

HOW IS SOCIETY POSSIBLE?

1908

KANT ASKED and answered the fundamental question of his philosophy, "How is nature possible?" He could do so only because nature for him was nothing but the representation of nature. It was so not merely in the sense that "the world is my representation" and that we can therefore speak of nature too as only a content of consciousness, but also in the sense that what we call nature is the special way in which the mind assembles, orders, and shapes sense perceptions. These given perceptions of color, taste, tone, temperature, resistance, and smell pass through our consciousness in the accidental sequence of our subjective experience. In themselves, they are not yet nature. They rather become nature, and they do so through the activity of the mind which combines them into objects and series of objects, into substances and attributes, and into causal connections. In their immediate givenness, Kant held, the elements of the world do not have the interdependence which alone makes them intelligible as the unity of nature's laws. It is this interdependence which transforms the world fragments—in themselves incoherent and unstructured—into nature. . . .

It is very suggestive to treat as an analogous matter the ques-

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tion of the aprioristic conditions under which society is possible. Here, also, we find individual elements. In a certain sense, they too, like sense perceptions, stay forever isolated from one another. They, likewise, are synthesized into the unity of society only by means of a conscious process which correlates the individual existence of the single element with that of the other, and which does so in certain forms and according to certain rules. However, there is a decisive difference between the unity of a society and the unity of nature. It is this: In the Kantian view (which we follow here), the unity of nature emerges in the observing subject exclusively; it is produced exclusively by him in the sense materials, and on the basis of sense materials, which are in themselves heterogeneous. By contrast, the unity of society needs no observer. It is directly realized by its own elements because these elements are themselves conscious and synthesizing units.

Kant's axiom that connection, since it is the exclusive product of the subject, cannot inhere in things themselves, does not apply here. For societal connection immediately occurs in the "things," that is, the individuals. As a synthesis, it too, of course, remains something purely psychological. It has no parallels with spatial things and their interaction. Societal unification needs no factors outside its own component elements—the individuals. Each of them exercises the function which the psychic energy of the observer exercises in regard to external nature: the consciousness of constituting with the others a unity is actually all there is to this unity. This does not mean, of course, that each member of a society is conscious of such an abstract notion of unity. It means that he is absorbed in innumerable, specific relations and in the feeling and the knowledge of determining others and of being determined by them. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is quite possible for an observing outsider to perform an additional synthesis of the persons making up the society. The synthesis would proceed as if these persons were spatial elements, but it is based only upon the observer himself. The determination of which aspect of the externally observable is to be comprehended as a unity depends not only on the immediate and strictly objective content of the observable but also upon the categories and the cognitive require-

ments of the subjective psyche. Again, however, society, by contrast, is the objective unit which needs no outside observer. . . .

Owing to these circumstances, the question of how society is possible implies a methodology which is wholly different from that for the question of how nature is possible. The latter question is answered by the forms of cognition, through which the subject synthesizes the given elements into nature. By contrast, the former is answered by the conditions which reside a priori in the elements themselves, through which they combine, in reality, into the synthesis, society. In a certain sense, the entire content of this book [Soziologie], as it is developed on the basis of the principle enumerated, is the beginning of the answer to this question. For it inquires into the processes—those which, ultimately, take place in the individuals themselves—that condition the existence of the individuals as society. It investigates these processes, not as antecedent causes of this result, but as part of the synthesis to which we give the inclusive name of "society."

But the question of how society is possible must be understood in a still more fundamental sense. I said that, in the case of nature, the achieving of the synthetic unity is a function of the observing mind, whereas, in the case of society, that function is an aspect of society itself. To be sure, consciousness of the abstract principle that he is forming society is not present in the individual. Nevertheless, every individual knows that the other is tied to him—how- ever much this knowledge of the other as fellow sociate, this grasp of the whole complex as society, is usually realized only on the basis of particular, concrete contents. Perhaps, however, this is not different from the "unity of cognition." As far as our conscious processes are concerned, we proceed by arranging one concrete content alongside another, and we are distinctly conscious of the unity itself only in rare and later abstractions. The questions, then, are these: What, quite generally and a priori, is the basis or presupposition of the fact that particular, concrete processes in the individual consciousness are actually processes of sociation? Which elements in them account for the fact that (to put it abstractly) their achievement is the production of a societal unit out of individuals?

The sociological a-priorities envisaged are likely to have the same twofold significance as those which make nature possible. On the one hand, they more or less completely determine the actual processes of sociation¹ as functions or energies of psychological processes. On the other hand, they are the ideational, logical presuppositions for the perfect society (which is perhaps never realized in this perfection, however). We find a parallel in the law of causation. On the one hand, it inheres and is effective in the actual processes of cognition. On the other hand, it constitutes truth as the ideal system of perfect cognition. And it does so irrespective of whether or not this truth obtains in the temporal and relatively accidental psychological dynamics in which causation actually operates—irrespective, that is, of the greater or lesser degree to which the actual, consciously held truth approximates the ideally valid truth. . . .

(1) The picture of another man that a man gains through personal contact with him is based on certain distortions. These are not simple mistakes resulting from incomplete experience, defective vision, or sympathetic or antipathetic prejudices. They are fundamental changes in the quality of the actual object perceived, and they are of two types. We see the other person generalized, in some measure. This is so, perhaps, because we cannot fully represent to ourselves an individuality which deviates from our own. Any re-creation of a person is determined by one's similarity to him. To be sure, similarity is by no means the only condition of psychological insight, for dissimilarity, too, seems required in order to gain distance and objectivity. In addition, aside from the question of similarity or dissimilarity, an intellectual capacity is needed. Nevertheless, perfect cognition presupposes perfect identity. It seems, however, that every individual has in himself a core of individuality which cannot be re-created by anybody else whose core differs qualitatively from his own. And the challenge to re-create is logically incompatible with psychological distance

¹ *Vergesellschaftung*. For a discussion of this translation of the term, see *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. lxiii. Elsewhere in the present volume other translators at times use the words "sociality" or "association."—Ed.

and objective judgment which are also bases for representing another. We cannot know completely the individuality of another.

