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Comments on Lechner's "How Is *Society Possible?"*

With his article "How *is* Society Possible?", Frank Lechner has performed an exceedingly valuable service for students of Georg Simmel's *Sociology.* As Lechner notes, while Simmel's concepts were often criticized by his contemporaries and in his early reception, more recent scholarship has mostly taken the role of champions and expositors of Simmel's work. For their part, early critics rarely engaged in close examination of Simmel's texts. Lechner's essay represents a critical and welcome departure from both tendencies. It undertakes a close study of Simmel's writings and subjects them to the sort of critical scrutiny befitting of a classic, more in line, as he notes, with how authors like Max Weber or Emile Durkheim have routinely been treated.

For this sort of critical scrutiny to be authentic, the outcome must not be pre-determined. It must be possible for key concepts and theoretical arguments to be found unclear, redundant, incoherent, or wanting in some or another way. By the same token, such scrutiny can be a provocation to clarify or revise Simmel's ideas in ways that strengthen them or allow their meaning and limits to be grasped in a new light. Doing so promises to not only improve our understanding of Simmel, but also the theoretical traditions for which he serves as a classic. A rich critical-interpretative tradition of Weber scholarship has certainly advanced action theory by subjecting Weber's typologies to serious scrutiny. Advancing a similarly critical discourse concerning Simmel's ideas about the a priori conditions of society or forms of interaction may well advance relational or interactionist or formal social theory.

It is in this spirit that I have sought to respond to Lechner's provocative essay. I consider my response to be a kind of theoretical experiment: given the incisiveness of Lechner's critiques, what sort of defense of Simmel is possible? I defend Simmel not out of any loyalty to him or a conviction that he cannot be wrong but because it is through such ongoing processes of critique-defense-critique that collective learning progresses.

In this brief comment, I proceed in three steps. First, and most importantly, I evaluate Lechner's claims about the substantive content of the three a prioris. Lechner argues that two of three are redundant, the third does not work as Simmel envisaged, and as a whole they are incomplete. In response, I offer an interpretation of the a prioris, somewhat at odds with the conventions of the literature, that I argue can avoid these criticisms. Second, I evaluate Lechner's claims to the effect that the a prioris in "How is Society Possible?" fail to provide principles of empirical application. I agree with this claim, but argue that this is at it should be, given that Simmel conceived his a prioris as transcendental conditions of social experience, similar to their Kantian analogies such as space and time. Third, I suggest that much confusion could be cleared up by taking seriously the proposition that in *Sociology* Simmel uses multiple conceptions of form.

I

An overall point of agreement with Lechner: Simmel's excursus on "How is Society Possible?" is a very odd piece. It does not integrate easily into *Sociology* as a whole, and is at best in need of some serious hermeneutic effort to clarify its ideas. At worst it is contradictory and incomplete. I can report that in multiple conversations Don Levine discussed his dislike for it with me, noting that it had led readers down blind alleys trying to synthesize it with the rest of the book. Levine moreover thought Simmel erred in departing from the version of neo-Kantianism he had pursued in the *Philosophy of History* – i.e. that the relevant epistemological

categories are those that the scientific observer requires to understand a given subject matter, not those (supposedly) necessarily employed by actors engaged in interaction. Acknowledging that Don might have been right, for present purposes, however, I aim to articulate what I think Simmel must have been groping towards for the ideas in the excursus to make sense, even if he did not always express it clearly.

Are the first and second a prioris redundant, as Lechner claims? Lechner articulates a thought of which any sensitive reader of Simmel will feel the force. It can seem like the second a priori is nothing more than the negative image of the first. If the first is, as Uta Gerhardt has suggested, the "role a priori" -- whereby we must assume that the other stands in some role or other in order to categorize them as a possible interaction partner -- then the second would be another version of this same phenomenon: that part of the other that does not fall under the social category. This is what Gerhardt calls the "a priori of individuality."

I agree with Lechner that the first and second a prioris are redundant *if* Gerhardt is correct in glossing them as the "role" and "individuality" a prioris. However, when I try to make the case to myself about the coherence and distinctness of the three a prioris, I take a different approach. Key to my approach is an effort to keep the analogy with Kant fairly strict. Kant started from the experience of nature as governed by laws. He did not question this experience. He made it his task to ask how the experience is possible.

