Fragment
Simmel's Treatise on the Triad (1908)

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Editorial introduction

In the literature on firms and organizations, in economics, sociology, and business studies, there has been an increasing awareness that firms need others, outside the firm, in order to function, and particularly in order to innovate. This has led to the proliferation of studies on subjects such as outsourcing, inter-firm alliances, and networks of firms. Still, though, most of these studies focus on dyads of firms (i.e., strategic interaction of firms). Even in network studies, networks were seen mostly as aggregates of dyads. In contrast, in network analysis in sociology there has been, for some time, attention to roles and effects of third parties and of triads. In particular, the work of Ronald Burt (e.g. Burt, 1992) noted the importance, especially in the context of the acquisition of new information, of being a third party in 'bridging structural holes' between unconnected nodes or networks, and the opportunities for advantage as a *tertius gaudens* (laughing third) in playing agents off against each other. While in network analysis this attention to triads is relatively new, it has, in fact, a long history, going back, in particular, to the work of the sociologist Georg Simmel. A recent publication that acknowledges this is Krackhardt (1999).

Georg Simmel was born in Berlin in 1858 and died in 1918. He studied history and philosophy and lectured on logic, philosophy, ethics, psychology, and sociology. To the extent that Simmel is known among economists, it is probably mostly from his *Philosophy of Money*. However, prior to Burt, Simmel analysed the *tertius gaudens*, with great Machiavellian elaboration of stratagems of *divide et impera* (divide and rule). In contrast with Burt, he analysed not only its opportunities but also its limits, where it breaks down, and where advantage switches to disadvantage, as recognized and elaborated by Krackhardt (1999). Also, Simmel analysed how, in contrast with the *tertius gaudens,* benevolent third parties can facilitate collaboration between others, as intermediaries and arbitrators, and the limits and problems associated with that.

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In contrast with Burt and later researchers, Simmel did not analyse the implications of triad structures for learning and innovation. Nevertheless, his work retains a high degree of relevance. In his analyses, Simmel used examples and illustrations from markets, from the life of families and friends, and, most extensively, from politics. The latter especially illustrate the relevance of his analysis for institutional analysis.

Here, fragments from Simmel's writing concerning the triad are taken from the bundle of English translations written and edited by Kurt H. Wolff (1950), Part Two (Quantitative Aspects of the Group):

- Chapter 3, on 'The Isolated Individual and the Dyad', last paragraph 'The Expansion of the Dyad'
- Chapter 4, on 'The triad', all paragraphs.

This work was taken from Simmel's *Soziologie, Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, published in 1908.

Given the limitations of space, for the selection I had to choose between two alternatives. The first was a more or less complete text from a narrow range of the book, with only part of the chapter on the triad (Chapter 4). The second alternative was to select more fragmented texts, with frequent cuts, from a wider range, including both Chapter 4 and the part of Chapter 3 that deals with the 'expansion of the dyad', in addition to the dyad of a third party. I opted for the latter, since much of what is relevant relates to that 'expansion of the dyad'. Cuts in the text were made in the following way. First, elaborations and side-paths that seemed less relevant for the JOIE readership; second, illustrations concerning relations of courtship, children, and family that are out of tune with current times. This yields a survey of Simmel's central tenets concerning the addition of a third party to a dyad, including, in particular, the beneficial roles of a third party, then the triad as a whole, particularly the opportunities and limits of the laughing third, and finally details on divide and rule. The order of these is as presented in the book. In the text, the location of cuts is indicated by dotted lines, followed by a line space. Page transitions (in the 1950 volume edited by Wolff) are indicated in square brackets. I have added a few editorial comments in footnotes.

I emphasize that even with the choice of selection made, not all that pertains to the triad is included. In earlier chapters, Simmel preludes to the issue, and in later chapters he returns to it. The full benefit from Simmel's work on this subject can only be obtained by reading it all, and hopefully these fragments provide an incentive for that.

References

Burt, R. S. (1992), *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Krackhardt, D. (1999), 'The Ties that Torture: Simmelian Tie Analysis in Organizations', *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, **16**: 183–210.

Wolff, K. H. (ed.) (1950), *The Sociology of George Simmel*, New York: Free Press.

Chapter 3 The isolated individual and the dyad

Last lines of §8. *Delegation of duties and responsibilities*

... the fact that each of the two (*in a dyad*) knows that he can depend only on the other and on nobody else, gives the dyad a special consecration – as is seen in marriage and friendship, but also in more external associations, including political ones, that consist of two groups. In respect to its sociological destiny and in regard to any other destiny that depends on it, the dyadic element is much more frequently confronted with All or Nothing than is the member of the larger group.

§**9.** *The expansion of the dyad*

(a) THE TRIAD VS. THE DYAD

This peculiar closeness between the two is most clearly revealed if the dyad is contrasted with the triad.[1] For among three elements, each one operates as an intermediary between the other two, exhibiting the twofold function of such an organ, which is to unite and to separate. Where three elements, A, B, C, constitute a group, there is, in addition to the direct relationship between A and B, for instance, their indirect one, which is derived from their common relation to C. The fact that two elements are each connected not only by a straight line – the shortest – but also by a broken line, as it were, is an enrichment from a formal-sociological standpoint. Points that cannot be contacted by the straight line are connected by the third element,[2] which offers a different side to each of the other two, and yet fuses these different sides in the unity of its own personality. Discords between two parties which they themselves cannot remedy, are accommodated by the third or by absorption in a comprehensive whole.

