The Vision of the Social Theorist – Simmel on Space

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“Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Foucault 1984: 252)

In modern social theory time and temporality, space and spatiality have become ubiquitous categories. Conceptualizations of a subject matter that emphasize development, evolution, adaptation, genealogy, sequences, stages, transitions, breakthroughs, emergent properties, innovations and continuities, or archaeologies of knowledge inevitably employ notions of unfolding relationships through time, often enriched with temporal metaphors. On the other hand conceptualizations that highlight structure, systems, functions, social position, linkages, domains, boundaries, horizons, formal properties, or networks invariably rely upon images of structured relationships on a “field,” often stylized spatially. Using visual imagery, we might say the former resembles a layered excavation, a tracing of processes through time; the latter an architectural edifice, a mapping of forms in space. The one conveys the sense of a moving series or sequence, the other an interconnected framework or grid.

Illustrations are plentiful among contemporaries: Anthony Giddens’ theory of “structuration” employs essentially two analytics – temporal and spatial – to solve the problem of the relationship, theoretically considered, between “structure” and “agency.” Starting with a quite different question about social capital, Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of a “field,” organized vertically and horizontally, to explain the role of social position and power relationships in the production of cultural and symbolic capital. Or Bruno Latour’s well-known actor-network theory puts forward the model of a domain of interconnected relationships, a kind of cybernetic web, to map the practices and inequalities of associative activity. Extending the idea of networks, Manuel Castells proposes the distinction between a “space of places” and a “space of flows” to anchor his argument about the distinctive quality of the modern network society, which confines and replaces local experience and habits with seemingly instantaneous, limitless, far-reaching and expansive flows of communication and manufactured meanings. Even Michel Foucault, noted for his genealogical retrieval of discourses of power, has acknowledged as well the complementary significance of spatiality.

Against this contemporary backdrop a return to Georg Simmel’s social theory offers an edifying prospect. For among the founding generation of sociologists and social theorists, Simmel occupies a unique position because of his self-conscious exploration of temporality and spatiality as the crucial dimensions of any theory of social action and social structure. Consider the perspectives announced in his major works, for instance. In the Philosophy of Money of 1900 his point of view is suffused with the imagery of circulation and
exchange, rhythms and dynamics, stability and flux, the increase and decrease in distance between the self and the “objective culture” produced in the modern money economy. For the Sociology of 1908 his starting point is announced in the temporal processes and spatial forms of interaction (Wechselwirkung), the result of which is sociation (Vergesellschaftung) or the formation of “society” itself, the very subject matter of sociology. Or in his final statement on these matters, in the Grundfragen der Soziologie of 1917, Simmel transposes this language into a kind of methodological perspectivism:

“When we look at human life from a certain distance, he notes, we see each individual in his precise differentiation from all others. But if we increase our distance, the single individual disappears, and there emerges, instead, the picture of a “society” with its own forms and colors – a picture which has its own possibilities of being recognized or missed. It is certainly no less justified than is the other in which the parts, the individuals, are seen in their differentiation. Nor is it by any means a mere preliminary of it. The difference between the two merely consists in the difference between purposes of cognition; and this difference, in turn, corresponds to a difference in distance” (Simmel 1950: 8).

The analogy is drawn appropriately from the kind of “seeing” essential to the sphere of art and aesthetics. We approach a painting, first viewing it from close range, then at increasing distance, with each positioning of the observing eye revealing important and distinctive knowledge of the object. Simmel is suggesting that knowing is not a matter of accurate “representation” or of mirroring in the mind what is present in the world. If this kind of mirroring is what conceptual realism demands, then realism as a theory of knowledge is fundamentally misleading. As in the realm of art, so also in the province of science: knowledge becomes possible by establishing perspective, and it proceeds through distanciation, through establishing angle of vision and field of focus, the preconditions for scientific observation.

Having taken up the problems of time and temporality elsewhere (cf. Scaff 2005: 5-23), I propose in this essay to focus attention upon space and spatiality in Simmel’s thought. The theme is Simmel’s own, signaled by the innovative ninth chapter in the Sociology entitled “Space and the Spatial Orders of Society” (Der Raum und die räumliche Ordnungen der Gesellschaft). In these pages some of Simmel’s boldest assertions appear, remarks to the effect that all social relationships can be understood from the standpoint of spatial categories, spatial metaphors, and the processes of spatialization, including the dualisms of nearness/remoteness, attachment/detachment, and attraction/repulsion. As he writes in one passage, “spatial relations not only are determining conditions of relationships among men, but are also symbolic of those relationships,” or translated more precisely, “the relation to space is on the one hand the condition, on the other the symbol of the relationships to humans” (Simmel 1971: 143). Consequently, it makes sense to say that “In fact, all personal relations whatsoever can be analyzed in terms of this scheme” built upon spatial

1 The original reads: “das Verhältnis zum Raum nur einerseits die Bedingung, andererseits das Symbol der Verhältnisse zu Menschen ist” (Simmel 1992: 764). The second version of this passage is my own translation. One of the most serious difficulties in grasping Simmel’s ideas, particularly in view of his early reception in American sociology, promoted by Albion Small as editor of the American Journal of Sociology, is the poor state of the English translations, both in their content and in their compilation as unified texts consistent with Simmel’s authorial intentions.