

**Classical Sociological Theory**  
**Professor R Santhosh**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 46**  
**George Simmel (1858 - 1918)**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



## George Simmel (1858-1918)



Welcome back to the class. In this class and in coming two more sessions we will be discussing yet another important classical sociologist, sociologist George Simmel. Simmel is again a French sociologist. In fact, the three, sorry a German sociologist the three or four major sociologists whom we have discussed in the previous classes are from Germany, including Tonnies, Karl Marx and Max Weber and today George Simmel, and he was born in 1858 and passed away in 1918.

And you would have noticed that in terms of his period of his life he lived along with Max Weber, in fact, they were great friends, they admired each other's work and Weber was a great influence in Simmel's development of sociology and they kind of exchanged ideas and so they lived in almost the same time period.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:19)

### Life and Intellectual influences



Born in Berlin in a Jewish family

Marginal life with respect to family and German academia

PhD in philosophy from University of Berlin

Failed to secure permanent academic position in Germany in spite of his stellar reputation and scholarship

Passed away in 1918 in Berlin



And let us have a very brief overview of his life and intellectual influence. He was born in Berlin, in a Jewish family. Soon after his birth his father converted into Christianity, but this whole stigma of being a Jew that really haunted Simmel throughout his career. So that is why quite a lot of his biographers have mentioned that Simmel led a kind of a marginal life with respect to the family and German academy. Even he was not very connected with his mother; he was not connected with his father.

So kind of a marginal existence is something that quite a lot of biographers attribute to George Simmel's both personal as well as academic existence. Marginal in the sense he was not given any, in spite of his reputation and the extent of his scholarship and he was a voracious writer, he has written extensively. But in spite of his very proven scholarship he was not given any professional position, he was not given any permanent professorial position in any of the major Berlin universities, mainly because he belonged to a Jewish family.


And you know, that this is the time when the anti-Jewish sentiments were brewing in Germany, which later led to the emergence of Adolf Hitler and others. So he had a PhD in philosophy from University of Berlin. And in even after that none of the universities accepted him as a permanent faculty and he led his life as a private lecturer. In the sense he takes classes and he, students pay him directly or many times he was given a kind of an adhoc

position in the university faculty. So that was, he was always on the margins of mainstream academia in Berlin or in Germany during that particular time.

So he failed to secure permanent academic position in Germany in spite of his stellar reputation and scholarship. And many scholars also say that his way of academic engagement was also something not very accepted by many people. He was not very meticulous in writing his scholarship in a very academic manner with endnotes, with footnotes with references and he used to write a lot for periodicals and newspapers.

So, he was not in that sense a very conventional academic, and he passed away in 1918. But Simmel along with these scholars whom we discussed so far is an important figure. So we will devote three sessions, including this to understand his major contribution, especially his contributions on the circulation of money, his argument about the overall nature of sociology, his argument about social conflict, all these things are something important. And even today, his writings are continued to be discussed and debated among the contemporary sociologists.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:31)

- 
- Simmel was a philosopher and sociologist, influenced by Immanuel Kant, Marx, Weber
  - Unlike Weber, Simmel held that sociology should focus on the development of timelessly valid laws of social organization.
  - Failed to develop a coherent body of work unlike other stalwarts. He maintained a foot in both philosophy and sociology while sustaining a commitment to both formal analytical analysis and social commentary on events and topical questions.



So Simmel was a philosopher and a sociologist, sociologist influenced by Immanuel Kant, Marx and Weber. And here we are seeing a very interesting scenario, I hope you understand. He was a philosopher and as well as a sociologist, and this combination of philosophy and sociology we came across quite early. I do not think that anybody would call Emile Durkheim as a philosopher, not Max Weber. They were not philosophers even Karl Marx, of course, he we can say that he was a philosopher, but if you go beyond Montesquieu was a

philosopher, so there were there were quite a lot of Saint Simon was a philosopher. So this blurring of boundaries between philosophy and sociology it was very evident in the very beginning of the emergence of the discipline.

After that, with the time of Durkheim and Weber and even Spencer and Auguste Comte could be somebody again can be called as a philosopher in a very different sense, but Weber was never a philosopher, he was a sociologist. So he was very clear that in what way is a philosophical exploration is different from a sociological exploration. But here, we come back to Simmel who was both a philosopher as well as a sociologist.

So this is something quite interesting, because he had very interesting engagement with larger philosophical questions. About the reality, about what constitutes the social, about his attempt to frame laws or frame larger laws that could be applicable to across the societies, a kind of attempt that Weber never ventured into or an attempt that Weber was extremely critical of.