 Yet the indirect relation does not only strengthen the direct one. It may also disturb it. No matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on

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1 Translator's note: Not Simmel's term, but...more convenient than 'Verbindung zu dreien' (accommodation of three) and the like.

2 Note that this is a prelude to Burt's later notion of bridging a structural hole.

which two of the three members regard the third as an intruder.[3] The reason may be the mere fact that he shares in certain moods which can unfold in all their [135/136] intensity and tenderness only when two can meet without distraction: the sensitive union of two is always irritated by the spectator. It may also be noted how extraordinarily difficult and rare it is for three people to attain a really uniform mood – when visiting a museum, for instance, or looking at a landscape – and how much more easily such a mood emerges between two. A and B may stress and harmoniously feel their m, because the n which A does not share with B, and the x which B does not share with A, are at once spontaneously conceded to be individual prerogatives located, as it were, on another plane. If, however, C joins the company, who shares n with A and x with B, the result is that (even under this scheme, which is the one most favorable to the unity of the whole) harmony of feeling is made completely impossible. Two may actually be *one* party, or may stand entirely beyond any question of party. But it is usual for just such finely tuned combinations of three at once to result in three parties of two persons each, and thus to destroy the unequivocal character of the relations between each two of them.

The sociological structure of the dyad is characterized by two phenomena that are absent from it. One is the intensification of relation by a third element, or by a social framework that transcends both members of the dyad. The other is any disturbance and distraction of pure and immediate reciprocity. In some cases it is precisely this absence which makes the dyadic relationship more intensive and strong. For, many otherwise undeveloped, unifying forces that derive from more remote psychical reservoirs come to life in the feeling of exclusive dependence upon one another and of hopelessness that cohesion might come from anywhere but immediate interaction. Likewise, they carefully avoid many disturbances and dangers into which confidence in a third party and in the triad itself might lead the two. This intimacy, which is the tendency of relations between two persons, is the reason why the dyad constitutes the chief seat of jealousy [136/137].

(b) TWO TYPES OF INDIVIDUALITY AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH DYADIC AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Dyads, wholes composed of only two participants, presuppose a greater individualization of their members than larger groups do (other things being equal). This observation is merely another aspect of the same fundamental sociological constellation. The essential point is that within a dyad, there can be no majority which could outvote the individual. This majority, however, is made possible by the mere addition of a third member [137/138]...

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3 Note how in the last six lines Simmel introduces, from the beginning, both the beneficial and the negative side of having a third party.

(c) DYADS, TRIADS, AND LARGER GROUPS

Dyads thus have very specific features. This is shown not only by the fact that the addition of a third person completely changes them, but also, and even more so, by the common observation that the further expansion to four or more by no means correspondingly modifies the group any further. For instance, a marriage with one child has a character which is completely different from that of a childless marriage, but it is not significantly different from a marriage with two or more children. To be sure, the difference resulting from the advent of the second child is again much more considerable than is that which results from the third. But this really follows from the norm [138/139] mentioned: in many respects, the marriage with one child is a relation consisting of two elements on the one hand, the parental unit, and on the other, the child. The second child is not only a fourth member of a relation but, sociologically speaking, also a third, with the peculiar effects of the third member. For, as soon as infancy has passed, it is much more often the parents who form a functional unit within the family than it is the totality of the children.

This same fundamental idea can also be seen in Voltaire's statement about the political usefulness of religious anarchy. It says that, within a state, two rivaling sects inevitably produce unrests and difficulties which can never result from two hundred. The significance that the dualism of one element has in group of several members is, of course, no less specific and decisive when this group serves the maintenance, rather than the disturbance, of the total collectivity of which it is a part. Thus it has been suggested that the collegiate relationship of the two Roman Consuls was perhaps a more effective obstacle to monarchical aspirations than the Athenian system of nine highest officials. It is the same dualistic tension which works now in a conservative, now in a destructive manner, depending on the other circumstances that characterize the total group. The decisive point is that this total group completely changes its sociological character as soon as the function in question [139/140] is exerted, rather than by two, either by one person or by more than two. Important colleges are often composed of two members, like the Roman Consuls: there are the two kings of the Spartans, whose continuous frictions are explicitly stressed as assuring the continuation of the state; the two highest war chiefs of the Iroquois; the two civic heads of medieval Augsburg, where the aspiration toward a single mayoralty stood under a severe penalty. The peculiar tensions between the dualistic elements of a larger structure guarantee the *status quo* function of the dyad: in the examples given, the fusion into unity could easily have resulted in the predominance of an individual, and the expansion into a plurality, in an oligarchical clique.

This discussion has already shown the general significance of dualism and the comparable insignificance of its numerical increase. In concluding this analysis, I will mention two particular but sociologically highly significant facts.

