

## THE CONFLICT OF SOCIAL LIFE AND CULTURAL FORMS: SIMMEL'S THEORY OF "QUALITATIVE SOCIETAL DIFFERENTIATION"

O conflito da vida social e das formas culturais: a teoria simmeliana da  
"diferenciação social qualitativa"

Gregor Fitzzi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Simmel's work has often been interpreted as a succession of disparate phases of development following contradictory epistemological paradigms and intellectual stances, and a similar misunderstanding applies to his theory of societal differentiation. A completely different view emerges of Simmel's contribution to sociological theory if his process of theory-building is placed at the forefront of analysis along with its specific continuities. The present paper provides a synthetic study of Simmel's theory of societal differentiation by systematically reconstructing the different stages of its development. It starts with Simmel's early theory of the parallel differentiation of the social group and the personality of the social actors, thus highlighting that social differentiation can be understood only as a process that takes place both on the level of social action and social structure. The focus then shifts to Simmel's theory of culture and its relationship to the core of his sociological theory in the so-called *a priori* of sociation. Finally, the paper shows how Simmel's late sociological anthropology links the different contributions on social differentiation, cultural sociology and the epistemological premises of sociation in a theory of life forms producing the structuration of "qualitative differentiated societies".

**Keywords:** Qualitative Societal Differentiation; Sociological *a priori*; Form and Life Conflict; Sociological Anthropology.

### Resumo

A obra de Simmel é com frequência interpretada como uma sucessão de fases díspares de desenvolvimento, seguindo paradigmas epistemológicos e posturas intelectuais contraditórios, e sua teoria da diferenciação social é objeto de um mal-entendido similar. Uma visão completamente diferente da contribuição de Simmel à teoria sociológica emerge quando seu processo de construção teórica é colocado em primeiro plano, juntamente com suas continuidades específicas. O presente artigo apresenta um estudo sintético da teoria da diferenciação social de Simmel por meio da reconstrução sistemática de seus diferentes estágios de desenvolvimento. Começa-se por sua teoria inicial da diferenciação paralela do grupo social e da personalidade dos atores sociais, a qual enfatiza que a diferenciação social deve ser compreendida como um processo que se dá tanto no nível da ação quanto da estrutura social. O foco se desloca, então, para a teoria da cultura de Simmel e sua relação com o cerne de sua teoria sociológica, os chamados *a priori* da sociação. Por fim, o artigo demonstra como a antropologia sociológica tardia de Simmel articula suas diferentes contribuições a respeito da diferenciação social, da sociologia cultural e das premissas epistemológicas da sociação em uma teoria das formas de vida estruturantes das "sociedades qualitativamente diferenciadas".

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor e co-diretor do Centro de Cidadania, Pluralismo Social e Diversidade Religiosa da Universidade de Potsdam, Alemanha. Email: fitzzi@uni-potsdam.de.

**Palavras-chave:** Diferenciação Social Qualitativa; *A priori* Sociológico; Conflito entre Forma e Vida; Antropologia Sociológica.

## Introduction

Simmel's work has often been interpreted as a succession of disparate phases of development following contradictory epistemological paradigms and intellectual stances. This approach dates back to the obituary which Frischeisen-Köhler wrote about Simmel (1919/20), and does not provide a sufficiently profound account of the continuities in his theoretical reflection. A closer scrutiny of Simmel's sociological theory-building demonstrates that his work takes the form of an ongoing widening of the enquiry into social reality – starting from the analysis of the societal issues in a narrower sense, moving on to their socio-cultural implications and premises, and finally turning to the anthropological roots of societal phenomena. Simmel's approach consists in a deepening the enquiry by stages and is related to his theoretical understanding of social reality, which, until today, has not been the focus of a systematic reconstruction.

A similar misunderstanding applies to Simmel's theory of societal differentiation. His early book *On Social Differentiation* (Simmel, 1890, GSG 2, p. 109-295)<sup>2</sup> is often forgotten or overshadowed by the *Philosophy of Money* as a product of the so-called positivist phase (GSG 6; Simmel, 2004). His late *View of Life* is seen as a product of the vitalist or metaphysical phase (GSG 16, p. 209–425; Simmel, 2015), which seems to have nothing to do with Simmel's sociology because it remains under the alleged influence of Bergson's philosophy, even if upon closer inspection one notices that this is not the case. Simmel's *View of Life* is an open critique of Bergson's philosophy of life (Fitzi, 2002). In the intervening period, his sociological study is often only regarded in terms of its fragments, thus overlooking the question about its consistency as a “sociological grand theory”. A completely different view emerges of Simmel's contribution to sociological theory if his process of theory-building is placed at the forefront of analysis along with its specific continuities. Simmel's late conception of the conflict of life forms can

---

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: GSG is the abbreviation for *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, the edition of his complete works published by Suhrkamp in 24 volumes.

therefore be seen as the final development of a decennial reflection on the “qualitative differentiation” of modern societies. Its major result is a theory of the conflict-fraught differentiation processes of the various domains not only of culture but also of personality in complex societies.