And like every other scholar, he was also the product of his time, he was heavily influenced by the political and economic transformations of German, of Germany during that particular time, that there was a decisive increase emergence of a middle class, but the political system was with still with that of the feudal load. So lots of, all these factors the political climate really influenced Simmel's thinking.

And similarly, a host of philosophical writings, especially Immanuel Kant, his argument about the pure reason and the argument that human mind try to create a particular picture about or tries to make an ordered picture of the reality out there. So Kant in a significant way influenced Simmel's philosophical understandings about what constitutes the social out there, what constitutes the social out there.

Is it that we simply make out of something or is there were a reality out there? So Simmel was heavily influenced by quite a lot of philosophical arguments of Kant and of course, similarly with Karl Marx. And you must be knowing that Marx was a very, very predominant figure, intellectual figure during that particular time and, but Simmel had a very critical approach towards Karl Marx.

He argued that, he agreed with Karl Marx that alienation is a, is an inescapable situation in the era of capitalism. But he argued that it is not to do with the exploitative character of capitalism, but in every society when there is extreme form of differentiation when there is extreme form of division of labor then alienation is bound to happen. And Simmel also disagreed with Marx in terms of the value, with whole argument about circulation of money, circulation of money and the exchange value, we will come back to that later.

And of course, he was heavily influenced by Weber and Weber they were, as I told you, they were contemporaries, they were, they lived the same time, they influenced each other's thinking and Weber disagreed with quite a lot of positions of Simmel, but they influence each other very well.

So unlike Weber, Simmel held that sociologists should focus on the development of timeless valid laws of social organization. This is something extremely important. I hope you remember that this urge to prepare a set of laws, the urge to come up with a set of laws which are timeless and which are valid across the globe these are two ambitious claim, these are two ambitious, two ambitious desires and which you know that quite a lot of early scholars, including Comte and Spencer, they wanted to create that.

Comte talks about this law of three stages, he is also using the word law. But by the time Weber's, Weber comes in, Weber was extremely against this particular kind of understanding of sociology. He argued that you cannot frame sociological laws at the cost of the specificities. If you frame very broad laws then what you are actually formulating would be too broad that it will not be able to take into account the historical and political peculiarities of different contexts, and such a law hardly serves any purpose.

But Simmel was against that, Simmel's his entire intellectual trajectory in terms of defining sociology in a particular manner revolved around this idea of formulating, timeless valid laws of social organization. He failed to develop a coherent body of work unlike other stalwarts. He maintained a foot in both, philosophy and sociology while sustaining a commitment to both, formal analytical analysis and social commentary on events and topical questions.

So this is what I mentioned earlier. He was not very methodical or he did not produce very systematic books or other thing, his writings were kind of scattered across topics on a wide variety of topics, and many of his works are actually verbatim translations of his own classes the lectures that he has, he delivered in different places or kind of reproduced from his manuscripts or what he had written for this weeklies and other publications.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:29)

#### Simmel's Methodological Approach to the Study of Society



- He was concerned with the question of subject matter and independent stature of sociology
- He argued that basic and generic forms of interaction must be seen as the subject matter of the discipline.
- Three questions:(1) What is society? (2) How should sociology study society? (3) What are the problem areas of sociology?



Now, let us try to understand Simmel's methodological approach towards the study of society. And again, I do not think that I need to remind you that these are the formative years of the discipline, there is still quite a lot of discussion and debate about the trajectory of this discipline, the direction in which the discipline is supposed to traverse and the methodological character of the discipline, whether it is science or not science, Weber brings in the idea of Verstehen, Weber brings in a much larger complexity in terms of values.

So it is a very fraught situation in which Simmel tries to formulate his own understanding about the discipline. So he was concerned with the question of subject matter and independent stature of sociology, just like any other sociologist, especially like Weber during that particular time. He strived for the independent stature of sociology, he did not want it to be a derivative of any other discipline, and he very strongly believed that sociology deserves to be an independent separate discipline.

So he argued that, basic and generic forms of interaction must be seen as the subject matter of the discipline, and this is something very important. He comes to the whole, this fundamental

question of interaction, the basic and generic form of interaction. I think, I hope you would remember that we have come across this discussion several times. Many people use different terminologies, but the fundamental, the core of sociological inquiry is that the, it is the question of forms of interaction.