France's political position in Europe was at once changed profoundly as soon as the country entered into a closer relationship with Russia. A third or fourth ally would not have produced any significant modification once this decisive modification had occurred. In general, the contents of human life differ very considerably according to whether the first step is the most difficult and decisive step and all later ones are of a comparatively secondary importance, or whether the first step itself proves nothing, while only later and more outspoken steps realize the turn of events that was merely foreshadowed in the beginning. The numerical aspects of sociation provide numerous illustrations of either case, as will become increasingly clear later on. For a state whose isolation entails the loss of political prestige, the existence of any one alliance whatever is decisive. By contrast, certain economic or military advantages perhaps develop only in a *number* of alliances of which none may be absent if their success is to be guaranteed. Obviously, between these two types there is the intermediate one wherein the particular character and success of the relationship is directly correlated with the number of elements, as is usually true in the aggregation of large masses. The second type is suggested by the experience that relations of command and assistance radically change their character if, instead of one servant, assistant, or other subordinate, there are [140/141] two. Aside from the question of cost, housewives sometimes prefer to get along with one servant because of the special difficulties that are involved if there are several. Because of a natural need for attachment, one servant tries to approach and enter the employer's personal sphere and interest. But the same need for attachment may lead him to take a stand against the employer by joining a second servant, for each of the two has support in the other. Feelings of specific social status, with their latent or more conscious opposition against the master, become effective only where there are two servants, because they emerge as a feature which they have in common.

   In short, the sociological situation between the superordinate and the subordinate is completely changed as soon as a third element is added. Party formation is suggested instead of solidarity; that which separates servant and master is stressed instead of what binds them, because now common features are sought in the comrade and, of course, are found in their common contrast to the superordinate of them both. But this transformation of a numerical into a qualitative difference is no less fundamental if viewed from the master's standpoint. It is easier to keep two rather than one at a desired distance; in their jealousy and competition the master has a tool for keeping them down and making them obedient, while there is no equivalent tool in the case of *one* servant.[4] This is expressed, in formally the same sense, in an old proverb: 'He who has one child is his slave; who has more is their master'. It is seen in all these cases that the triad is a structure completely different from the dyad but not, on

4 This is a prelude to Simmel's later and much more detailed analysis of divide and rule.

the other hand, specifically distinguished from groups of four or more members [141/145] . . .

Chapter 4 The triad

§**1.** *The sociological significance of the third element*

. . . The triad as such seems to me to result in three kinds of typical group formations. All of them are impossible if there are only two elements; and, on the other hand, if there are more than three, they are either equally impossible or only expand in quantity but do not change their formal type.

§**2.** *The Non-Partisan and the Mediator*

It is sociologically very significant that isolated elements are unified by their common relation to a phenomenon which lies outside of them. This applies as much to the alliance between states for the purpose of defense against a common enemy as to the 'invisible church' which unifies all faithful in their equal relation to the one God. The *group-forming,* mediating function a third element will be discussed in a later context. In the cases under examination now, the third element is at such a distance from the other two that there exist no properly sociological interactions which concern all three elements alike. Rather, there are configurations of two. In the center of sociological attention, there is either the relation between the two [145/146] joining elements, the relation between them as a unit and the center of interest that confronts them. At the moment, however, we are concerned with three elements which are so closely related or so closely approach one another that they form a group, permanent or momentary.

In the most significant of all dyads, monogamous marriage, the child or children, as the third element, often has the function of holding the whole together.

. . . the actual result of the third element, the child, is that it alone really closes the circle by tying the parents to one another. This can occur in two forms. The existence of the third element may directly start or strengthen the union of the two, as for instance, when the birth of a child increases the spouses' mutual love, or at least the husband's for his wife. Or the relation of each of the spouses to the child may produce a new and *indirect* bond between them. In general, the common preoccupations of a married couple with the child reveal that their union passes through the child, as it were; the union often consists of sympathies which could not exist without such a point of mediation. This emergence of the inner socialization of three elements, which the two elements by themselves do not desire, is the reason for a phenomenon mentioned earlier, namely, the

tendency of unhappily married couples not to wish children. They instinctively feel that the child would close a circle within which they would be nearer one another, not only externally but also in their deeper psychological layers, than they are inclined to be.

When the third element functions as a non-partisan, we have a different variety of mediation.[5] The non-partisan either produces the concord of two colliding parties, whereby he withdraws after making the effort of creating direct contact between the unconnected or quarreling elements; or he functions as an arbiter who balances, as it were, their contradictory claims [146/147] against one another and eliminates what is incompatible in them. Differences between labor and management, especially in England, have developed both forms of unification. There a boards of conciliation where the parties negotiate their conflicts under the presidency of a non-partisan. The mediator, of course, can achieve reconciliation in this form only if each party believes that the proportion between the reasons for the hostility, in short, the objective situation justifies the reconciliation and makes peace advantageous. The very great opportunity that non-partisan mediation has to produce this belief lies not only in the obvious elimination of misunderstandings or in appeals to good will, etc. It may also be analyzed as follows. The non-partisan shows each party the claims and arguments of the other; they thus lose the tone of subjective passion which usually provokes the same tone on the part of the adversary. What is so often regrettable here appears as something wholesome, namely, that the feeling which accompanies a psychological content when one individual has it, usually weakens greatly when is transferred to a second. This fact explains why recommendations and testimonies that have to pass several mediating persons before reaching the deciding individual, are so often ineffective, even if their objective content arrives at its destination without any change. In the course of these transfers, affective imponderables get lost; and these not only supplement insufficient objective qualifications, but, in practice, they alone cause sufficient ones to be acted upon.

