

**Classical Sociological Theory**  
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**Lecture 47**  
**Social Differentiation and Conflict**

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## Social Differentiation and Conflict



Welcome back to the class, and welcome back to the discussion on George Simmel. We had a class in the, we had a session in the previous class where we discussed some introductory ideas about George Simmel, as a very important sociologist, German sociologist who had a very marginal academic life, but whose writings were quite influential. He is still discussed and his works are debated, his works are often quoted.


So in the previous class we looked at some of his ideas, his overall orientation towards the discipline of sociology. His insistence that sociology must deal with larger philosophical questions and his belief that sociology will be able to formulate certain timeless laws, the laws that can be applicable to any time to any societies, a claim we discussed, we mentioned several times are, which is extremely problematic, highly problematic.

So in this class, in this session we are going to discuss two important themes of George Simmel. One is Social Differentiation the other one is Social Conflict. And these two themes are extremely important because social differentiation when we discuss, you will realize that why it

is such a powerful argument that Simmel builds in order to talk about social change. And the conflict is a very important theme, again, because if you look at the subsequent development of sociological theory later, you have a conflict school of sociological theory, something similar to structural functionalism and interactions to school.

So there are scholars like say Lewis Coser, and Dahrendorf and people who shared a kind of a theoretical argument based on this idea of social conflict. And Simmel was one of the forerunners, one of the early scholars who theorized the social conflict. In a very distinct and different way in which a conflict was understood by host of other scholars, including that of Durkheim and Weber. So these concepts are important, not only to understand Simmel, but also to understand their relative importance in the sociological theory.

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- Simmel believed that the number of groups a person belongs to and the basis on which they are formed influence interaction apart from the interests that the groups are intended to satisfy.
  - The degree of *social differentiation*, or the number of different activities or structures organizing these activities
  - A hunting-gathering and industrial society
  - Process of social differentiation produced two fundamental changes in patterns of interaction. First, the principle underlying group formation changed, in his words, from *organic* to *rational* criteria. As Simmel uses it, the term *organic* is a biological metaphor suggesting that a family or village is like a living organism in which the parts are inherently connected.



So Simmel believed that the number of groups a person belongs to and the basis on which they are formed influence interactions apart from the interest that the groups are intended to satisfy. So Simmel was very curious about the question that how many types of groups in which a person can become member? And why that in modern societies you will see a person becoming voluntarily or involuntarily becoming member of a number of groups, whereas in more traditional societies the number of groups in which a person can take membership or a person belongs to are very, very less. And what are the implications of that? What does it do?

The very fact that, you are a part of different groups in one scenario and the other scenario is that you are part of very few number of groups. And what are the implications of that? Or what are the influences that the very fact that one person is simultaneously member of different groups in one scenario, and the other scenario that the person is a member of a very limited number of groups.

So Simmel argued that the degree of social differentiation or the number of different activities or structures organized to these activities. So Durkheim argued that, rather than a person's willingness to become a part of groups. It is not that somebody suddenly realizes that I want to become a part of more number of groups. It does not work that way, but the very fact that in modern industrial societies, in modern complex societies we find ourself in a, as a member of so many different groups. And this is a product of social differentiation.

It is a product of social differentiation as the number of different activities or structures organizing these activities. Once these activities become numerous, once these activities become so complex it becomes important that a person or it becomes evident that a person is forced to become a member of different kind of social groups. It is not his or her choice. A person cannot decide to stay aloof from these groups.

So Durkheim argued that the kind of activities, the kind of specialization, the kind of differences that you confront in your social life is an extremely important indicator of the kind of society that you live. And that has very lasting implication on the idea of individuality, the idea of subjecthood, the idea of your rationality, the idea of the emergence of a person and an individual who is able to think independently.

So all these are factors, which we think many times as product of their own psyche or products of their own mind Simmel would argue that they are specifically products of certain sociological arrangement. So he makes this again, this usual distinction between the hunting-gathering and industrial society a theme, a constant theme that we have come across in so many earlier theorists. Starting with Comte and almost every sociologist who have attempted to talk about

social change have invariably spoken about these two major types of societies, which are very, very different.

