

# A Simmelian approach to space in world politics

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Assumptions regarding space and spatiality exist in all major theoretical traditions in international relations, from realism to constructivism, but the mutual constitution of space and social interaction in the study of world politics requires further conceptual development in its own right. This article suggests a preliminary research agenda for the study of space and social relations in IR by lending insight from Georg Simmel's classical sociology of space. Simmel's approach offers scholars of contemporary world politics an innovative conceptualization of the relations between physical and symbolic space ('the physical-symbolic axis') and between space and time ('the spatio-temporal axis'); and a set of practical analytical tools to apply in IR research by defining the foundational qualities of space (exclusivity, divisibility, containment, positioning, and mobility) and suggesting a typology of distinct sociospatial formations: organized space, governed space, fixed space, and empty space. The article discusses the potential of Simmel's nuanced relational approach to contribute to the contemporary study of world politics, and demonstrates its utility in two particular areas of research: the study of unbundled sovereignty and mobility in late modernity; and the study of empty spaces in IR.

**Keywords:** Simmel; spatiality; unbundled sovereignty; the stranger; ontological security; empty space

How are interactions in the international realm – whether rooted in rational power politics or in intersubjective social understandings and practices – anchored and configured in space? And how are these interactions affected by, and in turn affect, differing spatial configurations? The answers to these questions may seem marginal compared to the substantial issues that regularly occupy scholars of international politics, such as the mechanisms of international security and cooperation, systemic change, or the diffusion of norms and practices around the globe. But in a discipline whose main object of inquiry is the globe itself, we cannot in fact fully address such topics without first placing the agents that generate these phenomena in their spatial surroundings and specifying the various ways these settings affect

their relations and behavior. It is therefore imperative to explicitly spell out how the relations between space and social interaction are approached in IR, and to generate a systematic research agenda for the study of how space shapes and is shaped by social processes and outcomes in the international system.

As opposed to ‘territory’ in the thin sense – that is, brute topographical physical settings and terrestrial landscapes (Kadercan 2015, 128–29; Agnew 2016, 196–201) – the term ‘space’ is used here to refer to the broader dynamic webs of socio-cultural and symbolic relations evolving within, around, and in relation to these settings (Couclelis 1999, 29–38; Jones 2009, 487–506).<sup>1</sup> Following Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (2008), I use this broad conception of space in order to focus particularly on the theorization of *sociospatial relations* in IR. Critical studies in neighboring disciplines like political geography widely acknowledge the pivotal role of space in shaping social and political encounters (Newman 1998; Ó Tuathail 2000, 166–78; Agnew and Corbridge 2002, 1–16). However, although the study of territory and the effects of the broader environment on international politics has advanced considerably in recent years (see, e.g. Hassner 2009; Elden 2013; Starr 2013; Banai *et al.* 2014; Branch 2014, 2016), the linkage between space and social interaction requires further explication and conceptual development in its own right.

Though one may suggest several hypothesis as to *why* IR theory has historically tended to take the sociospatial dimension of world politics for granted,<sup>2</sup> this is a separate, albeit no less significant, question. Instead, I take this tendency as a given intellectual reality, and, focusing not on space in general but rather on the more confined question of the mutual relations between space and social encounters, I suggest approaching this challenge by turning to Georg Simmel’s classical sociology of space. Simmel was one of the first modern sociologists to explicitly address the social power of space in both its physical-geometric and its metaphoric-symbolic dimensions, stressing the continuous evolution of social encounters not only in space but also in time. Rather than remaining strictly in the abstract sphere, however, his spatial approach is articulated through two useful typologies.

<sup>1</sup> These terms differ from ‘spatiality’ – the effect of location and spatial setting upon social, political, and economic processes (Agnew and Corbridge 2002, 79–80); and ‘territoriality’, which refers to the human purposeful delimitation of boundaries and political control over a geographic area (Sack 1986; Kahler 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Such as the evolution of the discipline as an American policy-oriented field of study; the lack of relevant data; or the influence of the Parsonian systemic perspective on IR theory. See Weber (2015, 1–23).

The first typology refers to the five foundational qualities of space: exclusivity, divisibility, containment, positioning, and mobility. Simmel's notion of *exclusivity* pertains to the uniqueness of space, in that no portion of space is ever identical to another. *Divisibility*, from a Simmelian perspective,<sup>3</sup> refers to the social implications of the human tendency to divide space into units surrounded by boundaries. *Containment* pertains to the ways social formations are settled within particular spatial settings.<sup>4</sup> *Positioning* refers to how the spatial continuum, which spans from nearness to distance, affects social relations. And the final foundational quality of space is *mobility* – the social effects of the movement of people in and across spaces when 'the spatial constraints on their existence are put into flux' (Simmel 2009, 545–605; see also Škorić, Kišjuhas, and Škorić 2013).

Simmel's second, and complementary, typology refers to his four ideal types of distinct spatial formations: organized space (i.e. the connection between how a social group is organized in space and its type of social bond); governed space (i.e. how the exercise of governance over people flows into particular spatial expressions); fixed space (i.e. the unique qualities of social associations that are 'housed' in particular spatial settings); and empty space (i.e. a spectrum of different types of 'emptiness' that are manifested in diverse kinds of sociospatial relations) (Simmel 2009, 605–20; see also Borden 1997).

These typologies, which encapsulate Simmel's general relational approach to space, enable us to practically apply his approach in specific areas of study in IR. Thus, while some contemporary IR scholars may dismiss Simmel's classical spatial sociology as anachronistic or simplistic compared to recent scholarly advancements in the field of spatiality, I suggest that his relational and dynamic approach, with its mid-range generalizations and concrete empirical illustrations, is simple and accessible yet at the same time rich in detail and sophisticated in dialectical nuance – and may therefore prove to be highly effective when applied to current international settings.

<sup>3</sup> 'Divisibility' for Simmel refers to the preliminary cognitive human tendency to connect that which is separated and separate that which is perceived to be connected, and to the social implications that derive from this tendency. This notion is further developed in Simmel's (1994 [1909]) 'Bridge and Door' – although as Michael Kaern (1994, 399) stresses, despite this premise Simmel is not to be seen as a Neo-Kantian given his emphasis on the *nonrational* elements of social life (see also Kemple 2007). This Simmelian notion of 'divisibility' thus differs from the way this concept is commonly approached in IR: either as part of the 'territory and war' literature regarding the perception of a territory as indivisible in protracted conflicts (see Toft 2003), or as the 'divisibility of benefits' within the international cooperation and 'security dilemma' literature (see Cerny 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Simmel's (2009, 557–61) interesting notion of space as a pivot around which social relations spin is explained in this context.

By focusing on one aspect of Simmelian thought I also highlight the broader potential contribution of Simmel's work to the contemporary study of world politics. The intellectual breadth of Simmel's immense body of work ranges from such topics as the money economy, urbanism, migration, ecology, conflict, cooperation, and social networks to the effects of modernity on individual and collective experience (Simmel 1950, 2004, 2009; Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976), all of which are highly relevant to the study of international politics. Despite this, Simmel's scholarly contributions have rarely been incorporated into studies in IR, a fact all the more puzzling in light of the growing interest within the discipline in later thinkers like Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci, and Derrida as part of the *social turn* in IR theory (Cox 1983; Löwenheim 2008; Adler 2013; Adler-Nissen 2013).

Several contemporary theoretical perspectives in IR were indeed broadly influenced by Simmelian notions, especially relational approaches and various brands of network theory (Jackson and Nexon 1999; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009). Some IR scholars are also familiar with the works of Lewis Coser (1956), who adapted and interpreted a significant portion of Simmel's work on conflict and inter-group relations. Yet, most IR scholars are far less familiar with Simmel in the original. One notable exception is a study published more than a decade ago by Cederman and Daase (2003), who extended the constructivist approach to include a new 'sociational' brand based on Simmel's concept of *Vergesellschaftung*.<sup>5</sup> Despite its originality, their research has not been followed by similar scholarly endeavors.<sup>6</sup> I pick up on this effort to apply Simmel's approach to international politics by focusing on a relatively narrow slice of his overall intellectual legacy – his sociology of space – with the aim of demonstrating the larger potential of his abundant body of work to enrich contemporary theoretical discourse in IR.

