

"Excursus on the Stranger" in the Context of Simmel's Sociology of Space¹

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"Excursus on the Stranger" in the Context of Simmel's Sociology of Space. "Excursus on the Stranger" by Georg Simmel is a popular classical sociological text, whereas the stranger as a social type is one of the best known concepts of classical sociology. This paper claims that common sociological interpretations of this concept greatly ignore the context of Simmel's text and his thoughts, thus missing the essence of his idea. This is due to the fact that Simmel wrote about the stranger in the context of his sociology of space, which is a relatively unknown feature of his thought. We discuss significant features of Simmel's sociology of space, and present a reconceptualization of the stranger within this context. *Sociológia* 2013, Vol. 45 (No. 6: 589-602)

Key words: *Georg Simmel; sociology of space; the stranger; the marginal man; social distance*

It has been the fate of many of Simmel's essays to lead a life of their own, far away from their original context. (Frisby 1992: 71)

Georg Simmel is an undisputed sociological classic (Coser 1977; Levine et al, 1976a, b) although he rarely ranks alongside Marx, Durkheim and Weber. There are many reasons for such a status among sociologists, most of them non-epistemic such as the lack of translation (especially into English), his style of writing, misinterpretation of his ideas etc. Today he is best known for books such as *Sociology* (Simmel 1908/2009a) and *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel 1907/2004), as well as his famous texts "Excursus on the stranger" (Simmel 1908/2009f) and "Metropolis and mental life" (Simmel 1903/1950). It is, however, often forgotten that Simmel was also a philosopher and, therefore, his contributions to the sociology of the senses, evolutionary epistemology (i.e. selection theory), as well as pragmatic, interactional and evolutionary elements of his thought are less known. One of such neglected contributions is surely the sociology of space although the famous excursus on the stranger is part of the chapter on space (Simmel 1908/2009b). Despite that, this excursus is far more known than the chapter itself, which was contributed by the fact that *Sociology* was only recently translated into English as a whole (until that translation,

¹ The paper was written as part of project no. 179037 *Significance of Participation in Social Networks for Adjustment to Processes of Eurointegration* which is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Republic of Serbia.

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Simmel 1908/2009a, the best known collection of Simmel's texts was Wolff 1950).

Simultaneously the influence of Simmel's social type of stranger has been great but it should be noted that it was not always adequately perceived by the authors who used it. He directly influenced the formulation of Park's marginal man (Park 1928), Bogardus' scale of social distance (Bogardus 1925a, b), Coser's sociology of conflict (Coser 1956), but he can also be associated with Kadushin's social circles (Kadushin 1966) and reference groups (Merton – Rossi 1968). In this way, the concept of stranger also influenced the study of various social communities in history and in contemporary society (e.g. Greifer 1945; Nash – Wolfe, 1957; Bonacich 1973). Yet, the correct understanding of this concept is not possible without contextualizing Simmel's sociology of space.

Simmel's sociology of space

It is obvious that social action takes place in space and that individuals, groups and institutions have their place in it. Therefore, space is *conditio sine qua non* of social relationships and that truism does not need to be stressed. However, space as a topic was not given greater significance in classical sociology and was only occasionally written about, primarily in the larger framework of the sociology of city (e.g. Saunders 1985), (sociology of) architecture (e.g. Schmarsow 1893/1994) and social geography (e.g. Harvey 1990; Urry 1985). Only in the last few decades there is a change in this trend and a rise in the interest of sociologists in the issues of space (see e.g. Gregory – Urry 1985; Crang – Thrift 2000; Urry 2000; and classical texts e.g. Foucault 1967/1986 and Lefebvre 1974/1991).

The first aspect of space that Simmel mentions is *exclusivity* in the sense of exclusive occupation of space or its uniqueness. This exclusivity implies that an object is always unique if it is considered only from the viewpoint of its position on Earth's surface and if all its other dimensions are ignored. In that sense, only one object can occupy a certain position in any given moment, which means that two absolutely identical bodies can *always* be distinguished in relation to their position in the context of physical world (Werlen 1988/1993). According to Simmel, each part of space possesses certain uniqueness so its quantitative "filling" of space (which is the characteristic of space as territory) is irrelevant as well as its functionality (it is possible that there are several separate functions in the same city that coexist within the same space).

