Simmel's Spatiality and the Construction of the National Sphere

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CHARLINE KOPF, JUL 15 2016

Designated as 'first sociologist of space,'[1] Georg Simmel's theory on space provides useful concepts for theorising national claims made upon territory. First, this treatment locates the German sociologist in the broader sociological field and expounds his theory on space with his texts on *The Sociology of Space* (1903) and *Bridge and Door* (1909). The main characteristics of his spatial conception will then be drawn upon to investigate the link between the claim made upon history and territory in the production of the national sphere. Furthermore, it will reveal how Simmel's framework enables us to dismantle the process of territorialising national identity in inscribing it in space, thus drawing a historical continuity of a nation whose purpose it is to legitimise the difference between a national 'us' and a foreign 'them', investing the former with rights which the latter do not benefit from. This hence unravels the relationship of dominance underlying nationalist discourses linking birth rights, citizenship and territory.

Towards a Sociology of Space

Simmel's insistence on forms of social interaction rejected organicist approaches of writers like Spencer and Schäffle in 19th-century Europe.[2] Instead of emphasising the continuity between nature and society, he argued for defining society as 'merely the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction.'[3] He treated the question how society is possible in a similar antipositivist manner as Kant resolved 'How is Nature Possible?' stressing man's cognitive capacities in understanding the social world.[4] Simmel's sociology is grounded in the perception of the social world as 'construction made by selection and interpretation' and not as objective assemblage of facts.[5] The opinion that perceptions are subject to *a priori* categories is essential for his neo-Kantian analytical distinction between form and content of social relationships: sociology as the study of the former should concentrate on their structuring principles.[6] Situating himself in Nietzsche's and Bergson's line,[7] Simmel draws on their vitalist motifs to articulate 'notions about the life process' and emphasise the actors' ability to create social structures.[8] Yet, in contrast to Bergson's focus on *durée* and productive power of 'time,'[9] Simmel stressed the importance of spatial configurations for social relations.[10] Indeed, Simmel's spatial analysis represents one of the largest parts of his major work *Soziologie* (1908).[11]

In *The Sociology of Space* and *Bridge and Door*, three aspects are deemed particularly important for the application to nationalism: the claim of spatial exclusivity, divisibility and fixity. Concerning the first aspect, Simmel reveals that there are 'certain types of association that can only be realized in such a way that there is no room for a second one within the spatial area that one of its formations occupies.'[12] In giving the state as example, he ties the entitlement to a sovereign territory to the claim of uniqueness, rejecting the presence of an alternative form on that place. He confers to the association holding the spatial exclusivity the domination over other social formations, rendering them mutually exclusive. Thus, the social formation's authority over its space is legitimised though this specific claim of exclusivity.

The second characteristic of his spatial concept concerns the divisibility of space; the drawing of boundaries as reason and consequence of a division. He draws the analogy between the boundary of a social group and frame of a painting. Both are imbued with a dual function; they operate in delimiting their content against their surroundings while holding their constituent together: 'It symbolizes the self-contented unity of the work of art, the frame at the

same time strengthens its reality and its impression.'[13] In highlighting that a group's characterisation as homogenous is foremost the result and not the cause of inscribing this group in a bounded space, Simmel reveals the boundaries' constructedness and questions this homogeneity:

a society is characterised as inwardly homogenous because its sphere of existence is enclosed in acutely conscious boundaries, … conversely the reciprocal unity and functional relationship of every element to every other one gains its spatial expression in the enclosing boundary.[14]

The fact that these boundaries are not nature-given – 'not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially'– discloses the need for the boundedness' constant reproduction.[15] Thus, Simmel refers to the 'formative power of the social context' which implies a 'mutual referencing' of the inhabitants' assumed homogeneity.[16] He demonstrates the reciprocal effect of the constitution in the relationship between boundaries and the occupants of the delimited space.[17] The boundary's subjective nature of inside/outside construction is further enhanced in *Bridge and Door* where the malleability of the act of connecting and separating is laid bare: 'everything can be considered to be connected, but also as separated.'[18] For Simmel it is above all the door which symbolises this Janus-faced nature of separation/connection.