The article is organized in three sections. I begin by briefly addressing the gap between IR and political geography in their treatment of the socio-spatial nexus. Relying on John Agnew's (1994) still relevant critique on the 'territorial trap', as well as on more recent scholarly contributions, I articulate the problem as pertaining to the underspecified treatment of the relations between space and social interaction in IR theory, particularly

<sup>5</sup> The term *Vergesellschaftung* was translated by Wolff (Simmel 1950, xiii) as *sociation*, but has several interchangeable meanings (see Simmel 2009, xv). In the most foundational sense, it refers to the relational process in which social forms are constituted via continuous social interaction among 'real' agents (Simmel 1950, 9; Frisby 1984, 47–50).

<sup>6</sup> Cederman and Daase focused particularly on the endogenization of corporate identities in IR theory.

regarding the question of how the actors' position in space affects their *predispositions*. In the second section, I present the basic elements of Simmel's sociology of space as a possible way to approach this challenge, explaining the relevance of his approach to the study of international politics. The final section demonstrates the practical utility of Simmel's analytical scales for IR in two particular areas of study – unbundled sovereignty and mobility in late modernity from an ontological security (OS) perspective; and empty spaces in IR.

## The sociospatial nexus in IR theory

### *IR vs. political geography: a trailing discipline*

For most of the 20th century, the discussion of space and spatiality within IR was restricted almost exclusively to the inexhaustible debate over the persistence vs. the disappearance of the territorial state as the principle form of political organization in the Westphalian system, a debate that dates back to Herz's (1957) classical text on the subject. While the spatial dimension remained undertheorized in IR during this period (Banai *et al.* 2014, 99), the neighboring field of political geography has adeptly advanced geopolitics as a comprehensive framework for analyzing space and foreign policy. This approach has evolved from an essentialist view that the state's geographical settings determine its destiny (Mackinder 1904; Kearns 2008, 1599–601) to a critical and self-conscious perspective acknowledging the latent power structures behind the discursive practices of geopolitical specialists and 'intellectuals of statecraft'<sup>7</sup> (Newman 1989; Ó Tuathail 1996).

Since the end of the Cold War, geopolitics has grown into a broader critique of the 'Western' way of reasoning, its political discourses, and its logics of foreign policy (Bassin 2004; Dalby 2010).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, within the burgeoning political and human geography literature, scholars like Colin Flint have expanded the traditional geographical notions of space and conflict to include relational theories of power and social networks (Flint *et al.* 2009), while Stuart Elden (2009, xviii) developed Henri Lefebvre's ([1970] 2009, 167–84) assertion that space is political in and of itself to study key strategic issues like the 'war on terror', and also addressed

<sup>7</sup> A myriad of state bureaucrats, foreign policy experts, and leaders who 'comment upon, influence and conduct the activities of statecraft'. See Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, 193).

<sup>8</sup> Several 'sociospatial turns' facilitated this transformation in geopolitics – the acknowledgment that territory is 'unbound' solely to the limits of the nation state in the 1980s; the introduction of the more contentious notion of 'geographical scale' in the 1990s; and the shift toward interconnectedness through the 'geographies of networks' thereafter (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008, 390).

the broader historical, philosophical, and political evolution of the modern concept of territory (Elden 2013). Other prominent political geographers, such as David Newman (2006), have pushed the limits of this field further by focusing on the study of borders and boundaries, critically tying together the concepts of territory, power, and national identity. For example, Anssi Paasi (1999), using as illustration the changing meanings attributed to the Finish–Russian border over time, conceives boundaries as ongoing social processes in the making, expressing themselves simultaneously in diverse practices and discourses on a local, state, and global scale. These studies are complemented by inquiries into the philosophical aspects of spatiality, which focus on ontological laws relating to geographical concepts such as surface and connectedness (e.g. Smith 1996).

Political geography has hence incrementally evolved into a field that offers a new language to think about the social and political dimensions of spatiality. In IR, however, the analysis of space as an autonomous influence on the international system only gradually began to evolve in the 1980s. Richard Ashley's (1987) pioneering work on geopolitical space was later joined by R.B.J. Walker's (1993) re-evaluation of the nonreflexive use of the inside/outside divide, and by John Ruggie's (1993) conception of 'unbundled territoriality' as a new framework for understanding postmodern spaces. Furthermore, Harvey Starr's (1978, 2013) scholarly effort – which dates back to his 'opportunity and willingness' framework at the end of the 1970s<sup>9</sup> and has evolved thereafter into a geopolitical approach to conflict and international politics – has continuously unpacked the significance of space in IR not only in the locational sense but also in its symbolic and perceptual properties. These studies have all significantly contributed to turning the spotlight on the spatial dimension of international politics. Nonetheless, at this point the overall gap between IR and political geography in terms of the variety and richness of the analytical tools they offer for the study of sociospatial relations was already highly evident and difficult to bridge.

### *The 'territorial trap' and the sociospatial nexus*

A particularly salient contribution to the growing attention given to the spatial dimension of IR was John Agnew's (1994) critical plea to re-evaluate the misrepresentation of territory in IR theory, which he framed as the 'territorial trap': that is, the common view of the international system as comprising a set of statist building blocks with well-defined territorial

<sup>9</sup> Starr's concept of 'opportunity' as the environment in which the agents function includes the spatial context but also possibilities, probabilities, and constraints, and thus has a strong perceptual and constructionist emphasis to it.

boundaries. This view, evident in the works of neo-realists and neo-liberals alike, led to the reification of the state as a fixed unit of sovereign space and to the production of research based on the artificial hermetic separation between internal and foreign affairs.<sup>10</sup>

Agnew saw evidence of this unrealistic notion of society as bound solely to the territorial limits of the nation state not only in the neorealist and neoliberal traditions, but also in the critical and supposedly more geographically conscious structural perspectives of Wallerstein's Modern World System approach and the sociological dependency theory. Although these approaches acknowledge the interconnectedness of territorial and social factors via their socio-economic-geographical distinction between 'core' and 'periphery' states, they still fundamentally perceive geography as 'a body of fixed facts, setting the environment for the action of territorial states that are essentially the same today as two hundred years ago, as much so in Africa as in Europe' (Agnew 1994, 56).<sup>11</sup>

Although Agnew's critique is widely used to legitimate studies that attempt to transcend the state-centric view of territory in IR (see, e.g. Atzili and Kantel 2015), it in effect goes far beyond the discussion of the 'territorial trap' *per se*. It, in fact, points to a dehistoricized and decontextualized representation of space in its broader meanings in IR theory, and to a sweeping neglect of an explicit discussion of the meanings, roles, and effects of space on phenomena in the international sphere in the discipline's major research scholarship and theoretical repertoire.

### *Conceptualizing sociospatial relations in contemporary IR*

Several substantial scholarly advancements in this field have been made in IR since Agnew's critique. One of the first attempts to deal directly with this topic was the volume *Identities, Borders, Orders* by Albert, Jacobson, and Lapid (1999). Within the context of rapid democratization and liberalization processes and old-new ethno-national identities that surfaced at the

<sup>10</sup> In a paraphrase on Kant, Larkins (2010, 2) conceptualizes this essentialist view as 'the territorial *a priori*' in IR, which is in turn based on the 'Westphalian myth' – the well-known depiction of the international system as comprised of separate, recognizable, sovereign states engaging with each other within an anarchical territorial order since 1648.

