension and mediate between the two philosophers Dilthey and Simmel may be due to the fact that because of his young colleague's enormous self-confidence Schmolter was not entirely unbiased towards Simmel either (Schullerus 2000, 232-233).

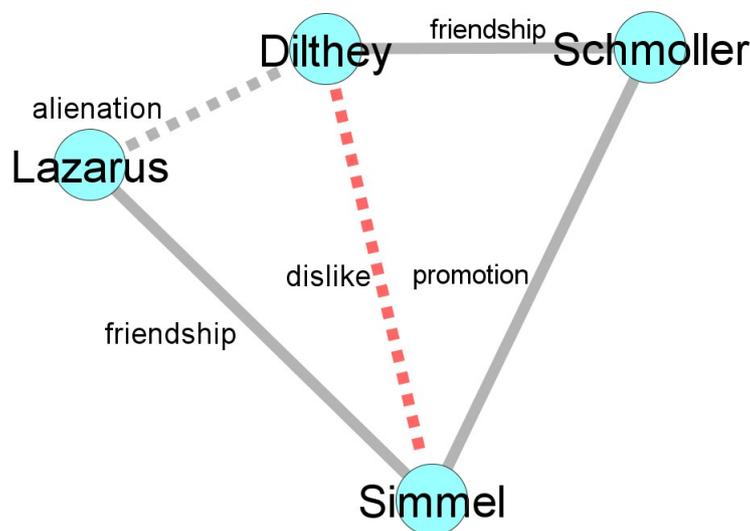


Figure 2: The initial conflict

When the competitive situation arose in Berlin, the appointments commission discussed two candidates who both laid themselves open to criticism. With his two-volume *Introduction to the Moral Sciences. A Critique of Ethical Basic Concepts* (Simmel 1892/93), Simmel (private lecturer since 1885) had already published an extensive opus in the field of ethics and distinguished himself to a certain degree as a sociologist. However, he had a reputation in the faculty as a critical and corrosive spirit. In addition, he garnished his early writings with implicit and explicit polemics and allusions to Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Köhnke 1989; 1996, 380-397). Dessoir (private lecturer since 1892), on the other hand, was part of the "clique" around Dilthey, the decision-maker in this matter, but did not so far have sufficient experience in the field of ethics (Simmel 2005a, 173-174; Herrmann 1929, 78), since he had become an aesthete on Dilthey's advice (Dessoir 1946, 31). In addition, he had a reputation for lacking the moral substance required for a professorship in ethics because he was unnecessarily engaged in a literary and apologetic way with the current

oral sex statistics of Berlin's prostitutes (Diels et al. 1992, 132-133). Both candidates, needless to say, did their equal best to maintain a good relationship with ministerial official Friedrich Althoff mentioned above (cf. Simmel 2005a, 65, 146-147; Dessoir 1946, 206-208).

Just as economist Schmoller had his reservations as far as Simmel was concerned but wanted to promote him nevertheless, so Dilthey wanted to promote Dessoir although he was aware of his lack of logical sharpness and scientific accuracy (cf. Gerhardt et al. 1999, 239). This criticism was discussed in the appointments commission to the extent that both opponents were marred to such a degree that the professorship was to be reallocated from ethics to aesthetics and the personnel issue postponed (Simmel 2016, 233-234). One year later, a commission was set up to appoint the new professor of aesthetics, which, however, now no longer included either Dilthey or Schmoller. The post was awarded to Dessoir, the second-choice candidate, in October 1897 (Dessoir 1946, 36; Simmel 2016, 238-239). Simmel, who had stepped in during the summer to take over Dilthey's logic lectures while he was ill (Simmel 2012, 1034), was not on the list at all. Yet even for him the competition was rewarding, since in 1898 a commission was formed with the task of applying for an associate professorship for Simmel, to which Dilthey and Schmoller again belonged. That convinced anti-Semite Ludwig Elster used these efforts in his second attempt to force Simmel to forego his salary (Simmel 2016, 257-258) was part of another conflict.