Moreover, the social effect of boundaries has to be linked to the physical territorial space in asking how this 'human capacity … [to] cut a portion out of the continuity and infinity of space, … arrange[d] this into a particular unity in accordance with a single meaning' and to confer upon it the claim of exclusivity is legitimised and upheld by a group.[19] Here a third aspect comes into play: the symbolic fixation of a geographical territory invested with feelings through 'seemingly mundane, everyday interactions.'[20] The place as pivotal point of supposedly shared recollection, contributing to the construction of a common past, becomes a vital factor in social interactions for the 'cohesion' and the 'consciousness of belonging among members.'[21] For memories which are being attached to a special point in space can be understood as acts of designation which give to a group a qualitative feeling of uniqueness.

Claiming a Historical Space

Although Simmel's three aspects of space seem rather abstract to understand the meaning of space in social interaction,[22] they provide valuable insights into the epistemology of claims connecting a specific territory to a national past. Mexico's anthem offers an example of the interlinking of exclusivity, divisibility and fixity:

But should a foreign enemy

Dare to profane your soil with his tread

Know, beloved fatherland, that heaven gave you

A soldier in each of your sons [23]

The claim to uniqueness of the national space named 'fatherland' is demonstrated through the God-given and filial link between territory and population: in connecting the nation located on a specific place to sacred and ancestral ties, the anthem – similar to naturalist, primordial and ethno-symbolic theories of nationalism – traces the nation's origin back to an ethnic past endowing it with a historical perpetuity which legitimises its future existence as well as territorial and political aspirations.[24] Hence, the qualitative character of spatial claims works hand-in-hand with the fundamental assumption of a temporal continuity conferring exclusive and unquestionable authority to one national group. As accepted form of knowledge, this historical exclusivity, precluding another national form to make the same claim upon that territory, is revealed in the juxtaposition of 'foreign enemy' and 'sons.' The inside/outside, exclusion/inclusion divisions encompassed in Simmel's divisibility aspect are expressed through the land's personification as father connected to his 'sons'; natives who have inherited of that 'soil.' The anthem opposes them to people not born on that space who thus 'profane' and threaten it. Boundaries have here the same function as Simmel's artwork frame: they delimit a national group from outsiders against whom the soldier-sons have to protect

their sacred territory. Simultaneously, it is through this act that their 'reality' and 'impression' of belonging together is reinforced, hence displaying the boundaries' productive nature.[25]

Moreover, writing this anthem, such as writing history, is an act of discursive designation symbolically fixing memories in a geographical space and bestowing it with emotions. This testifies to the power of daily practices enforcing a national group-feeling through a common past: 'The definiteness … of the act of designation … must give its inhabitants a feeling of spatial individuality, of belonging to a qualitatively fixed point in space.'[26] This fixity is the focal point where historical claims of uniqueness and group distinctiveness, as well as the demarcation of boundaries come together and are expressed in the form of 'emotion-laden interactions.'[27]

Effect and Utility of Simmel's Spatial Triad

Simmel's framework provides the opportunity to comprehend how national discourses are informed by space and exposes the devices through which claims upon national identity linked to territory are presented as given and are embedded in performances of 'Banal Nationalism.'[28] It is also the consequence of Simmel's triangular association and act of discursive designation which seems of particular importance for nationalism:

Of course, it [designation] … is paid for by an indeterminacy and a lack of objective permanence, … its position cannot be constructed objectively … As such, great organizations, require a spatial centre, for they cannot exist without subordination and domination, … it must always be paid for by certain sacrifices.[29]