Secondly, a very significant sociological feature of space is *divisibility*, i.e. the existence of boundaries which are extremely important for social order and conflicts (Simmel 1908/2009d). Space can be divided into parts for practical

reasons and the concept of boundary is of great significance for all human relationships. In a certain way, the boundary is not a mere spatial fact with sociological consequences, it is a spatially formed sociological fact. The frame of boundaries can be very wide, which does not depend on the size of the social group but on the forces of tension that develops inside the group so it should not be identified only with issues concerning politics. One must bear in mind that Simmel's idea of the boundary is a line which simultaneously separates and unites, i.e. joins, because a person is not something that only exists within the boundaries of a physical body (Frisby 1992).

The third aspect relates to *fixedness* which space "offers" to social forms, i.e. to the establishment of social forms in space. Namely, besides a unique position that they occupy, objects can be distinguished by their (im)mobility because in the context of action the fact that material objects are mobile or fixed influences the structure of the empirical flow of action from the viewpoint of physical world. That is clear if one considers the fact that certain social relationships have to be arranged with regard to immobile material objects so it cannot be disputed that the location of immobile material objects is important for human interactions (they can even "acquire" symbolic content and thus obtain a certain force, which is exemplified by religion) (Werlen 1988/1993).

The fourth aspect of space is connected with *distance* – the spatial closeness or remoteness. Simmel claims that all social interactions can be positioned on a scale of closeness and remoteness, i.e. the scale of distance, and the excursus on the senses can be located in the context of this feature (Simmel 1908/2009e). The category of distance is obvious if it is understood that two objects cannot occupy the same spatial position simultaneously, which means that a certain distance *always* exists. However, two kinds of social relationships are not altered when physical distance is changed and these are purely objective impersonal relationships (e.g. economic or scientific transactions, for which distance is not relevant) and those that include a high intensity of emotions (e.g. religious feelings and love relationships which annul physical distance through imagination or emotional devotion). Further and more general elaboration of these propositions can be found in Simmel's famous chapter on conflict, especially where social antagonisms are seen as a function of closeness and remoteness (Simmel 1908/2009b; see also Coser 1956). For example, he claims that the state of conflict draws its (previously distant) elements closely together, especially through common enemy (Simmel 1908/2009b).

Finally, the fifth dimension of space concerns *mobility* and change of locations. This dimension is the context of the excursus on the stranger, who is different from the type of wanderer and "native", i.e. it is their synthesis, and

indicates that spatial relationships not only have a certain influence on the relationships among people, but also have a symbolic dimension. That is why Simmel writes that space itself does not have social significance, but psychological organization which is the consequence of its existence and our perception (Simmel 1908/2009c: 544). He clearly saw that events have to be spatially located but cannot be caused by space, which in itself is form without content. That form must be filled with a kind of social or psychological energy and that is why, for example, an empire does not comprise its geographical area, but people. In that sense interaction among people in a way represents the fulfillment of space (but not only that). It might be good to also mention that Simmel analyzes another characteristic of social space which at a first glance is not obvious and that is empty space, which can be described by the concept of “no man’s land” in such cases like neighborly relations or neutral zones, where economic transactions take place in certain societies etc. That is why it can be said that empty space represents the expression of social interaction (Frisby 1992).

Therefore, the ideas of distance and boundaries are very important for Simmel’s sociology of space and his sociology in general because almost all social processes or social types which he wrote about can be understood exactly through the concept of social distance (e.g. domination and subordination, secrecy, stranger, etc.) (Frisby 1992). In his less known article “The bridge and the door” he writes: “We are at any moment – in the immediate or symbolic, in the physical or mental sense – beings who separate what is related and who relate what is separate” (Simmel 1909/1994: 408). Simmel’s concepts of bridges and doors can be interpreted as a unique social theory of the limit (Kemple 2007). According to Kemple, Simmel provided a phenomenology of social thresholds (“doors”), as well as the analysis of the limits of social life and the processes of transformation (“bridges”), which all contributes to his theory of sociation and sociality (Kemple 2007: 3-5) and aesthetics (Kemple 2007: 7-8).