3. Syntheses

This competitive situation forced both adversaries to devote themselves to a greater degree to their social circles. As Simmel stated, many "kinds of interest that ultimately hold the circle together from member to member seem to be vital only with the expansion and individualization of society, when the need and the heat of competition force them onto the conscious subject" (Simmel 2009, 262; cf. Simmel 1992, 329). Dessoir started to publish further papers in the area of aesthetics (Herrmann 1929, 78-80) and Simmel started to publish articles in various journals and expanded his area of influence. Several years passed and Simmel became more and more well-known, since he had started to write short articles in a number of magazines for a broader audience (Härpfer 2014, 75). Over time, even the situation between him and Dilthey improved. In the notes published posthumously regarding his preparations for a second edition of the *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey explicitly excluded Simmel when he polemicized against sociology (Dilthey 1933a, 420).

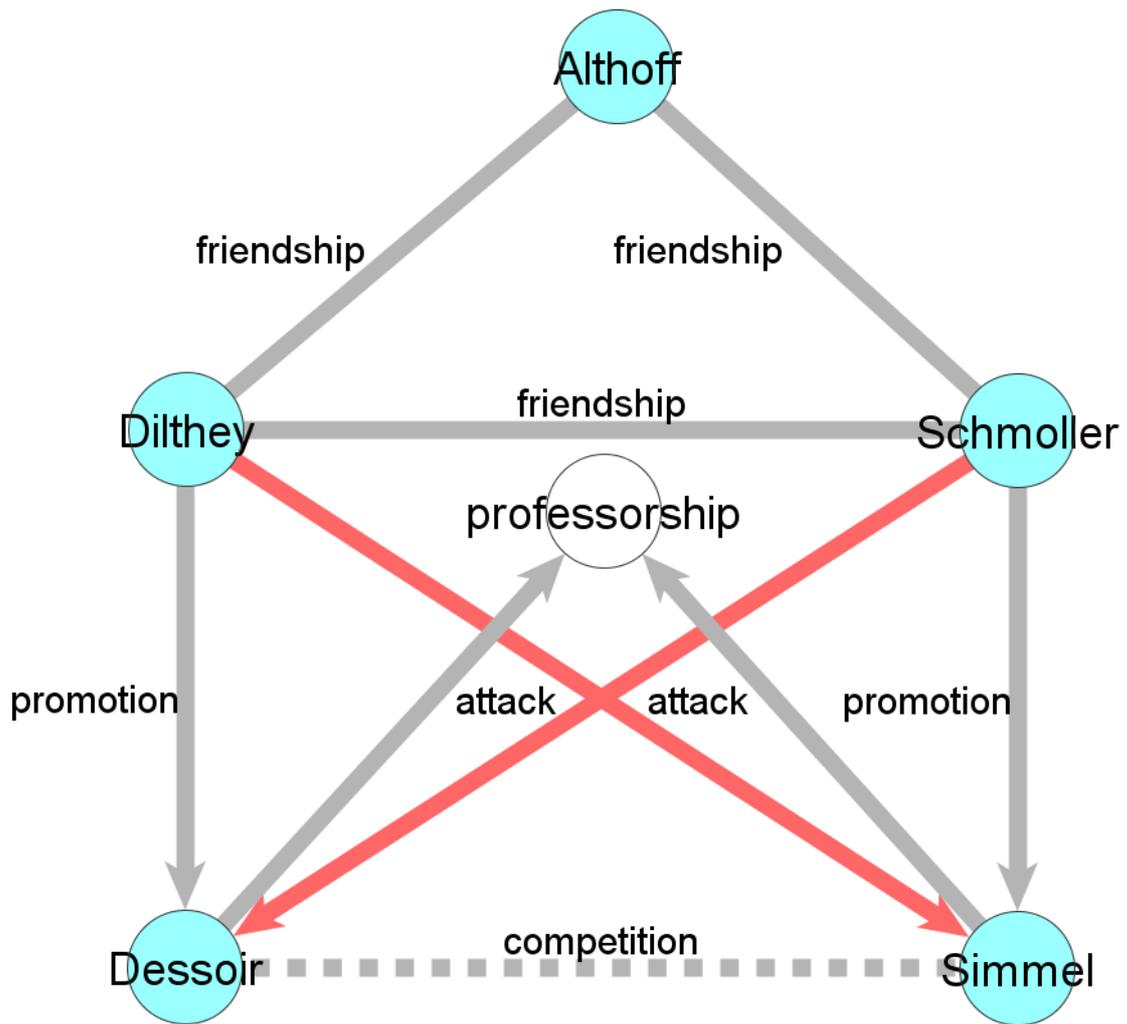


Figure 3: The competition

The “passive competition” of the parallel candidatures of Simmel and Dessoir left no “envy and embitterment” between them (Simmel 2009, 267; cf. Simmel 1992, 334-335). Simmel mentioned that a situation of competition might be possible that lacks the essence of competition and might take place in the area of religion or in games of chance. This means that the cause for winning or losing is chance or some kind of higher power and not the difference between the individual energies of the competitors, which creates a certain indifference and companionship among the candidates.

Simmel and Dessoir continued to maintain a respectful and collegial relationship. The letters between the two have not survived (Simmel 2005a, 1026) so evidence is sparse. Dessoir told Simmel in late 1897, shortly after he was appointed as professor, that Dilthey had already informed him before the beginning of the competition for the post that the professorship would be reallocated to aesthetics. Simmel later complained to Heinrich Rickert about Dilthey and that he had launched a competition under specific conditions but informed only one of the competitors (Simmel 2005a, 265). Simmel recommended Dessoir to one of his publishers, G. J. Göschen'schen Verlagsbuchhandlung, a few years later for an introductory book on pre-Kantian philosophy (Simmel 2005a, 582-584).