The present paper provides a synthetic study of this reflection process by drawing on the more detailed analysis developed in a forthcoming monograph due for publication in the Simmel year of 2018. This reconstructive analysis includes Simmel’s early theory of the parallel differentiation of the social group and the personality of the social actors, thus highlighting that social differentiation for Simmel can be understood only as a process that takes place both on the level of social action and social structure (GSG 2, p. 109-295). The focus then shifts to Simmel’s theory of culture and its relationship to the core of his sociological theory in the so-called *a priori* of sociation (GSG 11, p. 42-61). Finally, the paper shows how Simmel’s late sociological anthropology links the different contributions on social differentiation, cultural sociology and the epistemological premises of sociation in a theory of life forms producing the structuration of “qualitative differentiated societies” (GSG 16, p. 209-296).

### **Social differentiation**

The theory of the parallel differentiation process of the social structure and the individual personality builds the core of Simmel’s first sociological work, *On Social Differentiation*, published in 1890 (*Über soziale Differenzierung*, GSG 2, p. 109-295). As Simmel explains here in detail, there is no consistent separation in undifferentiated societies between individuals and the social group. A dense collective consciousness dominates social relationships and uniformly shapes individuals’ way of being, acting and thinking. The duty of solidarity, which relates the individual to the social group, knows no limit. Consequently, under the label of “collective accountability” every allegation made about one individual automatically extends to the family clan. With the quantitative development of the social group, however, the social bonds imposed on the person are loosened. As a rule, one can suggest that the smaller the social group, the less possible it

becomes for the individual to develop relationships beyond the original community of belonging. Conversely, the bigger the number of relationships which the individual entertains, the easier it is for him or her to emancipate himself/herself from each one of them (GSG 2, p. 140). Smaller social groups can be easily integrated by virtue of their social structure, but individuals must accomplish more for the community. In undifferentiated conditions, therefore, not only is the individual stronger, depending on the social group, but this also applies vice versa. With increasing social differentiation and the multiplication of functional roles, the interdependence between all individuals intensifies, hence making the personal bonds imposed upon the individual less tight and constraining. This permits a wider scope of individual liberty, by extending social relationships beyond one's original background. Individuals now take part in very different "social circles", so that their social action interconnects the disparate domains of society (GSG 2, p. 237).

Nevertheless, for Simmel the differentiation of social structure does not occur without involving a parallel process, namely, the differentiation of the individual's personality (GSG 2, p. 169). Consequently, the development of social structure and of individual agency must be assessed in terms of their reciprocal relationship. The rise of modern individuality is a function of the quantitative extension of the social group; it depends on the quantity of the social circles in which individuals are engaged (GSG 2, p. 239). By acting in differentiated societies, individuals become the "crossing point" of highly diverse social circles, so that their particular combination in turn structures their personality in a completely original way. Individuals do not simply live in a family that is part of a clan, a village, a nation and so on, that is in concentric social circles (GSG 2, p. 241). At one and the same time, they entertain complex networks of relationships in professional, economic, political, religious, or leisure circles involving very different groups of persons. Thus, individuals' liberty in complex societies is given by the fact that the social circles in which they participate are less and less concentric. Moreover, the number of different circles in which single individuals act must be seen as an indicator for the complexity of culture (GSG 2, p. 239).

Their combination represents the coordinate system for social relationships of individuals and becomes increasingly personal depending on which new circles are added to it. The quantitative development of social differentiation thereby immediately leads to a qualitative differentiation of social structure and to a process of stronger individualization.

Society becomes a complex entity of social circles with which every individual connects differently by combining them in a personal way. Hence, a multiplicity of parallel realizations of social networks emerges with different meanings and joining up in the same societal space. The individual personalities become mirror inversions of them and a matrix of the different specialized social domains that the social actors are engaged in. Their quantitative complexity turns out to be of qualitative character. Only single fragments of the personality are now connected to the different social circles, thus making the individuals much more independent from each other than they could ever be in undifferentiated societies. In turn, individuals are more strongly dependent on the amount of different relationships which they are engaged in, and their personality is much more deeply fragmented. The modern condition of life is thus characterized by a wider scope of personal liberty, yet also by a feeling of disorientation and senselessness. Modern individuals try to relate the fragments of their personality as well as the different social roles which they have to play in a meaningful synthesis. The dynamics of the social circles, however, constantly fills the personality fragments with new meanings and expectations, thus making the task a never-ending process and exposing individuals to a sense of alienation. The tension-ridden relationship between social differentiation, the fragmentation of the personality and the need to grant at least a dynamic unity to the social agency, is a topic that accompanies Simmel's sociological reflection until his late works.