Distance (which includes both remoteness and proximity) is truly one of the basic features of human life in the sense that it indicates that human body is “existentially incomplete” (Cooper 2010: 69), because spatial and temporal gaps indicate that man is always in the state of “being in between”. Distance is always a double structure (*di-stance*) between two positions: “between *me* and *you*, *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*” (Cooper 2010: 71; italics in the original), which means that social action is always “between” and never “within” and that it transfers social action. It can be concluded that Simmel’s sociology of space, his analysis of distance and movement, clearly emphasizes that social life is not composed of static structures.

From the above it follows that sociation, certain patterns and forms in which people join and interact, fills the space: "Social interaction among human beings is – apart from everything else it is – also experienced as a realization of space" (Simmel 1908/2009c: 545). Yet, all these aspects and features of space cannot be fully understood without establishing a connection with a wider context of Simmel's thought, that is, with at least two more important facts. His formal sociology of space can best be conceptualized as an incomplete study of abstract preconditions of social interaction, which includes the analysis of numbers, mass, size, time and modernity (Frisby 1992; Borden 1997; Allen 2000). He least wrote about time although at the end of *Philosophy of Money* he writes about the tempo and rhythm of social life, while in his essay "Adventure" (Simmel 1910/1997) he writes about the phenomenology of time. In an inspiring analysis of adventure and everyday life, Alieva uses Simmelian concepts of (extra)territoriality, and of the external and the internal, also claiming that individuals repeatedly orient their everyday lives and their individual selves according to spatial categories (Alieva 2005).

Furthermore, ideas about space have to be connected with the famous essay on metropolis (Simmel, 1903/1950), which has been described as "[t]he most important single article on the city from the sociological standpoint" (Wirth, 1925/1967: 219). It is, however, important to note that this article was never connected with Simmel's other texts on cities, primarily Rome, Florence and Venice (Simmel 1898/2007, 1906/2007a, b), because there one can read about a different concept of city, where the emphasis lies on their aesthetic dimensions (e.g. the original subtitle of the article on Rome is "Aesthetic analysis"). In addition, "Metropolis" is presented as an essay on city and the transit nature of interactions among people in modern times, but it is simultaneously an essay on the Webber-Fechner Law, which concerns the quantitative relationship between the sensory perception and the (change of) external stimulus (Kaern 1994).

This essay was published in the same year when Simmel published the first two parts of his essay on the sociology of space (1903) and belongs to the same topic. In the context of the sociology of space he claims that the city is not a spatial entity with sociological consequences but a sociological entity formed spatially. In other words, the city is not just a focus of social differentiation or complex social networks, but also a location of an endless number of collectivities. Its inherent openness brings closer different social strata but it simultaneously sharply separates them like for example in ghettos, which is also an implication of Simmel's considerations of the boundaries in space. In a less extreme form social distance is reflected in a certain reservedness which is characteristic of social interactions in a metropolis. This distance is significant for the preservation of an individual self faced with the threats of constantly

changing stimuli typical of life in the city, as well as the problem of atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture, which was the topic of his sociocultural criticism of modern society.

In other words, the topics he “grouped” around his sociology of space – some basic formal characteristics of space, social distance and boundaries, sociology of the senses, modern urban life etc. – all imply some coherence within the problems discussed in his sociology, as well as the context for these problems which is wider than the simple reduction to forms of sociation (in a metropolis). So, in 1903 Simmel published two papers on the sociology of space: "Sociology of space" and "On spatial projections of social forms", and they were reorganized and joined into a chapter in *Sociology* under the name “Sociology of space” but with three excurses: "Excursus on social boundary", "Excursus on sociology of sense impression" (or "Sociology of the senses" in some translations) and "Excursus on the stranger". They analyze various spatial dimensions of social interaction and forms of social distance, which include the forms of social, physical and psychological differentiation.

