



From Spatial Forms to Perception: Reassessing Georg Simmel's Theory of Space

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Abstract

Among the founders of sociology, it was Georg Simmel who provided the most thorough analysis and theory of space. This paper aims to reconstruct Simmel's spatial theory and his observations of spatial relations. The German sociologist engaged with spatiality in a threefold way. First, he tried to provide a systematic social theory of space; second, analyzing spatial relations was important for his diagnosis of modernity; third, he dealt with the subjective constitutions of space in his shorter, essayistic writings. This paper argues that the importance of the third strand for a sociological understanding of space has seldom been recognized in sociology. In addition, it also shows that despite the diversity in perspectives, there is an underlying coherence to Simmel's theory of space. As a result, it becomes evident that Simmel was not only ground-breaking in conceptualizing space from a sociological point of view, but that his theory of space continues to be inspirational and relevant to this day for interpreting the entanglement of social and spatial relations.

Keywords Simmel · History of sociology · Theory of space · Relationalism

Materiality or spatiality is a fundamental aspect of societies; yet sociology has, for a long time, tended to scrutinize abstract nonmaterial social relations instead, with questions of spatiality delegated to subfields such as urban studies or regional science. However, spatial structures influence social life, and, in turn, are shaped by social actions. Therefore, it is vital for sociology to acknowledge the importance of spatial relations and to contribute to their theoretical interpretation. The issue of spatiality has been gaining momentum in the interdisciplinary environment of sociology and within the discipline itself over the past decades (Crang & Thrift, 2000; Döring

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& Thielmann, 2008; Günzel, 2010; Lehnert 2011, Löw, 2016; Schroer 2006; Soja, 1989; Warf & Arias, 2009). Contemporary theoretical debates on space have often highlighted sociology's forgetfulness of space, or space blindness (Läpple, 1991, p. 163; Schroer 2006, p. 29, 2019, p. 10; Werlen 2009, p. 143). This criticism is not entirely unfounded, given sociological theory's longstanding tendency to downplay questions of spatiality. The systematic neglect of spatial relations is still persistent in a wide swath of sociological theories (rational choice theory, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, as well as Weberian, Habermasian and Parsonian theories).

That said, the diagnosis of "space blindness" appears largely overstated. While spatial issues received scant attention in sociological theories in the roughly two decades after World War II, a growing number of scholars (Bourdieu, 1996; Foucault, 1986/1967; Giddens 1985; Lefebvre, 1991/1974; Urry 1995) have stressed the significance of spatiality for social sciences since the second half of the 1960s. All social practices have spatial dimensions (Crang & Thrift, 2000: 3), and spatiality is constituted by human agency. However, space is not a mere passive reflection of social processes, but rather a constitutive part of sociality. Various attempts by classical authors of sociology, notably Simmel but also Durkheim (1982/1899; Durkheim and Mauss, 2010/1903), Mauss (2004/1906) and Halbwachs (1980/1950, 1992/1941), to interpret spatial phenomena should invite caution against the accusation of sociology's "forgetfulness of space".

In our quest to challenge the assumption of the "forgetfulness of space" (cf. Läpple, 1991, p. 163; Schroer 2019, p. 10; Werlen 2009, p. 143) it is worth invoking the centrality of spatiality to the work of one of the founders of sociology, Georg Simmel. It is no coincidence that after decades of neglect we are witnessing a revival of interest in Simmel's sociology of space (Allen, 2000; Filippov, 1998; Glauser, 2006; Lechner, 1991w, 2016/2001, p. 43–48; Schroer 2006, p. 60–81; Strassoldo, 1992; Zieleniec, 2007, p. 60–81). Notwithstanding its undisputed significance, Simmel's sociology of space has received mixed scholarly appraisals to date. While some commentators highlight his espousal of an absolutist view of space (Läpple, 1991, p. 189; Löw, 2016/2001, p. 43–48), others stress his adherence to the relational approach (Glauser, 2006). Likewise, the appreciation of his influence on subsequent problematizations of space has been ambivalent. Various commentators recognize the continuing relevance of space for Simmel's work but reproach him for downplaying its role in modern societies, which, in their view, has contributed to the side-lining of the problematics of space (Dangschat, 1996; Läpple, 1991; Schroer, 2006; Strassoldo, 1992). Other authors in turn challenge this view and attribute the scholarly neglect of space to a misinterpretation of Simmel's theory (Allen, 2000; Glauser, 2006).

Filippov (1998, p. 2–3) notes that Simmel's intense engagement with spatial issues coincided with the period when his interest in sociology was at its peak. He already laid the groundwork for his spatial theory between 1894 and 1898. This work was interrupted temporarily by the writing process of *The Philosophy of Money*, whose publication allowed Simmel to refocus his attention on the issue of space. Two of his seminal works on spatial theory, "Soziologie des Raumes" [Sociology of Space] and "Über räumliche Projektionen sozialer Formen" [On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms], were published in 1903. That same year also saw the publication of

“The Metropolis and Mental Life”, while his Kantian lectures at the University of Berlin, with one chapter dedicated to the category of space, were published in 1904. Moreover, the title of Chap. 9 of *Sociology* (2009/1908) is “Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society”.

The coming sections of the paper will attempt to provide an interpretative reconstruction of Simmel’s spatial theory. An overview of Simmel’s *oeuvre* demonstrates that space was indeed an important topic for him throughout his entire career. Simmel’s reflections on space can be grouped into three major themes. His primary interest lay in the creation of a systematic social theory of space, in order to uncover, on the one hand, the foundational qualities of space (*Raumqualitäten*) and their role in shaping social life, and, on the other, the spatial projections of social processes. Secondly, the problem of space resurfaces in Simmel’s theoretical writings on modernity, albeit mostly in the form of comments and without the concepts of the systematic considerations of spatial theory. Simmel’s spatial-theoretical reflections were commonly interpreted as a devaluation of space in the specific context of modernization theory. Drawing on Simmel’s systematic sociology of space, this paper seeks to counter such interpretations by exposing their problematic nature. Thirdly, Simmel’s writings also address subjective experiences of space. The various modes of perceiving and constructing spaces described in these essays go beyond Euclidean geometry. What follows is a reconstruction of Simmel’s insights on space in the specific order of the foregoing themes.¹

This raises the question to what extent Simmel’s theoretical reflections represent a coherent theory of space, or merely a fragmented set of disjointed ideas. As argued below, Simmel’s reflections on space, despite their thematic diversity and differences in emphasis, form a quasi-single narrative unified by his distinctive relational epistemology. Simmel’s theory of space is a major contribution to the theoretical interpretation of the social significance of spatial relations, and it continues to be instructive for sociologists today.