Indeed, for Simmel, the social differentiation process also involves a further aspect. Each domain of society gradually produces an autonomous logic, hence becoming independent from the others, and triggering a qualitative differentiation of society. In the beginning, individuals just specialize in the different functions that are demanded by the process of the

social division of labour to realize their life goals. Afterwards, the objective qualitative domains of society develop a compelling power and select the individuals that they need to reproduce themselves. Thereby, the means of social action become the goals, and the process of social differentiation leads to the reification of the social structure (GSG 2, p. 247). Along with this evolution, however, the integration of modern society is confronted with an issue that cannot be solved on a purely structural level, so that “system integration” does not suffice (Lockwood, 1964). For Simmel, a society consisting solely of functional systems would fall apart (GSG 11, p. 33). Only for as long as the “creativity of action” weaves new relationships between the objectified social circles can complex societies be socially integrated. This performance of the social agency occurs in the everyday dynamics of social reality construction, where the individuals retain the multitudinous threads of their social belonging in their hands, thus ensuring the cohesion of the social fabric. Every individual brings forth a different variation of the interweaving process of the social circles; every individual makes the social and systemic integration of highly differentiated societies possible.

For Simmel, the creativity and the rhythm of social action thus replaces the need for a normative integration in complex societies. This is a direct contrast to Parsons’s opinion (Parsons, 1967) that no functional substitute of “collective consciousness” or “collective accountability” is needed to integrate highly differentiated societies (GSG 2, p. 139). On a level of structural analysis, the ongoing social differentiation makes the normative integration of society impossible, because the manifold and ever-changing combinations of social circles produced by social agency can hardly be reduced to an overlapping common pattern. Rather, what holds the social groups together is the increased frequency of social exchanges that substitutes their missing homogeneity. Simmel will further develop this topic in the closing chapter of the *Philosophy of Money* under the theme of the “pace of life” (*Tempo des Lebens*) (GSG 6, p. 696). Seen from a level of the analysis of social action, instead of establishing overlapping solidarity bonds, which hold social actors together, social agency produces an infinite number of slightly direct relations with intermittent character, so granting social

integration. If some social threads should rupture, the social fabric lasts on others and, moreover, social agency will build new ones. Only if the majority of such ties were lost over a longer period would this lead to a crisis of the social structure (GSG 2, p. 142). From a methodological viewpoint, highly differentiated societies, therefore, cannot be seen as a “social building” which is statically founded on clearly defined patterns of social action. Instead, they must be assessed as an “organic fabric” that continues to exist thanks to its ongoing dynamics of building, cutting and rebuilding social relationships.

However, there is a crucial difference between Simmel’s and Durkheim’s theories of social differentiation. Three years before Durkheim’s *Division of Social Labour* (Durkheim, 1893/2014), namely, in Simmel’s *On Social Differentiation* we already have a theory of the difference between mechanic and organic solidarity, so addressing the issues of collective consciousness and anomy. The similarities between Durkheim’s and Simmel’s differentiation theories derive largely from their common critical examination of Spencer’s sociology (Spencer, 1876/1882–1885). Yet, the striking contrast between them is due to the fact that for Simmel social differentiation has to be assessed as a parallel process, which is ongoing within the social group and the individual personality, because social agency is considered to be a structure and a building block of complex societies. As Simmel’s study shows, the assessment of social differentiation must be carried out on a strictly descriptive level. Modernity is the stage of history when the differentiation process progressed the most. In view of the fact that the different social circles here only address restricted domains of the personality, the freedom of individuals from personal subjection grows beyond every former limit. In turn, personality becomes so complex and fragmented that it is hardly possible to grant individuation processes. Simmel sees a major risk for the modern human condition in the fact that individuals are less and less capable of coordinating the roles which they play in different social circles within a meaningful synthesis. He thus already formulates the core of his later theory of culture within his scrutiny of social differentiation (GSG 2, p. 241).

### Cultural Differentiation

Simmel's pivotal achievement in his *Soziologie* (1908) is the foundation of sociological epistemology on the theory of the so-called *a priori* of sociation. Social reality is regarded as the domain of life experience that is related to social interaction and that can be explained by reconstructing the conditions of its possibility within the consciousness of social actors. Simmel obtains the method to reconstruct the *a priori* of sociation by developing and adapting the so-called regressive analytical method of Kant's epistemology to the matter of social reality (GSG 11, p. 42–61; English: GSG 18, p. 498–518). Sociological epistemology thus supplies an answer to the basic question of the cultural sciences, as Dilthey formulated it in his seminal *Introduction to the Humanities (Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften)* (Dilthey, 1883). However, he did so without recourse to hermeneutics based on individual psychology. A science of the complex plurality of human activity (*menschliche Tätigkeit*), which is not restricted to the knowledge of the sciences of nature – as was Kant's epistemology – must start with the assumption that in complex societies no cultural science is possible without considering the social relationships of the acting individuals (GSG 11, p. 13). Consequently, in modernity a philosophical anthropology in the classical sense of the term is no longer possible, if it is not a sociology. The foundation of a “science of society and history”, as Dilthey sought it, can only be given on the basis of a sociological epistemology, i.e. by taking into account the fact that society is an “objective form of subjective consciousnesses” and consists of a constant tension and adaptation to each other of both dimensions of social reality (GSG 11, p. 41). The effort of establishing a relationship between the objective logic of social structure and the subjective logic of social action represents, therefore, the core of the never-ending production process of society.