<sup>11</sup> Later theoretical contributions take sociospatial relations more seriously. Wendt's (1999, 110–11) moderate constructivism, for example, indirectly offers a 'space-as-frame' metaphor, suggesting that 'brute material forces' define 'for all actors the outer limits of feasible activity', while on the ontological level a wide range of constructivists engage with the question of spatiality when analyzing diverse postmodern spatial configurations within and beyond the nation state (Kratochwil 1986; Reus-Smit 2001; Ruggie 2004). The more recent 'practice turn' (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 3), with its pragmatic emphasis on competent performances, holds further potential to bring the sociospatial dimension into IR, pending a detailed account of *how* spatial settings shape these patterned competent performances.

end of the 1990s, this volume was part of a wider intellectual effort to engage with poststructural and critical theory in addressing the entangled relations between territory, sovereignty, and boundaries (see also Albert 1998). Other significant contributions were made later along this vein by symposiums and edited collections that engaged directly with the questions raised in Agnew's critique and that conceptualized changing notions of territoriality within and beyond the state (see, e.g. Ferguson and Jones 2002; Banai *et al.* 2014).

A second salient contribution to this field is Jordan Branch's (2013) innovative study on territorial boundaries and cartography. Branch demonstrates the crucial role cartographers played in constructing the modern notion of sovereignty as attached exclusively to a particular physical territory through the practice of mapping and demarcating the concrete and, more importantly, conceptual lines of modern politics.<sup>12</sup> Together with Jeremy Larkins' (2010, 13–15) in-depth study on the evolution of the 'territorial imaginary' of the state, these works are part of a broader effort to delve deeper into the socio-historical evolution of the idea (s) of territoriality and sovereignty in world politics.

A third and no less significant development in this field stems from feminist critical theory (Sjoberg 2013; Enloe 2014) and relates to its distinction between public and private spaces. According to Cynthia Enloe (2004, 295–96), adopting a feminist lens on the aftermath of war means that what is often popularly considered as private feminized space, such as a beauty salon in Baghdad, is no less a political space where 'the relations between public and private power are being sorted out' and 'the implications of sexual violence for enacting effective citizenship are being exposed'. More broadly, Enloe, as well as Sjoberg and Gentry (2007, 200) and others, address what they see as the masculinized, patriarchal distinction between public and private spaces as part of their fundamental argument that the overall relationship between public and private, the international and the personal, in world politics is much more blurred and hybridized than it is often conceived to be in mainstream international political theory. (As Sjoberg and Gentry put it, IR is about 'everything from a Campbell's soup can to a nuclear bomb'.)

The fourth major development in this field originates from the rapidly growing literature on territory and war in IR (Miodownik and Cartrite 2006; Vasquez and Henehan 2011; Toft 2014). Relying on the Correlates

<sup>12</sup> Branch (2016) also addresses broader conceptual questions pertaining to boundaries and territorial shape, like the background assumptions attached to concepts such as the 'contiguity' and 'compactness' of territory that often uncritically serve as the basis for the empirical and normative assessment of territorial claims.



of War as well as on other more specific data sets,<sup>13</sup> these works examine the effects of various territory-related variables on conflict. They are hence concerned with such questions as how contested territory and interstate rivalries interact to make the use of force more probable (Rasler and Thompson 2006, 146); how territorial changes affect international conflict (Lustick 1993; Kacowicz 1994; Tir *et al.* 1998; Goddard 2010; Atzili and Kantel 2015, 89–93); and why conflict over the homeland is distinct from conflict over other kinds of territories (Shelef 2016, 35).

Lake and O'Mahony (2006, 133), for example, map the relations between average state size and interstate wars, while other studies shift the focus to intrastate conflicts and civil wars, offering a theory of territory and conflict that consists of perceptual variables beyond brute physical territory. Toft (2003, 13–14), for example, studies the indivisibility of territory to explain ethnic violence, and suggests that if both the state and the ethnic group regard a particular territory as indivisible, and an ethnic group demands independence, then violence is likely to occur. Alternatively, Goddard (2010, 4) demonstrates how politicians utilize 'legitimation strategies' as rhetorical devices that may have unexpected consequences, trapping the actors who negotiate an intractable conflict by socially constructing a territory as indivisible.

By measuring the relations between an array of territory-related variables, on the one hand, and the probability, incentives, duration, intensity, and peaceful resolution of conflict, on the other, this vast 'territory and war' literature undeniably furthers our understanding of the peculiar features of territory and their effects on world politics. Some of these studies go further and directly refer to the symbolic value of territory and to the ways territory is perceived and politically negotiated inside and beyond the state (see Lustick 1993; Toft 2003; Hassner 2009; Goddard 2010; Atzili and Kantel 2015). However, their empirical focus on particular territorial variables such as state size, and even on the perception of territory as indivisible, still requires an upfront engagement with the fundamental preliminary question of how the actors' position in space affects their *predispositions*: that is, the ways by which these particular actors understand, interpret, and experience themselves, the world, and each other in the first place. This has far-reaching effects on their actions and interactions in any given conflict.

This point was obliquely made nearly a decade ago within the territory and war literature in a debate in *International Security* on time and the intractability of territorial disputes (Goddard, Pressman, and

<sup>13</sup> Such as the Minorities at Risk project (see, e.g. Toft 2003).

Hassner 2008, 191–92), when, in her still relevant critique, Goddard argued that one cannot overlook ‘the actors’ initial perceptions’ as affecting the dispute’s entrenchment. More broadly put, we can study an array of well-defined territory-related variables such as the strategic intrinsic worth of territory (Carter 2010); ‘triadic deterrence’<sup>14</sup> (Atzili and Pearlman 2012); commitment and information problems (Fearon 1995); and states’ concerns of precedent-setting and reputation (Toft 2003, 2014; Walter 2009), but these cannot suffice in themselves. In the end, it is the actors’ predispositions, shaped in relation to their initial position in space, that trigger these dynamics in the first place, and make territorial disputes erupt, persist, and, in some cases, dissolve.

Simmel’s sociology enables us to address precisely these predispositions. How does the position of social actors in space affect their intentions, their ability to voluntarily act within the international system, and their encounters with each other within this system? Is space a structural element that ‘shapes and shoves’ the actors, limiting the range of their possible actions and interactions, and if so, in what ways? Due to the relative disregard of these questions in the bulk of IR research, we are currently at a stage where we must take one step back in order to clarify their answers, as a preliminary move that will enable us to more adequately and maturely embrace poststructural critical notions of spatiality and power (Ó Tuathail 1996). In this respect, Simmel’s sociology serves to complement critical geopolitics rather than to contradict it.

### **Simmel’s sociology of social forms**

In order to make the case for a Simmelian sociology of space in IR, Simmel’s concept of space must first be understood as an integral part of his broader sociological approach. Much different from Durkheim’s image of society as a *sui generis* abstract construct, Simmel perceives society as the sum of ongoing daily interactions (Frisby 1992, 14; Simmel 2009, 22) among flesh and blood social actors.<sup>15</sup> Simmelian social reality is thus experienced through and embodied in relations (Simmel 2009, 33; Pietila 2011, 173). Put differently, analogous to Max Weber’s illustration of human beings

<sup>14</sup> When a state ‘uses threats and/or punishments against another state to coerce it to prevent nonstate actors from conducting attacks from its territory’.

<sup>15</sup> These actors are agents acting upon the world through subjective mental constructs, but Simmel sharply diverges from Kantian philosophy in his interest in how society as such is made possible, rather than in ‘how *knowledge* of society is possible’. Instead of a transcendental subject, he presupposes empirical subjects embedded in actual social interaction (Frisby 2013, 64; Helle 2013, 1).

continuously spinning ‘webs of meaning’, the Simmelian image of society entails individual actors constantly spinning ‘webs of interaction’ (Helle 2009, 4). Simmel then proceeds to categorize these open-ended interactions as the basis for the process of *sociation* (*Vergesellschaftung*). This process includes countless social encounters. It ‘continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again’, serving as the binding force that links individuals together, and prevents society from breaking up into its discontinuous elements (Simmel 1950, 9–10). Although this is a dynamic ongoing process, in diverse types of societies we would expect to find similar forms of sociation, such as subordination, domination, competition, division of labor, marriage, and family (Simmel 2009, 24), and sociology as a discipline entails the study of this process (Frisby 1992, 12).

