Racial prejudice: a phenomenon of social distance

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Abstract

In 1924, R. E. Park published The Concept of Social Distance as Applied to the Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Relations, thus resuming the analysis carried out in 1921 together with Burgess on the types of behavior of individuals and of groups and the phenomenon of social distance. It is emphasized how these "accommodations so flagrantly displayed in the relation between white and black men (race prejudice)" are not confined solely to this specific relation but "The same mechanisms are involved in all the subordinations, exclusions, privacies, social distances, and reserves which we seek everywhere, by the subtle devices of taboo and social ritual, to maintain and defend".

The conceptualization of social distance in Park and Burgess's volume is mediated, especially by Park, through Simmel's formal sociology and will subsequently be elaborated, on a methodological level, by E. Bogardus through the relative measurement scale. The influence of the German sociologist is made evident by the constant reference Park makes to him in his writings, with particular reference to the treatment of the foreigner and to the spatial variable as constitutive of the dynamic form and meaning of social relations.

This contribution aims to deepen the conceptual elaboration of social distance, starting from the argumentation in the volume by Park and Burgess.

Keywords: race; social distance; Park; stranger; Simmel.

1. Introduction

The interest in and study of social distance developed in a historical period with two characteristic aspects: the profound social and urban transformation of American society – between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – originating from the arrival and settlement of immigrants in cities and their subsequent metropolization, and the effort to strengthen the sociological discipline and to represent it to the public with a more marked scientific profile.

In focusing on these social aspects and pursuing this objective, it can be recalled how two sociologists who worked at the university founded by the capitalist Rockefeller in 1890, W.I. Thomas (in *Social Origins*, 1909) and Park, respectively dwelled on the study of quantitative and qualitative techniques – more specifically, the former on social attitudes in general and on racial and ethnic groups in particular, and the latter on issues concerning race and racial relations within American society.

It is Park himself who develops the concept of "social distance", on both the theoretical and methodological level, starting from Simmel's formal sociology, by which he was clearly influenced during his time in Berlin. A clear confirmation of this is both the constant reference to Simmel in his writings (Hinkle 1994) and the extensive use he makes of the simmelian treatment of the foreigner in hi (now century-old) book. He also hinges on the problematic aspects of foreigners belonging to racial and cultural groups they are in contact with, especially when they settle in the same neighborhood, focusing on "the combination of the near and the distant" (Park and Burgess 1921).

Henceforth, Park and then Bogardus believed that the concept of social distance could be used to study race and ethnic relationships, using the "prejudice" that is developed by some individuals/groups

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towards other individuals/groups in a social space (Park 1924) in order to establish some measurability through the degrees of understanding/intimacy and closeness/distance.

2. The premises of social distance in Simmel's formal sociology

Simmel's so-called "formal sociology" (Simmel 1971) has always had a twofold purpose, the second of which is consistent with the first, namely to take as a formal category the geometry of social life with which to proceed to the interpretation of psychological content.

Simmel (1971, 1989) analyzed the way in which the distances between subjects influence the formation and dynamics of what he defined as forms of associated living and argued that it is precisely the distance that determines the relational processes at the base of the construction of the social.

The German sociologist and philosopher, remembered primarily as a "formal sociologist", had tried to achieve an image and a "more geometric" study of the *social* in which space appears to be a semantic dimension. At the same time, he recognized in the pragmatic effects the ability of the symbolic-semantic dimension to exert an influence on individuals in determining distances from other individuals and the very forms of social life.

Simmel insists on the importance of the study of space to understand the interactions between people. "Men", says Simmel, "cannot be close to or far from each other without space imprinting its shape" (Simmel 1989). According to Simmel, space – within which men activate their relationships, their cultural and economic exchanges – more than a geographical entity, represents a set of psychological forces that tend to bind individuals. By virtue of these ties, space takes on different connotations that lead Simmel to define it as "an activity of the soul" capable of connecting "in unitary visions sensitive affections that are unrelated in themselves" (Simmel 1989).

