FRANK J. LECHNER

Rejoinder to Silver on "How Is *Society Possible?"*

By inserting his famous essay "How Is Society Possible?" [HISP] into the first chapter of his *Soziologie*, Georg Simmel appeared to invite readers to view it in connection with what came before and after—to read it backward, as helping to clarify the problem of sociology described in the first section of the opening chapter, and forward, as part of accounting for real "processes of sociation" analyzed in the rest of the book. Recent work on Simmel, for example by Helle, Fitzi, and Gerhardt, takes up this invitation by interpreting HISP as more than a free-standing essay. What matters about HISP, this work suggests, is not *just* the mental picture-within that social actors form but *also* the way their constructs affect *Wechselwirkungen* in general and in specific forms. In this vein, Donald Levine (1989: 168) straightforwardly described the a prioris Simmel lays out as "preconditions of interaction." In my paper on HISP, I adopt this interpretive approach but with a distinctly critical twist, questioning both the adequacy of the a prioris as answers to the main question and their coherence with the rest of Simmel's sociology.

In his generous but skeptical comments on my paper, Daniel Silver challenges what he calls the "conventional reading" of HISP by arguing that we should understand it as a purely transcendental Kantian exercise, focused only on identifying conditions for the possibility of actors' sense of relatedness, of me-being-bound-up-with-you. In Silver's creative "rational reconstruction," Simmel's three a prioris, redefined as "ideality," "otherness," and "selfhood," work well as plausible answers to the question raised in the essay.

Perhaps most importantly, Silver's reading makes the concerns of some prior work and several of my own criticisms moot: HISP really was not meant to address the problem of sociology or contribute to the analysis of social forms, and we should therefore not judge it by external standards of coherence or utility. On this reading, a critique could still ask how well Simmel executes his neo-Kantian agenda (as I also do in my paper), but no more.

While Silver certainly presents an intriguing alternative, in this brief rejoinder I first argue that some textual evidence and the hybrid nature of HISP's argument suggest that we should not confine it to a purely transcendental domain, and then respond to Silver's version of the a prioris to reiterate that they are problematic both as answers to Simmel's question and as ingredients of sociological analysis.

Interpreting HISP

Simmel himself gives some justification for the broad conventional reading I adopt in my paper. At the outset of his essay, Simmel stresses that his question invokes a methodology "wholly different" than the one Kant applied to nature, that the answer refers to conditions in the elements through which they combine "in reality" into society, and that in a sense the "entire content" of his book helps to answer the question about how individuals synthesize (themselves) into society (Simmel 1992: 45/Wolff 1959: 340). He argues that the aprioris are not just "ideational logical presuppositions" but *also* "more or less completely determine the actual processes of sociation" (ibid. 46/341); he writes that assigning others to a type "operates as the a priori condition of additional interactions that arise among individuals" (49/344); he speaks of the second a priori as one of "empirical social life" and "empirical society" (53/347 , 56-7/351); and he similarly treats the third as an a priori of "empirical society," not necessarily brought to full consciousness but a prerequisite expressed in actual practice (*in der Realität der Praxis sich ausdrückenden Voraussetzung*) (60-1/354-5).

These and other passages suggest that Simmel himself directly relates the conditions for the "possibility" of a certain *Bild* to the unfolding of social practices. While Simmel, as usual, allows for interpretive latitude, at least some of the textual evidence thus seems to run against Silver's more restrictive view.

That Simmelian justification also makes good sense. An orthodox Kantian analysis might have focused on the categories needed to form coherent sociological knowledge by outside scientific observers of society confronted with manifold sense impressions. As Silver notes, Donald Levine would have preferred an analysis along these lines. But this is not what HISP does; instead, it locates the conditions for coherence within active insiders. That would seem to suggest that they matter to them *as* active insiders *differently* than they would for an idealized scientific observer compiling a body of objective knowledge. Thinking of HISP in relation to the overall agenda set by the first part of chapter 1 in *Soziologie* and carried out in the subsequent analysis of forms productively exploits the unique move Simmel makes to attribute the mental power of unifying manifold experience to the participating elements, to the actual carriers of association—his phenomenological twist, so the speak, on a transcendental argument. It would be unfortunate if the *Exkurs* turned into a cul-de-sac, where understanding what makes society possible has *no* bearing on how the actors *use* their *Bild* in constructing forms of reciprocal influence, where the possibility of knowing society does not affect their doing society. Silver's reading of HISP as a purely philosophical argument risks missing the implication of Simmel's hybrid move. I think the implication mattered to Simmel and should matter to us.

Beyond such considerations, which guide the critique in my paper, a slightly more speculative argument points to an even deeper connection between HISP and the rest of Simmel's sociology. One could ask if Simmel adequately defends the very premise that society *is* possible. Kant could reasonably assume that "nature" existed as an object of organized knowledge, and then delve into the apparatus

of reason that made it possible while leaving actual inquiry into physical phenomena to the physicists. As noted, a strictly analogous operation for "society" would look for conditions in the capacity for organizing knowledge on the part of an idealized outside observer, leaving detailed analysis to sociologists. But the assumption that participants, even if also treated in somewhat idealized fashion, actually *are* able to construct the postulated *Bild* seems more ambitious, since it cannot assume an existing body of knowledge on the order of physics or history or sociology. In the absence of such a foundation, the strongest argument-in-principle for the plausibility of the assumption would seem to have to rely on the existence of society as such: the actual forming of forms of reciprocal effect among human beings, the overwhelming fact that we pull off practical coherence, presupposes that the participants have certain formative capacities. As Simmel says, "It is the processes of interaction [*Wechselwirkung*] which signify the fact of being [as]sociated [*vergesellschaftet*] to the individual" (47/342). Put differently, forms of *Wechselwirkung* are possible only if the constitutive elements are able mutually to construct images of the other as related to themselves. One can then ask, as Simmel does, what makes that construction, "society" in a particular sense, possible. But the implication of what we might call this transcendental induction as justification—it is reasonable to assume "society" as *Bild* is possible because actors actually produce social forms and know that they can produce them—is that the *Bild* in turn must do *some* work in the forming of forms. If so, then the a prioris are *also* at least partial conditions for effectuating the forms through association. And if that is a reasonable inference, reading HISP as more than a transcendental argument focused on consciousness becomes that much more plausible.