From this it follows that in Simmel’s thinking sociology is not a field of study but rather a method.<sup>16</sup> This method – with the process of sociation as its object of inquiry – approaches this object by differentiating form from content.<sup>17</sup> By *content* Simmel refers to all that drives an actor to interact with others in the first place: impulses, interests, motivations, and psychological conditions such as love, hunger, lack of material resources, and religiosity, which partially overlap with the notions of ‘incentives’ and ‘material capabilities’ in IR. All of these serve, according to Simmel, as ‘the energies and impulses of life’, and their study is beyond the mandate of the sociologist.<sup>18</sup> By *form* he refers to the outcome of these interactions once they have taken place. These social forms are the object of sociological inquiry, and they take on a relatively stable external shape. In this sense, they may be equated to the common notion of ‘international outcomes’ in IR and, more broadly, to the notion of ‘social structure’, but since they serve as an ongoing dynamic expression of the content that has driven their creation in the first place, they are nonetheless characterized by constant internal flux (Helle 2009, 4–5; Simmel 2009, 22–23).

The range of social forms in society spans from individuals<sup>19</sup> (including specific types of individuals, such as the poor person and the stranger) to the dyad, the triad, and the small group.<sup>20</sup> All of these culminate in the ‘form of forms’ at the highest level, which is society itself (Helle 2013, 5). These forms display specific traits that derive from their formal numerical

<sup>16</sup> By *method* he refers to a systematic way of ‘knowing the world’ in the epistemological sense.

<sup>17</sup> Simmel’s binary distinction between form and content should be understood as a heuristic tool. See Helle (2013, 2–3).

<sup>18</sup> In Simmel’s view these should be studied within such fields as economics or psychology.

<sup>19</sup> The individual is perceived as a social form no less than the dyad or triad.

<sup>20</sup> This includes special types of groups such as the secret society. See Simmel (1950, 345–76).

character and geometrical shape,<sup>21</sup> as well as from their relative position in time and space. They are thus relational in the sense that they always exist in relation to other objects in space (Kaern 1990, 87). As history advances through a process in which these forms are constantly transmuted into content and the other way around,<sup>22</sup> the forms of sociation also exhibit by definition a dialectical, often seemingly opposite, effect on the human experience of the agents that have created them.<sup>23</sup>

Simmel's sociology of space should hence be read as an inseparable part of his sociology of forms and not as an autonomous theory of spatial formations. While scholars of Simmel's legacy produced profound in-depth studies of his work (Frisby 1984; Dahme 1990; Levine 1991; Weinstein and Weinstein 1993; Jaworski 1998; Kemple 2007; Helle 2013), research that deals specifically with his sociology of space is more scarce and scattered in diverse disciplinary venues (see, e.g. Borden 1997). It is therefore important to note here that Simmel's spatial sociology has its roots in some of his well-known essays on modernity and its effects, especially *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel 2004) and *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Simmel 1950, 409–26), in which the main space of reference is the modern European metropolis (Vidler 1991). Yet, the foundational text for a Simmelian sociology of space is the ninth chapter of his *Soziologie* treatise (Simmel 2009) 'Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society',<sup>24</sup> which includes his famous *Excursus on the Stranger (der Fremde)* as well as the *Excursus on the Social Boundary*. These are joined by Simmel's (1994) lesser-known but no less significant short essay *Bridge and Door*,<sup>25</sup> in which he extends his analysis on social boundaries to include bridges and thresholds in the context of the separateness vs. the connectedness of space.

<sup>21</sup> Simmel's reference to geometry stems from his interest in the shape of the interaction as determining individual experience rather than as concrete advice that sociology should adopt formal methods. See Kaern (1990, 86).

<sup>22</sup> For example, the same content (such as government) may appear across time and space in different forms (democracy, dictatorship), and the same form (such as autocratic leadership) may shape various contents (family, state, church). See Helle (1997, xiii).

<sup>23</sup> Simmel's conception of the relations between social forms and human consciousness resembles in this sense the later Bourdieusian notion of the mutual constitution of field and habitus.

<sup>24</sup> The fact that this chapter was first published as a two-part essay in 1903, the same year Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life* was published, is no coincidence. In 1908 this two-part essay was incorporated into *Soziologie*. While selected excerpts of *Soziologie* were translated into English by Wolff (Simmel 1950) and others, the full text was translated only in 2009.

<sup>25</sup> This 1909 essay was translated into English by Mark Ritter in 1994. For a different translation published that same year together with the translator's notes see Kaern (1994).

### Simmel meets IR: betweenness as a spatial mode of analysis

Relying directly on this corpus, I now turn to discuss the contribution of Simmel's spatial approach to IR. I begin with his general relational approach to space, and then move on to demonstrate the practical utility of this approach by applying his spatial scales in particular areas of study. The first crucial point for utilizing Simmel's spatial approach in IR is that he does not see space as a generating explanatory factor in any sense, but rather a *conditio sine qua non*. A great kingdom, for example, is not made of a huge geographical expansion measured in square miles, but of the psychological powers that work from a governing center to hold the inhabitants of such a territory together in the political sense (Simmel 2009, 543–44). Nonetheless, we experience social interaction only through the realization of space, which holds a dual geometric (Euclidian) and symbolic (metaphoric) meaning (Ethington 1997). Since interaction fills space, which is originally empty and null, the relationship between two actors occurs immanently between two points in space, characterized by constant movement – or *betweenness* – that is realized in and through space. Thus, from the very moment social interaction is conceived, it is placed in-between rather than fixed in one spatial end or the other (Simmel 2009, 545).

I refer to Simmel's conception of social interaction as transforming continuously in-between two points in space, and thus as relational in the most foundational sense, as 'the spatio-temporal axis' of his theory. This axis intersects with a further vital element of his spatial approach – the 'physical-symbolic axis'. For Simmel, social interaction comes into being via its physical-geometric relative positioning in space; yet once social interaction has taken place, physical space also remains as a representation of it: a *symbol* embodying the social encounter, encapsulating the entangled power asymmetries that stand at its basis and gaining a life in its own right. This occurs since space is 'perceptibly more graphic' than time, giving the place where an emotionally charged social interaction – whether positive or negative – has occurred a strong binding 'associative power'; in this way, the place 'remains the pivot around which the memory of the actors then spins'. As interaction is ongoing and reciprocal, this memory also 'spins the individuals' into a continuous shared intersubjective experience (Simmel 2009, 561). As Simmel (1950, 402) elucidates regarding the social form of the stranger, spatial relations are hence both 'the condition' and 'the symbol' of human relations.<sup>26</sup> This symbol is not static, however; as the spatio-temporal axis of his theory suggests, it continuously evolves in time via social interaction among flesh and blood social agents.

<sup>26</sup> See also *The Stranger* in Simmel (2009, 601) in the later translation of *Soziologie*.

Simmel's relational spatial approach thus encapsulates two intersecting analytical axes – that of space-time, and that of physical-symbolic space. This spatial theory therefore offers the existing relational approaches in IR (Goddard 2009; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009) an innovative way to overcome 'the dichotomy between the semiotic and the material' that many of them find difficult to bridge (Nexon and Pouliot 2013, 344) without neglecting the spatio-temporal dimension – the premise that social relations continuously evolve and transform across time and space – that stands at the basis of all relational approaches in IR. Indeed, Simmel's German modernist intellectual origins differ considerably from the pragmatist-instrumentalist roots of Jackson and Nexon's (1999, 292–301) processual relationalism (p/r), as well as from other post-structural relational modes of analysis (Nexon and Pouliot 2013, 342; Selg 2016). Furthermore, historically Simmel's spatial sociology predates network theory and various other relational modes of thought in IR – and in a broader sense enabled these developments by imagining, at the turn of the 20th century, the possibility of thinking about space in a relative, open-ended manner. Despite these points, however, I suggest that the significance of his ideas for IR *today* lies in his innovative integration of these two axes within one holistic theoretical framework, encapsulating the intertwined relations between physical and symbolic space as they evolve in time through the agency of the actors, nonetheless acknowledging their structural constraints (i.e. the fluxual, yet binding, force of social forms).

