



Introduction. Georg Simmel's living heritage

Monica Martinelli

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MONICA MARTINELLI

Introduction. Georg Simmel's living heritage

This “Simmel Studies” volume includes the conference proceedings on “Georg Simmel’s living heritage”. On the centenary of Georg Simmel’s death (1918-2018), the Department of Sociology and the ARC Centre at the Catholic University of Milan, in collaboration with the AIS (Italian Sociological Association), held an *International Conference* in Milan (30 November-1 December 2017) celebrating one of the greatest founding fathers of sociology and social philosophy. This Conference anticipates further events, organised considering the centenary of Georg Simmel’s death. These may be found at the end of this Volume of Simmel Studies -

The Milan Conference’s aim was to present and debate some of the most important lines of inquiry into the heritage of Georg Simmel’s work.

The four ‘Simmelian lectures’ that introduced the sessions of the Conference are now available in this volume, along with some of the discussants’ papers (as indicated in the Index of this Volume): they show that Simmel’s importance is the result of an original interweaving between the analysis of the anthropological dimension of social phenomena and of socio-historical processes. This interweaving runs through all his writings as a linking thread, ranging from his first writings on morality in relation to social life, through analyses of the emerging social differentiation and studies of the socio-cultural premises and implications of the modern era, to his philosophy of life.

i) *The first session* focused on the anthropological dimension of the social sciences and social analysis. Simmel declared that the notion

of society, its values and conflicts, derives from the fundamental ideas of humanity and the individual which form its background, such that the models of coexistence in a given historical period appear as projections of the philosophical properties of the social individual in the economic. Indeed, for Simmel, social coexistence is not a merely 'structural' or 'functional' problem; rather, it involves an anthropological question.

Precisely through the study of the anthropological dimension of social phenomena, Simmel has taught us to question an epoch critically. In his case, it concerns the modernity of his dualisms: an epoch that has divided the individual from society (to the point of supporting, on the one hand, substantialist conceptions of society and, on the other, extreme individualism) and has not fully permitted the formation of individuality in spite of having pursued it ideally.

Whilst maintaining a fixed central role for the individual, Simmel resolutely criticises every abstract view, such as that of individualism and the substantialist view of society. His reflection is oriented towards the rethinking of such notions. The Simmelian preoccupation concerns the destiny of the individual in modernity and the possibility that he can forge an autonomous '*Lebensführung*' (conduct of life). In this sense, as underlined by Hans-Peter Müller - and discussed by Alessandro Cavalli and Alessandro Ferrara - we can reformulate Simmel's celebrated expression – from "how is society possible?" to "how is individuality possible?". This is an inescapable question, and Simmel returns to it repeatedly and offers us a fresh insight to face the contemporary crisis and call into question the 'kind of man' that each epoch claims to forge.

ii) *The second session* focused on the inescapable question of freedom in social life. Among the numerous themes oriented to interpreting the human condition, Simmel's thought leads us through the question of freedom as a crucial topic for the social sciences in every period. Social relationships, as well as models and forms of organised life arise and develop around an image of freedom. He has taught us that, in order to understand an epoch

and take up the challenge of the art of building something that still has a meaning, we must start from a critical analysis of the image of freedom. Significantly, in his wide-ranging youthful work – “Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft” (1892-93) – he dedicated a long chapter to freedom; his last piece of work, a fragment delivered to the publisher in the month of his death (September 1918), tackles this exact theme, which is explicit in its title, “Über Freiheit”. Without making any forced interpretation, we can state that freedom is a running theme throughout Simmel’s writings.

Simmel analysis of freedom intertwines closely with the analysis of the aforementioned individual-society relationship, as the fate of freedom in western Modernity – as pointed out by Cornelia Bohn, and discussed by Riccardo Prandini and Monica Martinelli – has been of a ‘twofold kind’: the freedom of individual on the one hand, and the freedom of self-differentiating, objective links of meaning that are supra-individual. Simmel’s analysis, with its peculiar approach, leads us outside deterministic, mechanistic and individualised views.

