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George Simmel on Social Types : The Stranger

Reading : Simmel, George, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, (Chaps: 3).

Chapter III. Social Types

- The Stranger (1908).

Introduction

- Simmel's study of 'social types' is associated with the ideas on sociology of space, the stranger as a social category is unique, where individuality and social forms are explained in terms of the idea of groups and their interaction process.
- Simmel's approach to the study of 'social types' such as stranger is based on its position in an interactional structure.

The stranger

- For Simmel, synthesis of attachment and detachment is a sociological form of “the stranger”.
- The stranger as a social category is different from ‘wanderer’ and ‘outsider’, because the later are not the member of any group, they come today and leave tomorrow. But the stranger becomes the member of a group, who comes today and stays tomorrow. For stranger the “remoteness” is more emphasized than the “closeness”.

- Because of the remoteness and objectivity of the strangers, they were capable of doing certain things for which the natives were not considered appropriate. For example, participation of strangers in trades, their appointment for judges in Italy.
- This was also because no natives were considered free from the involvement in family interests and factionalism.

- For Simmel , “objectivity can also be defined as freedom. The objective man is not bound by ties which could prejudice his perception, his understanding, and his assessment of data”(Simmel,1971:146).
- In fact, the stranger even becomes close to us when we have a feeling of similarities between him and ourselves in the context of nationality, social position, occupation and the general human nature. Trace of strangeness even enters into our most intimate relationship.

- The objectivity of the stranger is a point which can be seen in the theorization of Schutz's idea of stranger too.
- Simmel's study of stranger tells us about the relevance of anonymity and individuality as the important features of modern society where formal impersonal dominates over informal personal relations.

Concluding remarks

- In fact, modernity makes a condition where one often deals with various types of strangers because of the expanding size of groups and the pattern of interaction process.
- As the objectivity of the strangers gives a sense of freedom because of their remoteness from the primordial groups, Simmel argues that it also serves the claims of individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces.

Thank you !