According to Simmel's sociological epistemology, this performance is of a cultural character because it produces, in whatever way, a “meaning” relating the objective needs of social structure to the subjective motivation of the social actors, so that the latter can become their bearer (third *a priori*, GSG 11, p. 58). Hence, from the epistemological perspective of a theory of



the participant in social interaction, Simmel's third *a priori* of sociation addresses the key issue of sociological theory. Later on, Weber conceptualized this from the viewpoint of the observer of social reality with the category of the "meaning [*Sinn*] of social action" (Weber, 1921). Consequently, culture cannot be considered as a secondary result of economic or social action, as Marx and Durkheim argue, but must be explained as the constitutive performance holding society together, by relating the logic of social structure and social action to each other. The concept of culture thus becomes the grounding category of sociology, so that the sociology of culture cannot count as a special sociology among others, but rather becomes the central pillar of sociological theory. Following the logic of the third *a priori* of sociology, meaning or sense must be considered as the material which knits together social reality, thus allowing for the steady production, reproduction and change of the social fabric. Accordingly, sociology must inquire into the mechanisms which permit these processes, by reconstructing the everyday cultural work that connects social action and social structure.

Furthermore, sociological epistemology adopts an approach that permits the extension of the focus of the theory of the sociological *a priori*, thus facilitating an analysis of the production of social meaning *in abstracto* and of the manifold ways in which cultural performance is delivered in the different fields of modern, highly differentiated societies. Besides the domain of life experience, which strictly speaking is related to social interaction, various other domains become the focus of a similar enquiry. This is based on Simmel's regressive method; it works out the *a priori* of consciousness that constitutes the premises for their existence. Cultural work of highly diverse types constitutes the focus of sociological enquiry because it grants the production of meaning as the material that knits and holds society together. The fraught and conflicted relationship between objective and subjective culture, which Simmel described in the *Philosophy of Money* (GSG 6, p. 617–654), therefore becomes the object of the research programme into the different domains of culture which Simmel developed from 1908 on. Given the fact that modern societies tend to be differentiated in objective

fields guided by autonomous logics, the methodology that Simmel developed to explain the everyday adjustment of social structure and social action can be applied to the enquiry into the manifold ways in which objective and subjective culture are mutually integrated in different societal fields. This approach permits the study of the cultural work which holds social reality together. It takes into account that in highly differentiated societies there is a need to combine disparate contents of objectified culture together, so that the cultural work menaces to stagnate, by jeopardizing social integration.

Modern societies fall into various domains which are structured following different logics. The extension of the methodological approach of sociological epistemology to each one allows for working out of the *a priori* of consciousness governing the different kinds of socially mediated life experience which gives rise to the existence of the manifold domains of society. Accordingly, economy, politics, law, religion, science, art and so on, are seen as the product of the different logics of cultural work and become the object of a unitary research programme that questions what constitutes the *a priori* of social experience which must be presupposed to permit their respective existence. Applying the methodology of sociological epistemology to the different domains of modern society, Simmel reconstructs the specific cultural performance that relates social action and social structure in each societal field, by animating the dialectical interchange between subjective and objective culture. From the viewpoint of sociological theory, sociological epistemology thus promotes a specific approach for analyzing the tension-fraught relationship between the micro- and macro-social dynamics, which reorganizes the hierarchy of the grounding sociological concepts in a completely innovative way. Not society, but culture becomes the superordinate category of sociology because different kinds of cultural work are seen as constituting the basic integrating performance of society (third *a priori*, GSG 11, p. 58). On the one hand, social interaction in the strict sense counts as one domain of experience among the others, since it relies on the imperative of cultural work. On the other hand, however, every domain of culture is seen as a product of the sociation processes relating subjective and objective culture in the everyday struggle for the integration of social

action and social structure. Hence, “the societal” represents the grounding dimension of social reality, in the sense that it deploys the means of cultural work necessary to integrate society in its different fields, as the three *a priori* of sociation show. Yet, cultural work follows different logics in different domains of society, so that sociology must reconstruct it in all its complexity.

### **Qualitative social differentiation**

Under the influence of Parsons, contemporary sociology refers to functional differentiation as the modern form of social differentiation (Parsons, 1951). The idea is that society develops different domains that are specialized in delivering a particular performance to the rest of society, so that each societal domain can be assigned to a specific “function of society” as a whole. Society is seen as a living organism consisting of a number of organs that cooperate to assure the life and wealth of the whole, as the biology-inspired sociology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already argued (Schäffle, 1875–1878; Spencer, 1876/1882–1885). In the radicalized functionalism, the relationship between the different social domains is considered as being of secondary importance, so that the focus of enquiry remains on the “internal functionality” of the different societal domains as social systems (Luhmann, 1984). Classical sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel or Weber had a quite different understanding of the modern societal differentiation. At the centre of their attention is the fact that highly differentiated societies tend to give rise to societal domains that follow an autonomous logic and do not accept the leading function of any particular domain. The process is seen as a contingent societal phenomenon that does not follow any natural law, including evolutionary biology. Furthermore, classical sociologists make no axiomatic assumptions about the relationships that persist between the different societal domains; moreover, they refuse to subordinate sociological research to pre-cast metaphors borrowed from other scientific domains. Neither the biological-functional character of society as a living being, nor a predetermined harmony between societal domains, nor conflict, nor the prevalence of one domain, like religion, politics or economy over the other, can be made to conform to the unquestioned axiomatic premise of