Here we have a phenomenon which is very significant for the development of purely psychological influences. A third mediating social element deprives conflicting claims of their affective qualities because it neutrally formulates and presents claims to the two parties involved. Thus this circle that is fatal to all reconciliation is avoided: the vehemence of the one no longer provokes that of the other, which in turn intensifies that of the first, and so forth, until the whole relationship breaks down. Furthermore, because of the non-partisan, each party to the conflict not only listens to more objective matters but is also forced to put the issue in more objective terms than it would if it confronted the other without mediation. For now it is important for each to win over even the mediator. This, [147/148] however, can be hoped for only on purely objective grounds, because the mediator is not the arbitrator, but only guides the process of coming to terms;

5 This is where Simmel starts to elaborate the positive roles of a third party.

because, in other words, he must always keep out of any decision – whereas the arbitrator ends up by taking sides. Within the realm of sociological techniques, there is nothing that serves the reconciliation of conflicting parties so effectively as does objectivity, that is, the attempt at limiting all complaints and requests to their objective contents . . .

It is important for the analysis of social life to realize clearly that the constellation thus characterized constantly emerges in all groups of more than two elements. To be sure, the mediator may not be specifically chosen, nor be known or designated as such . . . [148/149] . . . Such mediations do not even have to be performed by means of words. A gesture, a way of listening, the mood that radiates from a particular person, are enough to change the difference between two individuals so that they can seek understanding, are enough to make them feel their essential commonness which is concealed under their acutely differing opinions, and to bring this divergence into the shape in which it can be ironed out the most easily. The situation does not have to involve a real conflict or fight. It is rather the thousand insignificant differences of opinion, the allusions to an antagonism of personalities, the emergence of quite momentary contrasts of interest or feeling, which continuously color the fluctuating forms of all living together; and this social life is constantly determined in its course by the presence of the third person, who almost inevitably exercises the function of mediation. This function makes the round among the three elements, since the ebb and flow of social life realizes the form of conflict in every possible combination of two members.

The non-partisanship that is required for mediation has one of two pre-suppositions. The third element is non-partisan either if he stands above the contrasting interests and opinions and is actually not concerned with them, or if he is equally concerned with both. The first case is the simpler of the two and involves fewest complications. In conflicts between English laborers and entrepreneurs, for instance, the non-partisan called in could be neither a laborer nor an entrepreneur. It is notable how decisively the separation of objective from personal elements in the conflict (mentioned earlier) is realized here. The idea is that the non-partisan is not attached by personal interest to the objective aspects of either party position. Rather, both come to be weighed by him as by a pure, impersonal intellect; without touching the subjective sphere. But the mediator must be subjectively interested in the persons or groups themselves who exemplify the contents of the quarrel which to him are merely [149/150] theoretical, since otherwise he would not take over his function. It is, therefore, as if subjective interest set in motion a purely objective mechanism . . .

The situation becomes more complicated when the nonpartisan owes his position, not to his neutrality, but to his equal participation in the interests in conflict. This case is frequent when a given individual belongs to two different interest groups, one local, and the other objective, especially occupational. In earlier times, bishops could sometimes intervene between the secular ruler of

their diocese and the pope. The administrator who is thoroughly familiar with the special interests of his district, will be the most suitable mediator in the case of a collision between these special interests and the general interests of the state which employs him. The measure of the combination between impartiality and interest which is favorable to the mediation between two locally separate groups, is often found in persons that come from one of these groups but live with the other. The difficulty of positions of this kind in which the mediator may find himself, usually derives from the fact that his equal interests in both parties, that is, his inner equilibrium, cannot be definitely ascertained and is, in fact, doubted often enough by both parties.

Yet an even more difficult and indeed, often tragic situation occurs when the third is tied to the two parties, not by specific interests, but by his total personality; and this situation is extreme when the whole matter of the conflict cannot be clearly objectified, and its objective aspect is really only a pretext or opportunity for deeper personal irreconcilabilities to manifest themselves. In such a case, the third, whom love or duty, fate or habit have made equally intimate with both, can be crushed by the conflict – much more so than if he himself took sides. The danger is increased because the balance of his interests, which does not lean in either direction, usually does not lead to successful mediation [150/151], since reduction to a merely objective contrast fails. This is the type instanced by a great many family conflicts. The mediator, whose equal distance to both conflicting parties assures his impartiality, can accommodate both with relative case. But the person who is impartial because he is equally close to the two, will find this much more difficult and will personally get into the most painful dualism of feelings. Where the mediator is *chosen,* therefore, the equally uninterested will be preferred (other things being equal) to the equally interested. Medieval Italian cities, for instance, often obtained their judges from the outside in order to be sure that they were not prejudiced by inner party frictions.