Simmel’s Systematic Social Theory of Space

Simmel’s systematic inquiries into space are grounded in his basic sociological assumptions. For Simmel, society is not a given but “exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction” (Simmel, 1971b/1908, p. 23). Interaction or reciprocal interaction (*Wechselwirkung*)² refers to sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*), that is, the unremitting processes of forming society. The resultant social forms are the structural aspects of interactions between actors. In other words, society is a result of the relent-

¹ Alternatively, a discussion of Simmel’s better-known modernization theory could precede the presentation of his systematic spatial theory since Simmel developed the former earlier than his systematic approach. However, proceeding from the abstract theoretical framework to particular topics appears to be a more productive approach. The conceptual framework of systematic spatial theory allows for a more complex appreciation of Simmel’s ideas on the interplay between modernity and spatiality, which would be more difficult in the reverse order.

² As Kaern has pointed out, the German term *Wechselwirkung* has a broader meaning than just action or behavior, hence he opted for translating it more literally as “reciprocal effect” (Kaern, 1983, p. 175).

less involvement, stabilization and breaking off of human reciprocal interactions, and thus of the unceasing emergence and dissolution of forms through processes of sociation. Reciprocal interaction, sociation, form: this conceptual triad with its mutually defining elements lies at the core of Simmel's sociology, which leaves the study of content (motives of interactions) to other disciplines. The relational nature of sociality (Simmel, 2004, p. 99–102) compels us to abandon absolutist approaches to knowledge based on the primacy of substances in favor of a relativism emphasizing the primacy of interaction:

For life is the un[c]easing relativity of opposites, the determination of the one through the other and the other through the one; the surging restlessness in which all being can exist only as being conditioned (Simmel, 1993/1911, p. 184).

While Simmel did not adhere to the kind of relativism that denies the existence of objective reality, he understood reality as being constituted by relations, which establishes him as a forerunner of relational sociology (Ruggieri, 2017, p. 44). Simmel was seeking to align his insights on space with his relativistic/relationist theoretical stance, meaning that he was inclined toward a relationist concept of spatiality rather than an absolutist one. In the absolutist view, space is a pre-existing entity that contains all social life. Space is treated as a neutral container within which social actions and processes unfold (Löw, 2016/2001, p. 25). The differentiation in the social sciences between absolutist and relationist concepts of space is borrowed from physical-philosophical theories. Space is thus vital for but not constitutive of society, a neutral backdrop against which social life plays out. However, as contemporary theorists of space have pointed out (Löw, 2016, Chap. 2), the absolutist distinction between space and society undermines – precisely because it treats space as a neutral container of objects and social life – the recognition of space as being socially constructed and its nature as a product of human agency, which in turn affects the lives of its producers. Rejecting the idea of space as a container, the relational approach treats space as being constituted by the interrelations of objects, whose meaning is shaped by the interpretative perceptions and experiences of actors (Löw, 2016/2001). Hence, spaces are social spaces produced by social practices (Lefebvre, 1991/1974). To assert his relationism, Simmel merged formal sociological theory with Kantian insights. As such, Simmel answered the question of “what is space” in a Kantian manner in one of his lectures on the German philosopher at the University of Berlin.³ Accordingly, space is not an independent reality but rather a particular order of perceptions:

What does this infinite container around us mean, the container in which we float as lost dots, but which we imagine together with its contents, which is therefore in us just as we are in it? (...) I will proceed from the Kantian distinction between sensual perception and cognition. In fact, for perceptual elements to become intuitions (*Anschauung*)⁴ our consciousness has to arrange them

³ I relied on the second revised version instead of the 1904 edition.

⁴ For the difficulties in translating *Anschauung*, see Bird (1962, p. 64).

according to our idea of “spatiality” (...) The term “spatial intuition” (*Raumanschauung*) (...) is a tautology. We do not glance at the space of things as if it were some kind of object; intuition denotes the process whereby our perceptions come to produce that particular, uncognizable yet sensible order called “spatiality” (Simmel, 1913, pp. 59, 60).

The term “infinite container” used by Simmel at the beginning of the quote is somewhat misleading – it is not intended to invoke the absolutist idea of an objectively existing container space external to us, but one constituted by intuition (*Anschauung*). In his systematic spatio-theoretical analyses, Simmel sought to offer a sociological re-interpretation of Kant in order to integrate the Kantian insights into the concept of formal sociology (cf. Glauser, 2006, p. 258; Lechner, 1991, p. 196).

In Simmel’s systematic reflections, the problem of spatiality is investigated from two distinct vantage points: how space frames sociation and how social processes in turn frame spatial arrangements. Chapter 9 of *Sociology* (Simmel, 2009/1908) represents the consummation of this project.⁵ Its interpretation presupposes familiarity with the contemporary intellectual milieu. In fact, Simmel was not so much addressing his message to fellow sociologists, but polemicizing against the then dominant geo-deterministic approach to social geography in imperial Germany. Underpinned by an absolutist notion of space, this theoretical strand, attributed to Friedrich Ratzel, investigated the interplay between natural and spatial assets (e.g. soil, water, topography, climate, state territory) on the one hand, and the constitution or structure of the state and national character on the other. It is in this context that we should interpret the following remark made by Simmel at the beginning of the chapter: “Among the most frequent degenerations of the human causal impulse is the cessation of the formal conditions without which particular events cannot occur for maintaining their positive, productive motives” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 543). For Simmel, unlike his German contemporaries in social geography, spatiality does not determine but rather enables specific forms of social relations:

[T]he contents of these [spatial] forms still take on the distinctive feature of their fates only through other contents; space remains always the form, in itself ineffectual, in whose modifications the real energies are indeed revealed, but only in the way language expresses thought processes that proceed certainly in words but not through words (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 543–544).

In Simmel’s view, space is a form organized by social interactions, processes, activities and energies. Consistent with Kant and contesting the geo-deterministic position, he argues that “Not space, but the divisions and conjugations (*Gliederung und Zusammenfassung*) of its parts, as emanating from the mind, have social signifi-

⁵ This chapter is comprised of two earlier papers (Simmel, 1903a, 1903b). A textual comparison shows that apart from removing a few passages, Simmel barely reworked his earlier publications. To the corpus of the chapter, he only added a few new pages of text and his excursus on the stranger (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 601–605).

cance” (Simmel, 1908, p. 461).⁶ While the next sentence describes the synthesis of space as a “specifically psychological function” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 544), this does not refer only to individual psychological operations, given that divisions and conjugations of space are also social processes. Simmel’s aim was to examine the foundational qualities of space “with which forms of social life must reckon” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 545). These essential qualities do not have social effects in and of themselves but only through mediation, as factors to be “reckoned with” that represent relevant aspects of space for given groups of people. In other words, the qualities of space exert their effects on social life only through their socially organized perceptions. The question arises whether the foundational spatial qualities with which people have to reckon are grounded in the objective properties of space or whether these qualities are products of the human imagination (or, thirdly, both). Simmel remains ambiguous in this respect:

This synthesis of the space segment (*Raumstück*) is a specifically psychological function that is certainly individually modified with every apparently “natural” reality, but the categories from which it originates of course comply, more or less vividly, with the immediacy of space (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 544).⁷

The “immediacy of space” would suggest some correspondence with objective qualities of space, yet the ambiguity of the concept leaves room for other interpretations. However, if it were the case that syntheses of “space segments” are solely informed by the objective qualities of space, this would undermine the Kantian idea of space being constituted by intuition. Despite these ambiguities, Simmel’s position can be understood as a sociological re-interpretation of the Kantian a priori category of space, as his reference to the qualities of space as being socially perceived suggests. Simmel’s inquiries are systematic in their attempt to grasp the socially perceived and relevant foundational qualities of space, which affect sociation as well as the various spatial projections of social processes and forms. Space has five foundational qualities that societies and social groups must “reckon” with in the constitution of their social lives.