Looking at Dessoir's memoirs written in 1942, it can be assumed that the competition brought the two adversaries closer together with each other than with their backers. Dessoir describes Simmel as an exceptional human being, in whose later work true enlightenments can be found, and as a philosophical personality of the highest order (Dessoir 1946, 146), whereas his old supporter Dilthey is described in quite a different light. Just as Dilthey missed logical sharpness in Dessoir, Dessoir was disturbed by Dilthey's appearance. He describes him as “small with growth, somewhat fat and greasy, with foolish, pale-blue eyes in a roundish face” who was “like an angry little monkey” when he was in a bad mood. Yet when he started to speak and in spite of his weak voice, the “inconspicuous gnome” turned into “a magical imp man” who created a fascinating world (Dessoir 1946, 174).

Simmel's relationship with Schmoller remained good over the years. Schmoller expressed praise for Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* (Schmoller 1901) and it was Simmel who approached Schmoller in 1908 to encourage him to work in the German Sociological Association (Simmel 2005a, 671-678). The competitive situation thus brought about closure and sustainable consolidation of the social circle in which it took place.

Conclusion

As we have seen from this mixture of theory, conflicts and competition, many of the elements addressed by Simmel can be found in the events he experienced and the events make some of his ideas more comprehensible. On the one hand, the competitive situation led to a rapprochement between the two competitors. On the other hand, it had a society-forming effect in that the focus on the social circle's common goal sharpened its contours and thus de-escalated the conflict between Simmel and Dilthey. In the aftermath of the competitive situation, Simmel's assessment of competition in the scientific world becomes positive. It could be argued that his earlier statements appeared in an anonymous form, but a look at his "Sociology of Competition" shows that the passage on science cited above does not fulfil a central function. Accordingly, he could simply have omitted it if he had not been fully convinced.

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