I am not repeating the previous references like Durkheim or Tonnies or other thing you are quite familiar with that I believe. So the process of social differentiation produced two fundamental changes in patterns of interaction. And for a, just for a very quick recap, this is a term that is very closely connected with division of labour as elaborated by Durkheim. So I hope you remember that Durkheim talks about the conditions under which division of labour increases in a society when the population size increases, when their population is not able to expand, when their resources increase then division of labour is expected to increase.

So similarly here as well, Weber, sorry Simmel as well bring in as kind of a similar argument. So he argues that, when the process of social differentiation produced two fundamental changes in the patterns of interaction. First, the principle underlying group formation change in his words from organic to rational criteria. And this is something very similar to what we discussed in the previous class by Tonnies, when Ferdinand Tonnies talks about the differentiation between community and the society from *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. This is exact, almost similar what they are talking about.

So there is one form is organic, which is quite spontaneous, which is quite natural. You belong to a group in which you are born into. If you are born into a tribal group you naturally become a group, a member of that. If you are a woman, you become a member of that woman's group. If you belong to a particular cast, naturally you belong to a particular, that particular group. If you are born into the house of a Porter, for example or a blacksmith for example then naturally you tend to take up that occupation and then you become a member of that particular guild. These are seen as organic. These are seen as spontaneous unconscious process.

Whereas the other, when differentiation increases in something like a industrial society, it becomes no longer, it is no longer natural. It is no longer a spontaneous rather it becomes a rational criteria. A person will be forced to choose maybe successfully as well as unsuccessfully to become a member of distinct kind of groups. And these groups could be certain clubs, it could

begroups on the basis of certain ideas, certain sexual orientations, certain ideological orientations, certain hobbies, certain professions, certain jobs, certain, so many other similar kinds of interests that person uses his rationality.

As Simmel uses it the term organic is a biological metaphor suggesting that a family or village is like a living organism in which parts are inherently connected. And we know that we have discussed organismic analogical for Herbert Spencer. So and in Durkheim also we come across this particular term. So Simmel also uses the term organic in order to it is a biological metaphor. It gives an impression that when you are talking about the human body so just like an organ functions along with, in tandem with the other organs of a body and individual also functions like that.

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- The term *rational* suggests the use of reason and logic.
- Thus, as Simmel uses the term, when groups have a "rational" basis, people belong by choice. E.g.: trade unions and clubs
- Social differentiation also leads to an increase in the number of groups that people can join.
- When groups have an "organic" basis, people can only belong to a few primary groups.
- In contrast, when groups have a "rational" basis, people can join a greater number and variety of them, based on skill, mutual interests, money, and other types of commonality.
- Group affiliations in differentiated societies are characterized by a superstructure of secondary groups that develops beyond primary group membership.



So on the other hand, the term rational suggest the use of reason and logic. It is a very important long-lasting debates about reason and logic. Thus, as Simmel uses the term when groups have a rational basis people belong by choice and examples are trade unions and clubs. So it is no longer, you have to maybe for some of the prestigious clubs you will have to wait four years to get into that. It is seen as some very elite and exclusive kind of clubs or trade unions or as I told you earlier maybe groups based on hobbies, groups based on ideologies, groups based on certain kind of professions. So in each of these things you use your rationality.

Now, social differentiation also leads to an increase in the number of groups that people can join. Obviously, it is quite evident in primitive in simple societies you simply do not have that many groups. Whereas, in a modern society you have innumerable number of, there are numerous social groups that are awaiting for you. Only thing is that you realize that you have, you do not have time.

And in the current globalized world you have different groups. You have WhatsApp groups for different subjects. You have online groups of different subjects, different interests. So our understanding of group is completely different. Our understanding of community is quite different. So when groups have an organic basis people can only belong to a few primary groups.

As which is very evident they can become member of their family, their client, their cast, their maybe guild, their occupational group, their village. That is all, nothing much more than that. Whereas in contrast, when groups have a rational basis people can join a greater number and variety of them based on skill, mutual interest, money and other types of commonality. I think it is pretty clear, they are not very difficult concepts for you.