This chapter on space can be interpreted in three (mutually compatible) ways: as a sociological reinterpretation of Kantian categories, as an addition to formal sociology and as an analysis of modernity (Lechner 1991). Simmel does not advocate radical spatial determinism because space is a context for action and not its cause, but he does not say that it is a mere social construct either, regardless of the fact that it is formed in a social way (in the *L'Année Sociologique* Durkheim wrote that Friedrich Ratzel was the unquoted source of Simmel's papers on space; see Frisby 1992). In that sense it can be said that his position is somewhere between spatial determinism and social constructivism. This position reflects the idea that spatial relationships are not an independent variable because the relationship between social relations and space is extremely complex, which is well illustrated in the paper "The bridge and the door" (Simmel 1909/1994).

The connection of space and social relations is both an empirical and an ontological fact because they presuppose each other and that is why one can talk about the social production of space and spatial organization of society. The idea of a purely spatial relationship among people does not make much sense from a sociological viewpoint because people are social beings and the distance between them is always something more than a mere spatial fact. That is why Simmel thinks that the characteristics of space are not independent from its material content and unlike Kant he does not see it only as an abstract *a priori* category of experience (Kant 1781/1890). In other words, from a sociological viewpoint spatial relations are not conceivable without indicating social relations but it is also pointless to talk about social relations that do not have their spatial expression. Sociality is always crystallized in a spatial form

and without boundaries, roads, bridges, fences, hierarchies, networks etc. there would be no society. This means that the very structuring and arrangement of social life is spatially based and that is reflected in the name of Simmel's chapter on space (Simmel 1908/2009c).

The human experience of social surroundings is similar to the experience of spatial form – they are something that people can be included in or excluded from, something they are “trapped in” or they wish to escape to etc. From this it can be concluded that man has experience of society as space but that society is not only an expression of physical space but the experience about it is gained through its “crystallizations” in physical space. That is why it can be said that Simmel has an implicit idea on social space, which Bourdieu will later write about (Bourdieu, 1993/1999). Social space is not a special domain of physical space and it cannot be said that physical space is only real and that social space is only symbolical, because they are in constant interaction.

“Excursus on the stranger”

Simmel defined sociology through the study of social forms, i.e. through patterns that people impose on social interactions in order to ascribe a coherent meaning to them. These are structured features of interaction which are most often formed without any awareness. Besides that, he thought that social types, which are the general features of personality, are based on these social forms and that they depend on them in social interactions. This means that individuality, which we often presume to be unique, is actually rooted in social interaction. Simmel's best known illustration of social type is the stranger, which is often connected with his own position in the society and the academic community (e.g. Coser 1958; see also Pels 2000).

This short excursus appeared for the first time in the book *Sociology* and was written in Berlin before the rise of Nazism, which is not irrelevant for its social context. The significance of the analysis of space for the complete analysis of the stranger becomes clear if the text itself is read carefully because it does not speak of culture, but of space, i.e. there is no mention of identity and differences, only of remoteness and proximity. This is the part of the excursus and of Simmel's original concept that has been most misunderstood.

Therefore, the essence of the excursus is the emphasis of *a unique form of social difference* (where the person is identified on the basis of their origin) and *a unique form of social relation* (where distance and proximity are in a state of constant, reciprocal tension). This is indicative of Simmel's wish to emphasize the significance of spatial relationships for the occurrence and continuation of social distinctions. For him, distances are both spatial and social, as they are bodily and symbolic, or cognitive and emotional, or real and constructed. For that reason one can say that this concept of the stranger is *relational*, which

means that someone can always become a stranger by entering a particular relationship with a group. Furthermore, the distance of the stranger is always contextual because it can be understood only through the things that constitute proximity among members of a group (and vice versa).