This suggests the second form of accommodation by means an impartial third element, namely, arbitration. As long as the third properly operates as a mediator, the final termination of the conflict lies exclusively in the hands of the parties themselves. But when they choose an arbitrator, they relinquish this final decision. They project, as it were, their will to conciliation, and this will becomes personified in the arbitrator. He thus gains a special impressiveness and power over the antagonistic forces. The voluntary appeal to an arbitrator, to whom they submit from the beginning, presupposes a greater subjective confidence in the objectivity of judgment than does any other form of decision. For, even in the state tribunal, it is only the action of the complainant that results from confidence in just decision, since the complainant considers the decision that is favorable to him the just decision. The defendant, on the other hand, must enter the suit whether or not he believes in the impartiality of the judge. But arbitration results only when both parties to the conflict have this belief. This is the principle which sharply differentiates mediation from arbitration; and the

more official the act of conciliation, the more punctiliously this differentiation observed ... [151/152]

After all that has been said, it is clear that from an over-all viewpoint, the existence of the impartial third element serves the perpetuation of the group ... [152/153]

Whether impartiality consists in the equal distance or in the equal closeness that connects the non-partisan and the two conflicting parties, it is obvious that it may be mixed with a great many other relations between him and each of the two others and their group as a whole. For instance, if he constitutes a group with the other two but is remote from their conflicts, he may be drawn into them in the very name of independence from the parties which already exists. This may greatly serve the unity and equilibrium of the group, although the equilibrium may be highly unstable. It was this sociological form in which the third estate's participation in state matters occurred in England. Ever since Henry III, state matters were inextricably dependent on the cooperation of the great barons who, along with the prelates, had to grant the monies; and their combination had power, often superior power, over the king. Nevertheless, instead of the fruitful collaboration between estates and crown, there were incessant splits, abuses, power shifts, and clashes. Both parties came to feel that these could be ended only by resort to a third element which, until then, had been kept out of state matters; lower vassals, freemen, counties, and cities. Their representatives were invited to councils; and this was the beginning of the House of Commons. The third element thus exerted a double function. First, it helped to make an actuality of government as the image of the state in its comprehensiveness. Secondly, it did so as an agency which confronted hitherto existing government parties objectively, as it were, and thus contributed to the more harmonious employment of their reciprocally exhausted forces for the over-all purpose of the state. [153/154]

§ 3. *The tertius gaudens*

In the combinations thus far considered, the impartiality of the third element either served or harmed the group as a whole. Both the mediator and the arbitrator wish to save the group unity from the danger of splitting up. But, evidently, the nonpartisan may also use his relatively superior position for purely egoistic interests. While in the cases discussed, he behaved as a means to the ends of the group, he may also, inversely, make the interaction that takes place between the parties and between himself and them, a means for his own purposes. In the social life of well consolidated groups, this may happen merely as one event among others. But often the relation between the parties and the non-partisan emerges as a new relationship: elements that have never before formed an interactional unit may come into conflict; a third non-partisan element, which before was equally unconnected with either, may spontaneously seize upon the chances that this quarrel gives him; and thus an entirely unstable interaction may result which

can have an animation and wealth of forms, for each of the elements engaged in it, which are out of all proportion to its brief life.

I will only mention two forms of the *tertius gaudens* in which the interaction within the triad does not emerge very distinctly; and here we are interested in its more typical formations. In these two, the essential characteristic is rather a certain passivity, either of the two engaged in the conflict or of the *tertius* [third element, party, or person]. The advantage of the *tertius* may result from the fact that the remaining two hold each other in check, and he can make a gain which one of the two would otherwise deny him. The discord here only effectuates a paralyzation of forces which, if they only could, would strike against him. The situation thus really suspends interaction among the three elements, instead of fomenting it, although it is certainly, nonetheless, of the most distinct consequences for all of them. The case in which this situation is brought about on purpose will be discussed in connection with the next type of configuration among three elements. Meanwhile, the second [154/155] form appears when the *tertius* gains an advantage only because action by one of the two conflicting parties brings it about for its own purposes – the *tertius* does not need to take the initiative. A case in point are the benefits and promotions which a party bestows upon him, only in order to offend its adversary. Thus, the English laws for the protection of labor originally derived, in part at least, from the mere rancor of the Tories against liberal manufacturers. Various charitable actions that result from competition for popularity also belong here. Strangely enough, it is a particularly petty and mean attitude that befriends a third element for the sake of annoying a second: indifference to the moral autonomy of altruism cannot appear more sharply than in this exploitation of altruism. And it is doubly significant that the purpose of annoying one's adversary can be achieved by favoring either one's friend or one's enemy.

The formations that are more essential here emerge whenever the *tertius* makes his own indirect or direct gain by turning toward one of the two conflicting parties – but not intellectually and objectively, like the arbitrator, but practically, supporting or granting. This general type has two main variants: either two parties are hostile toward one another and therefore compete for the favor of a third element; or they compete for the favor of the third element and therefore are hostile toward one another. This difference is important particularly for the further development of the threefold constellation. For where an already existing hostility urges each party to seek the favor of a third, the outcome of this competition – the fact that the third party joins one of the two, rather than the other – marks the real beginning of the fight. Inversely, two elements may curry favor with a third independently of one another. If so, this very fact may be the reason for their hostility, for their becoming parties. The eventual granting of the favor is thus the object, not the means of the conflict and, therefore, usually ends the quarrel. The decision is made, and further hostilities become practically pointless.