This approach is also of direct relevance to the empirical study of territory and war. While Rosenau (1966), and later Vasquez (1983) and others (Diehl and Goertz 1988; Starr 2013), acknowledged the intangible properties of territory, Toft (2014, 189) argues that the attempt to touch upon the 'relational value' of territory – when the actors attach 'some sort of historical or identity-value' to it – remained by and large 'materially based' and lacked broader theorizing until recently. Recent studies have begun to systematically unpack these symbolic properties, suggesting that political agents tend to construct symbolic narratives that affect the parties' claims to territory and limit the possibilities of conflict resolution (Goddard, Pressman, and Hassner 2008; Hassner 2009; Goddard 2010; Toft 2014, 187).

Simmel's conception of the binding associative power of space – remaining as a symbol of an emotionally charged social interaction in the memory of the agents long after it has transformed in time – thus offers these studies a powerful sociospatial mechanism upon which to ground their hypotheses. It not only supports the claim that as interstate conflicts on territory become more entrenched, the symbolic value of territory grows, but further suggests that despite their emotional baggage, symbolic narratives of territory also inevitably transform in time.

Without overlooking obvious structural constraints, especially in ethnic disputes in which individuals ‘fight, live and die in conquered land’ and therefore ‘construct myths to legitimate their territorial claims’ (Goddard, Pressman, and Hassner 2008, 191), Simmel’s relational approach to space renders the possibility of agency and change in entrenched territorial disputes. As Goddard eloquently argued, this type of premise is more than academic. It has direct normative implications, since ‘if actors can ... reconstruct perceptions ... then they may be able to redefine their links to specific territory, leaving room for a negotiated settlement’ (Goddard, Pressman and Hassner 2008, 193–194). Moreover, from a Simmelian perspective, it is precisely due to the actors’ *predispositions* that these symbolic narratives of territory hold the potential of transformation. Simmel’s theory does not replace existing theories of territory and war that focus on particular explaining variables (e.g. the construction of territory as indivisible), but rather shifts our focus to the actors’ preliminary socio-spatial predispositions. Put differently, as powerful and ‘real’ as the perceptions of a disputed territory may seem in the consciousness of the agents in a given moment in time, Simmel suggests these perceptions are nonetheless inseparable symbolic expressions of the ongoing, and continuously changing, social interaction that has created them in the first place. Hence, they can never be static or deterministic.

More broadly, I suggest that in the most pragmatic sense, Simmel offers IR scholars a relational mode of analysis to approach sociospatial relations within the international system as a formal category anchored in space – as part of ‘the geometry of social life’ (Ethington 1997). At the same time, his approach enables us to interpret the influence of this geometric position – which continuously evolves in time in a nonlinear fashion via social interaction – on the deep psychological content and symbolic meanings it holds for the agents, who are the actual generators of this social form. This applies to relations not only among nation states but also involving international regimes and nonstate actors such as terror networks, militias, diasporic communities, ethnic minorities, multinational corporations, transnational advocacy networks, and civilizations (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009; Adler 2010; Miodownik and Barak 2013).

That space and time need to be thought of together rather than separately, and in a nonlinear fashion, has long been contemplated by later thinkers like Lefebvre (2004), and acknowledged in IR by critical theorists such as Cox and Ashley (Hutchings 2007, 76). However, this particular relational mode of analysis – which examines the evolution of the social bond in accordance with the physical and symbolic spatial organization of society, transforming not only across space but also in time while shaping the practical experience of the agents – does not exist in IR to this day.

## Unbundled sovereignty and mobility in late modernity: a Simmelian spatial approach to ontological (in)security

Simmel's sociology offers scholars of international politics more than a general relational approach to sociospatial relations. His tangible spatial scales<sup>27</sup> add another layer to our discussion, since they serve as concrete analytical tools that encapsulate his general spatial approach, and can be lent to the study of various phenomena in the international sphere. Let us demonstrate the utility of these ideal types for one particular area of research: the study of unbundled forms of sovereignty and mobility in late modernity within the burgeoning OS literature in IR (Huysmans 1998; Kinnvall 2004; Steele 2017).

Applying Simmel's modernist approach to postmodern structures of sovereignty<sup>28</sup> and power is not an obvious move and requires particular caution. I begin with Simmel's conception of *organized space*, which refers to the connection between how a social group is organized in space and the type of its social bond. Simmel saw the ancient model of organic solidarity based on kin relationship as supra-spatial in the sense that it is independent of any common land, while the modern transition into a mechanical and rational type of solidarity was historically accompanied by a spatial division.<sup>29</sup> The movement toward mechanical solidarity via the differentiation of economic production and the adoption of rationalistic goal-oriented thinking was congruent with the spatial reorganization of local markets, which gradually converged into modern city centers.<sup>30</sup> One might argue, then, that this logic could be extended further to the current post-Westphalian era, and applied to a variety of more vanguard unbundled forms of spatio-social organization in the contemporary international system.

Yet before taking up this move, it is pertinent to stress that Simmel, quite similar to Weber and other of his German contemporaries,<sup>31</sup> saw the pure rational reasoning typical of the age of modernity as receiving a life of its own, independent of any spatial limitations.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, he perceived

<sup>27</sup> By 'scale' I refer here to an analytical heuristic tool and not to the concept as utilized in political geography (see Delaney and Leitner 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Following Hudson (2000, 269), I define sovereignty here as 'the principle which gives states the authority to set the rules for activities which take place within their borders'.

<sup>29</sup> For a Durkheimian analysis of a similar process and its application in IR, see Albert, Buzan, and Zürn (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Although cities as distinguishable spaces predate modernity. For Simmel's (1950, 409–24) broader analysis of modern urban spaces see his *Metropolis and Mental Life*.

<sup>31</sup> See also Martin Buber's (1970) *I and Thou*.

<sup>32</sup> This common theme of rationality receiving a life of its own resonates Max Weber's iron cage metaphor, as well as other 'Golem myth' narratives in German literature, philosophy and sociology. See Yair and Soyer (2008).



modern organized spaces, such as the metropolis and the nation state, to be constructed through weak ties of solidarity, enabling the evolution of *Gesellschaft*-type nonaffective, utilitarian social relations – which remolded these modern spaces as symbolic reflections of their rational character. While this modernist vision does not mean that we cannot apply Simmel's insights to postmodern settings, it should be done consciously and carefully, coupled with the clear acknowledgment that despite his relational inclination, Simmel was first and foremost a modern – rather than postmodern – thinker.<sup>33</sup>

Taking this premise back to Simmel's spatial typologies, it is here that his relativistic conception of a key quality of space becomes relevant – its *exclusivity*. For Simmel, the exclusivity of space refers to the notion that within the one, single universal space, no portion of space is ever identical to another. This uniqueness of space is conveyed to all objects set upon it that fill the formerly empty space, so that when fully identical exemplars with properties that appear to be indistinguishable occupy different portions of space, variety is created. Just as these physical objects set in space will never be alike, a social structure appropriated in space receives the qualities of uniqueness and exclusivity from the space on which it is located. This exclusivity is not a quality of space in the essentialist sense; it is, rather, a relative scale (Simmel 2009, 545–48). The nation state, as he sees it, is an example of a social formation that can only be realized in its complete sociological form by exclusively filling the spatial realm; by contrast, supra-spatial structures, such as the Catholic Church, have no relationship to one set space even though they reach out to every area.<sup>34</sup> Hence, Simmel offers us a concrete analytical tool that enables us to relatively distinguish between various sociospatial formations in the contemporary global milieu through the *dosage* of exclusivity in space these forms convey.