How and when, why people interact with each other. When people interact what happens? What are the major types of interaction? What are the kind of qualities of this interaction? What happens when people interact together? What are the different types of interaction, different forms of interaction? What are the values and cultural norms and other things that influence this kind of interaction? What are the structural aspects that influence this interaction? So these are some of the important concerns. And Simmel very strongly believed that the human interaction must be the subject matter of sociology.

So he has three broader questions. What is sociology? How should sociology study society? What are the problem areas of sociology? So as I, somebody like Weber, also somebody like Durkheim who wanted to establish their take on the discipline Simmel also devoted lot of attention trying to delineate the academic or intellectual character of the discipline.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:26)

#### What Is Society?



- "Society" exists when "interaction among human beings" occurs with enough frequency and intensity so that people mutually affect one another and organize themselves into groups or other social units.
- Patterns of social organization are constructed from basic processes of interaction.
- *Sociology asks what happens to men and by what rules do they behave, not insofar as they unfold their understandable individual existences in their totalities, but insofar as they form groups and are determined by their group existence because of interaction.*



Now, let us come to this first question, what is society? Now, does it sound a very simple question, what is society? You would say that society happens when people come together. But then that is not a correct or that is not a very convincing answer. And also, if you look

into some of the deeper philosophical questions regarding the nature, Immanuel Kant not only talks about the society, but he talks about the nature itself.

So what is reality? Is there a reality outside there? And how is that we as human beings understand the reality through our senses? So what is the relative position of our senses with respect to giving a kind of a particular understanding of that reality out there? What is the function of mind? How, what is the connection between mind and the senses? So these are some of very deeper philosophical questions.

So Simmel tries to answer that, society exists when interaction among human beings occur with enough frequency and intensity so that people mutually affect one another and organize themselves into groups or other social units. So this is a very important definition, he defines society as it exists when interaction among human being occurs, a group of people who just come to watch a show, a film or a circus and then they disperse nothing is happening there, they come, they sit there and then they go back.

But if you consider a group of people more than one person or more than two people or a group of people they come together, there is a meaningful, there is a systematic frequent interaction in a frequency and intensity. Frequency denotes the time period, it has to be frequent and it has to be intense enough. It cannot be merely superficial and it has to be intense enough, so that the people mutually affect one another, this is the most important point?

It is not that in a group people simply behave the way they want, their action definitely influences the other, and their influence in turn affect or influence these people's actions. So there is a reciprocal relationship, there is a reciprocal influence between the people who are engaged in a web of relationship or people who are engaged in a kind of a series of interaction and that is something extremely important.

And this thick network of relationship, this thick forms of mutual influence the reciprocal influence that lead to the emergence of certain groups and certain social units, which we need to really come to understand that. And in a sense, I think, while Durkheim defines sociology as the study of social fact, Weber defines it as study of social action, but I consider this as one



of the very, very important, very convincing definition of society as well as that of sociology, sociology study, social interaction.

So the patterns of social organization are constructed from basic processes of interaction. Now, what do we mean by these patterns of social organization? How do we organize our social activities? For example, how do we ensure that our children they are educated? One concern. How do we ensure, that our members in a particular society there is some system of governance so that everybody is governed with some sense of duties and obligations and control.

How is marriage has to be as an institution marriage be regulated or how is family to be maintained? What are the mechanisms through, which people from different gender or from the same gender constitute a basic unit called as family and then rear children if they want? How do you ensure that? We do not really think about these questions because they are, we have been so habituated to these organizations.

We are born into these organizations, we are, so they are quite used to that unless you challenge you never realize the influence or the coercive influence like what Durkheim says into these things. But Simmel says that, when you need to really understand how these social organizations, they attain very specific patterns are constructed from the basic process of interaction.

So whether you are talking about competition, whether you are talking about conflict, whether you are talking about say cooperation, you are talking about conciliation, you are talking about whatever be the various forms of social interaction or social organization the underlying fact or underlying process is nothing, but social interaction.

So this is how he defines, his own quotation is on writing. Sociology asks what happens to men and by what rules do they behave in so far as they unfold their understandable individual existence in their totalities, but in so far as they form groups and are determined by their group existence because of interaction.

So sociology ask what happens to men and by what rules do they behave. Not in so far as, they unfold their understandable individual existence. So I hope you remember our earlier

maybe the discussions during the very first week, the kind of a distinction between a sociological understanding and a, and an individual commonsensical understand.