In both cases, the advantage of impartiality, which was the *tertius'* original attitude toward the two, consists in his possibility of making his decision depend on certain conditions. Where he is denied this possibility, for whatever reason, he [155/156] cannot fully exploit the situation . . .

Let us come back to the other formation. In its beginning, a dispute is not related whatever to a third element. But then [156/157] it forces its parties to compete for help from such a third element. Ordinarily an example is provided by the history of every federation, whether it be between states or between members of a family. The very simple, typical course of the process, however, gains a particular sociological interest through the following modification. The power the *tertius* must expend in order to attain his advantageous position does not have to be great in comparison with the power of each of the two parties, since the quantity of his power is determined exclusively by the strength which each of them has relative to the other. For evidently, the only important thing is that his superadded power give one of them superiority. If, therefore, the power quanta are approximately equal, a minimum accretion is often sufficient definitely to decide in one direction. This explains the frequent influence of small parliamentary parties: they can never gain it through their own significance but only because the great parties keep one another in approximate balance. Wherever majorities decide, that is, where everything depends on one single vote, as it often does, it is possible for entirely insignificant parties to make the severest conditions for their support. Something similar may occur in the relations of small to large states which find themselves in conflict. What alone is important is that the forces of two antagonistic elements paralyze one another and thus actually give unlimited power to the intrinsically extremely weak position of a third element not yet engaged in the issue. Of course, intrinsically strong third elements profit no less from such a situation.

Yet within certain formations, as for instance within a highly developed system of political parties, it is more difficult to realize this advantage. For it is precisely the great parties that are often definitely committed, objectively as well as in their relations toward one another. They do not, therefore, have the freedom of decision that would give them all the advantages of the *tertius gaudens* . . . [157/158]

This very situation was characteristic of English politics at the beginning of the modern period, after the medieval phase, to the extent at least, that England no longer sought immediate possessions and dominions on the continent but always had a potential power between the continental realms. Already in the sixteenth century it was said that France and Spain were the scales of the European balance, but England was the 'tongue or the holder of the balance'. The Roman bishops, beginning with the whole development up to Leo the Great, elaborated this formal principle with great emphasis by forcing conflicting parties within the church to give them the role of the decisive power. Ever since very early times, bishops in dogmatic or other conflict with other bishops have sought

the assistance of their Roman colleague who, on principle, always took the party of the petitioner. Thus, nothing was left for others to do but likewise to turn to the Roman bishop, in order not to antagonize him from the start. He came, therefore, to acquire the prerogative and tradition of a decisive tribunal. Here, what might be called the sociological logic of the situation of three, of which [158/159] two are in conflict, is developed in great purity and intensity in the direction of the *tertius gaudens*.

Thus the advantage accruing to the *tertius* derives from the fact that he has an equal, equally independent, and for this reason decisive, relation to two others. The advantage, however does not exclusively depend on the hostility of the two. A certain general differentiation, mutual strangeness, or qualitative dualism may be sufficient . . . .

In the following case . . . it arises on the basis of duality characterized by qualitative differences. This explains judicial power of the English king, which was unheard of for the Germanic Middle Ages. William the Conqueror wished to respect the laws of the Anglo-Saxon population as he found them. But his Normans, too, brought their native laws with them. These two law complexes did not fit one another; they did not result in a unitary right of the people as over against king: consistent with his own interest, the king could force [159/160] himself between the two laws and thus could practically annul them. The discord of these nations resulted (and in similar cases results) not only from their actual conflicts but also from their actual differences that made a common legal enforcement difficult. In this discord lay the support of absolutism; and, for this reason, the power of absolutism declined steadily as soon as the two nationalities fused into one.

The favorable position of the *tertius* disappears quite generally the moment the two others become a unit – the moment, that is, the group in question changes from a combination of three elements back into that of two . . . [160/161]

Many among the various kinds of conflicts mentioned here and in connection with the next form of triad, must have operated to produce or increase the power position of the church ever since the Middle Ages, when it began to have it among secular powers. In view of the incessant unrests and quarrels in the political districts, large and small, the church, the only stable element, an element already revered or feared by every party, must have gained an incomparable prerogative. Many times, it is quite generally the mere stability of the *tertius* in the changing stages of the conflict – the fact that the *tertius* is not touched by its contents – around which oscillate the ups downs of the two parties; and this gives the stable third element its superiority and its possibility of gain. Other things being equal, it may be said that the more violently and, especially the longer the positions of the conflicting parties oscillate, all the more superior, respected, and of greater opportunity will the position of the *tertius* be rendered by firm endurance, as a purely formal fact. There is probably no more gigantic example of this widely observed relationship than the Catholic Church itself . . . .[161/162]

§ 4. *Divide et impera*

The previously discussed combinations of three element were characterized by an existing or emerging conflict between two, from which the third drew his advantage. One particular variety of this combination must now be considered separately, although in reality it is not always clearly delimited against other types. The distinguishing nuance consists in the fact that the third element intentionally produces the conflict in order to gain a dominating position. Here too, however, we must preface the treatment of this constellation by pointing out that the number three is merely the minimum number of elements that are necessary for this formation, and that it may thus serve as the simplest schema. Its outline is that initially two elements are united or mutually dependent in regard to a third, and that this third element knows how to put the forces combined against him into action against *one another*. The outcome is that the two either keep each other balanced so that he, who is not interfered with by either, can pursue his advantages; or that they so weaken one another that neither of them can stand up against his superiority.