In this kind of analysis distance is not opposed to proximity neither does it represent a negative condition. Instead, it gives the stranger capacities like mobility and objectivity (Simmel 1908/2009f). That is why Simmel spoke of the stranger's objective attitude with regard to social issues because he is simultaneously included in the life of the group and is somewhat indifferent towards the events in the group. For that reason members of a group often find themselves revealing certain intimate information to the stranger which they normally hide from the people closest to them (see also Zajonc 1952). The stranger also possesses a greater individual autonomy from the rest of the group and because of that he has less influence on the "distortion" of information – the stranger is different from the group and that allows him to have a divergent opinion from the standards of the group (Burt 2004). This objective viewpoint enables the stranger to acquire a greater freedom than members of the group feel (Simmel 1908/2009f: 602).

Simmel has an interesting observation that while assessing the stranger, members of a group have a tendency to emphasize general abstract features that they share with him while when assessing the people they are close with, they have a tendency to emphasize attributes and qualities that are particular to their relationships. Focusing on general qualities enables a certain closeness as well as distance because general features are valid for many other people. Simmel claimed that there is a level of distance or the unknown in absolutely all relationships regardless of how intimate they are. For example, if a romantic relationship starts developing, people focus on what they perceive as unique and specific in that relationship, neglecting some general similarities with other relationships. In time partners realize that their relationship is not as unique as they had thought and the singularity that they considered precious was not singularity at all (Simmel, 1908/2009f). This example clearly demonstrates that the idea of social types can be fairly useful when social interactions are concerned. Naturally, it is clear that the proportion of the remoteness and closeness of a relationship cannot be defined and quantified precisely, but for the social type of the stranger to exist, there must be a certain "amount" of distance.

Simmel's classic example of the stranger is a Jewish trader, who acquires good for his community from another group and, since he is a middleman in trade, he is mobile and unattached to the groups that he does business with through family ties, locality or occupations. That is precisely why he does not fit in completely, and he is simultaneously both near and far (see also Burt

1992). It is clear that the contact with a whole group of strangers is not the same as the contact with a representative of a group of strangers. Through the contact with the stranger the group most often loses a sense of universality and quickly comes to understand that there are certain differences among groups. Consequently, in most cases a seemingly universal orientation becomes limited and provincial. In that sense it can be said that the stranger has potentially both destructive and constructive consequences because he offers different patterns of thought and may open a door for a social change. This is, therefore, a person who is not well integrated in another group and most often does not want to be. With all this in mind, it is obvious that in accordance with Simmel's sociological ideas, the stranger is not a person, but a type, which means that many authors were wrong when they ascribed intentions and desires to the stranger as if he was a specific person.

Sociology of the stranger and sociology of the “stranger”

Like it was said at the beginning of the paper, it has been known for a long time that the classic texts are often quoted in a way that is different from or inadequate to their original meaning. This causes confusion rather than a better or more thorough understanding of classical concepts and Simmel's stranger is an excellent example of confusion and departure from the original meaning. These departures can be grouped in four areas of confusion (Levine 1979) (1) Simmel's concept of the stranger is often identified with Park's concept of the marginal man, who is actually a different social type; (2) he is usually identified with the outsider who has just arrived in a certain group, although that is a totally different social type; (3) distinguishing the stranger as an individual and foreign communities (which is only latent with Simmel) is not stressed clearly enough in later studies; (4) the importance of various ways in which Simmel used metaphors of simultaneous closeness and distance has become vague and neglected in time.

The diverse influence of “The stranger” is testified by the amount of quotations in probably every methodological “genre” – from ethnographic reviews, cross-cultural comparisons, historical reconstructions, laboratory experiments, mathematical models, sociology of ethnicity etc. (McLemore 1970; Driedger – Peters 1977; Levine 1979; Alexander 2004). The best known is the first field of confusion, where the marginal man is identified with the stranger as a social type. This is Robert Park's “fault” because he wrote an influential paper (Park 1928) and many after him did not realize that this is not an extension of Simmel's original idea. The marginal man is a completely different configuration from the stranger because he is a racial or cultural hybrid who has no status of equal membership in a new group although he wants it, while Simmel's stranger does not want to be assimilated and that is

why he is a potential wanderer with freedom to come and go. In addition, Park's marginal man suffers from spiritual instability and feels a lot of discomfort, while the stranger is a successful merchant, a "judge" and a "counselor".