Recognizing this crucial starting point for a Kantian-style transcendental argument means the formulation of the experience of which we are trying to find the transcendental conditions becomes very important. If the experience in question for Kant was of nature's lawfulness, then the corresponding experience for sociology would presumably be of sociality governed by principles of interaction. I am unsure if Simmel ever articulated such an experiential starting point precisely but here is the closest statement I can find in this direction from Simmel himself:

> "immerhin weiss jeder den andern als mit ihm verbunden"
> (Simmel 1908)

I propose a simplified version of this this statement, which highlights how it can function as a starting point for a Simmelian "transcendental deduction":

> "I know the other as bound up with me."

The value in stressing this formulation is that it starts from consciousness of sociality, namely, experiencing oneself as in some way interconnected with others. The philosophical question then becomes how this is possible. The formulation points the way in that it contains three terms out of which Simmel's three a prioris logically grow, and indicates why they form a unity.[1]

The three key terms are: "know," "other," and "I." I believe one could reconstruct each a priori as the condition under which each of these are possible. Let us try do so all-too-briefly as a kind of conceptual experiment.

First, consider "know." If we look at Simmel's discussion of the 1st a priori, the primary accent is *not* to my mind on the concept of roles. Rather, it is on ideality. If we have to give it a name, I would call it the "a priori of ideality." We can see this in the fact that Simmel begins his discussion with the idea of humanity, then he moves to social categories or roles as ideal constructions of the

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[1] That said, Simmel himself seems to hesitate on whether he thinks the three a prioris are complete, when in the end of the first section of "How is Society Possible?" he says he is "sketching several" of the a priori conditions, suggesting there could be many others. The issue of the completeness of the categories was of course a major issue in post-Kantian philosophy, about which Hegel was very critical of Kant.

other, but then goes immediately to each individual's own personal ideality – e.g. the ideal Dan Silver and the ideal Frank Lechner. These are not social roles like "professor," and this range of examples cannot be neatly subsumed under the notion of "role a priori." However, they make sense if we conceive this first a priori as the a priori of ideality, in such a way that follows from the term "know" in my formulation. If I am going to know the other as bound up with me, the other must be able to enter into my consciousness as an idea. Roles are one form of ideality, but they are not the only one. At this level of analysis, at the very high level of transcendental conditions of knowing, all that matters is that there must be some ideality that makes the other potentially conceivable to me. To reduce the a priori to "role" would be like reducing Kant's transcendental conception of space to squares rather than considering geometry as a whole.

Once we see that the first a priori is not the a priori of roles but of ideality, we can see that the 2nd is not functionally equivalent to it. The opposite of "ideal" is "actual," not "other." The opposite of "other" is "same." They are functionally different concepts. The 2nd a priori in my formulation elaborates the conditions under which the term "other" is possible. If I were conscious of the other not as the other but as identical to me, then the experience of relatedness would not be possible. It would be a communion not a relation. For relation, there must be distance and secrecy. To be sure, as Lechner notes, this can vary from friendship to impersonal relationships, but the varying is not particularly relevant from the transcendental point of view. Causal relations can vary too in various dimensions. From the transcendental point of view what matters however is that causality is the condition of the possibility of perceiving objective reality. Even friendship or love would not be possible unless there were otherness. I would therefore not call this the a priori of individuality. Instead, I prefer to refer to it as the "a priori of otherness."

I then view the third a priori as an articulation of the conditions under which the "I" and "me" are possible in the experience of "I

know the other as bound up with me." Lechner stresses – correctly in my view – that "vocation" is the key to understanding what Simmel is after with the third a priori. But the fundamental idea, I think, is about the experience of being *both* a subject ("I") and object ("me"), with clear premonitions of Mead. That is what the notion of vocation points toward: there is something out there that gives *me* direction (as an object), but whatever that is, it cannot be conceived as totally alien to me. Following the path it lays out for me must provide some way to develop my own inner potential (as a subject). The consciousness of the other would not be a consciousness for *me* without that. This principle conditions not just bureaucratic relations, as Lechner notes, but just as much close friendship relations: a friendship group that imposed no demands on me, and offered me no path toward cultivating my inner subjective potential, would not be recognizable as such.