The a prioris

Silver elegantly renders the "society" of which the possibility must be proved as "I know the other as bound up with me." But does this capture the full experience presumably at issue in HISP?

His preceding statement, that the experience to be accounted for is of "sociality governed by principles of interaction," seems broader in scope and refers to interaction. It hints at more than the fact of relatedness or being bound to the other as a static image. In the spirit of Simmel's analysis of *Vergesellschaftung*, the formulation suggests that the society it must be possible for us to construe includes some sort of process—not just being-bound but the ways in which bonding comes about. That intuition informs my critique where it proposes additional a prioris that enable actors to conceive of active, reciprocal engagement with the other as a dynamic partner, according to "principles of interaction." I suggest that this approach fits more easily with Simmel's treatment of "society" outside of HISP.

Silver argues that equating the first a priori with typifying actors in terms of a role is "reductive," since Simmel stresses ideality in a more general way—that is, an ideal version of the other enables her to enter my consciousness as an idea. I concede that in the relevant passages the first a priori does not simply refer to role assignment, for example because "human being" operates as the primary general type that enables us to relate to the other. Yet Simmel also clearly refers to the way in which, within particular circles, the veiled view of the other as "member" (*Mitglied*) serves as a priori. In addition to the human being as type, he recognizes, as part of the first a priori, the "social generality" (*soziale[n] Allgemeinheit*) to which we belong (1992: 50). While Silver corrects a bias in the conventional reading, he thus also slightly overstates the case. In the critical mode of my paper, I would further question how well Simmel's take on more-than-role-based typification works as a priori. I suppose that conceiving of the other as "human being" is indeed a condition for construing relatedness—but that is not saying very much. Silver's more specific point, that to think of relatedness or ordered sociality we must conceive of the "ideal" X, seems problematic: it is not clear how we would go about doing that, or why it is necessary as a general condition for creating our *Bild*. By contrast, it is quite clear, in a general way, how we might treat the other as role player or

fellow member, and this operation seems intrinsically more meaningful as something that makes society possible. To take an example related to Silver's own, I would not know how to construe the "ideal Dan" in this exchange and I do not think that I need to do so to view Silver as a relevant other; assigning him to the idealized role of sociological "colleague" and fellow "member" of the circle of Simmel scholars serves perfectly well to make society possible, both as a construct on my end and as an actual process of mutual engagement.

Silver suggests that the second a priori "elaborates the conditions under which the term "other" is possible." Here his reconstruction turns into major remodeling. For one thing, the text itself does not address the issue in these terms. As noted in my paper, Simmel simply says that "every element of the group is not only a societal part but, in addition, something else" and that in our picture of the other "non-social imponderables" come into play to add "nuance." Knowing that the other is more than my partner is a condition for conceiving of her as my partner. I still think that Gerhardt's label, "the individuality a priori," fits. Even by transcendental standards, Silver's own version of what he calls the "a priori of otherness" seems overly generic: indeed, to conceive of the other as related to me, I must be able to see her as non-identical—but that again is not saying very much. As I read him, Simmel says more. And while Silver stresses that variation is not relevant from a transcendental point of view, Simmel himself addresses variation in the way categorization according to the second a priori works, for example between romantic and economic relationships. Since I do not think Silver effectively undermines my reading of the second a priori, I believe the relevant critique in my paper stands.

On the meaning of the third a priori Silver and I are not as far apart. Whereas I stress the importance of fit, or "harmony" as noted by Simmel, with structural position as the key element, Silver emphasizes that "the path it lays out for me must provide some way to develop my own inner potential (as a subject)." We both view vocation as the prime case in point for Simmel. But Silver adds that

"the fundamental idea, I think, is about the experience of being *both* a subject ("I") and object ("me")." I am unsure if that Meadian formulation quite captures Simmel's meaning, and I would in any case question how the a priori framing of my experience of being subject and object can work as a category that helps me construe the other as related partner. Even if we take the third a priori as a purely transcendental category, realizing that its use "would seem even more variable than the individuality a priori," as I put it in the paper, is a problem, since conditions that make society possible should make it possible in all conditions, in all its manifestations. The fact that we can see it at work much more clearly in some than in other social settings, as described by Simmel himself, undermines its transcendental status as a general a priori that "makes society possible."

Conclusion

Dan Silver has issued a strong challenge, not just to me but also to other Simmel scholars. Partly for the sake of clarity, partly to spur further reflection by colleagues, this rejoinder has accentuated differences with his account of HISP. For now, I conclude that a conventional but critical reading of HISP has merit and reveals real problems with Simmel's a prioris. Interpreting Simmel in this way, while building on his argument, may also be more sociologically productive than demarcating HISP as a philosophical one-off. But on what grounds we should prefer one interpretation over another, or judge the validity of arguments about the possibility of x, remains a debatable issue.

References

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