

Georg Simmel' group expansion: a visionary path to an understanding of globalisation

Eloi Saint Bris
Doctorant en sociologie
University of Massachusetts (Massachusetts, USA)

(Titre Français : Elargissement des cercles sociaux et développement de l'individualité selon Georg Simmel : une analyse visionnaire du processus de mondialisation)

Georg Simmel triggers off much more interest among sociological scholars today than he previously did. Therefore I believe an interesting question to ask is: why does Simmel re-earn an academic legitimacy in the current social context? I will here assume that Simmel's analysis of "group expansion" and "enlarged social circles" can be put together with the notion of "globalization" as a topical explanation of today's social world. To the purpose of analyzing potential connections, I will mainly focus on the article entitled "Group expansion and the development of Individuality" (Simmel 1971, 251-293)¹ and I will indulge myself in a comparative study between concepts developed by Simmel such as "the transformation of social bonds", the "collective individuality", the "individuation of the economic sphere", and empiric observations on globalization in the 21st century. To put it another way, the question is: Is the idea of "group expansion" relevant to the transformations we can observe in modern societies? Hence I will propose an updated interpretation of Georg Simmel by relying on Roland Robertson's assertion: "in case of Simmel, we can see that his relative detachment from social matters *per se* [...] in the frame of his concern with forms of life in general led to the production of ideas, which are relevant in theoretical terms with the concept of globalization" (1992, 24). Here Robertson seems to say that Simmel's relational approach of sociology enables us to grasp the progression of societies in a more adequate way. This is a contribution that I will also discuss once I will have drawn the comparative study.

Defining "Globalization" in contemporary terms.

According to Sheila L. Croucher, globalization is the process of transformation of local or regional phenomena into global ones (2004, 10-11). It can be described as a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function together (Robertson names it the "crystallization of the entire world as a single place"). This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political movements. I will mainly focus on two of these *movements* (and here I lay stress on the term *movement* to which I refer as the dynamics of relations and transactions between individuals within different group layers): the economic movement (via the diffusion of cash economy) and the socio-cultural one (via the transformation of social bonds). Simmel provides a wide analysis of these two movements. And the fact that he does not absolutely set a time or a period to frame his theory allows us to transpose his vision into the 21st century context in order to acquire an interesting understanding of globalization. I will conduct my analysis by first studying the impact of economic transformations on group expansion and trying to grasp movement within social bonds in Simmel's work. Then I will connect them respectively with two current social phenomena: the

¹ Note de l'éditeur : Traduction française du texte disponible dans l'édition 1999 des PUF de *Sociologie* : pp. 685-707.

economic globalization and the cultural one; thus granting to Simmel's theories a certain *visionary-ness*.

The Monetary Economy in Simmel and Economic Globalization in Today's World.

To explain the transition from "insular economic circles" to a large group interconnected and interdependent, Simmel detailed the mechanism of monetary economy. The prevalence of money exchanges over payment in kind extends relations "into unboundable distances" (1971, 276). Indeed peculiar features of money, such as easiness of transportation and universal conversion, facilitate trade relations outside the *home social circle* and thus enlarge the circle into a single universal economic circle. According to Simmel, this gathering has three effects: the creation of interpenetrating interests, of complementary sectors of productivity and of similar practices. In other ways, it creates a uniformization of social practices, interests and hierarchies and a *flattening* of the world (Friedman 2005), which are two consequences very often mentioned as features of globalization.

The second point made by Simmel on cash economy mentions that the diffusion of monetary means of exchange entails the differentiation of individuals and an acceleration of the development of their own individuality (as more unique and differentiated individual) as well as the individualization of their activities (throughout the division and the specialization of the production process). In fact, cash wages provide more independence and more freedom of movement. But they also set the individual in a free competitive market (inside what Simmel calls the "liberal economy") in which they struggle for a higher wage and better conditions. Therefore the natural adjustment that results from this configuration is the specialization of functions (in the field the individual has maximum chance to succeed) and a substantial individualization/differentiation of each participant in the economy. Thus the economic circle can "dilate" and it keeps on integrating individuals in an always-enlarging circle, which already includes interdependent individuals that are all unique and different from each other but need one another. This economic "dilation" entails a group expansion that keeps on assimilating more and more individuals, because "differentiation and individualization [resulting from the adjustments to monetary economy] loosen the bond of the individual with those who are most near in order to weave in its place a new one – both real and ideal- with those who are more distant" (Simmel 1971, 256). This process of assimilation of every one in the monetary economy is very relevant to economic globalization, which integrates every one into an expanded group – around economic interests – throughout international division of labor (the broadest form of specialization and social differentiation).