Park's understanding and subsequent interpretations under his influence are the consequence of social circumstances in Chicago so the marginal man primarily referred to the immigrants in the United States – a person between the "old" and "new" cultures (Allen 2000). However, when writing about the stranger, Simmel's original intention was completely different – he used the figure of the stranger to illustrate a contradictory experience about what it means to engage in an interaction with someone who is spatially close and socially distant.

Besides Park's paper, surely the best known is Schütz's paper on the stranger, which has a subtitle "An essay in social psychology" (Schütz 1944) and indicates the differences in comparison with Simmel's stranger. Schütz developed a typology of the stranger as a marginalized type of person *inside* a local group – this is an immigrant, a newcomer, a guest or a visitor who fights to be socially accepted or at least tolerated by the local group. Simmel's stranger does not wish to belong to a local group while Schütz's, like Park's, also wants inclusion. Schütz's stranger is an intruder whose objectivity is not appreciated by the local group because he does not share the same cultural pattern. This means that Simmel's stranger is someone who encounters a conflict *between* (for example) two local individuals while Schütz's stranger is *in* conflict with local individuals. Both strangers are objective but the objectivity of Simmel's stranger is desired and necessary in order to resolve a conflict while the objectivity of Schütz's stranger is neither necessary nor desired by the local group because he is considered to be someone whose opinion is not relevant. Hence, it can be concluded that Schütz's stranger is closer to Park's marginal man (Ossewaarde 2007).

It is interesting that Bauman (Bauman 1997) connects the social position of Schütz's stranger with the present-day "global situation". Before the global era, a local group had to exclude strangers in order to maintain group boundaries and a clear identity, but today it is no longer possible to "get rid of" strangers so it is necessary to learn how to live daily lives with obvious differences. The tension between the Simmelian distance and closeness is something that is lived, not resolved – it is a fact of (urban) life, not a problem to be solved or discarded.

When one observes a truly vast literature on the stranger, whether it is conceived correctly or incorrectly, it is clear that superficial similarities and quotations in wrong contexts are dominant (McLemore 1970; Levine 1979). For instance, the list of authors that interpret the stranger as a marginal man

and/or a migrant includes Sombart (1915/1921), Park (1928), Hughes (1949), Meyer (1951), Bonacich (1973) and even Coser (1964). Furthermore, conceptualizing the stranger as a mere newcomer is evident in the papers by Greifer (1945), Nash and Wolfe (1957) and Grusky (1960), Skinner (1963), together with the already mentioned Schütz (1944) and Meyer (1951).

That is why it can be said that there are two main research traditions rooted in Simmel's analysis of the stranger and that there is a confusion in the use of terms "stranger," "marginal man," and "newcomer". The first one is the tradition of the "stranger", which deals with a certain social position inside a group, which includes a certain degree of inclusion or exclusion (the stranger is *in* a group, but he does *not* belong to it), and the second one is the tradition of studying a sojourner (see e.g. Siu 1952), which was in the background and was often not distinguished from the "stranger". Mostly because of Park's influence, the sociology of the stranger was hidden by the sociology of the "stranger", i.e. Simmel's misunderstood type. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that it is well known that a wrong interpretation of the original context or meaning of an idea can lead to very interesting studies, even new and significant discoveries, which is surely illustrated by Park's text.

In conclusion it can be said that the common sociological interpretations widely misinterpret Simmel's classical text. At the same time, these misinterpretations provided a rich theoretical and empirical program, especially through several illuminating concepts (such as "the marginal man"). Nevertheless, it remains very important to adequately approach Simmel's original formulations and to provide their proper contextualization. Above all else, approaching Simmel in a rightful way would contribute to an adequate (re)evaluation of a true sociological classic and his vast theoretical heritage. Thus, it is crucial to position Simmel's idea of the stranger in its original context or the context that Simmel himself placed it in, and that is the sociology of space.

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