All relations among men are determined by the varying degrees of this incompleteness. Whatever the cause of this incompleteness, its consequence is a generalization of the psychological picture that we have of another, a generalization that results in a blurring of contours which adds a relation to other pictures to the uniqueness of this one. We conceive of each man—and this is a fact which has a specific effect upon our practical behavior toward him—as being the human type which is suggested by his individuality. We think of him in terms not only of his singularity but also in terms of a general category. This category, of course, does not fully cover him, nor does he fully cover it. It is this peculiarly incomplete coincidence which distinguishes the relation between a human category and a human singularity from the relation which usually exists between a general concept and the particular instance it covers. In order to know a man, we see him not in terms of his pure individuality, but carried, lifted up or lowered, by the general type under which we classify him. Even when this transformation from the singular to the typical is so imperceptible that we cannot recognize it immediately; even when all the ordinary characteristic concepts such as "moral" or "immoral," "free" or "unfree," "lordly" or "slavish," and so on, clearly appear inadequate, we privately persist in labeling a man according to an un verbalized type, a type which does not coincide with his pure, individual being.

This leads to a further step. It is precisely because of the utter uniqueness of any given personality that we form a picture which is not identical with its reality but which at the same time does not coincide with a general type. The picture we form is the one the personality would show if the individual were truly himself, so to speak, if he realized, toward a good or toward a bad side, for better or worse, his ideal possibility, the possibility which lies in every individual. All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves. We are outlines not only of the types "man," "good," "bad," and the like but also of the individuality and uniqueness of ourselves. Although this individuality cannot, on

principle, be identified by any name, it surrounds our perceptible reality as if traced in ideal lines. It is supplemented by the other's view of us, which results in something that we never are purely and wholly. It is impossible for this view to see anything but juxtaposed fragments, which nevertheless are all that really exist. However, just as we compensate for a blind spot in our field of vision so that we are no longer aware of it, so a fragmentary structure is transformed by another's view into the completeness of an individuality. The practice of life urges us to make the picture of a man only from the real pieces that we empirically know of him, but it is precisely the practice of life which is based on those modifications and supplementations, on the transformation of the given fragments into the generality of a type and into the completeness of the ideal personality.

In practice, this fundamental process is only rarely carried to completion. Nevertheless, within an existing society it operates as the a priori condition of additional interactions that arise among individuals. Every member of a group which is held together by some common occupation or interest sees every other member not just empirically, but on the basis of an a priori principle which the group imposes on every one of its participants. Among officers, church members, employees, scholars, or members of a family, every member regards the other with the unquestioned assumption that he is a member of "my group." Such assumptions arise from some common basis of life. By virtue of it, people look at one another as if through a veil. This veil does not simply hide the peculiarity of the person; it gives it a new form. Its purely individual, real nature and its group nature fuse into a new, autonomous phenomenon. We see the other not simply as an individual but as a colleague or comrade or fellow party member—in short, as a cohabitant of the same specific world. And this inevitable, quite automatic assumption is one of the means by which one's personality and reality assume, in the imagination of another, the quality and form required by sociability.

Evidently, this is true also of the relations of members who belong to different groups. The civilian who meets an officer cannot free himself from his knowledge of the fact that this individual

is an officer. And although his officership may be a part of this particular individuality, it is certainly not so stereotypical as the civilian's prejudicial image would have it. And the same goes for the Protestant in regard to the Catholic, the businessman in regard to the bureaucrat, the layman in regard to the priest, and so on. In all these cases, reality is veiled by social generalization, which, in a highly differentiated society, makes discovering it altogether impossible. Man distorts the picture of another. He both detracts and supplements, since generalization is always both less and more than individuality is. The distortions derive from all these a priori, operative categories: from the individual's type as man, from the idea of his perfection, and from the general society to which he belongs. Beyond all of these, there is, as a heuristic principle of knowledge, the idea of his real, unconditionally individual nature. It seems as if only the apprehension of this nature could furnish the basis for an entirely correct relation to him. But the very alterations and new formations which preclude this ideal knowledge of him are, actually, the conditions which make possible the sort of relations we call social. The phenomenon recalls Kant's conception of the categories: they form immediate data into new objects, but they alone make the given world into a knowable world.

(2) There is another category under which the individual views himself and others and which transforms all of them into empirical society. This category may be suggested by the proposition that every element of a group is not only a societal part but, in addition, something else. However trivial it may seem, this fact nevertheless operates as a social a priori. For that part of the individual which is, as it were, not turned toward society and is not absorbed by it, does not simply lie beside its socially relevant part without having a relation to it. It is not simply something outside society to which society, willingly or unwillingly, submits. Rather, the fact that in certain respects the individual is not an element of society constitutes the positive condition for the possibility that in other respects he is: the way in which he is sociated is determined or codetermined by the way in which he is not. The chapters of this book discuss, among other things, several types whose

essential sociological significance lies in the very fact that in some fashion or other they are excluded from society (for which their existence, nevertheless, is important). Such types are the stranger, the enemy, the criminal, even the pauper. But this peculiar relationship to society not only holds for such generalized types as these but, albeit with innumerable modifications, for any individual whatever. The proposition is not invalidated by the fact that at every moment we are confronted, as it were, by relations which directly or indirectly determine the content of every moment: for the social environment does not surround all of the individual. We know of the bureaucrat that he is not only a bureaucrat, of the businessman that he is not only a businessman, of the officer that he is not only an officer. This extrasocial nature—a man's temperament, fate, interests, worth as a personality—gives a certain nuance to the picture formed by all who meet him. It intermixes his social picture with non-social imponderables—however little they may change his dominant activities as a bureaucrat or businessman or officer.

