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## CLASSIC REVIEW

### The first web theorist? Georg Simmel and the legacy of ‘The web of group-affiliations’

Review of ‘*The web of group-affiliations*’ from **Conflict and the web of group affiliations**, by George Simmel, New York, The Free Press, 1955, 197 pp., \$14.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0029288405

I first came upon Georg Simmel’s *Soziologie* (1908; translated in English as *Sociology* [1908/2009]) in a classical theory course for my graduate studies in sociology at Rutgers University. Several of its chapters stand on their own as essential sociological formulations of the structure and dynamics of social life, including ‘Quantitative aspects of the group’, ‘Superiority and subordination’, and ‘Conflict’ (with which ‘The web of group-affiliations’ is paired in its most widely read rendition, *Conflict and the web of group-affiliations* (1955)). It is the chapter of *Sociology* titled ‘The web of group-affiliations’, however, that I argue is most influential and relevant to scholars of communication, information, technology, and social networks in its explication of how modern social groupings and networks intersect, operate, and form the intricate weblike patterns that so often seem to emerge in internet and digital communication use today. Furthermore, the essay is peerless in illustrating how individuals respond to and are changed in such conditions.

Simmel lived in the last half of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, long before the internet, digital technology, and social media were invented, let alone could become so pervasive in everyday life. He was the first to uncover, isolate, and articulate the forms and patterns that underlie the organization of any and all societal units – from dyads to networks to nations – and to theorize how these structures affect their members and the dynamics of their members’ interactions. His insights would be astonishing in any era, but are all the more so when their application to practices that he surely could never have imagined are considered. Many scholars credit Simmel with pioneering the structural approach to studying social life – and trace its roots to this very essay (Bryant & Peck, 2007).

In ‘The web of group-affiliations’, Simmel explains that individuals in premodern, preindustrial times tended to come into contact with a relatively small number of the same other people wherever they went. Group affiliations could be characterized by a pattern of concentric circles, as groups (family, neighborhood, church) were relatively few in number and consisted of most of the same people. These circles could be seen as structurally subsumed within one another, collapsing into a single, not-very-diverse, whole. Both technological and cultural factors were at play – people could not easily travel great distances or contact distant others, and correspondingly there was limited need or desire to do so. As a result, the individual ‘was wholly absorbed by, and remained oriented toward, the group’ (1955, p. 151), and, importantly, ‘was treated as a member of a group rather than as an individual’ (1955, p. 139).

With ever-accelerating industrialization, however, came sufficient advancement of transportation and communication technology that one could belong to multiple groups that consisted of numerous, diverse, sometimes far-flung others. Now, people could (and did) participate in many family, friendship, occupational and interest-oriented groups, some of which were independent of one another and others of which would intersect. These social circles began to overlap and

proliferate in intricate ways and patterns, eventually spanning ‘an infinite range of individualizing combinations’ (1955, p. 155).

Critical to this theory was the impact of membership in multiple intersecting groups on the individual. As the modern connector ‘leaves his established position within one primary group’, Simmel observes, ‘he comes to stand at a point at which many groups intersect’ (1955, p. 141). For an individual to participate in numerous different groups heightens that person’s opportunities for connection but also his or her special, individualized *personality*. It allows the individual to ‘assert himself energetically’ (1955, p. 142) – to actively explore different aspects of the self in multiple, diverse contexts while making multiple, diverse social connections. As a result, the modern individual becomes highly differentiated from every other individual, for no two people will stand at the center of the same exact pattern of intersecting social circles and share the same set of group affiliations or the same opportunities for definition of the personality and self. One’s own personality, influenced by a unique set of ‘others’, can become *more* individualized, *more* unique than would previously have been possible. With characteristic evenhandedness, Simmel declares this state to be both anxiety-inducing and freeing.

Groundbreaking insights of Simmel’s have been echoed and deepened in the work of such scholars as Ronald Burt (1976), Peter Blau (1977), Anthony Giddens (1990), and, most recently, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012), whose conception of ‘networked individualism’ owes much to the theorist they call ‘the first to present a consistent network perspective’ (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 43). Building on Simmel’s ideas, Rainie and Wellman contend that modern people ‘have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups’ (2012, p. 6), for with ‘partial memberships in multiple networks, (they) rely less on permanent memberships in settled groups’ (2012, p. 12). While networked individuals must navigate a large, complex set of social networks, and often experience tensions and conflicts in the process, they also benefit greatly from the resources, information, and social capital and support that ‘flow’ along these network pathways (see also Chayko, 2002, 2008, 2014).