The first quality of space is its exclusivity. This recalls the dilemma mentioned earlier, for exclusivity, as the wording suggests, is both imagined and real. Here the synthesis of spaces seems to be not just a (socially mediated) mental act, but one which is based on an objectively existing quality of space. This is why Simmel states that “Just as there is only one single universal space, of which all individual spaces are portions, so each portion of space has a kind of uniqueness” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 545). Exclusivity for Simmel is a quality that exists both in reality and in people’s imagination. This quality holds significance for social relations with a marked spatial component. The emergence of certain social forms requires exclusivity in a certain area. In the vein of Max Weber (1978/1921, p. 54, 2015/1919, p. 135–136), Simmel views territorial exclusivity as a specific trait of (modern) states, though this does not hold for all social relations – in fact, some do not depend on territorial exclusivity

⁶ Translation by the author.

⁷ The translation was slightly modified by the author.

(e.g. several religious denominations can co-exist on the same territory) (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 547–548).

The second significance of space for social life lies in its divisibility into portions that can be separated by borders. Space therefore lends itself to partitioning and delimitation. Through this quality, Simmel emphasizes the social construction of borders. Space makes it possible to draw boundaries, and this is a social process: the concept of “natural borders” is a myth; borders are always arbitrarily and socially constructed. “The boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological reality that is formed spatially” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 551). Despite their socially constructed nature, once boundaries are established as spatial-social formations, they affect social interactions and human consciousness (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 551).

The third socially significant aspect of space is its capacity of fixing its contents. As Simmel states, “Whether a group or specific individual elements of it or essential objects of its interest are fully fixed or spatially indefinable obviously has to influence its structure” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 556–557). An emblematic example of spatial fixity is the “pivot-point”, i.e. any spatial unit around which social relationships “revolve”. A landed estate is such a pivot: although spatially fixed, multiple and spatially dispersed transactions can occur around it, for instance if it is mortgaged or other economic transactions are attached to it (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 557–559).

The fourth essential quality of space is that it offers sensory proximity or distance for individuals interacting with one another (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 565). Unlike Tönnies (2001/1887), for whom physical proximity is tantamount to an intensification of bonds and distance to growing disentanglement, Simmel highlights the intricate interplay between proximity and distance and human relationships. The capacity for abstraction plays an essential role in this respect: while “primitive consciousness” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 566) cannot grasp the solidarity of those who live far away and the non-solidarity of those who are spatially present, the rise in intellectualization that accompanied the process of social differentiation and the expansion of the money economy have led to the depersonalization of relationships, i.e. the ability to dissociate oneself from those nearby (e.g. one’s neighbors) and to enter into relations with those who are far away.

Fifthly, space enables movement, with varying implications on social interactions (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 587). Simmel was among the first to recognize the social significance of movement or mobility, anticipating later theories (cf. Appadurai, 1990; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Spatial mobility can become relevant for sociation in various ways. Migration or the nomadic lifestyle of entire groups can be consequential: typically, these groups are, according to Simmel, not highly differentiated, their political institutions are of low complexity, and they are governed by despotic rule. Simmel also invokes cases where spatial movement or migration concerns only specific groups of people, e.g. tourist travel,⁸ which can create special, nonmundane bonds between people.

⁸ Simmel was also a pioneer in recognizing the social significance of travel, making him a forerunner to tourism studies.

Simmel's approach is systematic in that he sought to explore how the perceived foundational qualities of space shape sociation, but also because of his focus on how social relations manifest themselves in space. The spatial inscription of social processes can take various forms. Simmel mentions four, although it is not clear whether his intention was to provide an exhaustive inventory or a simple list of the most obvious manifestations.

The first form of the spatial projection of social relations is the “division of the group that follows according to spatial principles” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 605). An important common trait in Simmel's examples alluding to the state and the economy is the growing abstraction and mechanization of social relations resulting from the enforcement of the spatial/territorial principle. This typically occurs with the transition of a group from organization based on blood ties and tribal relations into more complex, rational and “mechanical” forms of social organization. In this process, territorial subdivisions gradually replace subgroups based on kinship ties (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 605–606). The neutral principle of territoriality is more suitable for nascent states, as groups closed in on themselves and unified through kinship are not conducive to the formation of stable states.⁹

The second mode of the spatialization of social relations is the phenomenon whereby sovereignty over people is projected onto space. Organizations such as states govern their territory by exerting control over their citizens and their affairs. For Simmel, the sovereignty of territory is an expression of sovereignty over people (2009/1908: 605). But the spatialization of power relations is not exclusive to state territory. The dominance of various cities or regions over others is also manifest in the physical infrastructure: if, for instance, all roads lead to the capital of an empire, this symbolically expresses – but also reproduces – the central position of the capital within the power structure (Simmel, 2009/1908: 610–611).

According to Simmel, the third typical case of the projection of sociality into space is the materialization of social relations in fixed localities (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 611). Such examples include the family, a university, or a social club, each of which has a “house”, i.e. a building or a group of buildings where these organizations and groups are domiciled. The demand of certain communities or organizations for localization elevates the “house” from its status as property into a symbol of the group and a medium of its integration. Yet, several interpersonal relationships do not rely on spatial fixity: the most vivid examples of such nonspatialized relationships being friendships or temporary alliances based on a common objective. Between these two extremes sit organizations that are not themselves domiciled, strictly speaking, but whose specific subunits are (for instance, the Catholic Church as a global organization has no fixed locality, but its parishes own buildings). While the requirement to be “domiciled” often indicates a lack of social complexity, the growing abstraction of social relations driven by social differentiation has considerably undermined the role of physical presence for interactions and social relations (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 612–613).¹⁰

⁹ On the economic processes, see Simmel (2009/1908, p. 608–609).

¹⁰ This raises the issue of the relation of physical versus social space. As early as 1927, Pitirim Sorokin (1959/1927, p. 3–6) in his *Social Mobility* differentiated between physical (or in his words, “geometrical”)

And fourthly, social relations are also projected into space by creating “empty” spaces. Spaces considered as empty do not simply indicate the absence of something, but are socially constructed spatial forms in themselves. This case is epitomized by the vacant space separating two tribes or states which do not share immediate borders. This buffer zone bolsters the groups’ capacities of self-defense and increases their internal sense of security. Empty space between groups or societies is the spatial manifestation of the principle “Do me no harm, I also do you none” (Simmel, 2009/1908, p. 615–616).