And Simmel is saying exactly the same, you cannot understand the world around you, your own existence solely on the basis of your own perspective, your own experience, rather you need to take a step away and then locate yourself as somebody who is representing your time, somebody who is representing your place and then that understanding gives you much more important and interesting insights.

So, but in so far as, they form groups and are determined by their group existence are because of interaction. So how the group existence influences the individual? How the very fact that you live in a group and the group influences you? Or how the very fact that you are expected to interact in a group and how that particular compulsion influences your individual existence? That is the subject matter of or that is one society according to Simmel.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:23)

#### How Should Sociology Study Society?



- Sociologists should begin their study of society by distinguishing between form and content. How sociology could investigate social processes independently of their content.
- The distinction between the forms and contents of interaction offers the only "possibility for a special science of society" because it is a means of focusing on the generic basic processes by which people establish social relations and social structures, while ignoring for analytical purposes the contents (goals and purposes) of social relations.
- Simmel argued that attention to social forms led sociology to goals that were fundamentally different from those of the other social scientific disciplines, especially in the Germany of his time.
- "timelessly valid laws" about social interaction can be framed



Now second question, what, how should sociology study society? And again, this is a very, very debatable question. We know that sociology emerged as a very positive science somebody who believe that it has to be a social physics, it has to be just like any other hard natural sciences, but later there was an anti-positive turn, especially from Weber's time, we have discussed all these things. So let us see what Simmel tries to explain.

So sociologists should begin their study of society by distinguishing between form and content, this is an extremely important distinction that Simmel brings in, the distinction between form and content. How sociology could investigate social processes independently of their content?

So he argued that in different societies you will be able to observe kind of similar kind of forms, but the similar kind of form might have different kind of contents, and this contents could be influenced by say the cultural values or value systems or norms or the very specific historical incidences that happened, but you should not confuse it to with the rather, you, sociologists must be able to make this distinction between the form and the content.

The distinction between the forms and content of interaction offers the only possibility for a special science of society because it is a means of focusing on the generic basic processes by which people establish social relations and social structures, while ignoring or for analytical purposes the content goals and purposes of social relations.

So this is he very emphatically argues that you must look at the kind of a forms of social organization without really trying to understand the kind of a very specific goals and very specific purposes. Because if you go into that, then you might lose your focus and you might, you may not get the kind of a clarity in terms of your exploration.

So he would argue that this, if sociology has to emerge as a generic science as a science, as a discipline that has the ability to look at society in a very broad sense it has to develop an ability to look at the form of a social organization from its content. Simmel argued that attention to the social form let sociology to goals that were fundamentally different from those of other social scientific disciplines, especially in the Germany of his times.

So he argued that it is because sociology is concerned with the form of society, and that is why you are able to clearly establish the distinctive character of sociology in comparison with other disciplines. So that is why he argues the timelessly valid laws about social interaction can be framed. So he is very clear in his argument that if you do that, as just like a science, which looks at the character of various dynamics or various processes that take place without going into the content, you will be able to formulate timelessly valid laws.

And that is a very tall claim, very extremely problematic claim, but Simmel believed in that. Timelessly valid laws about social interaction can be framed. And that was his fundamental argument.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:03)

#### What Are the Problem Areas of Sociology?



- *Fundamental Problems (1918)*

- First is the sociological study of historical life and development, which he called *general sociology*. Concerned with the study "of the whole of historical life insofar as it is formed societally"—that is, through interaction.
- Studies of the contents of interaction can yield valid theoretical insights only when attention is paid to the more generic properties of the social structures in which people participate



And now, what are the problem areas of sociology? So if you, he discusses what does he mean by the term society, he discusses what should be the, how should sociology study society? Now he tries to understand what should be, what are the kind of problem areas of sociology? And this came up in his work, in his book *Fundamental Problems*, which was published in 1918.

So first is the sociological study of historical life and development, which he called the *general sociology*. Concerned with the study of the whole of historical life in so far as it is form society that is through interaction. So he was somebody who very strongly believed that a deeper historical exploration of social institutions of the contemporary society something very, very important.

It is, sociology should not limit its focus only to the study of the contemporary society, but you should look at the historical life under development. For example, when if Weber talks about the protestant ethic as a particular thing Weber, Simmel would argue that it is not really important to develop an ideal type of protestant ethic, but you should go for a full fledged

historical analysis about how it actually came about in that. So, that is something what Simmel is extremely emphatic about.