In addition to this psychological representation of the importance of space, there is another that identifies the interactions between men as a need to fill space. In fact, if everyone occupies a beautiful space delimited by his or her activity, with his presence distinguishing him from his neighbor who has his own space, Simmel says that an empty space is created between the two that is filled only thanks to interaction, and therefore it is animated. The concept of space understood geometrically or even geographically is different from what is sociologically understood, which instead is connected to the concept of soil and territory: as Simmel affirms, every social function that is consolidated on a territory has its own unique character. Within the district of a city, only that city can exist, and "if a second city were to be born within these borders it will be two cities, not on the same territory, but on two territories once united and now separated" (Simmel 1989).

In the medieval period, this separation represented the "mark", that is to say that space that was interposed in mental form between two or more spaces that had the same identity. At that time, within a city, which also shared the same historical and traditional identity linked to shared values, there could be several guilds, each of which represented a profession/group in the city. In this way, the city territory was divided not quantitatively but functionally. Similarly, there may be several churches for different professions, but all were understood as churches of that city.

Here then, the city is outlined by the occupation of a space imbued with not only social but also cultural and symbolic meanings, which take on their connotations in a more appropriate form when the space itself is actively occupied and lived. In this case, the existence of a "frame" acts as a limit capable of circumscribing the boundlessness of the space within well-defined boundaries. Within these borders, therefore, it is possible to find a world that responds to its own particular rules, representing a society linked not only by an inner coherence but also by a set of relationships that are functionally linked to each other.

For Simmel, the concept of "limit" – the *limes* of the Latins – has a notable sociological value, which serves to mark the relationships between people belonging to different cultures who recognize themselves in different territories. The sociological limit thus understood implies being unable to act not only beyond the border but above all on the other subject, understood as a social actor able to manage his freedom in full right. In this way, a limit is created that is no longer just spatial but has its roots in the *psyche* of the people, because it is this that basically create the boundaries. "The limit", Simmel will say, "is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but it is a sociological fact that is spatially formed" (Simmel 1989). Therefore, the boundary is nothing more than the concrete, structural representation of what has already settled in the consciousness of the community that recognizes and identifies itself within that boundary, nourishing the

"mechanical solidarity" that Durkheim (1984) will use to explain the social cohesion typical of pre-modern and isolated communities.

Simmel's reflection, precisely because of his ability to analyze the effects that the interpolations between spatial and semantic entail for life and social structuring, leads us to consider distance as the pragmatic consequence of bringing back a particular individual subject within a larger group, within a logical and semantic category. This statement is of considerable importance for the understanding and study of social distance itself since it introduces the need, on behalf of the researcher, to refer to the axiological, cultural and hermeneutical frameworks of societies, communities and groups within which social distances are observed and studied.

3. Simmel's "stranger" and the evolution of the concept of social distance

Simmel, in his broader treatise Sociologie of 1908, conceptually circumscribes the identity of the starrer in his personalistic essence of the subject of the search for social desirability which then takes shape in the social space. Simmel's contribution is sociologically an important reference point for the studies of Park and Bogardus as this could help them in identifying the different possibilities that individuals have at their disposal in interactions with other individuals or groups of individuals (social groups) or between groups of people (between social groups). Individuals or social groups through their social desires and instincts interpret differently the social space within which they intend to affirm their personalities and social identities by attributing, in fact, to the same space a true "geometry" (Lopez 2021). Simmelian "geometry" is used, by the sociologists of Chicago mentioned earlier, in the conceptualization of social distance on the basis of the counterposition of space distance as geometric space and symbolic distance as metaphoric space. Returning to the conceptualization of social distance, there is no doubt that Park, above all, used the simmelian treatment of the stranger as a sociological form to analyze the construction of the meaning of the relationships that each individual attributes to space, both in the form of individual relationship as well as of group and between social groups. In other words, one could talk of de-construction of semantics that is attributed to space (in a wider geometry) through the interests that individuals and groups pursue by creating alliances (proximity or distance).

This is reflected in Simmel's work when he writes:

The stranger is thus being discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself (Simmel 1950 [1908]).

The relationships that individuals and groups establish, therefore, assume precise meanings only if the symbolic conditions of the relationships themselves are also considered. Simmel, following Kantian ideas, considers the spatial and the temporal dimensions of modernity as two necessary forms without which we cannot perceive or conceive the objects, and discusses the way space and time entail empiric reality (Ethington 1997). Space is therefore a form of meaning, a way of organizing experience and life, and as such, it is always embodied in a single and peculiar spatial configuration. In other words, space can only be grasped starting from the configuration it helps to create as a container of relationships.

