The "Fragment" on Simmel [From Draft Chapter XVIII (Structure of Social Action): Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Toennies: Social Relationships and the Elements of Action]

Talcott Parsons

Much less even than in the previous cases do I wish to attempt in the present chapter to give a general critical evaluation of the sociological work of the two men whose names are placed at its head. It happens that they approached some of the problems which are relevant to our context in ways which are somewhat different from those we have so far considered. A brief examination of their experience with these problems will, I think, help to illuminate some important things on the borderline of our own previous analysis, to clarify one or two of the residual categories which we have encountered.¹

Simmel is most generally known to sociologists as the author of the view that sociology should be a special science concerned with "forms of social relationship" as distinct from the other social sciences which are concerned with their "content." This tenet has become the basic methodological position of the so-called "formal" school of sociology. Simmel's proposition has been the object of much controversy and has often been held to be totally untenable, but somehow refuses to be completely and permanently quashed. We are not ready to raise explicitly the question of the scope of sociology as such—that we have reserved for the final chapter. Here our concern is with the relation of Simmel's conception of social "form" to the conceptual schemas of our previous discussion.

The relevance of this question to our problems should be evident from the fact of the bifurcation we have shown to exist in the directions of Weber's systematical theoretical thinkings. In dealing with his "general ideal types" his main explicit theorizing took, as we saw, the form of the construction, out of elementary units of social relation, of a whole system of possible structural types which could be thought of as "composed" of these units. This mode of theoriz-
In introducing the subject, Simmel takes the position that a new science is not normally constituted by the discovery of a new class of concrete facts which has never been the object of scientific analysis before, but by “drawing a new line” through the facts, which brings them into relations to each other which had hitherto not been adequately understood. It is as such a “new line” drawn through the facts that he wishes his concept “form of relationship” or social “form” to be understood.

As has so often proved to be the case, in this one it should prove fruitful to start by inquiring what it is that Simmel primarily distinguishes his “form” from. It is what he calls “content.” He is very careful to state that nothing is to be inferred from the terms “form and content” as such. Their meanings in logic or epistemology must above all be held to constitute at best analogies. The meaning in the present context is to be taken directly from observation of the particular facts.

Human social life he conceives primarily in terms of process. Men have a variety of different impulses, ends, interests, which constitute motivations of their action. As such these motivations are not “social.” They have social implications only in so far as they lead to interaction between individuals. In so far as this interaction takes place, “society” (Vergesellschaftung) exists. In so far as this is true there will be relatively constant and determinant forms or modes of interaction. It is as such modes of interaction that Simmel defines his concept “social form.”

Simmel is very careful to point out that form in this sense is an abstraction which cannot even be thought of as concretely existent by itself. Form and content together constitute a concrete unity. In the concrete facts of social life they are always bound together. Form cannot be thought of as existing by itself at all, content not in so far as there is “society.” Form is thus an aspect of social life.

It is important, however, to understand just what kind of process of abstraction Simmel is here carrying out. His starting point is a classification of concrete “motives.” These are divisible into classes of concrete impulses, interests, ends, etc. Each of these classes has peculiarities of its own which make it legitimate to regard it as the object of a separate science. This is looking at the subject-matter of this group of sciences from the subjective point of view. A corresponding classification can also be made from the objective point of view, which will yield classes of concrete acts. The two classifications correspond in that one of the classes of interests or motives serves to activate each of the classes of concrete acts. This procedure yields a classification of what Simmel calls the “social sciences.” According both to the classification of motives and of the externally observable characters of the acts, their subject-matter is economic, political, religious, aesthetic, etc.

Unfortunately Simmel does not anywhere attempt to carry through this clas-