Various interpreters have labelled Simmel’s sociology as “impressionistic” (cf. Allen, 2000; Frisby, 2014/1981; Némedi 2005, p. 187), referring to his deployment of an “intuitive” or psychological method of investigation and to his typical way of discussing topics, given that he often makes minute observations which then serve as the basis for more general conclusions, albeit without the aim of creating a systematic “big picture” diagnosis. Since this paper does not intend to evaluate Simmel’s entire work in sociology, the discussion will be limited to his conceptualization of space. As Scaff has pointed out, Simmel’s systematic sociology of space has attracted limited scientific interest to date (Scaff, 2009, p. 47). Those rare commentators who have nevertheless addressed this specific strand of his spatial theory¹¹ have either limited their discussion to listing and interpreting the foundational qualities of space and the spatial projections of social processes, or merely hint at the fact that the qualities and the forms of projections may be interrelated in some way, but without delving into their deeper logic (Glauser, 2006; Scaff, 2009; Strassoldo, 1992; Zieleniec, 2007, p. 39–47). This could be due to these authors’ implicit or explicit assessment of Simmel’s sociological impressionism. According to a contrasting view (Schroer, 2006, p. 78), Simmel was so meticulous as to draw an analogy between the foundational qualities of space listed in the first half of Chap. 9 of *Sociology* and the spatial forms that he presented in the subsequent subchapter.¹² This is a plausible but somewhat exaggerated interpretation, as Simmel’s systematization was lacking such rigor. In contrast, the present paper argues that neither the assumption of “impressionism”

space and social space. Just as physical space is defined by the relations of its objects, social space is the totality of the relations among people. A person’s position in physical space and social space may overlap or be different. Two persons in physical proximity can be far from each other in social space (for example, members of different social classes present at the same location), and vice versa, people who are distant in physical space can be close to each other in social space (two bishops of the same religion, industrial workers in different regions, etc.). However, there are many cases, where positions in social and physical space converge, most prominently in the case of residential segregation in cities or places restricted to people with certain resources. The notion of social space came to fruition with Pierre Bourdieu (1996), who assumed that, by and large, social and physical space overlap. Although Simmel himself did not allude to an abstract social space, his considerations about social relations at a distance made possible by social differentiation may be interpreted as anticipating this later conceptual innovation in sociology.

¹¹ Other studies either do not address Simmel’s systematic sociology of space or mention it only briefly (Allen, 2000; Dangschat, 1996; Löw, 2016/2001).

¹² According to Schroer’s (2006, p. 78) interpretation, the following pairs can be discerned: (a) exclusivity–state; (b) divisibility into elements, delimitation–sovereign territory, central location; (c) spatial fixedness – localization in concrete places (“house”); (d) offering proximity and distance–empty space. Spatial mobility is the only exception, which, Schroer argues, has no equivalent among spatial forms. However, this assignment scheme may be problematic due to the numerous elements in Simmel’s text contradicting this interpretation.

nor that of rigorous systematization can facilitate a better understanding of Simmel's sociology of space.

Diverging from these perspectives, this paper advances the argument that Simmel's approach and method of discussion are paradoxically both overly analytical and insufficiently well-structured. Simmel is overly analytical in that his two typologies (qualities of space vs. projections into space) remain separated in the discussion.¹³ This separate discussion by its very structure does not lend itself to ascertain the connections between the foundational qualities of space and the spatial projections of social processes. However, close investigation reveals these connections. Despite their dissociation, both subchapters (i.e. the two earlier studies) discuss socio-spatial forms. Simmel first presented the specific contexts in which the (perceived) foundational qualities of space can become socially relevant and meaningful, giving rise to various socio-spatial forms. All qualities give rise to various spatial forms. For instance, exclusivity can facilitate the emergence of the state or the guild as a socio-spatial configuration. The notion of the boundary as a socially constructed spatial form highlights the quality of divisibility, while spatial fixity is the precondition of the pivot and the "house" (the latter two examples are cited only in the second half of the chapter). Proximity and distance, in turn, can give rise to spatial forms manifesting the nature of interactions and interrelations between physically proximate or distant individuals.¹⁴ While Simmel does not mention forms in the context of mobility, it can be assumed that they too have spatial imprints (for example highways or airports with their specific spatial structures). Countering Schroer's interpretation that assigns a single form to each spatial quality, the foregoing arguments and examples seem to suggest that a specific foundational quality of space can give rise to multiple socio-spatial forms (Fig. 1).

Following the discussion of the foundational qualities of space and their impact on social life, Simmel investigated the spatial projections of social relations and processes and the various spatial forms resulting from these. The spatial projection of rationalization processes indicates a shift from kinship to territoriality, which in itself is conducive to multiple spatial forms (e.g. the state, territorially organized economic entities, the church, etc.). Relations of domination and sovereignty can manifest themselves through various spatial configurations, as illustrated by the sovereign territory of the state or cities with a central geographical and infrastructural position.¹⁵ Likewise, the localization of social relations can take various forms: the "house" can metaphorically denote a plethora of different configurations. Overall, Simmel argued, in this chapter of *Sociology*, that there are foundational qualities of space which are conducive to various socio-spatial forms, and conversely, that social processes can manifest themselves in various socio-spatial configurations (Fig. 1). The deployment of socio-spatial formations on both sides of the image exposes the chapter's division

¹³ See also Strassoldo's criticism (1992, p. 333–334).

¹⁴ One may think of the classroom with its special spatial arrangement as a case of proximal interrelations, and of server clusters or stock markets as a case of distant relations.

¹⁵ Other examples (not by Simmel): the location of the CEO's office on the top floor of a skyscrapers; the panopticon as the spatial representation of asymmetrical power, etc.

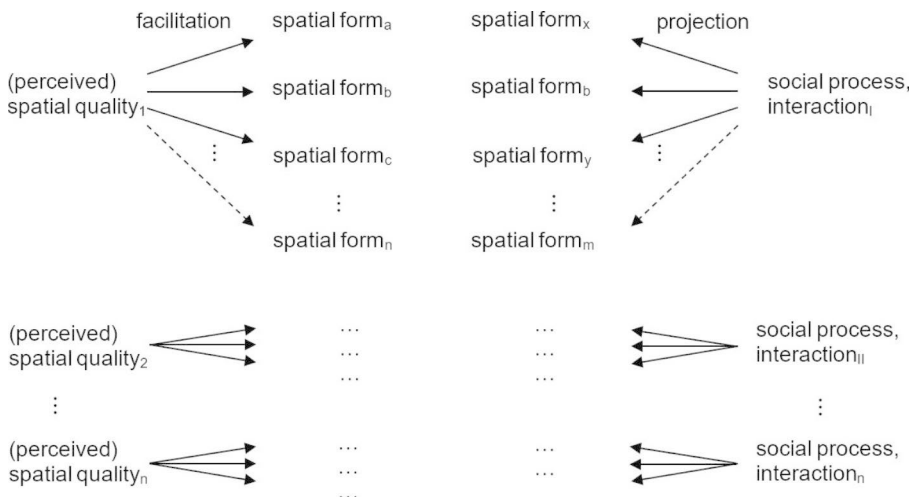


Fig. 1 Visual representation of Simmel's line of thought in Chap. 9 of *Sociology*

into two sections as being overly analytical and at the same time being not optimally structured.