Hence, the national inside/outside construction based on historical claims involves a hierarchical relation signifying 'sacrifices' for the Others who are condemned to silence.[30] These inequalities are institutionalised in national discourses of defence and xenophobia linking birth rights, citizenship and national identity to spatiality: the 'sons' of a territory are entitled to more rights, such as social benefits or the freedom to move, than people outside the frontiers of the "presumed 'zone of origin' of the nation."[31] This territory-nation-citizenship nexus is embodied in the passport, instrumental in nationalising those who cross borders.[32] Here, the variable character of Simmel's door which opens and closes a space can be transposed to national boundaries and resembles Foucault's characteristic of Heterotopias,[33]

which always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable … To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures … [they] seem to be pure and simple openings, but … generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter … but in fact that is only an illusion.[34]

The 'permission' and 'gestures' could refer to the act of showing your passport when crossing frontiers. Let alone those who are not able to enter a territory for failure to provide an adequate passport, non-nationals entering foreign spaces with valid identification will also be excluded from entitlements which natives benefit from, thus exposing a relation of dominance governing the means of access to a certain national sphere.

Moreover, concerning discourses of belonging, the 'indeterminacy' and 'lack of objective permanence' inherent in designating a special territory, help in a Foucauldian manner to deconstruct national histories and boundaries posited as truths.[35] This is echoed in *Bridge and Door* revealing how contingent identity claims are, and how one group's self-identification and loyalty can shift and be associated to another group in relation to different enemies. This is emblematic of linking and differentiation discourses,[36] which are never fixed but can alter and be deployed differently according to the context and aim, thus decomposing an identity's naturalness, and consequently also its link to a special territory.

Conclusion

Simmel hence helps us tease out discontinuities in national discourses on territory and shows how the machinery of spatial metaphors work. His framework discloses how claims of national spaces are, referring to Bourdieu's expression, a fundamental 'principle of vision and division' of the world,[37] and how presupposed historical ties inform their claim to uniqueness in linking time to space. Focusing on three elements – exclusivity, divisibility and

fixity – renders the linkages between the naturalised triad of nation-territory-citizenship visible and reveals the constructedness of national binaries like inside/outside and native/foreign. His focus on the social construction and productive power of boundaries is especially relevant when it comes to explaining the need for the constant creation of a nation's boundedness expressed in everyday performances and symbols. This institutionalisation of boundaries through routine interactions unveils the participation of spatial claims in a relationship of domination articulated in discourses which changing character can be illustrated in the door-and-bridge metaphor.

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Footnotes

[1] Zieleniec (2007), p. 57.

[2] Coser (1977), p. 177-179.

[3] Simmel (1917), p. 10.

[4] Schermer & Jary (2013), p. 28.

[5] Zieleniec (2007), p. 36.

[6] Simmel (1911), p. 33.

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Levine (1991), p. 109-110.

[9] Milà (2005), p. 90-91.

[10] Lipman (1959), p. 121.

[11] Frisby & Featherstone (1997), p. 10-11.

[12] Simmel (1903), p. 139.

[13] *ibid.*, p. 141.

[14] Simmel (1903), p. 141.

[15] *ibid.*, p. 143.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 141-143.

[17] *ibid.*

[18] Simmel (1909), p. 170.

[19] *ibid.*, p. 172.

[20] Zieliniec (2007), p. 44.

[21] Simmel (1903), p. 147.

[22] Zieleniec (2007), p. 34.

[23] Storey (2001), p. 82.

[24] Özkirimli (2000), p. 167-169.

[25] Simmel (1903), p. 141.

[26] *ibid.*, p. 149.

[27] Simmel (1903), p. 149.

[28] Billig (1995).

[29] Simmel (1903), p. 149-151.

[30] Shapiro (1990), p. 331.

[31] Storey (2001), p. 79.

[32] Häkli (2015), p. 90-91.

[33] Zieliniec (2007), p. 58.

[34] Foucault (1986), p. 7-8.

[35] Nozaki (2008), p. 96.

[36] Hansen (2006), p. 41.

[37] Bourdieu (2000), p. 53.

Written by: Charline Kopf
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Dr Pablo de Orellana
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