sociological theory. The question of which relationships persist between the different societal domains must be cleared on an empirical level of enquiry. Such relationships can be cooperation and exchange, competition, colonization, or reciprocal disregard. However, this can only be determined *a posteriori*. Classical sociological theories are, therefore, theories of “qualitative societal differentiation” but not of functional differentiation. The specificity of Simmel’s theory is given by the fact that he always develops a theory of the parallel differentiation of social structure and of social action and asks the question about their relationship in the same vein as the approach of the sociological *a priori*.

Weber gave his classical assessment of the qualitative societal differentiation as a commentary on the degrees and directions of the religious refusal of the world in the intermediate study of his *Sociology of Religion*, which he published in 1920 (Weber, 1988a, p. 542–567). The rationalization of religion provoked by the rise of the redemption prophecies in the axial age differentiated them, on the one hand, from the influence of the mundane spheres of reality, as economy and politics, and let religion raise the claim of subordinating the world to its ethics of fraternity. On the other hand, the self-differentiation of the other societal domains, following an own objective logic, inspired their growing resistance against every attempt of external regulation, especially by religious ethics. Due to the qualitative differentiation of societies, religion, therefore, came into a reciprocal relationship of conflict with the secular orders and powers of the world, which established their autonomy.

Modern societies differentiate in the autonomous spheres of economy, politics, law, art, science, sexuality and so on, which stay in a relationship of continuous competition for the leadership on social action. Social actors have to come to terms with the substantial “polytheism of the values”, i.e. with the perpetual conflict between different action orders in qualitative differentiated societies (Weber, 1988b, p. 603). Hence, Weber’s assessment of the issue of social differentiation focuses first on the structural aspect of the competition between action orders and then analyzes the consequences that emerge for the action orientation, i.e. for the individual conduct of life. As the

reader of *Über soziale Differenzierung* expects (GSG 2, p. 109-295), Simmel instead undertakes an analysis of the parallel qualitative differentiation of the societal structure and of the individual personality in complex societies.

Interestingly enough, Simmel also develops his analysis of qualitative social differentiation in the context of a study on religion, namely in *Die Religion*, which he wrote in 1906 at the request of Martin Buber for the series *Die Gesellschaft* (GSG 10, p. 39–118). In highly differentiated societies, as Simmel's cultural theory shows (GSG 5, p. 560–582), social life is subordinated to a number of external powers. The result is a wide fragmentation of the personality of the social actors, whose different domains are led by the autonomous logic of the respective social circles. Apparently, and this was the result of the analysis in the *Philosophy of Money*, there is no escape from the modern fragmentation of the social actor (GSG 6, p. 446), so that Simmel still writes about the “Fragmentary Character of Life” in August 1916 (GSG 13, p. 202–216). However, in a different perspective of analysis Simmel shows that the creativity of social action has the potential to overcome the modern human condition by regrouping all the contents of life experience under a particular approach to the world. This sense-giving attitude, which is an expression of the cultural work induced by the third *a priori* of sociation, does not grant an automatic reversal of the fragmentation of modern life. However, it can overcome it under specific conditions. According to Simmel, social actors can choose a “predominant logic” for ruling *their* social action, so that the fragmented contents of social reality are reordered under the particular perspective of art, or religion, economy, politics and so on (GSG 10, p. 39). The grasp on social action from the point of view of a specific logic represents a way of realizing the third *a priori* of sociation with consequences that also influence the ordering of social structure. This is because the intersection of the different social circles in which the social actor is active acquires a completely different complexion (GSG 11, p. 59). The quantity of social actors moving in the direction of a specific logic of action therefore determines the predominant way in which a society is structured.

In *Die Religion*, Simmel discusses the case of the religious worldview and action, but a similar assessment applies to each qualitative differentiated logic and domain of modern society. The submission of the totality of the world, which fragments under a particular perspective, depends on the subjective logic of social action. According to the analysis of the third *a priori* of sociation, the mind constitutes the connecting force that relates to each other the disparate contents of consciousness which characterize life experience within complex societies. Following very different impulses, emotions and choices, social actors let a specific qualitative nuance of consciousness dominate; they therefore paint the content of life with a prevailing colour or complexion. Hence, not only the objectified logics of the qualitative differentiated domains in complex societies attempt to impose their logic on the totality of social reality, but the same also applies for the subjective nuances of consciousness that motivate social actors. Thereby, the logics of social structure and of social action come into a relationship of reciprocal determination which also holds on the level of qualitative societal differentiation. Accordingly, if in the perspective of the social actor religion, art, politics, or economy constitutes the keynote of existence, the different domains of society, i.e. their disparate contents, organize around it.

