

UC Santa Barbara

CSISS Classics

Title

Georg Simmel, The Sociology of Space. *CSISS Classics*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7s73860q>

Author

Fearon, David

Publication Date

2004



Georg Simmel: The Sociology of Space By David Fearon

Background

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was a major contributor to social science thought whose work offers important insights on the social construction of space. Born in Berlin, he studied history and philosophy at the University of Berlin, but also studied with some of the preeminent professors in psychology, anthropology, and sociology. After receiving his Ph.D. in 1881, Simmel decided to remain at the university as an unpaid lecturer, living on student fees and a substantial inheritance. During his 15 years, his courses in sociology, philosophy, history, ethics, and cultural criticism were popular with students and were respected in academic circles. His own university, however, refused to promote him to an academic post. His status as an outsider may have contributed to his wide range of interests and innovative thought. He published more than 200 articles and over a dozen books in several social science fields. As a generalist, Simmel did not inspire a particular school of thought or methodology. Many social scientists, however, looked to Simmel as a source of insight for their work. His writings on the sociology of space are a case study of Simmel's contributions to social science concepts.



Innovation

Much of Simmel's writing on space appears in two articles, first published in 1903, "The Sociology of Space" and "On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms." He revised and expanded these for a single chapter in his major 1908 book, *Soziologie*, adding three essays on "The Social Boundary," "The

Sociology of the Senses," and "The Stranger" (c.f., Simmel 1997 for recent translations).

The chapter centers around spatial themes including (a) the socially relevant aspects of space, (b) the effect of spatial conditions upon social interaction, and (c) upon forms of social, physical, and psychological distance. As typical of his writing, however, Simmel did not present an organized theory of space. Rather, his interweaving of concepts, historically oriented examples and context, and occasional tangential discussions, provide heuristic tools for a sociological approach to space.

Simmel's approach to spatial analysis, especially in "The Sociology of Space" was, in part, a continuation of his uncompleted project to express the preconditions of human sociation by formal categories of time, mass, and number, which he called "social geometry." What the philosopher Kant had approached in the abstract, Simmel would attempt to catalog as the spatial reality of social life. He focuses on five basic properties of space:

1. Exclusivity or uniqueness space: While no two bodies can occupy the same space, social space varies by the configuration and exclusivity of the groups occupying it, such as the exclusive nation-state, or the universal Catholic church.
2. Space may be subdivided for social purposes and framed in boundaries. In contrast to natural boundaries, the social boundary is "not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that is formed spatially," meaning boundaries provide special configurations for experience and interaction. For example, by reinforcing social order within political boundaries (e.g., as a basis for nationalism) and highlighting relations across boundaries, these human inventions acquire a sense of concreteness. American Sociologists, especially [Robert Park](#), picked up on the idea of social boundaries, applying it, which Simmel did not, to issues of race and social class.
3. The localizing or fixing of social interaction in space also influences social formations. The church, for example brings together otherwise independent elements. Urban development relies on the fixing and individualizing of place, such as the numbering of houses and naming of streets, and its fluidity. Modernization of transportation and communication technologies, however, allow more flexible and brief interactions or no physical copresence of individuals.
4. All social interactions could be characterized by their relative degree of proximity and distance among individuals and groups. These dimensions were central to Simmel's writings on the experience of social life in the metropolis. With increasing physical proximity, "personal space" must be managed, and may lead to emotional extremes. Idealizations and

stereotypes of groups can begin to break down with physical nearness. However, with the concentration of population in cities, individuals may become "overstimulated" from the frequency and pace of interactions. Citizens therefore adopt a stance of social distance from others by taking on a reserved, detached, or blasé; attitude. They may also conform to the latest fads and fashions of dress as a way to preserve anonymity. Simmel's 1896 essay "Money in Modern Culture" discusses more fully the "urban personality."

5. The fifth dimension of special relations surround the changing of locations, such as by whole groups (e.g., nomadic tribes), individuals with particular functions (e.g., traveling salesmen) or travelers. Simmel's popular essay on "The Stranger" takes up the confluence in such individuals of spatial proximity with others from whom one is also socially distant, who is both outside a group and confronting it. Park, in the [urban ecology](#) work, cast the stranger as the migrants and marginal members of a society. Simmel, however, emphasized "strangeness" as an element of social interaction that all social relationships hold to some degree. The stranger is a case in which "spatial relations are not only determining conditions of relationships among people, but are also symbolic of those relationships."

In the 1903 article, and later 1908 chapter section, "On the Spatial Projection of Social Forms," Simmel focuses upon how social interaction produces various spatial effects and forms. He discusses four domains of spatial formation. First, social organization requires organization of space, especially at the level of political and economic institutions. For example, individuals can be treated differently by their national location. Second, authority and domination take on various spatial dimensions, such as territorial control. Third, there are spatial dimensions to social solidarity. A group's communal bonds may be stronger if they have a "home" or physical center; however, he notes that the Jewish people, post-Diaspora (and pre-Isreal), find social unity without a central location. Similarly, modern society is developing toward greater abstractness, without a center. A money economy is an example, in which objects can be thought of abstractly as pure expression of value. Also, communication technologies allow concrete spatial settings to be less important in many transactions, with today's Internet society a case in point.

Overall, Simmel's thoughts on the relation of space to the social world did not, at first, leave a legacy. This was in part because he offered mainly a collection of ideas and insights, rather than a theory or method that others might adopt. Simmel, however, clearly showed his readers the relevance of space to sociological thinking and analysis, which has only recently been rediscovered.

Publications

Simmel, Georg, David Frisby, and Mike Featherstone. *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997.

Simmel, Georg. *Soziologie: Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung*. Berlin: Duncket and Humbolt, 1958.

Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. Translated by T. Bottomore and D. Frisby. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1990.

Simmel, Georg, and Kurt H. Wolff. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950.

Related Works

Allen, John. "On Georg Simmel: Proximity, Distance and Movement." In *Thinking Space*, edited by Mike Crang and N. J. Thrift, 54–70. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

Lechner, Frank J. "Simmel on Social Space." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 3 (1991): 195–201.

Frisby, David. *Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel's Social Theory*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

Links [Georg Simmel Online: presented by Sociology in Switzerland](#)
[Georg Simmel](#)