In fact, Lechner formulates this very thought quite beautifully in his essay. He writes: "To view the other as "with" us, to view the social unit as a joint accomplishment, she cannot just sit there across from us, embodying a role or at peace with a position in society, but must mean something to us and demand something of us." However, I would see this formulation not, with Lechner, as an additional condition. Rather, I view it as an elaboration of what Simmel had in mind with the 3rd a priori. I am tempted to consider similarly Lechner's other proposal of adding "the definition of the situation" as another condition of social experience beyond Simmel's a prioris. It seems to me to be an excellent elaboration of what Simmel on my reading was groping toward with the 1st a priori.

In sum: in my view, it would be correct to describe the 1st and 2nd a prioris as functionally equivalent *if* it were correct to characterize them as the a prioris of roles and individuality, respectively. Rather than accept the consequence, I propose we deny the antecedent: they are not a prioris of roles and individuality but rather of ideality and otherness. This proposal is admittedly based upon a rational reconstruction of what would be required for Simmel's own statements to survive the cogent criticism offered by

Lechner. A further indication of the value of this line of argumentation, however, is that it obviates Lechner's second criticism. Under my post-Kantian reconstruction, the additional assumptions suggested by Lechner are unnecessary, since they are already contained within Simmel's three a prioris. I take the unity and simplicity offered by my proposal to be an additional point in its favor.[2]

II

Taking seriously the Kantian logic of Simmel's argumentation suggests a response to a second line of criticism Lechner mounts. We may broadly construe this line as concerning principles of application of the a prioris to empirical situations. Examples include Lechner's proposition that, regarding the 1st a priori, Simmel fails to "specify how the selection occurs in fact, how particular people get fit to particular roles, apart from suggesting that it somehow stems from an otherwise unrepresented "common basis of life." Similarly, Lechner suggests that Simmel's a prioris rarely occur as explicit conscious representations, beyond, in the case of the 2nd a priori for example, a very "minimal awareness that my counterpart is more-than-social, the individuality a priori is in fact necessary to enable

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[2] As an aside, I believe my suggestion also obviates Lechner's claims that Simmel presumes unschematized individuals onto which social concepts are imposed and that Simmel's three a prioris are not sufficiently relational. Regarding the latter, on my proposal, Simmel begins from the experience of relatedness, and then asks how that is possible. To answer that question, he develops concepts, in my terms, of ideality, otherness, and selfhood. Even if these are not relational (though that is a debatable claim), that may be beside the point. They are the conditions of the possibility of relatedness. To again press the Kantian analogy, space is the condition of objectivity, but space is not an object. By the same token, I am skeptical that Simmel is motivated by the Parsonian problem of order, and so it is not surprising that his concepts are not formed in reference to that question. Simmel's problem is that of relatedness, in my view, though clearly at some level the two – relatedness and order – do bear upon one another.

me to construe a coherent picture of our tie." In addition, Lechner points out that, even to the extent that we do sometimes employ the a prioris, we do so in highly variable ways. Thus in the case of the 3rd a priori, "its use would seem even more variable than the individuality a priori—feasible in a bureaucratic setting, less so in a friendship group." Selection, conscious representation, and variability – these are three areas in which, according to Lechner, Simmel fails to deal with processes by which the supposed a priori conditions of social experience would attain empirical validity through actual social processes and development.

These are crucial points, which here I will consider briefly in turn. Consider the claim about selection, that "Simmel does not specify how the selection occurs in fact, how particular people get fit to particular roles." If we approach Simmel's text as a piece of post-Kantian philosophy, then I do not think he is under any obligation to specify this, at least in the transcendental mode of argumentation of "How is Society Possible?". Kant was similarly under no obligation to explain how a specific entity comes to be in a specific position in space and time. That is for physics. Similarly, it is for sociology as an empirical science to explain how specific individuals become selected into specific roles. But the condition of possibility of doing so is an entirely different type of question.

Second, consider the claim about conscious representation. As Lechner rightly notes, we can pursue much if not all of our social life without any direct appeal to the a prioris. "In asking for directions, the fit of the other with a structure of unequal elements is immaterial to me and her, in forming a party you and I need not consider what we do in our private lives as non-members, and so on." This is no doubt the case. Yet from the point of view of the sort of transcendental argumentation of "How is Society Possible?", it is beside the point. On that level of argumentation, it does not matter much if one "considers" these principles in any explicit way while forming a party or the like. The argument would be that one could not do so intelligibly without those principles holding. Similarly, I need not consider space, time, or causality, but I could

not intelligibly engage with nature without them. Likewise, it is true that, as Lechner argues, political sociologists can carry out their studies without recourse to Simmelian epistemic assumptions. But by the same token, physicists need not (and maybe should not?) read Kant in order to pursue their research.