However, this approach to social action does not lead to the sole reign of one qualitative differentiated logic over the whole of qualitative differentiated social reality, but rather to the expression of all its possible contents through its language. Qualitative societal differentiation persists, but it is subsumed under a predominant logic of social action. This applies notably to religion, which conveys all world contents through its language, even if its oddest result is a “negation” of the secular world orders. Yet, the same dynamics involves the logic and language of every societal domain, if it becomes the overall focus of social action. Thanks to a particular approach to life experience, all the disparate contents of the world come to expression under its control, by relating and subsuming the manifold domains of social action under a common point of view. Different meaningful “stances to world and life” (*Attitüden zu Welt und Leben*) immediately come into a relationship

of competition and claim the same right of shaping all the disparate contents of qualitative differentiated societies. Yet, which approach prevails on social action depends on the attitude of the single actors, who decide which logic will lead their cultural work, so relating together the world fragments by following the logic of the third *a priori* of sociation.

According to the naïve stance towards the world, as Simmel underlines, only one reality seems to exist, namely, everyday practical life experience. Yet, examining the shaping of reality through art, religion, theoretical speculation and science, as well as through the feeling of love, produces the awareness that “practical reality” is also only one possibility among others. The same contents of life experience can be ordered through the stances of art, religion, law, politics, economy, science and so on. The practical order of reality is, of course, the most appropriate to achieve the goals of the struggle for the survival of the species. However, in qualitative differentiated societies it constitutes only one order among others. In opposition to less complex societies, here, the consciousness of the social actors is free to order the world contents following different principles and thus producing a world that is shaped according to different logics of social action. The qualitative differentiation of social reality therefore has its roots in the manifold logic of social action, so giving shape to the world contents within social interaction.

The task of sociology is therefore to reconstruct how social action produces its different logics, and how these become autonomous by constituting objective domains of social structure. For these reasons, Simmel’s cultural sociology provides an action theory based on an explanation of the continuous establishment, depletion and change of qualitative social differentiation in complex societies. Different subjective logics guide social action by producing the objects of different domains of socially determined experience, and following the scheme of the sociological *a priori*. The products of the cultural work then gather to form clusters of the objective culture and develop an own logic, which claims to be followed by the social actors (GSG 5, p. 560–582). Social action stances, however, can differently relate the objectified contents of social life together, by following

diverse logics. The result is a permanent tension between the subjective logic of action creativity and the objective logic of the social structure, which characterizes qualitative differentiated societies and builds the core of Simmel's sociological theory of culture. Complex societies never develop one static and perennial hypostasized social structure, whose functioning can be traced back to a pre-established metaphor borrowed from other scientific domains, but consist of multiple different competing perspectives about the shaping of social structure, struggling for predominance. The dynamics of qualitative societal differentiation, therefore, must be reconstructed empirically and cannot be traced back to axiomatic assumptions about the relationship between different social domains. The goal of Simmel's middle work phase starting around 1908 was to show how the tension-fraught dynamics between the logics of social action and social structure develops in the different domains of culture.

### **The Conflict of Culture**

In a developed market economy, the objective valuation of commodities becomes the precondition for their subjective valuation. This phenomenon is part of the overlapping reification process of modern societies that Marx traced back to the so-called "fetishism of commodities" (Marx, 1887, p. 61). In his theory of cultural reification, Simmel develops this insight by extending it beyond the economy to the tension-fraught relationship between social actors and the institutionalized role models which they have to play in the different domains of modern society. The multifaceted objectivation of the symbolic social orders makes cultural reification an overall phenomenon that social action has to cope with. Over and above that, however, for Simmel a different societal development must be taken into account that generalizes a further aspect of Marx's theory of modern capitalism to a structural dimension of cultural conflict (GSG 16, p. 181–207). This concerns the shaping of culture in its entirety. Simmel's diagnosis about the development of culture in the phase of European peace between 1872 and 1914 was sobering because the creative cycle of cultural innovation seemed to him to have come to a substantial stagnation. The historical process that time and again produces new lifestyles, new cultural and artistic



movements, and eventually new social forms substituting the older ones seemed to rotate on itself.

Entering this context of analysis, Simmel pointed out that Marx was the first social scientist who elaborated a theory of historical development and took into account the ongoing tension between the social impulse for change and the tendency to the pure reproduction of established social forms. Publishing his essay on “The Conflict of Modern Culture” during the last year of World War I, in 1918, Simmel could not nominate Marx because of the pressure of censorship, but he precisely reported his materialist conception of history (GSG 16, p. 184). Marx’s merit was, for Simmel, to detect within the economic domain the motor for historical change in the shape of a conflict between the productive forces and relations of production. Marx’s theory of the economic conflict, however, had to be extended to the whole of society and understood as an inquiry into the conflict between productive cultural forces and established cultural forms in the various qualitative differentiated domains of society. Moreover, in the face of the substantial cultural stagnation of modernity, Marx’s forecast of a dialectical evolution toward new relations of production had to be critically assessed. Simmel did not believe that the 1917 Russian Revolution would provide the expected breakthrough of history and referred instead to the empirical evidence of the changed quality of the cultural conflict in Western Europe as the crucial development of modernity.