Spatial forms are both socially structured and socially structuring entities (Glaser, 2006, p. 258). Arguably, the Simmelian exposition of the model suggests that spatial forms emerge from various (socially perceived and relevant) qualities of space and as such are projections of specific social processes. It is therefore no coincidence to see a recurrence of certain spatial forms both in the discussion of the foundational qualities of space and the section dedicated to the spatial projection of social phenomena. The spatial form “b” depicted in Fig. 1 illustrates this co-occurrence (as illustrated, for example, by the state), allowing for a joint discussion of spatial qualities and the spatial projection of social interactions.

Simmel undertook a relatively systematic analysis of the processes of spatial projection of social relations and the social usefulness of spatial qualities – and it is exactly because he was interested in uncovering these two aspects that he separated the discussion into two subchapters that are not organically connected. That said, Simmel could also have opted to focus on the socio-spatial forms themselves, which would have allowed him to carry out a joint treatment of the effects of spatial qualities and the processes of projection. Taking spatial forms as the starting point of the analysis of socio-spatial relations would make it possible to investigate their underlying spatial qualities and the social interactions or processes that they represent (Fig. 2).

Simmel mentions various spatial configurations or forms (territorial state, guild, border, pivot, spatial manifestations of proximity and distance, “house”, sovereign territory, central location, empty space), whose individual analysis would have facilitated the identification of the underlying (perceived) spatial qualities and the social interactions and processes manifested by them. This would have allowed for a closer inspection of the socially structured nature of socio-spatial forms and their role in structuring social life. Moreover, this procedure would have reduced the disproportionate discussion of illustrative examples and facilitated an in-depth analysis of spe-

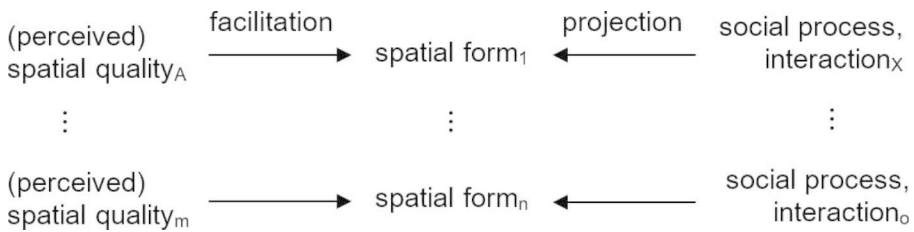


Fig. 2 An alternative exposition of Simmel's model

cific socio-spatial formations. Simmel's failure to pursue this method might stem from the fact that Chap. 9 of *Sociology* merges, albeit with slight modifications, two previous publications.

Space and Modernization

Simmel was an astute observer and theoretician of his epoch, whose works explored the phenomenon of modern life from different vantage points (see, for instance, Simmel 1890, 1968/1911, 1971a/1903, 2004/1900; cf. Frisby, 1990). His numerous insights on space must also be interpreted in the context of modernization, though they are of a less systematic nature. According to a key idea elaborated by Simmel in *Über soziale Differenzierung* [On Social Differentiation], the differentiation of initially homogeneous small circles produces two distinct tendencies; more specifically, the individualizing nature of differentiation loosens or cuts the ties to who is closest while creating new ones with the more distant (Simmel, 1890, p. 46–48). At the dawn of modernity, local disembedding was accompanied by the conquest of distance – that is, the development of abstract-functional relationships with far-off people and places.¹⁶

The idea of the conquest of distance also resurfaces in *The Philosophy of Money*. In early modern times, capital increasingly emancipated itself from local constraints, developing and becoming integrated into an ever-widening system of relations. As a result, its power and efficacy spanned greater distances (Simmel, 2004/1900, p. 227). This highlights the potential of money to forge ties between spatially and socially distant individuals (2004/1900, p. 348). Money plays a dual role in an advanced money economy: it overcomes distances, but can also create them. For instance, it can enable members of a family to enter new social circles while also creating mutual distance between them (2004/1900, p. 481–483). Accordingly, shareholders can also be spatially separated from their enterprise (2004/1900, p. 334).

A further distinctive feature of monetary transactions is their tendency to concentrate in a few locations. Simmel developed a scale of economic activities according to their propensity for spatial concentration. At the one extreme, we find agriculture,

¹⁶ Ulrich Beck later adopted this Simmelian schema in his description of individualization as a two-fold process, that is, as a disembedding from social classes and an integration into higher-order collective social relations, such as the labor market (Beck, 1983).

which resists spatial concentration because arable portions of land are adjacent to each other. By contrast, industry favors concentration: the modern factory is a spatial condensation compared to earlier forms of artisan production. Monetary transactions are located at the other extreme of the spectrum, exhibiting the highest level of spatial concentration, as exemplified in financial centers. On the one hand, money is spatially neutral: “Owing to the abstractness of its form, money has no definite relationship to space: it can exercise its effects upon the most remote areas” (Simmel, 2004/1900, p. 510); but on the other, financial centers develop in each metropolis, leading to an unprecedented concentration of financial transactions that transcend distances (2004/1900, p. 510–511).

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Simmel (1971a/1903) presents metropolitan life as distinctively modern. High levels of spatial concentration and the richness of stimuli trigger an intensification of emotional life (*Nervenleben*) (Simmel, 1971a/1903, p. 325), which provokes a defensive reaction from the metropolitan individual who, as a consequence, privileges impersonality, detachment, intellectualism and a *blasé* attitude over the congeniality of village and small-town folk. Spatial proximity creates demand for social distancing (cf. Allen, 2000, p. 61–62). Urban development boosts trade and the money economy and these, in turn, accelerate urbanization. The metropolitan concentration of trade and finance fosters the multiplication of long-distance social interactions and exchanges that transcend the local (Simmel, 1971a/1903).

A less cited passage of Simmel already anticipated the Foucauldian concept of panopticism. According to a brief excursus in *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2004/1900, p. 494), the social significance of temporal rhythms and spatial symmetry lies in their potential to exert control over previously unstructured multitudes of people. Regarding spatiality, Simmel observes the following:

The symmetrical [spatial] structure is completely rational in origin; it facilitates the control of the multitude from one vantage point. (...) If objects and men are brought under the yoke of the system – that is, if they are arranged symmetrically – then they can best be dealt with rationally. For this reason, both despotism and socialism possess particularly strong inclinations towards symmetrical constructions of society (Simmel, 2004/1900, p. 494).