Man's interactions would be quite different if he appeared to others only as what he is in his relevant societal category, as the mere exponent of a social role momentarily ascribed to him. Actually, individuals, as well as occupations and social situations, are differentiated according to how much of the non-social element they possess or allow along with their social content. On this basis, they may be arranged in a continuum. One pole of the continuum is represented by an individual in love or friendship. What this individual preserves for himself after all the developments and activities devoted to the friend or beloved are taken care of is almost nothing. In his case, there is only a single life that can be viewed or lived from two sides, as it were: from the inside, from the *terminus a quo* of the subject and in the direction of the beloved, and from the *terminus ad quem*, by which, too, this life is covered without residue. A very different tendency is illustrated by the formally identical phenomenon of the Catholic priest, where the clerical function entirely supersedes and absorbs his individual existence. In the first of these two extreme subtypes, the non-social element, which exists in addition to the social, disappears, because

its content has completely vanished in the individual's turning toward another person. In the second case, it disappears because the corresponding type of content itself has completely disappeared.

The opposite pole of the continuum is found in certain phenomena characteristic of modern culture with its money economy. Here the individual, inasmuch as he produces, buys, sells, and in general performs anything, approaches the ideal of absolute objectivity. Except in the highest leading positions, the individual life and the tone of the total personality is removed from the social action. Individuals are merely engaged in an exchange of performance and counter-performance that takes place according to objective norms—and everything that does not belong to this pure objectivity has actually disappeared from it. The personality itself, with its specific coloration, irrationality, and inner life, has completely absorbed the non-social element and, in a neat separation, has left to the social activities only those energies which are specifically appropriate for them.

Actually, social individuals move between these two extremes. They do so in such a way that the energies and characteristics which are directed back toward the individual have significance at the same time for the actions and attitudes which are directed toward another. There is an extreme case, namely, the notion that this social activity or mood is something separate from the rest of the personality, that the personality's non-social existence and significance do not enter into social relations. Clearly, even this notion, however, has its effect upon the attitude which the subject holding it adopts toward others and upon the attitude which others adopt toward him. The a priori of empirical social life consists of the fact that life is not entirely social. The reservation of a part of our personalities so as to prevent this part from entering into interaction has an effect upon our interactions which is twofold. In the first place, through general psychological processes it has its effect upon the social structure of the individual. In the second place, the formal fact itself, the part that exists outside the individual, affects this structure.

A society is, therefore, a structure which consists of beings who

stand inside and outside of it at the same time. This fact forms the basis for one of the most important sociological phenomena, namely, that between a society and its component individuals a relation may exist as if between two parties. In fact, to the degree that it is more open or more latent, this relation, perhaps, always does exist. Society shows possibly the most conscious, certainly the most general, elaboration of a fundamental form of general life.

This is that the individual can never stay within a unit which he does not at the same time stay outside of, that he is not incorporated into any order without also confronting it. This form is revealed in the most transcendent and general as well as in the most singular and accidental contexts. The religious man feels himself fully seized by the divine, as if he were merely a pulse-beat of his life. His own substance is given over unreservedly, if not in a mystical, undifferentiated fusion, to that of the absolute. But in spite of this, in order to give this fusion any significance whatever, he must preserve some sort of self-existence, some sort of personal counter, a differentiated ego, for whom the absorption in this divine all-being is a never ending task. It is a process that neither would be possible metaphysically, nor could be felt religiously, if it did not start from the existence of the individual: to be one with God is conditioned in its very significance by being other than God.

We do not have to adduce this experience of the transcendental. The same form of life is expressed in the idea that man's relation to nature is as a part of the totality of nature, an idea which the human mind has vindicated throughout its history. We view ourselves as incorporated into nature, as one of its products, as an equal of all other natural products, as a point which the stuffs and forces of nature reach and leave just as they circulate through flowing water and a blossoming plant. Yet we have the feeling of being independent and separate from all these entanglements and relationships, a feeling that is designated by the logically uncertain concept "freedom." We have a feeling that we represent a counter and contrast to this process, whose elements we nevertheless are. The most radical formulation of this feeling is found in the proposition that nature is merely a human imagination. In

this formulation, nature, with all its undeniable autonomy and hard reality is made part of the individual self, although this self, with all its freedom and separate existence and contrast to "mere" nature, is nevertheless a link in it. In its most general form, the very essence of the relation between nature and man is that man comprises nature in spite of the fact that it is independent and very often hostile; that which is, according to man's innermost life-feeling, outside of him, must necessarily be his medium and element.

This formula is no less valid in regard to the relation between individuals and the groups to which they are socially tied or, if these groups are subsumed under the over-all concept or feeling of sociation, in regard to the relation among individuals in general. On the one hand, we see ourselves as products of society. The physiological succession of our ancestors, their adaptations and peculiarities, the traditions of their work and knowledge and belief—the whole spirit of the past as it is crystallized in objective forms—determines the pattern and content of our lives. The question has even been raised as to whether the individual is anything more than a vessel in which elements existing before him are mixed in varying measures. For even if these elements ultimately are produced by the individual himself, his contribution is only minimal; only as individuals converge in species and society do the factors arise whose synthesis results in any discernible degree of individuality. On the other hand, we see ourselves as members of society. In this capacity we depend on it. By our life and its meaning and purpose, we are as inextricably woven into society, as a synchronic, coexisting phenomenon, as we are, as products, into diachronic, successive society.