In the different domains of society, the productive forces of culture showed an ongoing tendency to refuse every coagulation in a new cultural form (GSG 16, p. 185). No longer was to be observed a struggle of the productive forces against the obsolete forms of production, but rather their struggle against every possible form they could assume, and even against the principle of form itself. Simmel considered this attitude as the central characteristic of the different cultural tendencies that were manifest from 1872 to 1914, but for him the artistic movement which incorporated the rebellion of the cultural forces against form in the most typical way was Expressionism (GSG 16, p. 190). Cultural conflict pointed out the circumstance that modernity showed no clear line of development; rather, it

seemed to be trapped in an overall condition of substantial stagnation that was only set in motion again thanks to major destructive crises, as had happened during World War I. This disturbing novelty showed for Simmel that a post-dialectical theory of history was necessary to understand the development of modernity. A central element of the research programme that could contribute to understanding why the process of cultural change stalled, for Simmel, was the understanding of the anthropological roots of the cultural work integrating complex societies in the sense of the third *a priori* of sociation (GSG 11, p. 58).

### **The logic of life forms, conflict and synthesis**

Simmel's theory of modern society underlines the fact that human beings always live between a condition of intimacy and social liaison, so that they can never be confined to privacy nor completely socialized (Second *a priori*, GSG 11, p. 51). This assumption constitutes a central tenet of Simmel's sociological epistemology, although in a more generalized form it becomes one of the grounding theses for the anthropological foundation of the theory of culture which he presented in his late writing, *View of Life* (GSG 16, p. 209–425; Simmel, 2015). An individual human life can never be completely consumed by the social relationships in which the person participates. To this extent, the integration of social actors into the social fabric can be successful only if the former can combine socialized and intimate fields of the personality in a meaningful synthesis. Thus, the issue arises as to whether the qualities of the objective social order can harbour nuances that can make individuals to their bearers. The epistemological preconditions of the sociation process are rooted in the fact that the individual is placed in a particular situation in which he can combine the opposing consciousness flows of his being involved in the sociation process and existing independently. The necessity of establishing this connection constitutes Simmel's third *a priori* of sociology (GSG 11, p. 59). His classical expression is given by the secularized concept of "vocation" which, in Weber's eyes, was fundamental for the development of the modern conception of professional work (Weber, 1988a, p. 63). On the one hand, the objective structure of society prepares anonymous roles, which the random

individual can occupy, and on the other hand, the singular individual endeavours to occupy a social role by a sense of his “inner calling”. Merging the individual qualification with a socially relevant function within the objective fabric of society thus constitutes a necessary precondition for social integration.

The *View of Life* proposes an outline anthropology that is to be seen as a deepening of Simmel’s sociological epistemology, but also as the theoretical attempt to unite the theories of the disparate domains of qualitative differentiated societies within a single theoretical foundation of human action theory (GSG 16, p. 209–425; Simmel, 2015). In the *View of Life*, Simmel extends his epistemological model from the pilot study about society to the whole complex of cultural spheres, starting from the “preconditions of experience”, i.e. from the *a priori* that give rise to such spheres. The starting point and core of Simmel’s late paradigm is the definition of the “anthropological structure of experience” in terms of the concept of limit (*Grenze*) (GSG 16, p. 212). Human beings are to be seen as “beings of the limit” because their attitude to the world is determined by the fact that in every dimension of life experience they find themselves constantly moving between two opposing limits. This applies to the perception of time and space, to aesthetic and moral values, but also to the fact of being socialized in the tension between the socialized and non-socialized spheres of the personality. Corresponding to the formal structure of human existence, those opposite limits of the experiential flow of consciousness represent the means whereby human beings locate themselves properly in their potentially infinite and disorienting domain of life experience. Having limits everywhere, therefore, they are anthropologically characterized as “limit-setting animals”. The subsistence of experience-limits is fundamental for the life of human beings, yet under the condition that the individual limits can be steadily overcome by establishing new ones. These assumptions extend the logic of the sociation process to the whole of social action in the different spheres of qualitative differentiated societies (GSG 16, p. 215). The dynamic process of the third *a priori*, continuously re-establishing and redefining the merging of social action and social structure in a meaningful synthesis, is then seen as

an anthropological precondition not only of sociation but also of human life in general. Instead of merely being a category of sociological epistemology, the concept “relating in a meaningful form” different flows of consciousness becomes the main instrument for the analysis of all the domains of experience and the related cultural spheres.