So first is the sociological study of historical life and development, which he called the *genetic sociology*, concerned with the study of the whole of historical life, in so far as it is formed societally, so a kind of a social history. And through the analysis of social history you try to understand how society evolved or society transformed over a period in time that is through interaction.

Studies of the contents of interaction can yield valid theoretical insights only when attention is paid to the more generic properties of the social structures in which people participate. So he argues that unless you look into the very specific social structures of different periods in time and then try to understand how specific were these structures during this particular time, unless you pay attention to the specificities of social structures during different epochs in time your sociological insight is not going to give you anything interesting.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:39)

- Second is the sociological study of the forms of interaction independent of history, which he called *pure , or formal , sociology*. Society is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of this interaction is the task of the science of society in "its strictest and most essential sense."
- to isolate and identify fundamental forms of interaction.
- Third is the sociological study of the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of society, which he called *philosophical sociology*. Dealt with the larger philosophical questions concerning relationship between man and society.



Second, is the sociological study of the forms of interaction independent of history, which he calls as pure or formal sociology. Society is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of his interaction is the task of the science of society in its strictest and most essential sense.

So he talks about general sociology, now he talks about the pure or formal sociology. And this formal sociology he says is, where society is conceived as in its present time it is not, it has to be understood independent of history you try to understand in this present time how the societies or various social interaction take place in different societies and what are the specificities of the contemporary time.

So society is conceived as an interaction among individuals, the description of this interaction is a task of the science of society in its strictest and the most essentialist sense. So focus only on the interaction, derive or devote your attention only to the realm of social interaction and try to understand what happens when people come together, how their interaction influences each other and how that in turn influences various social or political or economic activities of human being.

So the first one he talks about how you need to develop sociology has the task of understanding the historical development. Second one is keeping history aside you try to get a snapshot, you try to get a snapshot of the contemporary society. So basically the aim is to isolate and identify the fundamentals of social interaction. So when you take a snapshot of a particular process you give the account of how things are in this particular time, in this particular period in time. You get a more clearer picture regarding the situation, how things influence each other. Of course, it has a historical baggage, definitely, but he says that in this aspect when you talk about pure or formal sociology, it has to preoccupy itself with the present situation.

The third is the sociological study of the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of society, which he calls a philosophical sociology dealt with the larger philosophical questions concerning relationship between man and society. As I told you, Simmel was a philosopher, so he was preoccupied with quite a lot of philosophical questions, so he very strongly argued that sociology cannot escape from larger philosophical questions.

For example, the relationship between man and society, it is not something resolved, it is not something very easily resolved or there is no kind of complete consensus among scholars regarding what is the relationship between man and society. Is it man, is it man who or man, human beings do they actively create society or are they mere puppets at the hands of society? These are two extreme positions.

And about how do we conceive of society? How do we understand society? How do we make sense of society? How we use our senses to get an image of society? How do we create a sense of order in society? So these are all extremely philosophically profound questions. And Simmel very strongly believed that sociology must develop a sense of specialization to make sense of that.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:23)

#### Two important themes



- First, he was concerned, as were all social theorists of this early in sociology, with the process of differentiation and its effects on the individual.
- Second, the methodological unity in his work revolves around trying to extract the underlying essence and form of the particular empirical topics.
- He always sought to discover the underlying structure of social interaction and organization that linked diverse substantive areas.



And also, he talks about two important themes. The first one, he was concerned, as were all social theorists of his early sociology with the process of differentiation and its effects on individual. And this point, we will discuss later, his argument about differentiation, what happens when people, when a society become more and more complex, when differentiation takes place, I hope, we already discussed it in several sociologists.

We discussed it in Durkheim, we discussed in the previous class when we talked about Ferdinand Tonnies and for Simmel also differentiation is an extremely important social process. So when a society grows, when a society develops, when a society advances in terms of various things there is a process of differentiation. And what are the implications of this differentiation on human beings and its effects on the individual.

Second, the methodological unity in his work revolves around trying to extract underlying essence and the form of the particular empirical topic. So he was quite preoccupied with the whole question of underlying essence on form of particular empirical topics. So it was his methodological concern. He always sought to discover the underlying structure of social interaction and organization that linked diverse substantive areas.

So that was, it will become evident when we discuss later what were his major preoccupations, he always sought to discover the underlying structure of social interaction and organization that linked diverse substantive areas. We will see that when we will discuss his works in the coming classes.

So as I mentioned earlier, we will have two more sessions on Simmel, because Simmel is an important scholar. So we will meet in the next class. Thank you.