In our capacity as natural objects we have no self-existence. The circulation of natural forces passes through us as through completely self-less structures, and our equality before the laws of nature resolves our existence without residue into a mere example of the necessity of these laws. Analogously, as social beings we do not live around any autonomous core. Rather, at any given moment, we consist of interactions with others. We are thus comparable to a physical body which consists merely of the sum of numer-

ous sense impressions and does not have its own existence. Yet we feel that this social diffusion does not entirely dissolve our personalities. We feel this, not only because of the reservations already mentioned, that is, because of particular contents whose significance and development inhere exclusively in the individual and find no room whatever in the social sphere; nor only because the unifying center, the individual phenomenon, in the formation of social contents is not itself social (just as the artistic form, though composed of color spots on canvases, cannot be derived from the chemical nature of the colors); but also because, although it may be possible to explain the whole content of life completely in terms of social antecedents and interactions, this content must also be considered under the category of the individual life, as the individual's experience, as something exclusively oriented toward the individual. The two—social and individual—are only two different categories under which the same content is subsumed, just as the same plant may be considered from the standpoint of its biological development or its practical uses or its aesthetic significance. In the same way, the standpoint from which the life of the individual is conceived and structured may be taken from within as well as from without the individual. With all its socially derivable contents, a total life may be interpreted as the centripetally directed fate of its bearer as legitimately as—with all the elements that are reserved for the individual—it may be conceived of as the product and component of social life.

We thus see how the fact of sociation puts the individual into the dual position which I discussed in the beginning: The individual is contained in sociation and, at the same time, finds himself confronted by it. He is both a link in the organism of sociation and an autonomous organic whole; he exists both for society and for himself. The essence and deepest significance of the specific sociological a priori which is founded on this phenomenon is this: The "within" and the "without" between individual and society are not two unrelated definitions but define together the fully homogeneous position of man as a social animal. His existence, if we analyze its contents, is not only partly social and partly individual, but also belongs to the fundamental, decisive, and irreducible cate-

gory of a unity which we cannot designate other than as the synthesis or simultaneity of two logically contradictory characterizations of man—the characterization which is based on his function as a member, as a product and content, of society; and the opposing characterization which is based on his functions as an autonomous being, and which views his life from its own center and for its own sake. Society consists not only of beings that are partially non-associated, as we saw earlier, but also of beings which, on the one hand, feel themselves to be complete social entities, and, on the other hand—and without thereby changing their content at all—complete personal entities. And we do not deal here with two unrelated, alternative standpoints such as we adopt, for instance, when we look at an object in regard to either its weight or its color; for we are dealing with two elements that together form the unit we call the social being, that is, with a synthetic category. The phenomenon parallels the concept of causation. It, too, is an a priori unit, in spite of the fact that it covers two elements which are heterogeneous in content, cause and effect. We do perform the synthesis “social being.” We are capable of constructing the notion of society from the very idea of beings, each of whom may feel himself as the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of his developments and destinies and qualities. And we do construct this concept of society, which is built up from that of the potentially autonomous individual, as the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the individual’s very life and fate. This capacity constitutes an a priori of empirical society. It makes possible the form of society as we know it.

(3) Society is a structure composed of unequal elements. The “equality” toward which democratic or socialistic efforts are directed—and which they partly attain—is actually an equivalence of people, functions, or positions. Equality in people is impossible because of their different natures, life contents, and destinies. On the other hand, the equality of everybody with everybody else in an enslaved mass, such as we find in the great oriental despotisms, applies only to certain specific aspects of existence—political or economic aspects, for example—never to the total personality. For innate qualities, personal relations, and decisive experiences inevi-

tably make for some sort of uniqueness and irreplaceability in both the individual’s self-evaluation and his interactions with others.

Society may be conceived as a purely objective system of contents and actions connected by space, time, concepts, and values. In such a scheme, personality, the articulation of the ego (in which, nevertheless, the dynamics of society is located) may be ignored. However, the elements of this system are heterogeneous. Every action and quality within it is individual and is irrevocably located in its specific place. Society appears as a cosmos whose complex nature and direction are unlimited, but in which every single point can be fixed and can develop only in a particular way because otherwise the structure of the whole would change. What has been said of the structure of the world in general—that not a single grain of sand could have a shape different from what it has or be in a position different from its actual position without first conditioning the alteration by a change of the whole and without entailing such a change in the whole—is true of the structure of society, or society considered as a web of qualitatively differentiated phenomena.

This image of general society finds a small-scale analogy (infinitely simplified and stylized) in bureaucracy. A bureaucracy consists of a certain order of positions, of a predetermined system of functions. It exists as an ideal structure, irrespective of the particular occupants of these positions. Every new entrant finds within it a clearly defined place which has waited for him, so to speak, and to which his individual talents must be suited. In society at large, what here is a conscious, systematic determination of functions is a deeply entangled play and counterplay of them. Positions within society are not planned by a constructive will but can be grasped only through an analysis of the creativity and experience of the component individuals. Empirical, historical society is therefore vastly different from a bureaucracy because of its irrational and imperfect elements. From certain value standpoints, some of these elements must be condemned. Nevertheless, the phenomenological structure of society is the sum of the objective existences and actions of its elements and the interrelations among

these existences and actions. It is a system of elements each of which occupies an individual place, a co-ordination of functions and function-centers which have objective and social significance, although they are not always valuable. Purely personal and creative aspects of the ego, its impulses and reflexes, have no place in this system. To put it otherwise: The life of society (considered not psychologically but phenomenologically, that is, exclusively in regard to its social contents) takes its course as if each of its elements were predestined for its particular place in it. In spite of all discrepancies between it and ideal standards, social life exists as if all of its elements found themselves interrelated with one another in such a manner that each of them, because of its very individuality, depends on all others and all others depend on it.