Put differently, if the unbundling of sovereignty means that sovereignty splits up into various constituent elements, while the relations between power and space are reconfigured within this process (Elkins 1995; Hudson 2000, 275), then such unbundled forms of sovereignty can be placed along this continuum of exclusivity and compared to each other. These include, for example, the novel sociospatial organization of global city clusters and city-regions in late capitalist societies (Sassen 2002; Scott 2002), as well as the evolution of cosmopolitan sovereignty in unconventional spatial settings such as the high seas and outer space, where symbolic power relations, new modes of governance and notions of postnational sovereignty emerge and prosper (Stuart 2009, 8–9).

<sup>33</sup> For a differing approach, of Simmel as a 'postmodernized' thinker, see Weinstein and Weinstein (1993).

<sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding the city-state of the Vatican.

This type of analysis is most compatible with the more recent attempt within OS studies in IR (Kinnvall 2004; Browning 2015; Steele 2017) to grasp the hyper-modern, hybrid mode of existence of late modernity, often referred to as a crystallization of the transnational moment (Clifford 1994; Appadurai 1996; Tölölyan 1996), in which sovereign space is eroding while new forms of global spaces are on the rise (Ruggie 1993; Manners 2002, 140; Steele 2008, 20–22; Browning and Joenniemi 2013, 504–07). Adopting Simmel's scale of exclusivity in space thus allows us to place the nation state next to – rather than above or below – unbundled forms of sovereignty typical of late modernity, and trace the exclusivity they convey in particular fields (economic, political, and cultural) and in differing social and historical contexts. In this way, we approach the processes of continuous bundling and unbundling of sovereignty in late modernity in a holistic manner, as part of a fluxual process of 'becoming' (Kinnvall and Lindén 2010).

This enables us to further look at an inseparable feature of this process – the growing mobility of individuals and groups across, through, and beyond national spaces that has intensified in recent decades as national exclusivist forms of spatiality and power have partially eroded (Hudson 2000, 272–73; Kinnvall 2004, 744; Aradau, Huysmans, and Squire 2010, 3). It is here that Simmel's approach allows us to explore the effects of this increased mobility typical of late modernity on the ontological (in)security of the agents (Huysmans 1998; Innes 2010). It does so by pointing to a second sociospatial quality – *mobility*, namely the movement of individuals and groups in and across space. This is complemented by a further foundational quality of space – its *containment* of social formations that settle within it (Simmel 2009, 556–65, 587–605). While society dynamically evolves through mobility, or wandering, Simmel (2009, 587–600) argues that this change of place also carries great dangers, putting the spatial constraints of peoples' social existence into constant flux. This conception is hence directly applicable to the realities of the current 'age of migration' (Castles, De Haas, and Miller 2014), which encapsulates a compressed sense of time and space, together with an existential experience of dislocation, anxiety, and uncertainty for the agents (Kinnvall 2004, 742). Simmel (2009, 589–93) saw such perpetual nomadism – such as the historical migration of masses of peoples to, from, and within Europe, China, Persia, India, and Africa – as a prototypical experience in which wandering becomes the fundamental substance of life and uncertainty the defining force of the self, with the lack of a spatial reference point to ground the individual experience.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Simmel (1997 [1911], 226) further develops this conception of uncertainty as both a temporal and spatial mode of existence in his illuminating short essay 'The Adventure'.

Joining his scale of exclusivity, these complementary scales of mobility/containment in space thus open up the possibility to evaluate the effect of the degree to which a social group is fixed within a given space on the subjective and lived experience of the agents, migrants and receiving societies alike. We can thus utilize them to approach migration, border crossing, and territorial passages as grounded in space. This is not in the essentialist, decontextualized manner that Agnew points to in his critique, but rather on a relative scale that ranges from complete fixedness of the group members in space to their complete freedom from it, shaping the practical experiences of the agents of migration under the structural conditions of late modernity (Giddens 1991, 184–85).

The relevance of these sociospatial scales to the study of OS in migration crystallizes further in Simmel's analysis of the social form of the stranger. The stranger is placed in the middle of this spectrum since he is 'the *potential wanderer*' – he is both 'fixed within a particular spatial group', but has also 'not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going' (Simmel 1950, 402).<sup>36</sup> In their earlier foundational studies, Huysmans (1998) and Kinnvall (2004) depicted the stranger as an 'insider/outsider', who threatens the very foundation of the group since, as Huysmans (1998, 241) articulated, he challenges the modern possibility 'of the activity of ordering itself'. The receiving society responds to this existential threat, as Kinnvall (2004, 744–55) suggests, by 'ordering' the stranger both 'structurally' – such as in the efforts to construct immigrants as 'fake' asylum-seekers (efforts which became highly evident, e.g. in the 2015 European refugee crisis) – and 'psychologically', by turning the stranger into an enemy.

Based on Kristeva's neo-Lacanian conceptions of the self and the unconscious, among other sources, Kinnvall (2004, 753–55) sees the deep basis of demonizing the other, and thus of 'xenophobia, racism, and the marginalization of others', as originating from the 'foreigner within ourselves', while those shadow-type aspects 'that the self experiences as dangerous and unpleasant are further projected onto the other'. This qualifies the turning of the strangers outside us into enemies, eventually stripping them from their human qualities and reducing them to essentialized bodies in an attempt 'to securitize subjectivity in times of uncertainty'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Simmel uses the social form of the stranger not only to discuss 'mobility' but also 'positioning', in respect to the ways by which the dosage of distance and nearness between individuals and collectives affects their subjective experience and behavior.

<sup>37</sup> Simmel (1950, 407–08) points to a similar process regarding the medieval Jew, who due to his 'strangeness of origin' was conceived by others only through his 'social position as a Jew', rather than as an individual whole with various human traits.

Relying on Huysmans and Kinnvall, more recent studies in the field of OS and migration develop these notions further, demonstrating how discourses of belonging and ‘otherness’, manipulated by various social and political agents, construct migrants and ethnic minorities as a threat to the state while securitizing state identity (Innes 2010; Roe 2006; Croft 2012; Rumelili 2015). Nonetheless, the OS literature on migration still requires a clear engagement with the positioning of these processes in space. It is here that Simmel (1950, 402–04) adds to this field by articulating in spatial terms why and how the stranger poses such an existential threat to society.

In this respect, as opposed to the manner in which Simmel’s stranger is often utilized, lending an illustration of estrangement together with the positive meaning of being ‘out of place’, I suggest we understand it as but an example of his broader spatial sociology.<sup>38</sup> In Simmel’s eyes, the stranger is perceived as a threat to society precisely because of his unique spatial position as a ‘potential wanderer’. The stranger is by nature no ‘owner of soil’, not only in the physical but also ‘in the figurative sense’, since he is not the owner of ‘a life substance which is fixed’ in space; this is why the stranger is ‘not radically committed to the ... peculiar tendencies of the group’. This lack of complete fixity in space makes the stranger peculiar, different, and threatening. We might experience the stranger as close to us, ‘insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social ... or generally human nature’, but the stranger is nevertheless always potentially ‘far from us’. It is thus the elusive quality of unfixity in space that *makes* the stranger an existential threat to the self. From here the road to classifying strangers as an ‘inner enemy’ (Simmel 1950, 402) by dehumanizing them is short, portraying them, as Kinnvall argues, as holding ‘only a limited number of cultural traits’ (Kinnvall 2004, 754–55).