Now group affiliations in differentiated societies are characterized by a superstructure of secondary groups that develops beyond primary group membership. So he is talking about how structurally when you look at it in more advanced societies there are superstructures of secondary groups. The secondary groups are groups, which go beyond that of the primary groups. Primary groups, as we discussed groups in which you are born into, which are, which you are very familiar with you will realize people by face, personal relationship, whereas secondary group, for example, a political party. A political party is an example of a secondary group, it is no longer a primary group.

Whereas a primary group is somebody whom you know everybody, you know the relationship is face-to-face relationship. So in more differentiated societies there are always larger secondary groups as political party, trade unions, clubs, citizen groups and civil society organizations. They work beyond the confines of smaller primary groups.

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- When groups are formed by choice and people belong to a large number of them, the possibility of role conflict arises because membership in diverse groups places competing demands on people.
- "external and internal conflicts arise through the multiplicity of group affiliations, which threaten the individual with psychological tensions or even a schizophrenic break."
- Simmel's theory implies that the changes produced by social differentiation lead to greater individuality (what he called a "core of inner unity") that makes each person discrete. In Simmel's words, "the objective structure of society provides a framework within which an individual's non-interchangeable and singular characteristics may develop and find expression."
- The ideology of personal freedom as an inalienable right of every adult arose during the past two centuries. Its structural basis, Simmel said, lies in social differentiation.



When groups are formed by choice and people belong to large number of them, the possibility of role conflict arises because the membership in diverse groups places competing demands on people. And here so it is interesting to see that Simmel not only talks about these groups and then leave it at that, he has something more interesting to say.

So he says that when people becoming, people become members of so many different groups then there is quite a lot of possibility of a role conflict to emerge. What does role conflict mean? A role conflict means when simultaneously opposite kind of roles are expected what do you do? So you expect at various times, you expect it in almost every day, we always try to balance this kind of a role expectation. The expectation as a student, the expectation as a child, the expectations as a parent, the expectation as a citizen or expectation as a passenger, expectation as a professional.

And all these, for example, the expectation as a son and expectation as a husband or expectation as a wife and expectation as a daughter there are, all these roles have the potential to become contradictory, quite opposite, and then conflict can arise.

But Simmel says that, if one has become a member of more and more number of groups, the people in diverse groups will be placed on competing demands in situations. And this is something very important that he says, because a person who is born into primary groups with certain set of values, expectations, ideas and ideologies once they grow up and then become a part of another group many times this conflicts these values could be quite contradictory.

For example, imagine a situation a person belonging to a particular caste, he becomes a police officer. And then once he discharges his duty as a police officer, he no longer is expected to work as a member of a particular caste, he is supposed to go beyond that. So or even if he is, there is some crime or some incident happens and his own brother is an accused, he is not expected to show any such kind of familial connections or affinity or sentiment to that person rather, he is supposed to act as a firm officer who follows the rule of the law, rule of the land.

So in such situations you will see role conflicts emerge. And external and internal conflicts arise through the multiplicity of group's affiliations, which threatened the individual with psychological tension or even a Schizophrenic break and this is something extremely important. But how do we manage that or what is the, what are the consequences of this particular kind of conflict? Is it something good or is it something bad?

And you know that for certain in society people who belong to more simpler societies, people who are living in for example in tribal societies they do not have so much of role conflicts. Because their sense of commitment to their own group will be very strong and they could be quite happy with that.

Whereas in modern societies, you are, for example, you are a member of a particular group with a particular type of sexual orientation. You identify yourself as a person belonging to sexual minority, as a lesbian or as a gay, whereas it is quite that roles or that particular group the ideas and ideologies of that particular group is quite different from that of your primary group that is your family. So how do you deal with that?



So Simmel's theory implies that the changes produced by social stratification leads to greater individuality that he calls a core inner unity that makes each person discrete. In Simmel's words the objective structure of society provides a framework within which an individual's non-interchangeable and singular characteristic may develop and find expression. And this is an extremely important point, a very, very important point.

Remember Durkheim talking about the emergence of the individual from the, from a community oriented society, from a traditional oriented society, an individual emerges in a, during the modern times. And here Simmel offers a kind of a different interpretation for the same phenomenon. So he says that when an individual is faced with so much of conflicts in terms of roles, in terms of what somebody is supposed to do, what happens it leads to greater individuality.