In this passage, Simmel introduces the underlying principle of Foucauldian (1977/1975) panopticism: individualizing surveillance and its spatial aspects. These spatial configurations have risen to prominence in the course of modernity (epitomized, in Simmel’s examples, by the hypersymmetrical urban visions of modern utopias and the symmetrical spatial arrangements of Louis XIV) (Simmel, 2004/1900, p. 494–495).

Interpreters who have engaged not only with Simmel’s systematic theory of space but also with the spatial aspects of his modernization theory frequently emphasize that his influence on the sociology of space was equivocal, recognizing him as a pioneer in the systematic treatment of space while pointing out that his diagnosis of the progressive devaluation of space in modernity paved the way for sociology’s persistent neglect of space (Dangschat, 1996, p. 102; Läßle 1991, p. 330–331; Schroer

2006, p. 79; Strassoldo, 1992, p. 330–331). In the view of these analysts, it is little surprise that spatiality was undertheorized by subsequent generations of sociologists, and that Simmel prefigured the theory of the annihilation of space advanced by post-modern scholars (for instance Virilio, 1986/1977).

By contrast, other commentators (Allen, 2000; Glauser, 2006) assert the undiminished significance of space in Simmel's theory of modernization, emphasizing the spatial underpinnings of the contemporary era. Modernity is defined by the various interactions between proximity/distance and movement, which continue to structure our experiences. Whereas in premodern societies, social interactions overwhelmingly took place between people in close proximity, this pattern has been transformed in modernity. New modes of interrelating spatial relations and sociality have emerged. First of all, physical proximity is no longer necessarily associated with social proximity: overpopulation (meaning the state of being forced to live in close proximity to strangers) urges city dwellers to create social distances from others by adopting peculiarly metropolitan attitudes. Secondly, in modernity, spatial distance and social interaction can be connected in a novel way: while the two rarely coincided in the premodern era, because people interacted with others in their physical proximity, modernity's disembedding and re-embedding mechanisms facilitate interactions and associations at a distance. Third, modernity has produced an unprecedented increase in movement and mobility (Allen, 2000, p. 56–59).

In fact, Simmel did not advocate the idea of an emancipation of sociation from space. In most cases, he mentioned the overcoming of distances and not the annihilation of space per se. According to Glauser, Simmel merely suggested a new type of mediation between space and society compared to earlier periods:

For Simmel, the processes unfolding in modernity do not trigger the emancipation of social life from space, but changes in the social significance (...) of spatial qualities and the composition of socially constructed (and repercussive) spatial configurations (Glauser, 2006, p. 261).

In other words, modernity prioritizes certain qualities of space above others and modifies the nature of spatially organized social relations. In modernity, the role of physical proximity in interactions is significantly reduced. Only if space is considered in terms of local attachments and physical proximity (meaning in an absolutist way) could Simmel's theory of modernization be interpreted as implying an emancipation from space. Instead, Simmel's theory posits not an emancipation from space but a restructuring of the relationship between sociality and spatiality. An interpretation of this shift would have benefited greatly from Simmel's systematic conceptualization of space, given modernity's emphasis on concentration and centralization, mobility and migration, and the spatial forms of far-reaching actions and long-distance associations (Glauser, 2006, p. 260–261).

There are spatial forms which are characteristic of modernity. For instance, the role of space is reasserted in the context of the pivotal point: critical urban theory (Harvey, 2001/1992, 2004) unearths the complexity of actions and exploitations revolving around the purchase and sale of land. Modernity also gave rise to territorial states. Besides that, there is a tendency for financial transactions to be concentrated

in financial centers, and symmetrically arranged (panoptic) spatial configurations tend to predominate. Meanwhile, the significance of other socio-spatial forms, such as empty space, has declined. Localization has likewise become less relevant for a variety of social relations. Modernity privileges certain qualities of space over others, so that social relations emphasizing fixity, mobility and divisibility (the latter being relevant for symmetrical arrangements) have come to the fore. By contrast, the role of exclusivity has diminished.

Overall, instead of suggesting that Simmel interpreted modernity as emancipating itself from spatiality, it should be acknowledged that he merely highlighted the changing interplay between spatiality and sociality. However, in the absence of a conceptual apparatus of the systematic sociology of space, Simmel's diagnosis remains undeveloped. According to the proponents of the emancipation thesis, by diagnosing the emancipation of modernity from space, Simmel effectively prepared the terrain for sociology's neglect of space. While Simmel's work may have had such an effect, it must be stressed that this was not so much due to how he actually conceptualized the relation between modernity and spatiality, but to a misapprehension of his theory of modernization on the part of later sociologists.

Questions of the Subjective Constitution of Space in Simmel's Writings

Simmel also addressed the issue of spatiality in his Kantian lectures and several shorter essays, albeit from varying perspectives and without any aim to systematize. These studies do not involve a sociological perspective – as they do not focus on the socially significant foundational qualities of space or the spatial projection of social relations but on the perception and subjective constitution of spaces – and instead interpret these subjective processes within the framework of philosophy and perception theory.

There are two contradictory appraisals of Simmel's theory on the subjective constitution of space: one denotes it as absolutist and the other as relational. The first group of interpreters point out his (alleged) adherence to Euclidean geometry as the *a priori* principles of perception, which, according to this view, undermines the possibility of acknowledging that in everyday life there are also non-Euclidean principles of perception at work (Löw, 2016/2001, p. 47–48). This interpretation is not entirely unfounded. It is grounded in Simmel's Kantian-inspired assumption that space is merely an activity of the mind, the peculiarly human way of *a priori* connecting sensory impulses into the shape of space (Simmel, 1913, pp. 19, 59–68). According to this assumption, the basic principles of Euclidean geometry (three dimensions, space as an empty container to be filled, constancy of metrics) are the rules that determine the mind's construction of spatiality by giving form to sensory matter.

However, in various passages of his Berlin lectures on Kant, Simmel describes subjective constitutions of space that do not rely on Euclidean geometry:

The theorems of [Euclidean] geometry provide abstract formulas for the energies that systematically transform our sensory impressions into spatial forms.

However, this does not preclude the possibility of uncertainties and deviations, e.g. in the case of children, or under atypical external or physiological conditions (Simmel, 1913, p. 29).

Hence, in some cases, sensory impressions are not configured according to these theorems. The question arises as to what extent this might be compatible with the a priori (universal and necessary) nature of the axioms of Euclidean geometry:

Kant would provide a very simple answer: an a priori is an a priori only to the extent that it involves cognition (*Erkenntnis*). If and when it is not employed, we cannot talk about cognition but some other subjective mental processes. (...) The legitimate validity of the a priori (...) is hardly undermined by the imperfections of its employment, (...) a priori being the law of experience and not of some arbitrary mental construction (Simmel, 1913, p. 29).

In other words, the a priori relevance of Euclidean geometry for cognition is not affected by cases where its principles are not employed, since these do not imply cognition.¹⁷

Their prevalence [of Euclidean principles] is not determined by their timeless meaning (being the truth), but by our imagination (*Vorstellungsleben*), which either employs or discards them (Simmel, 1913, p. 29).