iii) The third session focused on the ambivalence and open challenges of an epoch through the role of culture. Simmel is an acute interpreter of the most striking manifestations of modernity, such as that of metropolitan life and the money economy with their potentials and ambivalences. In his critical reading, he distances himself both from self-referential technicism, in which the objective spirit is imposed with the fatal disposition of not knowing any boundary, and from the trend of an exasperated individualisation which slides into a weakening and isolation of the subject. Modernity is traversed by an implacable dualism between subject and object; it gives rise to a widespread disorientation brought about by a ‘sick culture’ and by ‘a socio-economic system that offers the most complete example in reference to the world history and of the coverage of the ends through the means (as Simmel indicated in his many essays on the cultural crisis). This dualism lacerates life and experience. Modern men are less and less capable of building meaningful synthesis as they are not able to appropriate the

objective, cultural elements that remain without value. Simmel noted that, for the first time in European history, ‘we lack a global ideal of culture’, that is a form which could organise the objectified contents of culture in order to form and orient ourselves.

The fact that ‘occasionally the opposite may happen’ (as Simmel wrote in “Philosophie des Geldes”), i.e. that within the prevalent objectification the subjective spirit emerges, proves the resistance of the subject to being levelled and dissolved within a technical-social mechanism, i.e. a totally-objectified culture where the man of culture is replaced by the specialist. This kind of human resilience (as well as life’s) brings back the need to analyse the original correspondence between individual life and objective forms as well as to redefine the relations between society, individual and humanity through the role of culture as a way to get a sense for human life to the centre of the discussion, as indicated by Patrick Watier, and in the reflections of Matthieu Amat and Emanuela Mora. Simmel does not wish to resign himself to the involutions of modernity and, at the same time, does not envisage any rewinding of the reel of history; he repeatedly expresses his search for culturally-adequate ways towards sustaining and rehabilitating the subject. His reflection on culture in Modernity coincides with what he calls a ‘philosophical culture’: a particular attitude of mind towards the phenomena of the world and life, intended to penetrate through the surface of things. The philosophical culture is not purely intellectual, but aims to be an authentic cultivation of the soul and of individuality.

iv) The fourth session focused on the central hermeneutic principle of Simmel’s outlook: life and forms. ‘Life’ becomes the filter whereby Simmel takes up a critical stance towards the constraints imposed by the technical systems and a social differentiation that leads to the reification of social structures which, in their expansion, establish the logic around which society and individuals are organised and set in motion those processes of rationalisation that overturn all the shades of human existence, reducing life itself to a mere ‘technical problem’. The concept of ‘life’ also allows him to distance himself from an abstract metaphysics and a science that is

increasingly remote from human experience and from the sense of reality. However, the central position of life does not mean opting for some purely physiological or psychic sort of vitalistic spontaneousness – where ‘forms’ are completely dissolved – or for a substantialist view of reality, which fixes life in a univocal concept – where the form, on the contrary, predominates over life.

For Simmel – as underlined by Gregor Fitzl, and the discussion papers of Vincenzo Mele and Mauro Magatti – a society consisting solely of functional systems would fall apart; only for as long as the living ‘creativity of action’ is considered, the never-ending production process of society can build social forms able to coagulate the complexity of life in its societal issues, socio-cultural implications and anthropological roots of social phenomena.

To sum up, as shown by the different contributions during the Milan Conference, as a thinker on the border between sociology and philosophy, Simmel safeguarded both the different specific characters of the two disciplines and the richness of the dialogue between them. He was thus able to hold together processes and contents of the experience with what is never fully objectivised in any event of the human existence. During the last century, this position has sparked a debate between the supporters of an exclusively sociologist Simmel and the supporters of a prevalently philosophical Simmel, while in between are those who have maintained that he should be marginalised from both disciplinary areas. In this regard, the Conference argued for a position distant from all kinds of unilaterality, which may appear great but amount to an illegitimate simplification of Simmel’s thought and of reality.

In fact, Simmel renounced univocal schemas and concentrated on the irreducibility of life and its many manifestations, focusing on different aspects of the human experience within both the historical macro-processes and the micro-fragments of social interaction. His analysis was characterized by a constant endeavour to understand the dynamics of relationships between the individual and society beyond all reductionism: the questions linked to the meaning of

experience emerged as a fundamental concern for his sociological investigation.

These questions guided his intellectual work and are at the heart of his importance today.