We are thus in a position to see the a priori which we must now discuss. This a priori provides the individual with the basis for, and offers the "possibility" of, his being a member of a society. An individual is directed toward a certain place within his social milieu by his very quality. This place which ideally belongs to him actually exists. Here we have the precondition of the individual's social life. It may be called the general value of individuality. It is independent both of its development into a clear, consciously formed conception and of its realization in the empirical life-process. In the same way, the a priori of causality as a determining precondition of cognition depends neither on its conscious formulation in specific concepts nor on the behavior of reality, as we grasp it psychologically, in accord or discord with it. For our cognition is based on the premise of a pre-established harmony that exists between our psychological energies, however individualized they may be, and external, objective existence. This existence always remains immediate, no matter how many attempts there have been to show, metaphysically or psychologically, that it is the intellect's own product. In a similar fashion, social life presupposes an unquestionable harmony between the individual and society as a whole. This harmony, of course, does not preclude violent ethical and eudaemonistic dissonances. If social reality were determined by this presupposition of harmony alone, without the interference of other factors, it would result in the

perfect society. It would be perfect, however, not in the sense of ethical or eudaemonistic perfection, but of conceptual perfection; it would be not the *perfect society* but the *perfect society*. The a priori of the individual's social existence is the fundamental correlation between his life and the society that surrounds him, the integrative function and necessity of his specific character, as it is determined by his personal life, to the life of the whole. In so far as he does not realize this a priori or does not find it realized in society, the individual is not socialized and society is not the perfect system of interactions called for by its definition.

This situation is shown with particular sharpness in the phenomenon of vocation. Antiquity, to be sure, did not know this concept in its connotation of personal differentiation in a society articulated by a division of labor. But even antiquity knew its root, the idea that socially effective action is the unified expression of the inner qualification of the individual, the idea that by functioning in society the wholeness and permanence of subjectivity becomes practically objective. Yet in antiquity this relationship was exemplified by contents that were much less heterogeneous than they are today. Its principle is expressed in the Aristotelian axiom that some individuals are by nature destined to slavery; others, to domination. The more highly developed concept of vocation refers to a particular phenomenon: On the one hand, society within itself produces and offers to the individual a place which—however different in content and delimitation it may be from other places—can be filled by many individuals, and which is, for this reason, something anonymous, as it were. On the other hand, this place, in spite of its general character, is nevertheless taken by the individual on the basis of an inner calling, a qualification felt to be intimately personal. For such a thing as vocation to be possible, there must exist that harmony, whatever its origin, between the structure and development of society, and individual qualities and impulses. It is this general premise that constitutes the ultimate basis of the idea that for every personality there exist a position and a function in society to which he is called and which he must seek and find.

Empirical society becomes possible because of the a priori that

finds its most obvious expression in the concept of vocation. Nevertheless, like the other a priori thus far discussed, it cannot be designated by a simple slogan like those which it is possible to use for the Kantian categories. The processes of consciousness which formulate sociation— notions such as the unity of the many, the reciprocal determination of the individuals, the significance of the individual for the totality of the others and vice versa— presuppose something fundamental which finds expression in practice although we are not aware of it in its abstractness. The presupposition is that individuality finds its place in the structure of generality and, furthermore, that in spite of the unpredictable character of individuality, this structure is laid out, as it were, for individuality and its functions. The nexus by which each social element (each individual) is interwoven with the life and activities of every other, and by which the external framework of society is produced, is a causal nexus. But it is transformed into a teleological nexus as soon as it is considered from the perspective of the elements that carry and produce it— individuals. For they feel themselves to be egos whose behavior grows out of autonomous, self-determined personalities. The objective totality yields to the individuals that confront it from without, as it were; it offers a place to their subjectively determined life-processes, which thereby, in their very individuality, become necessary links in the life of the whole. It is the dual nexus which supplies the individual consciousness with a fundamental category and thus transforms it into a social element.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIOLOGY

1908

SOCIETY EXISTS where a number of individuals enter into interaction. This interaction always arises on the basis of certain drives or for the sake of certain purposes. Erotic, religious, or merely associative impulses; and purposes of defense, attack, play, gain, aid, or instruction— these and countless others cause man to live with other men, to act for them, with them, against them, and thus to correlate his condition with theirs. In brief, he influences and is influenced by them. The significance of these interactions among men lies in the fact that it is because of them that the individuals, in whom these driving impulses and purposes are lodged, form a unity, that is, a society. For unity in the empirical sense of the word is nothing but the interaction of elements. An organic body is a unity because its organs maintain a more intimate exchange of their energies with each other than with any other organism; a state is a unity because its citizens show similar mutual effects. In fact, the whole world could not be called one if each of its parts did not somehow influence every other part, or, if at any one point the reciprocity of effects, however indirect it may be, were cut off.

This unity, or sociation, may be of very different degrees, ac-

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ording to the kind and the intimacy of the interaction which obtains. Sociation ranges all the way from the momentary getting together for a walk to the founding of a family, from relations maintained "until further notice" to membership in a state, from the temporary aggregation of hotel guests to the intimate bond of a medieval guild. I designate as the content—the materials, so to speak—of sociation everything that is present in individuals (the immediately concrete loci of all historical reality)—drive, interest, purpose, inclination, psychic state, movement—everything that is present in them in such a way as to engender or mediate effects upon others or to receive such effects. In themselves, these materials which fill life, these motivations which propel it, are not social. Strictly speaking, neither hunger nor love, work nor religiosity, technology nor the functions and results of intelligence, are social. They are factors in sociation only when they transform the mere aggregation of isolated individuals into specific forms of being with and for one another, forms that are subsumed under the general concept of interaction. Sociation is the form (realized in innumerable different ways) in which individuals grow together into a unity and within which their interests are realized. And it is on the basis of their interests—sensuous or ideal, momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, causal or teleological—that individuals form such unities.

In any given social phenomenon, content and societal form constitute one reality. A social form severed from all content can no more attain existence than a spatial form can exist without a material whose form it is. Any social phenomenon or process is composed of two elements which in reality are inseparable: on the one hand, an interest, a purpose, or a motive; on the other, a form or mode of interaction among individuals through which, or in the shape of which, that content attains social reality.