The Likening Process in Simmel and Cultural Globalization.

In his article, Simmel conceptualizes two groups – M and N – that are originally "sharply distinguished from one another both in characteristic attributes and in opposing systems of shared belief" (1971, 252). When he places them into the growing competitive context resulting from the rise of monetary economy, he shows how specialized both group must become to "compete for a livelihood". Nevertheless, unlike the previous social organization where M and N were independent from each other and rarely in contact, on the competitive market they come to differentiate more and more one from another and thus the number of their interactions increase. In order to define what they are, they point at what they are not. However, this intensified differentiation process encounters one obstacle: they are not many different "fundamental human formations upon which a group can build and it can only slowly be increased" (Simmel 1971, 252). Hence, within a society encompassing a rising number of interactions between M and N, the number of human fundamental formations increases in both groups. They naturally come to have some of them in common, and therefore they produce "structures in one group that have their equivalent in the other group" (1971, 252). Finally the forms of social differentiation become similar and M and N's social organizations are more and more alike. All social groups come to have the same goals, the same sanctions and similar hierarchies. Indeed "deviation in all directions from what had thus far been the prevailing norm in each group complex must necessarily result in a likening [...] between parts of the two complexes" (1971, 252-253). Today, cultural globalization is defined as follows: the transmission of culture globally facilitated

by the movements of people, objects, signs and symbols. This process matches well with Simmel's analysis of socio-cultural transformations. In fact the increasing differentiation will lead to a likening between the first social complex (the one resulting from M and N relations) and the second one (resulting from X and Y relations). Thus the social world moves towards a *global likening*, which entails the creation and the transmission of a global culture (an aggregate of particular group differentiations on the basis of common human fundamental formations). This can actually be empirically verified throughout the process of regionalization within globalization: if, on the one hand, M and N were the countries of South America, and on the other hand, X and Y the ones of Southeastern Asia, we could notice how M and N first tried to differentiate one from another (due to their geographic proximity) and so did X and Y before creating a third social complex (as a result of the likening of each social complex). This new complex is symbolized today by trade agreements or trade organizations that actually embody a common socio-cultural basis that results from previous transactions and confrontations. These trade organizations nonetheless are constituent of cultural globalization; they become actors of the group expansion throughout the relationships they have with each other, which continues the process of differentiation on a worldwide scale.

The Importance of a Relational Approach to Globalization.

My attempt hitherto was to show how group expansion through the means of social differentiation and increasing individualization is an explanation of the phenomenon of globalization experienced nowadays. However it is crucial to point out the importance of the relational approach in the prospect of understanding globalization. This approach is well summarized here: "the [relational, transactional] approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space and thus precludes categorical stability in action" (Somers and Gibson, 1994). Indeed Simmel reminds us that it is the dynamics generated by relations between individuals (known as *transaction* in relational sociology) that produces the movement of social differentiation and thus a "need and an inclination to reach out beyond the original spatial, economic, and mental boundaries of the group and, in connection with the increase of individualization and concomitant mutual repulses of group elements, to supplement the original centripetal forces of the lone group with a centrifugal tendency that forms bridges with other groups" (1971, 253). It is clear here that the removal of social boundaries and the creation of an interconnected social world that prevails in a *global society* occur as a result of human relationships, a peculiar dynamic that generates forces and transforms the social world in its totality.

REFERENCES CITED

- Croucher, Sheila L. 2004. *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity a Changing World*. New York. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Friedman, Thomas L. 2005. *The World is Flat*. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Robertson, Roland. 1992. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London. Sage Publications.
- Simmel, Georg. 1971. "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality" in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
- Somers, Margaret and Gloria Gibson. 1994. "Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity" in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Editor: Craig Calhoun. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- Emirbayer, Mustafa. 1997. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology" in *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 103 Nr. 2. Pp.281-317.
- Fevre, Ralph. 2003. *The New Sociology of Economic Behaviour*. British Sociological Association. Pp.12-13. London. Sage Publications.
- Maffesoli, Michel. 2001. "Une lecture de Georg Simmel: Economie Monétaire et Modernité" in *Sociétés*. Nr 74. Pp.5-11. Brussels. De Boeck & Larquier.

-