I shall now characterize some steps in the scale on which the [162/163] relevant phenomena may be arranged. The simplest case is found where a superior prevents the unification of elements which do not yet positively strive after unification but *might* do so. Here, above all, belong the legal prohibitions against political organizations, as well as against leagues of organizations each of which, individually, is permitted. Usually there is no specifically defined fear or demonstrable danger that such organizations might present to the ruling powers. Rather, the form of association as such is feared, because there is the *possibility* that it might be combined with a dangerous content. Pliny, in his correspondence with Trajan, states explicitly that the Christians are dangerous because they form an association; otherwise they are completely harmless. On the one hand, there is the experience that revolutionary tendencies, or tendencies that are at all directed toward changing what *is*, must adopt the form of unifying as many interested parties as possible. But this experience changes into the logically false but psychologically well understandable inverse notion according to which all associations have tendencies directed against the existing powers. Their prohibition thus is founded upon a possibility of the second power, as it were. In the first place, the *a priori* prohibited associations are merely *possible* and very often do not exist even as wishes of the elements separated by the prohibition. In the second place, the dangers for the sake of which the prohibition occurred would only be *possibilities,* even if the associations actually existed. In this elimination of anticipated associations, the 'divide and rule', therefore, appears as the subtlest imaginable prophylactic on the part of the one element against all possibilities that might result from the fusion of the others.

This preventive form may exist even where the plurality that confronts one element consists of the various power components of one identical phenomenon.

The Anglo-Norman kings saw to it that the manors of the feudal lords were in as widely scattered locations as possible; some of the most powerful vassals had their seats in from seventeen to twenty-one different shires each. Because of this principle of local distribution, the dominion of the crown vassals could not consolidate themselves into great sovereign courts as they could on the continent. Regarding the earlier land distributions among the sons of [163/164] rulers, we hear that the individual pieces were parceled out as widely as possible in order to preclude their complete separation from the ruler. In this manner, the unified state wishes to preserve its dominion by splitting up all territorial subdivisions: if they were contiguous, they could more easily remove themselves from its influence.

Where there actually exists a desire for unification, the prophylactic prevention of the unification has an even more pointed effect. A relevant case (which, to be sure, is complicated by other motives as well) is the fact that generally, in wage and other controversial matters, employers categorically refuse to negotiate with intermediary persons who do not belong to their own employees. This refusal has two functions. It prevents the workers from strengthening their position by associating with a personality who has nothing to fear or hope from the employer. In the second place, it is an obstacle to the unified action of workers in different trades toward a common goal, for instance, the general establishment of a uniform wage scale. By rejecting the middle person who might negotiate on behalf of several workers' groups alike, the employer precludes the threatening unification of the workers.

. . . collective contracts eliminate(s) in principle the practice of 'divide and rule'. [164/165]

In a similar fashion, the attempts of constitutional monarchs at splitting up parliaments in order to prevent the rise of inconvenient majorities, go beyond mere prophylactic measures. I mention only one example which is of major interest because of its radicalism. Under George III, the English court had the practice of declaring the party principle and its operation as actually inadmissible, and incompatible with the welfare of the state. It did so on the thesis that only the individual and his individual capabilities could render political services. By designating laws and general directives as the specific functions of parties, the court requested 'men, not measures'. It thus played up the practical significance of individuality against the actions by pluralities; it tried to dissolve the plurality into its atoms, allegedly its only real and effective elements, by somewhat derogatorily identifying it with abstract generality itself.

The separation of the elements attains a more active, rather than a merely prohibitive form when the third person creates jealousy between them. The reference here is not yet to cases where he makes them destroy one another. On the contrary, here we are thinking of tendencies which often are conservative: the third wants to maintain his already existing prerogative by preventing a threatening coalition of the other two from arising, at least from developing

beyond mere beginnings. This technique seems to have been used with particular finesse in a case that is reported of ancient Peru. It was the general custom of Incas to divide a newly conquered tribe in two approximately equal halves and to place a supervisor over each of them, but to give these two supervisors slightly different ranks. This was indeed the most suitable means for provoking rivalry between the two heads, which prevented any united action against the ruler on the part of the subjected territory. By contrast, both identical ranks and greatly different ranks would have made unification much easier. If the two heads had had the same rank, equal distribution of leadership in case of action would have been more likely than any other arrangement; and, since there would have been need for subordination, peers would have most probably submitted to such a technical necessity. If the two heads had had very different ranks, the leadership of the one would have found no opposition. The *slight* difference in rank least [165/166] of all allows an organic and satisfactory arrangement in the unification feared, since the one would doubtless have claimed unconditional prerogative because of his superiority, which, on the other hand, was not significant enough to suggest the same claim to the other.