What he calls a core inner unit. A person gets a kind of a more crystallized sense of self. A person identifies and understands that he or she, of course I have, I come from this background, I have such and such affiliations, but I have to keep a balance I am also so-and-so. I am also a police officer, I am also a member of a particular club, I am also a member of a political group, I am also a member of a particular group who works for a particular sexual orientation.

So this enormous exposure into different kinds of expectations and roles will create a kind of a more singular self, that is what Durkheim talks about. The objective structure of society provides a framework within which an individual's non-interchangeable and singular characteristic may develop and find expression. So people become more and more individually rigid. They derive more kind of a crystallized sense of self, become more complete in terms of their individuality.

The ideology of personal freedom, as an inalienable right of every adult arose during the past two centuries. Its structural basis, Simmel said, lies in social differentiation. So if you think that the idea of personal freedom has become one of the most sacred things in the modern times, if you use to, if you were to use a Durkheim language, the idea of personal freedom is a sacred thing. It has become a sacred thing. I hope you remember our discussion on sacred and profane.

So if it is the situation, if that is a situation Simmel would argue that, that is the structural result, that is the result of a structural change that happened because of that increased social differentiation.

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- The increasing complexity of modern societies provides a structural basis for an important personality characteristic.

Note two implications of this argument:

- First, role conflict now appears to be a positive feature of modern societies. Second, the distribution of psychological characteristics in a population (e.g., people's sense of individuality and empathy) does not happen by chance; they reflect the social structure.
- Although role conflict burdens individuals, it also forces them to make choices and thereby encourages creativity.
- Modernity results from and, at the same time, produces a spiral effect such that as societies become more differentiated, more people become creative, and as more people become creative, societies become more complex.



The increasing complexity of modern societies provides a structural basis for an important personality characteristics. Now two, note two implications of this argument. First, role conflicts now appear to be a positive feature of modern societies. Because usually we say that role conflicts are not something good, but Simmel says that role conflict as something very important. You need to deal with it, you need to strike a kind of a balance. You need to be exposed to different kinds of pulls and pushes and that will only embolden you that will only make you more capable of dealing with that.

It is not that broken you crumble under this expectations of role conflict. Any examples, any example for that matter, an activist and a government employee or an activist and a homemaker, an active political activist and a wife. A political activist and a doctor or a student and a political activist. So each of these roles, it only enables the individual to emerge stronger and stronger. Second, the distribution of psychological characteristic in a population. People's sense of individuality and empathy does not happen by chance, they reflect the social structure very, very important.

That is people's sense of individuality how they identify their own individuality, their taste, their positions, their ideas how fiercely they argue for their independence. Each of these things

Simmel argues does not emerge from their own psychological processes rather they come from a larger structural arrangements.

Although, role conflicts burden individuals, it also forces them to make choices and thereby encourages creativity, very important point. That is why we, you constantly inquire, you constantly recreate, you constantly negotiate. New arrangements are made, new institutions are brought in, new forms of engagements are identified and it opens up quite a lot of creativity.

Modernity results from, and at the same time produces a spiral effect that such that the societies become more differentiated, more people become creative. And as more people become creative societies become more and more complex very, very interesting argument. He says that when a society become more complex, differentiated it produces more creative people. And when you talk about creativity, creativity always pushes the boundary to the limits.

Only when something new happens you call it as a creative idea. And the more creative it becomes, the more differentiated it will. So in modern societies, as and when this differentiation increases Simmel argues that more creative people will come, people with strong sense of individuality. And that is why in modern societies you will find people who are so much dissimilar. People who are so different from each other in terms of everything, in terms of their ideas, in terms of their taste, in terms of their attitude, in terms of their positions. It is a very fascinating thing.

If for example the kind of students who I meet in my everyday class in a class of 45 students, students come from different parts of the country and each one of them though they share the same age they are so different. Their ideas about life is so different, they are exposed to so much of different ideas, so much of different ideologies and they are actually undergoing a process of churning, which really influences them very, very deeply.