In sum, Simmel’s analysis of the stranger serves as one particularly powerful example of his broader conception of mobility in space as a relative scale. This deepens our understanding not only of the social and psychological, but also of the spatial basis for ‘securitizing subjectivity’ in face of the other in times of extreme uncertainty. Together with Simmel’s scale of exclusivity, which serves to explore the structural context of changing notions of sovereignty in late modernity, these complementary scales of mobility/containment in space allow us to look at the effects of the spatial settings of late modernity on the existential anxiety of receiving societies and immigrant and diasporic communities alike, ranging from

<sup>38</sup> It is not accidental that the *Excurses on the Stranger* is merely a note within Simmel’s lengthy discussion of mobility in space, in his ninth chapter of *Soziologie* on space (Simmel 2009, 587, 601).

modern nomadic ‘wandering bands’ such as the Romani people in Europe and America or the Bedouin of the Negev region in Israel, to more fixed-in-space diasporic communities such as the Turkish and Syrian diasporas in Germany; the Chinese and Korean diasporas in the United States; the Indian and Pakistani diasporas in the United Kingdom and Canada; the Lebanese diaspora in Latin America, the United States, and Europe; and the Palestinian diaspora in Western and Arab countries.

### Rethinking empty spaces in IR

Simmel’s sociospatial ideal types are also of direct practical relevance to the study of conflict and boundaries in IR. Scholars of international politics have already acknowledged that Simmel offers a well-developed sociology of conflict (Wendt 1995, 76; Neumann 1996, 147), which he conceptualizes as a dialectical phenomenon consisting of a unity between harmonious and disharmonious elements, and in which he emphasizes not only the destructive forces but also the positive potential of conflict to generate social change and innovation in and among societies (Simmel 1904). What we are less aware of is the close connection between Simmel’s sociology of conflict and his sociology of space, which exists primarily in the Simmelian conception of the social boundary. One of the most dominant themes within Simmel’s sociology of conflict is the significance of the social boundary as a powerful force that separates, connects, and creates social and political realities on the ground (Simmel 1994; see also Simmel 2009, 548–55). This is exactly the place where Simmel’s sociology of conflict meets his sociology of space.

Simmel’s account of the social boundary begins with his conception of another foundational quality of space – its *divisibility*. Space is dividable into portions, or units, surrounded by boundaries. The unity of the group ‘likewise expresses and bears’ the space it fills, and the boundaries of this unit serve as its frame, holding meaning for the social group similar to the relationship of a frame to an artwork. Beyond its metaphoric value, the divisibility of space also refers directly to the role of borders in international politics. The consciousness of being inside political borders is especially vivid in Simmel’s eyes, since sociological and political borders, as opposed to natural arbitrary boundaries like mountains and rivers, originate purposefully from within the social association. Focusing on the tensions created between ‘the frame’ and its ‘content’, he argues that when the border/frame is too narrow, unable to constrain the social energies exerted outward by the people residing within it, either inner conflict or territorial expansion may occur. The political territorial border, as an institutionalized example of a social boundary, thus signifies for Simmel both defense

and offense in the relationship between neighbors, and is perceived as a dynamic site where ‘dislocations’, ‘expansions’, ‘migrations’, and ‘mergers’ are contemplated (Simmel 2009, 548–55).

Indeed, abundant contemporary works theorize what occurs at the territorial margins of modern polities. These include insightful contributions such as Jackson and Nexon’s (1999) approach to the state as an ongoing relational project; Anne Norton’s (1988) notion of liminal identities; Peter Sahlin’s (1989) historical–relational approach to frontiers; as well as the most recent works in Critical Border Studies, which rely on theorists like Deleuze and Agamben to emphasize performance, practice, techniques, and ‘border-work’ instead of the traditional ‘line in the sand’ metaphor.<sup>39</sup>

To this contemporary discourse on borders and boundaries Simmel adds one aspect of particular significance to IR by focusing on the close connections that exist between boundaries, conflict, and empty spaces. This type of engagement with empty space (Simmel 2009, 615–20) holds promise for a future exploration of uncharted water, shifting our gaze to a type of spatial formation that is largely unnoticed by scholars of international politics. Space is conventionally conceived as an inhabited, ‘full’, portion of land – one that includes either population, physical objects, or natural resources – while empty space is popularly viewed as a lack of these. But although empty space may be vacant or null in the physical sense, such as in our popular notions of outer space or of the high seas,<sup>40</sup> Simmel’s most illuminating insight in this respect is that a variety of empty spaces exist within the social world, and that different types of ‘emptiness’ are manifested in diverse kinds of spatial relations among social groups.

For example, while empty space can be a *no man’s land*, it can also be empty of ownership when it is unclear to whom it belongs. Similar to an emotional area that two people are afraid to touch upon by tacit agreement, this type of empty space, potentially belonging to two or more parties at once, holds the possibility that one side can take hold of it and unleash conflict between the two groups. Consistent in his dialectical approach, however, Simmel argues that while the forceful seizure of such a region by one party may at first cause shock and enmity, it also holds great potential, since the encroachment of the avoided region may eventually lead to its development in novel directions that were previously unthinkable. It can

<sup>39</sup> This refers to the traditional image of the border as ‘the razor-edge of the nation state’, where ‘mutually recognized sovereignties meet’ but ‘do not overlap’ (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 728–32; Salter 2012, 737).

<sup>40</sup> Although far from being empty, outer space and the high seas are both infused with power politics and novel modes of governance. See Stuart (2009), Prescott (2015, 136–57).

evolve, for example, into a space that not only separates but also connects peoples in surprising ways and combinations (Simmel 2009, 617–19).<sup>41</sup>

One particular type of empty space to which we could apply this Simmelian lens in IR, and which would serve as a key to analyzing recent strategic dynamics in conflict areas such as the Middle East, are areas that are empty of effective sovereign governmental authority. Such areas are commonly under dispute between two or more conflicting rival factions, serving as spaces in which various local, international, and transnational actors further their own parochial interests. As Simmel suggests, such encounters may lead to violent clashes, but they might also spur surprising new strategic and political configurations.

A salient example is the South Lebanese border zone between Lebanon and Israel. Placed far from the Lebanese government in Beirut,<sup>42</sup> this space served over the years as a ‘playground’ for international actors (the United States and the Soviet Union), regional powers (Israel, Iran, and Syria), and foreign and local agents (the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the South Lebanese Army (SLA), Amal, and Hizbulla) taking advantage of the governmental power vacuum in the area (Hamizrachi 1988). Although since the late 1960s it served as the base for PLO insurgencies on Israel’s Northern towns and villages (in what was later labeled by Israel as ‘Fatahland’), this border area has transformed since the mid-1970s into Israel’s self-proclaimed ‘security zone’, where semi-legal activities of local agents were accompanied by the development of a unique, unexpected syncretic Israeli–Lebanese identity, expressed in various shared practices as part of the broader patron–client relations between Israel and the SLA.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, when we focus our attention on such spaces in the so-called periphery of states it becomes evident that they are by no means peripheral. Rather, they serve as a key for deciphering broader strategic dynamics stemming from the colonial heritage of many states with underdetermined political borders in developing areas. It is therefore not surprising that consistent findings in the study of territory and intrastate war clearly show that the majority of secessionist movements emerge in such regions, making a separatist war more likely to take place in these areas far from the seat of state power (Fuhrmann and Tir 2009; Toft 2014, 191). These spaces should

<sup>41</sup> For a similar, though not identical, approach to such spaces, see Van Gennep’s (1909, 18) discussion on the neutral zone in between societies.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Far’ in relative, not absolute terms.

<sup>43</sup> The SLA was a local militia composed of Christian (mainly Maronite) ex-officers in the Lebanese army, together with members of the Shi’i, Druze, and Sunni communities of the towns and villages along the Israeli–Lebanese border (Sela 2007).

hence be seen as essential sites for unpacking the broader dynamics of the violent ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine.