The principle of the unequal distribution of values (of whatever description) in order to make the ensuing jealousy a means for 'divide and rule', is a widely popular technique. But It should be noted that there are certain sociological circumstances that offer basic protection against it. Thus, the attempt was made to agitate Australian aborigines against one another by means of unequally distributed gifts. But this always failed in the face of the communism of the hordes, which distributed all gifts among all members, no matter to which they had gone. In addition to jealousy, it is particularly distrust which is used as psychological means to the same end. Distrust, in contrast to jealousy, is apt to prevent especially larger groups from forming conspiratory associations. In the most effective manner, this principle was employed by the government of Venice which, on a gigantic scale, invited the citizens to denounce all in any way suspect fellow citizens. Nobody knew whether his nearest acquaintance was in the service of the state inquisition. Revolutionary plans, which presuppose the mutual confidence of large numbers of persons, were thus cut at the root, so that in the later history of Venice, open revolts were practically absent.

The grossest form of 'divide and rule', the unleashing of positive battle between two parties, may have its intention in the relationship of the third element either to the two or to objects lying outside them. The second of these two alternatives occurs where one of three job applicants manages to turn the two others against one another so that they reciprocally destroy their chances by gossip and calumny which each circulates about the other. In all these cases, the art of the third element is shown by the distance he knows how to keep between himself and the action which he starts. The more invisible the threads are by which he directs the fight, the better he knows how to build a fire in such a way that it goes on burning without his further interference and even surveillance – not only the

more pointed and undistracted is the fight between the two until their mutual ruin is [166/167] reached, but the more likely is it that the prize of the fight between *them*, as well as other objects that are valuable to him, seem almost automatically to fall into his lap. In this technique, the Venetians were masters. In order to take possession of estates owned by noblemen on the mainland, they used the means of awarding high titles to younger or inferior members of the nobility. The indignation of their elders and superiors always presented occasions for brawls and breaches of the peace between the two parties, whereupon the government of Venice, in all legal formality, confiscated the estates of the guilty parties.

It is very plausible that in all such cases, the union of the discordant elements against the common suppressor would be a most expedient step to take. The failure of this union quite distinctly shows the general condition of 'divide and rule': the fact that hostilities by no means have their sufficient ground in the clash of real interests. Once there is a need for hostility at all, once there is an antagonism which is merely groping for its object, it is easy to substitute for the adversary against whom hostility would make sense and have a purpose, a totally different one. "Divide and rule" requires of its artist that he create a general state of excitation and desire to fight by means of instigation, calumnies, flatteries, the excitement of expectations etc. Once this is done, it is possible to succeed in slipping in an adversary that is not properly indicated. The form of the fight itself can thus be completely separated from its content and the reasonableness of this content. The third element, against whom the hostility of the two ought to be directed, can make himself invisible between them, so to speak, so that the clash of the two is not against him but against one another.

Where the purpose of the third party is directed, not toward an object, but toward the immediate domination of the other two elements, two sociological considerations are essential.

(1) Certain elements are formed in such a way that they can be fought successfully only by similar elements. The wish to subdue finds no immediate point of attack. It is, therefore, necessary to divide them within themselves, as it were, and to continue a fight among the parts which they can wage with homogeneous weapons until they are sufficiently weakened to fall to the third element. It has been said of England that she could gain India [167/168] only by means of India. Already Xerxes had recognized that Greeks were best to fight Greece. It is precisely those whose similarity of interests makes them depend upon one another who best know their mutual weaknesses and vulnerable points. The principle of *similia similibus*, of eliminating a condition by producing a similar one, therefore applies here on the largest scale. Mutual promotion and unification is best gained if there is a certain measure o qualitative difference, because this difference produces a supplementation, a growing together, and an organically differentiated life. Mutual destruction, on the other hand, seems to succeed best if there is qualitative homogeneity. Except, of course, in those cases where one party has such a quantitative superiority of power that the relation of its particular

characteristics to those of the other becomes altogether irrelevant. The whole category of hostilities that has its extreme development in the fight between brothers, draws its radically destructive character from the fact that experience and knowledge, as well as the instincts flowing from their common root give each of them the most deadly weapons precisely against this specific adversary. The basis of the relations among like elements is their common knowledge of external conditions and their empathy with the inner situation. Evidently, this is also the means for the deepest hurts, which neglect no possibility of attack. Since in its very nature this means is reciprocal, it leads to the most radical annihilation. For this reason, the fight of like against like, the splitting up of the adversary into two qualitatively homogeneous parties, is one of the most perverse realizations of 'divide and rule'.

(2) Where it is not possible for the suppressor to have his victims alone do his business, where, that is, he himself must take a hand in the fight, the schema is very simple: he supports one of them long enough for the other to be suppressed, whereupon the first is an easy prey for him. The most expedient manner is to support the one who is the stronger to begin with. This may take on the more negative form that, within a complex of elements intended for suppression, the more powerful is merely spared. When subjugating Greece, Rome was remarkably considerate in her treatment of Athens and Sparta. This procedure is bound to produce resentment and jealousy in the one camp, [168/169] and haughtiness and blind confidence in the other – a split which makes the prey easily available for the suppressor. It is a technique employed by many rulers: he protects the stronger of two, both of whom are actually interested in his own downfall, until he has ruined the weaker; then he changes fronts and advances against the one now left in isolation, and subjugates him. This technique is no less popular in the founding of world empires than in the brawls of street urchins. It is employed by governments in the manipulation of political parties as it is in competitive struggles in which three elements confront one another – perhaps a very powerful financier or industrialist and two less important competitors whose powers, though different from another, are yet both a nuisance to him.
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