It is evident that that which constitutes society in every current sense of the term is identical with the kinds of interaction discussed. A collection of human beings does not become a society because each of them has an objectively determined or subjectively impelling life-content. It becomes a society only when the vitality of these contents attains the form of reciprocal influence; only

when one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another, is mere spatial aggregation or temporal succession transformed into society. If, therefore, there is to be a science whose subject matter is society and nothing else, it must exclusively investigate these interactions, these kinds and forms of sociation. For everything else found within "society" and realized through it and within its framework is not itself society. It is merely a content that develops or is developed by this form of coexistence, and it produces the real phenomenon called "society" in the broader and more customary sense of the term only in conjunction with this form. To separate, by scientific abstraction, these two factors of form and content which are in reality inseparably united; to detach by analysis the forms of interaction or sociation from their contents (through which alone these forms become social forms); and to bring them together systematically under a consistent scientific viewpoint—this seems to me the basis for the only, as well as the entire, possibility of a special science of society as such. Only such a science can actually treat the facts that go under the name of sociohistorical reality upon the plane of the purely social.

Abstractions alone produce science out of the complexity or the unity of reality. Yet however urgently such abstractions may be demanded by the needs of cognition itself, they also require some sort of justification of their relation to the structure of the objective world. For only some functional relation to actuality can save one from sterile inquiries or from the haphazard formulation of scientific concepts. Certainly, naïve naturalism errs in assuming that the given itself contains the analytic or synthetic arrangements through which it becomes the content of a science. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the given are more or less susceptible to such arrangements. An analogy may help here. A portrait fundamentally transforms the natural human appearance, but one face is better suited than another to such a transformation into something radically alien. Remembering this helps us to appraise the greater or lesser appropriateness of various scientific problems and methods. The right to subject sociohistorical phenomena to an analysis in terms of form and content (and to synthesize the forms)

rests upon two conditions which must be verified on a factual basis. On the one hand, we must demonstrate that the same form of sociation can be observed in quite dissimilar contents and in connection with quite dissimilar purposes. On the other hand, we must show that the content is realized in using quite dissimilar forms of sociation as its medium or vehicle. A parallel is found in the fact that the same geometric forms may be observed in the most heterogeneous materials and that the same material occurs in the most heterogeneous spatial forms. Similar relations obtain between logical forms and the material contents of cognition.

Both of these conditions are undeniable facts. We do find that the same form of interaction obtains among individuals in societal groups that are the most unlike imaginable in purpose and significance. Superiority, subordination, competition, division of labor, formation of parties, representation, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and innumerable similar features are found in the state as well as in a religious community, in a band of conspirators as in an economic association, in an art school as in a family. However diverse the interests that give rise to these sociations, the forms in which the interests are realized are identical. On the other hand, the identical interest may take on form in very different sociations. Economic interest is realized both in competition and in the planned organization of producers, in isolation from other groups and in fusion with them. Although the religious contents of life remain identical, at one time they demand an unregulated, at another time a centralized, form of community. The interests upon which the relations between the sexes are based are satisfied by an almost endless variety of family forms. The educational interest may lead to a liberal or to a despotic relation between teacher and pupil, to individualistic interaction between them, or to a more collectivistic type of interaction between the teacher and the totality of his pupils. Hence, not only may the form in which the most widely different contents are realized be identical, but a content too may persist while its medium—the interactions of the individuals—moves in a variety of forms. We see, then, that the analysis in terms of form and content transforms the facts—which in their immediacy present form

and content as an indissoluble unity of social life—in such a way as to furnish the legitimation of the sociological problem. This problem demands that the pure forms of sociation be identified, ordered systematically, explained psychologically, and studied from the standpoint of their historical development. . . .

This conception of society implies a further proposition: A given number of individuals may be a society to a greater or a smaller degree. With each formation of parties, with each joining for common tasks or in a common feeling or way of thinking, with each articulation of the distribution of positions of submission and domination, with each common meal, with each self-adornment for others—with every growth of new synthesizing phenomena such as these, the same group becomes "more society" than it was before. There is no such thing as society "as such"; that is, there is no society in the sense that it is the condition for the emergence of all these particular phenomena. For there is no such thing as interaction "as such"—there are only specific kinds of interaction. And it is with their emergence that society too emerges, for they are neither the cause nor the consequence of society but are, themselves, society. The fact that an extraordinary multitude and variety of interactions operate at any one moment has given a seemingly autonomous historical reality to the general concept of society. Perhaps it is this hypostatization of a mere abstraction that is the reason for the peculiar vagueness and uncertainty involved in the concept of society and in the customary treatises in general sociology. We are here reminded of the fact that not much headway was made in formulating a concept of "life" as long as it was conceived of as an immediately real and homogeneous phenomenon. The science of life did not establish itself on a firm basis until it investigated specific processes within organisms—processes whose sum or web life is; not until, in other words, it recognized that life consists of these particular processes.

Only if we follow the conception here outlined can we grasp what in "society" really *is* society. Similarly, it is only geometry that determines what the spatiality of things in space really is. Sociology, the discipline that deals with the purely social aspects of man (who, of course, can be an object of scientific inquiry in

innumerable other respects), is related to the other special sciences of man as geometry is related to the physicochemical sciences. Geometry studies the forms through which any material becomes an empirical body, and these forms as such exist, of course, in abstraction only, precisely like the forms of sociation. Both geometry and sociology leave to other sciences the investigation of the contents realized in the forms, that is, the total phenomena whose forms they explore.