Therefore, in the terminology of *View of Life*, the decisive epistemological issue becomes how to explain from a consistent perspective what makes the “world” possible as the sum of the objects of the different domains of culture. According to the epistemological shift of Simmel’s late theory of experience, “world” not only consists of its contents, but also of the respective forms *a priori* that produce and connect the single contents to autonomous cultural spheres (GSG 16, p. 238). Consequently, every domain of culture has to be considered as having its own *a priori*, consisting of particular form-giving procedures, so that the task of cultural theory is to seize and correlate these procedures in a unitary theory of the construction of qualitative differentiated societies. As we saw, Simmel’s grounding anthropological assumption is that human beings can only realize their specific life form within the frame of their cultural and social environment. Accordingly, the fragmentary character of life can be traced back to the anthropologically determined structuring of the cultural and social world that becomes even sounder with the process of modern social differentiation. The rhythm of sociation in complex societies compels social actors to move constantly from one level to another of experience, exposing them to the risks of social pathologies, and above all to alienation. Simmel’s cultural theory, therefore, shows how difficult integration processes become for social actors that have to realize the related cultural work in qualitative differentiated societies. They must steadily cope with two uneven flows of consciousness, on the one hand, the objective contents of culture (i.e. social roles), and on the other hand the subjective creativity of social action (i.e. individual goals). Hence, in complex societies, the amount of objective cultural contents and external expectations acting upon the individual gain such momentum that the singular social actor can never cope (GSG 5, p. 560–582). The crisis of culture develops to a global phenomenon leading to a

sort of general entropy of societal creativity. Within the domain of culture, any new synthesis or style trend no longer seems possible. Life rebels against culture, or more specifically social action rebels against social structure, but is no longer able to produce new social structures (GSG 16, p. 181–207). This attitude, however, represents nothing other than a way of escaping the conflict of modern culture or, in other words, the basic tension of the human condition of being caught between intimacy and form-mediated sociation. In Simmel's eyes, sociological anthropology offers the interpretative key to trace back the multifariousness of the modern conflict of culture to its ultimate origins and thus contributes to its understanding.

### Conclusions

Modern societies, i.e. societies which develop a qualitative differentiation in manifold spheres of culture with autonomous logics, experience a growing tendency to a conflict between different life forms. Both on the level of social action and of social structure, different logics compete to shape social life. This characteristic phenomenon of modern societies, which Weber names the polytheism of values, stays at the forefront of Simmel's theory of societal differentiation. For Simmel, however, the most striking development characterizing modernity leads still further. The creativity of social action is no longer capable of coagulating in social forms. Therefore, qualitative differentiated societies cannot even come to a conflict between different life forms because they experience a deep entropy in the building of cultural syntheses and finally flow into an irresolvable conflict between social action and social structure. The modern *conditio humana* then comprises an overall fragmentation of social relationships, of the personality of the social actors, and of cultural contents. Accordingly, every attempt to construct a new synthesis out of the fragments of social life must come to terms with the quantitative and qualitative complexity of the objectified social forms and cultural contents. Yet, the conflict between social life and cultural forms cannot be overcome by the objective dynamics of complex societies. Sociology can contribute to its understanding, but a possible new cultural synthesis can only be produced by an overall societal

praxis, developing beyond the boundaries of the one domain of qualitative differentiated societies called science.

## Literature

DILTHEY, Wilhelm Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte, Vol. 1 [1883]; now in: \_\_\_\_\_. **Gesammelte Schriften**, Vol. 1, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1959.

DURKHEIM, Émile . De la division du travail social. Etude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures, Paris : Alcan, [1893]. Engl. Durkheim, Émile. **The Division of Labor in Society**. New York: Free Press, 2014.

FITZI, Gregor. **Soziale Erfahrung und Lebensphilosophie. Georg Simmels Beziehung zu Henri Bergson**. Konstanz: UVK, 2002.

FRISCHEISEN-KÖHLER, Max. Georg Simmel. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Kant-Studien*, 24. 1919-20.

LUHMANN, Niklas **Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie**. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. London, [1887], now in Id. (1990), **Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe**, Vol. 9, Berlin: Dietz, 1990.

SCHÄFFLE Albert. **Bau und Leben des socialen Körpers. Encyclopädischer Entwurf einer realen Anatomie, Physiologie und Psychologie der menschlichen Gesellschaft mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Volkswirtschaft als socialen Stoffwechsel**, 4th Vol. Tübingen: Laupp, 1875-78.

SIMMEL, Georg **Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe** (here cited as GSG). Ed. by Otthein Rammstedt et al. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 24 volumes. 1989-2015.

\_\_\_\_\_. **The Philosophy of Money**. Third enlarged edition. David Frisby (ed.). Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (trans). London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. **The View of Life. Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms**. English translation by Levine, D. and Andrews, J.. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

SPENCER, Herbert. **Principles of Sociology**, 3 vols. London: Williams and Norgate, 1876/1882-1885.

WEBER, Max. Soziologische Grundbegriffe. [1921] Now in id. **Max Weber Gesamtausgabe I/23 Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie**.

**Unvollendet. 1919-1920.** Ed. by Knut Borchardt, Edith Hanke und Wolfgang Schluchter. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 147-215, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie.** Vol. 1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988a.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Wissenschaft als Beruf" In: \_\_\_\_\_. **Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre.** Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 582-613, 1988b.