Certainly, "the stranger" (metaphorically, the strangeness – that which is unfamiliar) for Simmel constitutes the social type and the basic element of his social distance concept. The reference to Émile Durkheim is important because when he writes about the characteristic of organic solidarity and the social integration, he had already reflected on the physical and social distance "under the guise of the moral density concept" (Levine et al. 1976).

4. Park, Burgess and Bogardus: racial relations and the social distance scale

If the Simmelian theorization of the sociological form of the foreigner had as its historical-social background the transformations of the European continent of the late Eighth Century, its "American elaboration" had as the background some of the greatest transformations in history in general and of America in particular that, flying on the wings of an accelerated development, attracted immigrants from all parts of the world, increased its population with the development of metropolis, transformed its social realities with the birth of phenomena of discrimination and racism.

In 1908, W. I. Thomas began studying race relations, and in particular, Chicago's largest immigrant minority (Polish), at the time generally only discussed in local newspaper articles in reference to "Polish Crime" (Collins and Makowsky, 1978). This research, conducted together with Florian Znaniecki, set out to

criticize this stereotype and culminated in one of the classics of sociology, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. The scientific interest in race and ethnicity became one of the main topics that influenced the activities of sociologists at the University of Chicago, and among them, with particular reference to the concept of social distance, Park and Burgess.

They (and Bogardus later) privilege the purely formal nature of the concept of social distance and apply it empirically, especially with regards to the specific theme of the perception of and relationships with immigrants, in contrast to the high level of abstraction and formalization that characterized the concept in simmelian thought.

Ethington (1997) talks of a partial use – one would say exclusively "phenomenological" – of the social distance concept, to the detriment of the constructivist potential inherent in its previous simmelian elaboration. Park (Levine et al. 1976)[1] uses the conceptual figure of the foreigner to observe the new relations between social groups of immigrants coming not only from Europe and Asia (mainly) but also from other American states (especially the South) that were transforming American society (Wark and Galliher 2007).

Park and Burgess (1921) were very interested in the phenomena of race and racial prejudice linked to social distance. They talk about racial prejudice as:
- a form of insulation (pp. 250-252);
- primary contacts (p. 330);
- interracial competition (pp. 539-544);
- racial conflicts (pp. 578-579 and 631-633);
- a defense reaction (620);
- competition between people with different living standards (pp. 620-623);
- assimilation (pp. 756-762 and 769-770);
- prestige (pp. 808-809);
- and, finally, as a phenomenon of social distance, the main topic of interest here.

Park and Burgess distinguish their metaphoric sense of "distance" from its ordinary-use geometric meaning (Park and Burgess 1921). In fact, to separate individuals there are both spatial distances and psychological distances. Park and Burgess (Park and Burgess 1921) are well aware of the role that state of mind assumes as a guide to behaviors of "race consciousness" and "class consciousness" with which individuals themselves more or less consciously act in space to produce social distance or proximity. The same distance can be deployed in terms of class and/or race between individuals or between groups.

The two scholars reverse the simmelian assumption that geometric distance produces metaphorical distance, observing that people have an instinctual drive to "maintain social distance", choosing to occupy different residential and productive spaces. In chapter IV of their book *Centenary* (Park and Burgess 1921), they write:

> *A morphological survey of group formation in any society discloses the fact that there are lateral as well as vertical divisions in the social structure. Groups are arranged in strata of relative superiority and inferiority. […] New devices come into use to keep aspiring and insurgent individuals and groups at the proper social level. […] As protection against the penetration of the inner precincts of personality and the group individuality, there are the defences of suspicion and aversion, of reticence and reserve, designed to insure the proper social distance.*

And in chapter VII (pp. 440-441):

> *The simplest and most fundamental behaviours of individuals and groups are represented in these contrasting tendencies to approach or withdraw from an object. If instead of thinking of these two trends as unrelated, they are thought of as conflicting responses to the same situation, where the tendency to approach is modified and complicated by a tendency to withdraw, we obtain the phenomenon of social distance. There is a tendency to get close, but not too close. There is a*

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[1] Park proposed the "marginal man" as a counterpart to the concept of the stranger: "The emancipated Jew was, and is, historically and typically the marginal man, the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world" (Park, 1928: 892).

feeling of interest and sympathy of A for B, but only when B remains at some distance. So the Negro in the southern states is "all right for him". […] The adaptations between conflicting tendencies, so blatantly shown in the facts of racial prejudice, are not limited to the relationship between black and white men. The same mechanisms are involved in all the subordinations, exclusions, intimacies, social distances and reservations that we seek everywhere.