It is hardly necessary to point out that this analogy with geometry does not go beyond the clarification of the fundamental problem of sociology. It was only in attempting this clarification that we made use of this analogy. Above all, geometry has the advantage of having at its disposal extremely simple structures into which it can resolve the more complicated figures. Geometry can construe the whole range of possible formations from a relatively few fundamental definitions. Not even a remotely similar resolution into simple elements is to be hoped for in the foreseeable future as regards the forms of sociation. Sociological forms, if they are to be even approximately definite, can apply only to a limited range of phenomena. Even if we say, for instance, that superordination and subordination are forms found in almost every human sociation, we gain very little from this general knowledge. What is needed is the study of specific kinds of superordination and subordination, and of the specific forms in which they are realized. Through such a study, of course, these forms would lose in applicability what they would gain in definiteness.

In our day, we are used to asking of every science whether it is devoted to the discovery of timelessly valid laws or to the presentation and conceptualization of real, unique historical processes. Generally, this alternative ignores innumerable intermediate phenomena dealt with in the actual practice of science. It is irrelevant to our conception of the problem of sociology because this conception renders a choice between the two answers unnecessary. For, on the one hand, in sociology the object abstracted from the reality may be examined in regard to laws entirely inhering in the objective nature of the elements. These laws must be sharply distinguished from any spatiotemporal realization; they are valid

whether the historical actualities enforce them once or a thousand times. On the other hand, the forms of sociation may be examined, with equal validity, in regard to their occurrence at specific places and at specific times, and in regard to their historical development in specific groups. In this latter case, ascertaining them would be in the service of history, so to speak; in the former case, it would provide material for the induction of timeless uniformities. About competition, for instance, we learn something from a great many fields—political science, economics, history of religion, history of art, and so on. The point is to ascertain from all the facts what competition is as a pure form of human behavior; under what circumstances it emerges and develops; how it is modified by the particular character of its object; by what contemporaneous formal and material features of a society it is increased or reduced; and how competition between individuals differs from that between groups. In short, we must ascertain what competition is as a form of relation among individuals. This form may involve all sorts of contents. But in spite of the great variety of these contents, the form maintains its own identity and proves that it belongs to a sphere which is governed by its own laws and which may legitimately be abstracted from other spheres or from total reality. What we are suggesting, in brief, is that similar elements be singled out of the complex phenomena so as to secure a cross-section, whereby dissimilar elements—in our case the contents—reciprocally paralyze each other, as it were.

We have to proceed in this fashion with respect to all the great situations and interactions that form society—the formation of parties; imitation; the formation of classes and circles; secondary subdivisions; the embodiment of types of social interaction in special structures of an objective, personal, or ideal nature; the growth and the role of hierarchies; the representation of groups by individuals; the bearing of common hostility on the inner solidarity of the group. In addition to such major problems, there are others which no less regularly involve the form of the group and which are either more specialized or more complex than these. Among the more specialized questions, there are those such as the significance of the non-partisan, the role of the poor as organic

members of society, the numerical determination of group elements, and the phenomena of *primus inter pares* and *tertius gaudens*. Among more complex processes are the intersection of various social circles in the individual; the special significance of the secret for the formation of groups; the modification of the character of groups by a membership composed of individuals who belong together geographically, or by the addition of elements who do not; and innumerable other processes.

In this whole discussion, as I have already indicated, I waive the question of whether there ever occurs an *absolute* identity of forms along with a difference in content. The *approximate* identity that forms exhibit under materially dissimilar circumstances (and vice versa) is enough to conceive, in principle, of an affirmative answer to this question. The fact that absolute identity is not actually realized shows the difference between historical-psychological and geometrical phenomena. Historical-psychological processes, in their fluctuations and complexities, can never be completely rationalized. Geometry, by contrast, does have the power to isolate absolutely pure forms out of their material realizations. It should always be remembered that this identity of the kinds of interaction in the face of the simultaneously existing variety of human or objective material (and vice versa) is nothing primarily but a device to make and legitimate the scientific discrimination between form and content in the treatment of empirical phenomena. Methodologically speaking, this discrimination would be required even if the actual constellations did not call for the inductive procedure of crystallizing the like out of the unlike. In the same way, the geometrical abstraction of the spatial form of a body would be justified even if a body with such a particular form occurred only once empirically.

It cannot be denied, however, that this discussion suggests a difficulty in methodology. For instance, toward the end of the Middle Ages, extended trade relations forced certain guild masters to employ apprentices and to adopt new ways of obtaining materials and attracting customers. All of this was inconsistent with traditional guild principles, according to which every master was to have the same living as every other. Through these innova-

tions, every master sought to place himself outside this traditional narrow unity. Now, what about the purely sociological form which is abstracted from the special content of this whole process? The process seems to indicate that the expansion of the circle with which the individual is connected through his actions is accompanied by a greater articulation of individuality, an expansion of the freedom of the individual, and a greater differentiation of the members of the circle. Yet, as far as I can see, there is no sure method of distilling this sociological significance out of our complex fact which is, after all, real only along with all its contents. In other words, there is no sure method for answering the question of what purely sociological configurations and what specific interactions of individuals (irrespective of the interests and impulses residing in the individual, and of purely objective conditions) are involved in the historical process. On the contrary, all this can be interpreted in more than one way and, furthermore, the historical facts that attest to reality of the specific sociological forms must be presented in their material totality. In brief, there is no means of teaching and, under certain conditions, even of performing, the analysis of form and content into sociological elements. The case is comparable to the proof of a geometrical theorem by means of figures drawn in the unavoidably accidental and crude way of all drawings. The mathematician can feel quite safe in assuming that, in spite of the imperfect drawing, the concept of the ideal geometrical figure is known and understood, and that it is regarded as the essential significance of the chalk or ink marks. The sociologist, however, may not make the corresponding assumption; the isolation of truly pure sociation out of the complex total phenomenon cannot be forced by logical means.