The structure of any society, Simmel writes, ‘provides a framework within which an individual’s non-interchangeable and singular characteristics may develop and find expression’ (1955, p. 150). The internet and digital technology provide frequent and multiple opportunities for the expression of the characteristics of the self. Indeed, the abundant, near-continuous expression of unique characteristics and ‘peculiarities’ (as Simmel refers to human quirks in the also-groundbreaking ‘The metropolis and mental life’ [1903/1950]) that emerge in online and digital spaces can be seen as a hallmark of the internet age. Simmel also contends that as our group affiliations and modes of self-expression increase, every individual will find ‘a community for each of his inclinations and strivings’ (1955, p. 162), which, as my own work and that of many others has demonstrated, is a prime outcome of internet and digital media use (Baym, 1995, 2010; Cavanagh, 2009; Chayko, 2002, 2008, 2014; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Kendall, 2002, 2010; Rheingold, 1993).

Of the many metaphors currently used to represent internet- and digitally enabled structures (network, net, platform, cluster, even ‘facebook’), the ‘web’ is perhaps the most commonly invoked. Simmel’s work describes the development of sprawling weblike societal structures with elegance and precision. But it would be incorrect to affirm that he actually used the word ‘web’ in describing the shape that such structures can take. In Simmel’s native German, this essay’s title ‘Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise’ translates more closely to ‘The intersection of social circles’ than to ‘The web of group-affiliations’. It was translator Reinhold Bendix who determined for his 1955 translation that, as a title, ‘The intersection of social circles’ did not best represent Simmel’s intentions. Simmel wanted his terms be interpreted broadly rather than with too much specificity (Bendix in Simmel, 1955, p. 125). So Bendix carefully, famously, selected ‘web’ as the conceptual anchor for the essay’s title.

Though it is unclear the extent to which Simmel's vision was exactly that of a 'web', it is clear that Simmel's work – and this essay in particular – maps onto and depicts the morphology and structural development of the internet and the 'World Wide Web' brilliantly. It also describes forms of interaction within digitized, weblike structures perceptively and sensitively, even movingly. His selected examples of social units – from labor and feminist coalitions to families, occupational associations, and any number of special-interest groups – easily correspond to the countless groups and organizations found in all kinds of digital spaces. Simmel uses such examples strategically throughout all his work, juxtaposing them so as to emphasize their structural similarities and to teach larger lessons, as in 'Previously, each of the members had been confined to a single group; now the new group emancipates them from this confining relationship' (1955, p. 182). His vision is not only pioneering and prescient, it is modern and relevant enough to have been written today.

It is sometimes argued that Simmel's work omits too much of the content of relational life in its focus on form and structure. In an early review of *Soziologie*, the book in which 'The web of group-affiliations' first appears, Charles Ellwood opines that 'It is not that his conceptions are wrong, but ... Simmel's comparison of sociology with geometry is a most unhappy one, for geometry does not deal with living organic processes as sociology does' (1910, p. 65). Simmel's focus on form rather than content allows him to treat all social units as structural equivalents and to better explore their interactive organizational dynamics. In the century-plus that has passed since the work was written, societies have become more and more structurally complex and intricate, rendering Simmel's 'geometric' approach all the more useful and needed.

Still, I think Georg Simmel is undervalued and underrated among the great classical theorists. His work provides theoretical and analytical tools upon which such critical perspectives as social network analysis have been built. It outlines how group affiliations and social interactions develop and impact both the individual and the society. And it presages a world in which the finding and forming of social connections via digital technology is constant and ubiquitous, with rampant consequences, many of which we are just beginning to discern. But while his influence is widely acknowledged in sociological circles (albeit not widely enough for my taste), his salience to the fields of communication, information, and technology studies is acknowledged far too irregularly.

'The web of group-affiliations', and indeed the entirety of Simmel's body of work, offers ample evidence that he is not only our first web theorist but that he remains, quite possibly, our most incisive. Noting that 'opportunities for individualization proliferate into infinity' (1955, p. 151), he predicts that the scope and impact of the changes he was seeing in his lifetime would only intensify. As group affiliation, social connectedness, and networked individualism 'proliferate into infinity', now over a century after Simmel penned the words – and will surely continue to do so – we are reminded of the centrality, vitality, and legacy of Georg Simmel's insights for understanding digitally technologized societies.

### Notes on contributor

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