The area near the Northern Iraqi–Turkish border, also known as the independent zone of ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’, further exemplifies this point. One of four areas considered by the Kurds to be parts of Kurdistan (together with the regions in Northern Iran and Syria, and in Southern Turkey), this area attracted regional powers like Israel, Turkey, and Iran, as well as global powers such as the United States, and in this sense resembles South Lebanon. Historically composed of Muslim Kurds and an array of other minorities (Turkmen, Assyrian Christians, Arabs, Armenians, and Yezidis), these actors all struggle to preserve their ethnic boundaries in face of Kurdish dominance – a dominance that received formal recognition in 2003 with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Elden 2008, 147–76). While the Kurds are entangled in their own ongoing internal rivalries, and are partially challenged in recent years by a new nonstate actor – the Islamic State – Kurdish dominance in this area nonetheless prevails under the strategic umbrella of the United States, and the Kurds persistently advance their separationist aspirations from the far-off Federal Iraqi government through military and political practices of self-governance (Stansfield 2014). This is accompanied by their continuous symbolic ‘boundary work’ (Simmel 2009, 551)<sup>44</sup> *vis-à-vis* the various state and nonstate actors active in this area, negotiating the demarcation and remarcation of their ethnonational boundaries vs. these ‘significant others’ in a much more sophisticated and multilayered way than popularly assumed (Natali 2005).

These contested spaces at the edges of states, often referred to as ‘zones of statelessness’ or ‘modern Sherwood Forests’ (Barak and Cohen 2013, 12–15), are hence characterized by extreme ethnic tension together with a perceived void of sovereign statist power, forcefully attracting local ‘Robin hoods’ and national and transnational actors. Joining the critical literature on borderlands and bordering practices (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012, 1–18; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012), Simmelian sociology invites us to rearticulate our notion of these spaces in IR not as fixed unitary essences, but rather as rich and dynamic entities in which diverse interests, loyalties, norms, and practices transform and crystalize.

Approaching empty spaces from this point of view thus further complements the growing body of research on governmentality in international politics (Dean 2010). By focusing on the interplay among state institutional settings, local border techniques, and transnational flows of material goods (such as drug and arms trafficking) within and across these spaces, scholars

<sup>44</sup> For the contemporary notion of ‘boundary work’, see Lamont and Molnár (2002).



can apply this Foucauldian concept in the context of the daily ‘workings’ of state power in liminal areas supposedly empty of state central control. Similar to previous accounts of border outposts and airports (Cairo 2004; Salter 2007), looking at such empty spaces in IR as sites of governmentality at work broadens our understanding of these heterotopian spaces where the state is formally absent but at the same time very much present.

Simmel’s notion of empty space as a spectrum of lively socio-political constructs that constantly transform and reinvent themselves via social interaction could also serve as a first step toward establishing a case-sensitive typology of the various social and political conditions in which these spaces thrive and function. These include vacant or deserted spaces in the physical sense, but also distant border areas, where semi-legal and noninstitutionalized practices prosper far from the state’s inspective gaze. Relevant examples are the paradigmatic case of the US–Mexican border area (*La Frontera*) (Alvarez 1995), as well as spaces within European conflict zones (e.g. the former Yugoslavia) and distant borderlands in the margins of large states and former empires (e.g. the border area in North Asia, where the territories of China, Russia, and Mongolia meet) (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012). Such a broader typology of empty spaces may enable us to differentiate between these socio-spatial configurations in a more nuanced manner, looking at diverse cases in varied historical periods and geographical locations, not only in Europe and the United States but also in the developing spaces of the global south.

### **Toward a Simmelian research agenda for the study of space in world politics**

This article highlights the novelty and practical utility of Simmel’s sociology of space for IR. Simmel offers scholars of the international realm an invitation to break our previous conceptions of sociospatial relations into a set of tangible questions and concrete scales, enabling us to unpack some of the spatial ‘black boxes’ that exist in our studies. Simmel’s unique relational approach – based on two intersecting analytical axes (the spatio-temporal axis and the physical-symbolic axis) and encapsulated in his spatial scales – allows us to look at novel unbundled configurations of space and power in late modernity through the dosage of the exclusivity in space they convey, and his complementing scales of mobility/containment in space serve to unravel the increased movement of individuals and groups across national spaces in an age in which, following Simmel (1950, 406), one could argue that we are all, to a certain extent, strangers. Simmel’s scales thus ground the process of the securitization of subjectivity, which stands at the core of the concept of OS, not only in the psychological and sociological processes that turn the stranger into an enemy, but also in the spatial circumstances in which this process is realized.

As evident in the 2015 European refugee crisis, the growing influx of asylum-seekers and other migrants into Western countries and the ensuing adoption of exclusivist anti-migration policies by many of these countries have far-reaching effects on both the physical security and the OS of receiving societies and migrants alike. President Trump's recent anti-migration policies in the United States and the strong global resistance they have elicited further accentuate the closely knit relations existing between mobility and security, and mark this issue as a crucial one on the global agenda for the years to come. In these volatile circumstances, it seems that Simmel's social form of the stranger, when understood as an example of his broader scale of mobility in space, becomes more relevant than ever for tracking the sociospatial mechanisms that facilitate uncertainty and anxiety for the agents in late modernity (Steele 2017, 2).

Complementing this focus on the supposedly marginal stranger, Simmel's innovative notion of 'empty' not as the opposite of 'full' but as a spectrum of lively sociospatial constructs shifts our attention to what occurs at the so-called margins of modern polities from a novel perspective. Applying Simmel's approach to such contested spaces seemingly empty of statist conventional power highlights the fact that they are in effect a microcosm of larger strategic dynamics typical of conflict zones in postcolonial areas like the Middle East, in which processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of boundaries between self and other continuously challenge traditional statist 'bundled' notions of sovereignty and power.

While I have applied Simmel's spatial typologies in two areas of research, they also hold considerable promise for future studies in IR. One such promise lies in Simmel's (2009, 611–15) notion of *fixed spatial structures*, which opens the door for a spatial analysis of international regimes. Simmel's most useful insight in this respect is that social associations that are housed (i.e. grounded in particular physical settings) manifest a common sociological quality, which differentiates them from other free-floating associations existing only in common convictions in the consciousness of their members (e.g. friendships, groups temporarily working together, or epistemic communities). Hence, the physical church, which serves as the union of all like-minded believers or, for that matter, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the EU headquarters in Brussels, serve not only as property with economic value and legal standing, but also as the location of the spatial, visible crystallization of the community's social energy and solidarity. They are the meeting point of a great number of threads anchored in an array of peripheral points, dynamically changing from stability to fluctuation and vice versa (Simmel 2009, 610–12). Applying this insight to the future study of international regimes (see Krasner 1983; Keohane 1989; Levy, Young, and Zürn 1995; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001) means that it is not only the degree of institutionalization in itself

that matters, as is often argued in the regime literature, but also its manifestation in space, and that the relative degree to which these institutions are physically and symbolically anchored in space is a significant explaining variable influencing their overall performance and effectivity.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, this article joins other recent studies (see Kopstein 2007; Albert, Buzan, and Zürn 2013) in demonstrating that notwithstanding the major contribution of later critical thinkers like Derrida and Baudrillard to IR, classical sociology's rich holistic grasp of all aspects of the human experience offers a powerful and relevant prism for analyzing contemporary international phenomena. I have focused on Simmel, but other sociological founding fathers may also provide profound insights if systematically developed along this vein, particularly Durkheim's (2013, 184) concept of 'social morphology', which approaches the number of social units in a given space and their 'dynamic density' as crucial factors for understanding social processes. Thus, the current article should be seen as one step within the larger unfolding and much needed effort to unpack the relations between space and social interaction in world politics – from not only a philosophical but also a sociological perspective, and classical sociological theory carries great promise for further inquiry into this theme.

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<sup>45</sup> Approaching international regimes through this Simmelian lens also enables a fruitful engagement between the regime literature in IR and the literature on infrastructure and the state (see Joyce 2003; Mukerji 2010). The critical insights of these studies, which focus on the hierarchical nature of relations between material and social orders, could then be taken beyond the state level and applied to the study of international regimes.

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