In his lectures, Simmel grounds cognition (*Erkenntnis*) in the a priori principles of Euclidean geometry and leaves the characterization of mental processes of other types open to debate. This lacuna is addressed in some of his later essays (less known in the sociology of space). These writings, albeit with regard to various topics, demonstrate Simmel's basic idea that subjects can perceive spaces by applying principles different from those of Euclidean geometry. In such cases, it is not (or not only) the proximity/distance between objects, their size and expansion (i.e. their location in the container space) that is of importance for perception; rather, Simmel also emphasizes the role of cultural meanings, individual meaning and relevance, the various "moods" of spatial configurations, and the relationality of spaces.

In this respect, the 1909 essay "Bridge and Door" is clearly a case in point. Despite being only six pages long, this text is of outstanding significance. According to its (neo)Kantian postulation, the world is inherently chaotic, devoid of any meaning and order.¹⁸ Yet by virtue of their capacity to separate and connect, human actors can produce order in this chaotic world (Simmel, 1997/1909, p. 170–171). The mental operations of separating and connecting imply each other:

By choosing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to designate them as "separate", we have already related them to one another

¹⁷ Here we shall refrain from discussing Simmel's failure to address the scientific significance of non-Euclidean geometries.

¹⁸ On this point, Simmel and Weber (1998/1904, p. 117–118) are in agreement (Glaser, 2006, p. 255).

in our consciousness, we have emphasized these two together against whatever lies between them. And conversely, we can only sense those things to be related which we have previously somehow isolated from one another (Simmel, 1997/1909, p. 171).

In order to be able to connect things, we must first perceive them as being separated, whereas separating them presupposes a perception of their relatedness. Despite the mutually presupposing nature of the two mental operations, in some cases, one may prevail over the other. For instance, in the case of building a road the aspect of establishing a connection is that which is foregrounded in perception (while its precondition is separateness). The bridge is the clearest manifestation of connectedness. In the words of Simmel:

Only for us are the banks of a river not just apart but “separated”; if we did not first connect them in our practical thoughts, in our needs, and in our fantasy, then the concept of separation would have no meaning (Simmel, 1997/1909, p. 171).

Accordingly, perceiving a bridge does not only imply Euclidean principles, because the objects involved (banks, river, bridge, trees, road, etc.) are not simply situated in a container-like neutral space with three dimensions – instead, the very categories with which we perceive this scenery, namely separateness and connectedness, are relational concepts charged with culturally coded meanings. The bridge symbolizes the power of human volition over space (1997/1909, p. 171–172).

The bridge, which highlights the connecting aspect of perception, is counterposed by the house, constituting a tiny and isolated segment of infinite space. A door, in its turn, because it can be opened, represents a potential linkage between the interior space of the house and the exterior space of the outside world. By virtue of this possibility, its closure creates a more powerful sense of separation and isolation than a simple wall, which is impermeable (Simmel, 1997/1909, p. 172). Unlike the bridge, emphasizing only one mental operation, namely connecting, the example of the door demonstrates that separating and connecting are but two aspects of the same process (1997/1909, p. 172). By infusing cultural categories of openness and closure into spatial arrangements, subjects apply non-Euclidean (non-absolutist) principles of space-perception.

Simmel’s essay “The Philosophy of the Landscape” introduces similar ideas. Nature is presented as a chaotic flux that must be ordered by human subjects. The landscape is constructed by the human gaze that separates and connects things; it represents a quasi-distinct unit of nature and a perceptual unity at the same time (Simmel, 2007/1913). Perceiving the landscape (which in reality is only a part of nature without any evident boundaries) as a whole is a typically modern phenomenon: modernization, social differentiation and individualization create a distancing of people from nature, depriving them of the ability to experience nature’s unity.¹⁹ Again, we

¹⁹ See also Gurevich (1985/1972, p. 63–66).

witness the importance of cultural codes and meanings in the perception and subjective constitution of spaces and objects.

Nature is so infinitely varied that all divisions and distinctions are derived from arbitrary constructions of meaning (beyond the principles of Euclidean geometry). Simmel's reasoning, as Glauser (2006) has pointed out, echoes Weber's ideas in "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" (1998/1904). Weber also underlined the chaotic nature of the (social) world, the infinite multitude of observable phenomena and processes, and the need to extract from this mass certain elements that are considered important and hence culturally significant (Weber, 1998/1904, p. 117–118).

There exist various modes with distinct logic that allow for the construction of a meaningful unity out of the otherwise undifferentiated whole. Beyond Weber, Simmel argues that these articulatory modes give rise to autonomous cultural forms and spheres, each associated with a distinct logic, e.g. science, religion and art, which produce a "cleansed and principled" version of knowledge from the enmeshed practices and beliefs of everyday life. Everyday "religious" feelings and practices are extremely diverse, diffuse and intermeshed with the continual flux of everyday life. Religion as a system was elevated to its own state of being by virtue of transcending everyday religiosity in an act of self-creation, giving rise to peculiar beings, such as deities (Simmel, 2007/1913, p. 24). The same applies to science, whose methods and theories are but "distilled versions" of everyday knowledge that have gained an independent status (2007/1913, p. 24). Likewise, art is not a mere imitation of the world but a construct of sensory impressions that emerge out of a particular artistic dynamic. Simmel notes that art as a field with its own logic is born out of the everyday aesthetic attitude that is also at play when people contemplatively perceive a landscape: "Whenever we really do see a landscape, over and above an aggregate of separate natural objects, then we have a work of art in statu nascendi" (2007/1913, p. 25). This sheds new light on Simmel's argument in his Kant lectures that the basic principles of Euclidean geometry are indeed a priori conditions of perceiving space, though only in the case of *Erkenntnis*. Arguably, the various spheres mentioned (religion, science, art and possibly others) all imply different logics not necessarily bound to *Erkenntnis* (science being the one that revolves around *Erkenntnis*). If so, these different logics, one would assume with Simmel, correspond to different principles of the perception of spaces.²⁰

According to Simmel, mood is an essential carrier of the unity of a landscape. This mood or atmosphere is not attributable to a particular component of the landscape but to its entirety. However, the mood of a landscape is neither a mere projection of subjective feelings, nor is it grounded in the objective traits of the landscape.²¹ It would be wrong to ask which comes first or second: creating the landscape as a unity and imbuing it with a certain mood through perception is the product of a single mental act, while dissociating landscape and mood is but an ex-post reflection. The attitude required for the construction of a landscape has a strong aesthetic component. For the

²⁰ If this interpretation is correct, Simmel anticipated Cassirer (2000/1931) whose mythical, aesthetic and theoretical spaces correspond to symbolic forms with their particular logic.