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## Conflict



- Simmel argued that while conventional scholarship understood conflict as avoidable and as a negative social process, conflict often serves as a means of maintaining or increasing integration within groups.
- Humans are distinguished from other species because, in general, conflicts are means to goals rather than merely instinctual reactions to external stimuli. Hence, conflict has a social character.



Now let us very briefly move to his ideas of conflict, because social conflict is an important theme that Simmel spends considerable time on. And as I mentioned earlier, the subsequent developing the sociological theory, which I will talk towards the end of this classes, this development of a conflict theory is one of the three important traditional theoretical orientations of sociology, along with structural functionalism and symbolic interactions.

So Simmel argued that while conventional scholarship understood conflict as avoidable and as a negative social process, conflict often serves as a means of maintaining or increasing integration within the group. So we know that sociology emerged as a reaction, or to as a reaction to so much of drastic social changes and violence and then disruption, sociology was preoccupied with the question of order, sociology was preoccupied with the question of social stability and conflict is seen as something contrary to that of stability.

So most of the scholars who we discussed earlier starting with Montesquieu to Saint Simon to Comte, Spencer and Durkheim and even Weber to certain extent all took the position, they looked at conflict as something avoidable, something that is not good for the society. Whereas, Simmel takes a very, very different stand. He argues that conflict often serves as a means of maintaining or increasing integration within the group.

The group's integration increases. The kind of we feeling of the group, the kind of a solidarity of the group increases when the group confronts in a, another group in a social conflict. Humans are distinguished from other species because in general conflicts are means to goals rather than merely instinctual reactions to external stimuli. Hence conflict has a social character very, very interesting argument.

He is using the instance of social conflict to provide a very interesting insight about the differentiation between human beings and other animals. Use of violence is there in animal kingdom or even in plants. Among the plants you will, you know that, but these animals they unleash violence or they resort to conflict on the basis of their bodily instincts. Maybe, for food or for sexual satisfaction or to protect one's own territory animals resort to violence.

Whereas, for social, for human beings they use conflicts either direct violence or threat of violence it has a social character. Many times it is not only, or not at all for the bodily instincts, it is something much more than that. It could be some time for more property, it could be something more for political control, it could be something for a kind of a maintaining a kind of a superiority domination over the other group. So none of these things can be derived to your bodily instincts rather, they have very, very solid social character.

Why that certain group resorts to conflict and why that certain group resort to violence is an extremely important point because it is social. It is definitely social, social violence is a very, very interesting topic.

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### Conflict Within Groups

(1) conflicts in which the opposing parties possess common personal qualities

- Conflict between intimate people: spouses, siblings, close friends etc. People are involved with one another as whole persons, and even small antagonisms between them can be highly inflammatory, regardless of the content of the disagreements.

(2) conflicts in which the opposing parties perceive each other as a threat to the existence of the group

- When a group is divided into conflicting elements, the antagonistic parties "hate each other not only on the concrete ground which produced the conflict but also on the sociological ground of hatred for the enemy of the group itself."



So he talks about two or three major types of conflicts. I am not going into too much detail, but it is important that we have some idea about that. He talks about conflict within group. What happens when there is, when conflict emerges within the group. Conflicts two types within that, conflicts in which the opposite parties possess common personal qualities. When a conflict arises within a group maybe between siblings in a family or between two factions of a same caste group, people who possess the similar kind of character.

And that kind of conflict Simmel says could be quite lethal, it could be quite violent and it could be quite intense. Conflicts between intimate people spouses, siblings, close friends, etc people are involved with one another as a whole person and even more antagonism between them can be highly inflammatory regardless of the content of the disagreement, and that we come across quite a lot. Is not it?

Look around the news that are coming every day about violence in families, violence in friendship circle, violence in gangs, in friendship groups because they think that they were all one and if something is done by the other person then it is seen as a major treachery, as a reason and then it becomes extremely inflammatory.

And then, second type is conflicts in which opposite parties perceive each other as a threat to the existence of the group. Here, the whole question is some group is trying to take over the whole group. So when a group is divided into conflicting elements, the antagonistic parties hate each other, normally on the concrete ground, which produce the conflict, but also on the sociological ground of hatred for the enemy of the group itself. So here, the argument is about when there are two factions within the group and that conflict also can lead to very, very serious consequences.