Third is the claim that the three a prioris of "How is Society Possible?" do not vary and so presumably cannot be studied empirically. Lechner elaborates this point by referencing Simmel's discussion of faithfulness. There Simmel writes, "Faithfulness is…one of the *a priori* conditions of society which alone make society possible (at least as we know it), in spite of the extraordinary differences of degree in which this psychic state exists." Faithfulness, Lechner notes, clearly develops through some social process, and is moreover a psychological state that varies in intensity. Here one must note that Simmel is, unfortunately, rather loose with the phrase "a priori," and uses it in a somewhat promiscuous way throughout the text. For example, in the discussion in chapter 2 of arbitration, Simmel writes, "The voluntary appeal to an arbitrator, to whom one submits *a priori*, presupposes a greater subjective trust in the objectivity of the judgment than does any other form of adjudication." Similar uses of "a priori" abound.

Yet these uses cannot be meant in the same sense as the a prioris of "How is Society Possible?" And in fact Lechner points toward the key distinction. The a prioris of "How is Society Possible" are transcendental principles. As such, they do not vary in empirical experience any more than Kantian "space" varies in intensity. By contrast, particular natural forces such as gravity may vary in intensity, for example, depending on mass or size, even as they constitute the conditions under which empirical physical existence proceeds. While Simmel's loose use of "a priori" is regrettable, it seems he had some similar distinction in mind, between basic empirical pre-requisites or forces (mostly discussed throughout the body of *Sociology*) and transcendental conditions (mostly discussed in "How is Society Possible?").

To summarize the main point of this section: Lechner is correct that Simmel does not have a theory of the empirical application of the three a prioris. But that is as it should be. They are not empirical concepts; they are transcendental concepts.

III

I conclude my response by suggesting a potential diagnosis of what opens Simmel's writings up to the sort of criticism Lechner undertakes. As we saw above in the case of the term "a priori," Simmel uses some key concepts in inconsistent and sometimes contradictory ways. His early critics were right about that. However, I believe it is possible to disambiguate Simmel's thinking to some degree, and that doing so can help to understand both why interpreters may come to believe that his concepts are inconsistent and point toward a path for productively moving forward.

Elsewhere (with Miloš Broćić) I have argued that in *Sociology* Simmel employs three distinct conceptions of "form" (Silver and Broćić: 2019). Briefly, those are: 1) a transcendental conception, featured in "How is Society Possible?," in which a presuppositional logic pre-dominates, and "formal" is contrasted to "empirical"; 2) a more static geometric conception, featured throughout much of the book, in which "form" contrasts to "content" and refers to the schematic elements of interactions that cut across many substantive domains (such as exchange, hierarchy, and the like); 3) a dynamic vitalist conception, also present in *Sociology* but more prominent in Simmel's later writings, in which "form" contrasts to "life" and refers to the configurations into which creative energies congeal as they realize themselves, and against which they struggle to free themselves thereafter.

Much confusion arises in interpreting *Sociology* from not clearly distinguishing these three conceptions. Not doing so leads to two ultimately unfruitful interpretative paths. One direction starts from the assumption that there must be one notion of form throughout, and therefore we must unify under one conception all of Simmel's

discussions thereof. This to some extent is the path taken by Uta Gerhardt (and which Levine cautioned against); it leads, as Lechner rightly points out, to stretching very far to find the three a prioris at work throughout the rest of the book. Lechner's analysis, however, strikes me as the reverse image of this same tendency. It too starts from the proposition that the transcendental conception of form *should* be consistent with the other usages of form by Simmel later in the book. And when it finds that they are not consistent, it asserts the primacy of one or the other, or that the entire endeavor is potentially incoherent.

My proposal is more pragmatic, suggesting we look to Simmel's practical use of his key terms, and not expect them to do more practical (argumentative) work than can be rightly expected of them. Let's leave the transcendental concepts in their proper domain, in turn freeing ourselves up to use or expand or add to the array of geometric or vitalistic concepts in their domains. That seems to me to be a tractable approach that allows sociological research to proceed without troubling itself with transcendental philosophical questions, not because those questions are not vital, but because they are the proper subject of philosophy. This admittedly leaves us with a potential new philosophical question, about how and whether the three notions of constitute a unity. But that is a different, metaphysical topic, and one for another day.

Works Cited

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