²¹ With these ideas, Simmel prefigures the Böhman concept of the atmosphere (Böhme, 2017/1995).

aesthetic attitude, a physical setting is perceived as a landscape, while the elements of the same totality, the same segment of space, would be synthesized and perceived differently if the same subject were pursuing scientific knowledge or an economic activity (e.g. forestry, agriculture) (cf. Bohr, 2008, p. 29–38).

Simmel's essay "The Alps" (1993/1911) reinforces the idea of this break from the absolutist schema in his analysis of the subjective constitutions of space. The Alps convey a unique experience. Their immense dimensions, deformity, and lack of symmetrical balance have lured people (including artists) across time. With their overwhelming mass and size, they have a unique power to confront people with the finitude of their earthly existence (Simmel, 1993/1911, p. 180). The glaciated, snow-capped mountaintop where no vegetation or animals can survive and frost reigns supreme completely removes one from (social) life²² and creates a sense of transcendence (1993/1911, p. 180–181). The experience of the mountain peak uproots traditional perceptions of space. Everywhere else, "above" is defined in terms of "below", that is, relationally (relational positioning). This becomes impossible on the snowy summit: the eye losing sight of the deep annihilates the impression and any idea of a "below". Thus, the "high" presents itself as an absolute–relationless–magnitude (Simmel, 1993/1911, p. 183). In contrast to the Kantian lectures, which marginalize the non-Euclidean constitution of space, here it is the sense of absolute space that becomes exceptional.

Conclusion

The legacy of Simmel's theory of space among major subsequent scholars of space is apparently ambivalent. While in *Social Mobility*, Sorokin (1959/1927) briefly mentions Simmel as an important contributor to the theory of (social) space, this acknowledgement is evidently missing in seminal theories of spaces published in the second half of the 20th century. Theorists such as Michel Foucault (1977/1975, 1986/1967), Henri Lefebvre (1991/1974), Pierre Bourdieu (1996), Anthony Giddens (1984) and Rob Shields (1991) all developed their concepts of spaces and places independently of Simmel and ostensibly without any reference to him. It is also telling that Simmel is not included in a recent textbook dedicated to the work of key thinkers on space and place (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2010). Martina Löw is an exception in this regard, for in her *Sociology of Space* (Löw, 2016/2001), she engages with Simmel's theory of space, but only to provide a critique of his alleged absolutist approach. This relative neglect of Simmel's sociology of space might be partly due to Simmel's late canonization as a classical figure of sociology, and partly due to the common misinterpretation of his theory of modernity as an emancipation from spatial relations. However, scholars such as Kurt H. Wolff, Donald N. Levine, David Frisby and Lawrence Scaff have paved the way for a general acknowledgement of Simmel's oeuvre. It is certainly due to their work that recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in Simmel's theory of space, and that a growing number of scholars acknowledge the

²² In contrast to the sea, which is experienced as life itself (Simmel, 2007/1911, p. 181).

value of his approach for the interpretation of spatial relations (Fu, 2022; Gazit, 2018; Shields, 2017, pp. 76–83).

Simmel investigated space from various angles in many of his works. His reflections and comments on space can be grouped into three major themes. First and foremost, he sought to provide a systematic sociological theory of space. His novel approach addressed two aspects, the (perceived, socially relevant) foundational qualities of space, and their role in shaping spatial forms and the spatial projection of social processes, respectively. He interpreted spatial forms as the social use of perceived spatial qualities and the spatial projection of social processes. However, his way of discussing these matters was less suitable for an in-depth study of spatial forms. Various critics have accused Simmel of failing to depart from absolutist notions of space in his systematic spatial theory. This criticism is not entirely unjustified, given certain ambiguous claims by Simmel that suggest a possible analogy between the perceived and the “real” qualities of space. However, these passages do not settle the question definitively. Simmel’s systematic spatial theory is inarguably relational in terms of its generic features, being predominantly focused on exploring the nexus between sociality and spatiality within a relational/relativistic social theoretical framework.

Second, the spatial problematic resurfaced in his theoretical reflections on modernity, albeit less systematically and generally in the form of shorter passages. In the context of his writings on modernization, the criticism regarding Simmel’s diagnosis of the devaluation of space appears unfounded. While the texts analyzed in this paper corroborate this claim with regard to the overcoming of distances, critics tend to overlook the significance of other spatial forms for sociation in modernity. This misinterpretation is likely due to Simmel’s failure to apply a systematic conceptualization of spatiality in his writings on modernity (which he only developed later).

Third, Simmel also addressed the subjective processes of the constitution of space. Less studied by sociologists, these writings confirm the German author’s preoccupation with non-Euclidean principles of the constitution of space. Euclidean geometry is particularly relevant for *Erkenntnis*. Everyday perception in turn assigns a crucial role to cultural codes, moods and relative positions. For Simmel, the subjective constitution of space appears more likely to be conditioned by momentary thought processes.²³

Simmel did not explicitly merge these three strands into a single unified theory of social spatiality, and there are certainly minor inconsistencies between them. For one thing, his discussion of modernity lacks the terminology of spatiality developed in the following years. Moreover, there is seemingly a disconnect between Simmel’s systematic theory of space and his later reflections on the subjective constitution of space – for in his more systematized writings about the sociology of space, he was primarily concerned with absolutist traits of the perception of space underpinned by Euclidean principles,²⁴ whereas his interest in the later essays lay in the non-absolutist modalities of the perception and construction of space (culturally coded meanings, moods, etc.). That said, the present paper’s reassessment of Simmel’s soci-

²³ See also Cassirer (2000/1931).

²⁴ The perceived foundational qualities – exclusivity, divisibility, containment, etc. – indicate this.

ology of space shows that, beyond these minor inconsistencies, there is an underlying, albeit not fully elaborated coherence between Simmel's texts on space that points to a somewhat unified theory of space. According to Simmel, social actors engaging in mutual interaction are able to perceive their material environments. This perception of space can be based on absolutist or on non-absolutist principles, but in any case, perception of spatiality shapes the specific way how social interactions and processes are projected onto the material world, and how spatial forms are created. These spatial forms, for their part, mold social actions, as they define the room of possibilities for actors. Perception of spatial qualities, interaction among actors, the projection of social processes onto space, and spatial forms are all intertwined and mutually influence each other. It could be argued that, in a way, Simmel solved the problem of structure and agency before it even became a major theoretical issue in sociology, since his theory can account for both the influence of structures (here: spatial forms) and agency (actors' actively perceiving and constituting spaces), without an overemphasis on either pole.

Simmel's observations on space were ground-breaking by the standards of his time, but they are of value not only for scholars of the history of sociology. It is precisely due to the integration of agency and structure that Simmel's theory of space provides a highly sophisticated conceptual toolkit for the analysis of spatial relations on every level. Simmel's considerations of space might be deployed to interpret the spatial behavior of individuals and social groups, or to analyze spatial forms at the level of rural communities, cities, regions, states and even that of networked globalized relations. As noted by Glauser (2006, p. 262), Simmel offers an alternative relationist concept of space, whose potential is yet to be fully realized.

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