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(3) conflicts in which the opposing parties recognize and accept each other as legitimate opponents.

- When a conflict is "direct," the opposing parties act squarely against each other to obtain their goals.
- When a conflict is "indirect," the opponents interact only with a third party to obtain their goals. Simmel referred to this latter form of conflict as *competition*.
- Sociological consequences of these types of conflicts



Third one is conflicts in which the opposing parties recognize and accept each other as legitimate opponents. The conflicts in which opposite parties recognize and accept each other as legitimate opponents, when conflict is direct, the opposing parties act squarely against each other to obtain their goals. When you have a well-defined enemy for example, when two countries go for war or two factions when they encounter each other, the enemy is defined very clearly.

When a conflict is indirect the opponents interact only with the third-party to obtain their goals. Simmel referred to this latter form of conflict as competition. When there are, this conflict is not very direct. For example, when there are scarce resources. When there are scarce resources, scarce resources could be as a common property rights, it could be common grazing land.



It could be common forest, common water and there are different sections of people competing with each other. Many times it may not lead to direct conflict, but it actually takes the form of a competition and involves a third-party because you interact indirectly, you do not have any kind of major antagonism against the other group, but basically you want to protect the interest of your group because the resources are very scarce. So the sociological consequences of these types of conflicts.

Now these conflicts have very, very significant sociological consequences. What, whether a conflict happens within the group or is it between two factions or is it between a well-defined other who wants to take over that each of these, or whether conflict is has taken the form of a competition each of these forms have enormous sociological consequences.

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#### Conflict Between Groups



#### Three consequences

- (1) it increases the degree of centralization of authority within each group
- (2) it increases the degree of social solidarity within each group and, at the same time, decreases the level of tolerance for deviance and dissent;
- (3) it increases likelihood of coalitions among groups having similar opponents.



And that is why Simmel argued that the study of conflict is something extremely important from a sociological perspective. Then he talks about conflict between groups when you have two groups who are well defined. There are three consequences. One is, it increases the degree of centralization of authority within each group, an extremely important argument. We have seen it in several places. So when there is a unity all the internal divisions are supposed to die out.

For example, if there is a war between two groups, two countries, then all internal criticisms and internal factions and internal divisive forces will go down and the country will stand together. At least, momentarily the country will stand together. So there is a centralization of authority the power structure will become very, very strong.

There will not be much of a, they might even declare an emergency. For example, if a country like India goes for a war against another country then the immediate thing would be to declare a political emergency so that there is a very strong centralized authority. And it increases the degree of social solidarity within each group and at the same time, decreases the level of tolerance for deviance and dissent. We have seen this or we are witnessing it every time.

When there is a threat, we tend to forget all the differences. All the political parties will come together, all the political parties will declare their support to the prime minister and anybody who criticizes to that particular, for example, nobody will criticize the army. The military cannot be criticized, even if a military is defeated it will not be directly criticize.

So any criticism will not be tolerated or the level of tolerance for deviance and dissent will go down. People will be very strongly supporting the, there will be a singular, there is a sense of panic, there is a sense of the major sense of insecurity. There is a sense of siege and that creates a kind of strong sense of solidarity.

And it increases likelihood of coalition among groups having similar opponents. And we have seen that there could be so much of different tactical moves. People will sometimes forget their differences and then forge new allies because this time of conflict is a type of exceptional time, it is an exceptional time, it is not the normal time. So during exceptional times, they go for exceptional kind of procedures, exceptional allies, exceptional kind of social behaviour.

So these are the main themes Simmel discusses when he talks about social conflict. And with Simmel's argument about social conflict, sociologists began to increasingly look at social conflict as an extremely important social phenomenon. It is not something that has to be brushed

aside, it is not something which has to be seen as negative as something avoidable, something bad for society, it is not. It is an extremely important.

First of all, it is inevitable. Every society will have social conflict. Secondly, it has enormous social character and sociology as a discipline offers very, very fascinating insights to understand the social character of conflict. So that is what the Simmel argues in his work.

So let us stop here. And we will come back with another session on Simmel in the next class.  
Thank you.