Park himself subsequently (Park 1924) clarifies that the "race consciousness" - as a type of social distance - it was possible to observe it precisely with the use of the social distance concept. The Chicago sociologist, highlighting the aspect of prejudice in the dynamics of social contact, adds that distance is a function of a "state of mind" in which differences are encountered: "What we ordinarily call prejudice seems to be more or less instinctive and spontaneous disposition to maintain social distances" (Park 1924). A further conceptual and methodological evolution is offered by Park in his 1924 *The Concept of Social Distance as Applied to the Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Relations*, which resumed the analysis carried out in 1921 together with Burgess on the types of behavior of individuals and of groups and the phenomenon of social distance.

Hence, Park, and then Bogardus, believed that the concept of social distance could be used to study racial and ethnic relationships, using the "prejudice" that some individuals/groups develop towards other individuals/groups in a social space (Park 1924) and establishing measurability precisely through the degree of understanding/intimacy and closeness/distance. Here, it is necessary to remember a non-accidental element, namely the "psychological" education (Wark and Galliher 2007) of both Chicago sociologists, in addition to the already mentioned interest in phenomena linked to immigration and race. This may have played a significant role in collaborations on joint research works, even though Bogardus had, in the meantime, moved from Chicago to California.

At the University of Southern California, through the Pacific Coast Race Relations Survey, Bogardus (as director) and Park methodologically experimented the first development of the social distance scale with a quantitative indicator of social distance. This methodological approach used to also analyze statistically the framework of racial relations, combined with the (already mentioned) more qualitative one of Thomas, Bogardus pursued the scientific interest in racial issues as one of the main social dilemmas of America of those times (Owen et al. 1981).

In 1925, Bogardus published *Social Distance and Its Origins*, in which he defines social distance as referring "to the grades of understanding and intimacy which characterize pre-social and social relations generally" (p. 216). The following year, he launched the most important investigation into social distance and the use of the relative scale. Through the collaboration of as many as 25 American universities in many states and implemented every decade until 1966 (except 1936), the scale made it possible to trace the evolution of the American experience of diversity and difference over a period of four decades and became one of the most famous tools in the social and psychological history of American culture. Finally, it should be emphasized that Bogardus' work is much broader (Clemente 2019) and that racial distance is only one of the ten types/fields of distance treated in his work *Social Distance* (1959).

5. Concluding remarks

The concept of social distance is characterized by a very rich ambivalence and flexibility for the purposes of social research. The bi-dimensionality of the concept of social distance has been underlined several times, through the identification of a symbolic-metaphorical value and a properly geometric-spatial value.

Furthermore, on the empirical level the concept of social distance expresses value in the analysis of social phenomena both at a micro and macro level, obviously not in a simplistic and absolute sense. On the micro side, for example, the theme of social distance becomes interesting for a sociological and epistemological reflection on the current relationship between the cognitive dimensions of the social and, in return, the social dimensions of cognition in the age of the Internet and social media networks. The social reorganization of time/space is strongly permeated by the Internet and the essential use of devices (smartphones), and all this concretely acts on the representation of social categories from which identity itself is constructed. In sum, social distance can be produced and reproduced with concrete effects through the use of media tools.

On the macro side, think of the theme of globalization, in which the approach to social and cultural differences develops within the same spatial dimension but in a system/network in which they are largely fluidified and complexified by the system of technological networks as social networks (Castells 2002). In this space – a container of multiple cultures and values, and different histories – there is both a contraction of social distance understood as geometric distance and (not automatically but very frequently) a high symbolic social distance.

On the other hand, there are numerous studies conducted in many countries of the world and in various disciplines (sociology, political science, psychology, linguistics and pedagogy) that, even very recently, have made use of Bogardus' scale of social distance.

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