Here we must take upon ourselves the odium of talking about intuitive procedures (however far these are removed from speculative, metaphysical intuition). We admit that we are discussing a particular viewpoint that helps to make the distinction between form and content. This viewpoint, for the time being, can be conveyed only by means of examples. Only much later may it be possible to grasp it by methods that are fully conceptualized and are sure guides to research. The difficulty is increased by two fac-

tors. Not only is there no perfectly clear technique for applying the fundamental sociological concept itself (that is, the concept of sociation), but, in addition, where this concept can be effectively applied, there are still many elements in the phenomena to be studied whose subsumption under the concept or form and content remains arbitrary. There will be contrary opinions, for instance, concerning the extent to which the phenomenon of the poor is a matter of form or content; the extent to which it is a result of formal relations within the group, a result which is determined by general currents and shifts that are the necessary outcome of contacts among human beings; or the extent to which poverty is to be regarded as a merely material characteristic of certain individuals, a characteristic that must be studied exclusively from the viewpoint of economic interests (that is, as regards its content)....²

To this extent, any history or description of a social situation is an exercise of psychological knowledge. But it is of extreme methodological relevance—even of decisive importance—to the principles of human studies in general to note that the scientific treatment of psychic data is not thereby automatically psychological. Even where we constantly use psychological rules and knowledge, even where the explanation of every single fact is possible only psychologically (as is true in sociology), the sense and intent of our activities do not have to be psychological. They do not have to aim, that is, at an understanding of the law of the psychic process itself (which, to be sure, has its content), but can aim rather at this content and its configurations. There is only a difference in degree between the studies of man and the sciences of external nature. After all, the natural sciences too, inasmuch as they are phenomena of the intellectual life, have their locus in the mind. The discovery of every astronomical or chemical truth, as well as the rethinking of each of them, is an event occurring in consciousness, an event which a perfect psychology could deduce without residue from physical conditions and developments alone. The procedure followed by the natural sciences in choosing the con-

² Simmel's development of the former interpretation of poverty appears as chapter II below.—Ed.

tents and interrelations of psychological processes—rather than the processes themselves—for their subject matter is similar to the procedure which determines the significance of a painting from its aesthetic relevance and from its place in the history of art, rather than from the physical oscillations which produce its colors and which constitute and carry its whole, actual existence. There is always one reality and we cannot grasp it scientifically in its immediacy and wholeness but must consider it from a number of different viewpoints and thereby make it into a plurality of mutually independent scientific subject matters. This applies, too, to those psychological phenomena whose contents fail to combine into an autonomous spatial world and which are not strikingly set apart from their psychic reality. Language, for instance, is certainly constructed out of psychological forces and for psychological purposes. But its forms and laws are treated by the science of linguistics with complete neglect of the realization (a realization which alone is given) that this is the object; they are treated exclusively through the presentation and analysis of the construction of the content and the forms that result from it.

The facts of sociation offer a similar picture. That people influence one another—that an individual does something, suffers something, shows his existence or his development because there are others who express themselves, act, or feel—is, of course, a psychological phenomenon. And the only way to grasp the historical emergence of each particular instance of this general phenomenon is to re-create it psychologically, to construct plausible psychological series, to interpret the externally observable by means of psychological categories. Yet from the particular scientific viewpoint conceived by the notion of sociation, this psychological phenomenon as such may be entirely ignored, and attention may be focused rather upon tracing, analyzing, and connecting its contents. Suppose, for example, that it is noted that the relation of a stronger to a weaker individual, which has the form of *primus inter pares*, tends to lead to a possession of absolute power by the stronger party and a gradual elimination of any elements of equality. This, in terms of historical reality, is certainly a psychological process. Yet from the sociological viewpoint, we are interested

only in such questions as: How do the various phases of superordination and subordination follow one another? To what extent is superordination in a given relation compatible with co-ordination in other relations? How much superordination is required in the initial phase of the relation to destroy co-ordination completely? Has combination or co-operation a greater chance to occur in an earlier or in a later stage of such a development? Or, as a further example, let us suppose it is noted that those hostilities are the bitterest that arise on the basis of a previous and somehow still felt communion or solidarity (hatred between blood relatives has been called the most burning hatred). As an occurrence, this can only be understood, or even described, psychologically. However, looking at this phenomenon as a sociological formation, we are not interested in the psychological processes that occur in each of the two individuals but in their subsumption under the categories of union and discord. We are interested in such problems as: Up to what point can the relation between two individuals or parties contain hostility and solidarity before depriving the relation of the character of solidarity or giving it that of hostility? What sort of solidarity—that which arises from remembered communion or that which is based on inextinguishable instinct—furnishes the means for more cruel, more profoundly wounding injury than is ever possible when the original relation was one of relatively great distance? In brief, how is our observation to be presented as the realization of forms of relation between people—what specific combination of social categories does it present? This is the point, and it is so in spite of the fact that the concrete description of the process, or the description of it as a typical process, can be nothing but psychological. Returning to an earlier illustration, we may (ignoring all differences) compare the procedure of sociology with the performance of a geometrical deduction using a figure drawn on a blackboard. All that is given and seen here is the physically produced chalk marks, but it is not in them that we are interested but in their significance from the viewpoint of geometry, which has nothing whatever to do with that physical figure as a deposit of chalk particles. (On the other hand, this figure, precisely as a physical structure, may be brought under scientific

categories; its physiological genesis, its chemical composition, or its optical impression may become the object of special investigations.)

In this sense, then, the givens of sociology are psychological processes whose immediate reality presents itself first of all under psychological categories. But these psychological categories, although indispensable for the description of the facts, remains outside the purpose of sociological investigation. It is to this end that we direct our study to the objective reality of sociation, a reality which, to be sure, is embodied in psychic processes and can often be described only by means of them. Similarly, a drama, from beginning to end, contains only psychological processes and can be understood only psychologically; but its purpose is not to study psychological cognitions but to examine the syntheses which result when the contents of the psychic processes are considered from the viewpoints of tragedy and artistic form, or as symbolic of certain aspects of life.