



# **Sociology and Philosophy of Culture. Otthein Rammstedt and Georg Simmel's legacy. Notes from Latin America**

Lorena Cervantes Reyes and Einer Mosquera Acevedo

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[See table of contents](#)

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*Sociology and Philosophy of Culture. Otthein Rammstedt and Georg Simmel's legacy. Notes from Latin America.*

LORENA CERVANTES REYES AND EINER MOSQUERA  
ACEVEDO

Elsewhere we recorded our impressions of our first and only face-to-face meeting with Otthein and Angela Rammstedt at the Third International Symposium on Georg Simmel in Medellín, Colombia.<sup>1</sup> These recollections, as a *sub specie aeternitatis*, not only bring us back to an experience which, almost a decade later, we still consider as one of the most significant of our formative years, but face us once again with the question regarding the heritage of the simmelian thought. On this occasion, we do so from the perspective of the legacy of the sociologist responsible for making Simmel's work one of his main life's task: Otthein Rammstedt.

In the last years of his life, Simmel himself formulated the question concerning what he named as “his contribution to the development of the spirit” (Rammstedt 2007: 124 and 134; Rammstedt 2015: 34 and 36; Vernik 2012: 161) aiming to guide, to the best of his abilities, his posthumous reception. This is how he wrote his so-called philosophical testament —*Lebensanschauung: vier metaphysische Kapitel* ([1918] 2001). He set out to round up what he considered his scientific achievements, and from this effort resulted his *Grundfragen der Soziologie* ([1917] 2002). He then entrusted both his published and unpublished works to his wife Gertrud and three of his disciples with the purpose of reuniting

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.redsimmel.org/instantaneas-en-torno-a-angela-y-otthein-rammstedt-a-proposito-de-su-partida/>. Furthermore, a review of the Third International Symposium on Georg Simmel published in *Simmel Studies* 20/1, 2016.

and preserving his legacy, a task that almost a century and endless vicissitudes later was finished by Otthein Rammstedt with the publication of the 24 volumes of Simmel's complete works. As stated by Rammstedt himself, the work led by him from 1982 and concluded in 2012 is intertwined with threads of contributions that from early 1918 sought to reunite, preserve, study and spread Simmel's work (Rammstedt 2013).

Thereupon, one of Otthein Rammstedt's most significant contributions (which is implicit in the titanic efforts of reuniting with his team Simmel's work in a single corpus), sought to make the threads of contributions surrounding Simmel's work live on. If the reception of the Berliner's works across different latitudes has been thus far distinguished by partial and fragmentary understandings, his complete works open the possibility of a thorough and deeper knowledge; one which acknowledges the scientific project that articulates Simmel's sociological and philosophical work allowing, at the same time, a clearer apprehension of the thinker's most intimate being through his work.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely the struggle for overcoming the idea of Simmel as a disperse and fragmentary author what set the pedagogic goal of Otthein Rammstedt's participation in the International Symposiums held in Latin America around Georg Simmel's thought.<sup>3</sup> So, for example, according to Esteban Vernik and

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<sup>2</sup> And as Simmel himself points out, philosophers "have stated their deepest intimacy in the form of objective images of the world" (Simmel [1904] 1998: 67).

<sup>3</sup> Four Symposiums around Georg Simmel's work have been organized in Latin America. The first one was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in May 2002; the second one in Mexico City on November 2006; the third one in Medellín, Colombia, in November 2011, and the fourth one in Buenos Aires again on November 2015. For an account on the contributions, topics and publications derived from each one of them as well as a preliminary proposal for a reception study of Simmel in this hemisphere, please consult the detailed memories of the event made by professor Olga Sabido Ramos (<http://www.redsimmel.org/programas-de-las-jornadas-internacionales-sobre-el-pensamiento-de-georg-simmel-una-propuesta-de-estudio-de-recepcion/>). Of

Mariano Fressoli's reviews (2002) of Rammstedt's intervention at the First Symposium held at Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2002, the emeritus professor vehemently stated the need of getting over the partial reading that has eclipsed the Simmelian proposal, referring to the common mistake of quoting his texts related to culture without displaying their implications in his sociological proposal.

Based on Otthein Rammstedt's interventions in the said Symposiums, as well as on his scant texts published in Spanish, we can identify a suggested agenda for the study of Simmel's work, which recaptures the balance of the "main and original motives" (Rammstedt 2015: 26 and 33) that he offered the "spiritual culture", which the Berliner himself made at the end of his life. The Bielefeld professor takes the place of an executor of the simmelian intellectual heritage by insisting —both in his oral and written contributions for Spanish speaking scholars— on the recovery, and more precisely, the revitalization of those motives pointed out by Simmel, among which, as that balance points out, sociology comes first.

Thus, for example, in the article "Georg Simmel 1858-1918", co-authored with Natàlia Cantó Milà (Sabido 2007), both authors not only gave an account of Simmel's influences and readings of the social sciences of his time but also reviewed different components that structured his sociological proposal. In this work, they display their thoughts on the object of the sociological science from the concepts of *sociation* and *forms*, and from the relational base of his proposal through the category of *Wechselwirkung*. Their exposition not only took on the task of displaying the development of Simmel's reflections on sociology from 1894 to 1908 but also endeavored to explore the opposition life/form, which, from the vitalist perspective developed in the last and

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the four symposiums, professor Rammstedt attended the first and third one, whilst for the second one sent an article as co-author for the event memories, later collected in a book compiled by professor Sabido herself and published in 2007 (*Georg Simmel: una revisión contemporánea*).

definitive stage of Simmel's intellectual progression, radicalizes the original abstraction of form regarding the contents of social life. With this, Rammstedt and Cantó Milà recover the importance of the "*Grundfragen der Soziologie*" of 1917 in order to thoroughly understand the sociological legacy of Georg Simmel.

At the Third Symposium, held in 2011, Rammstedt's purpose remained unchanged: to display the continuity between Simmel's sociology of 1908 and 1917, specifically attending to how the first is relativized by the latter (Rammstedt 2015: 40). This issue allows him to consolidate his answer to the central matter of the simmelian sociology, where both his sociological and philosophical-cultural points of view are articulated (Rammstedt 2015: 24). In Rammstedt's complete review of what he called the sociology of the later Simmel he highlights, on the one hand, his explanation of why the relation between individual and society is fundamental for the Berliner's sociological point of view; and, on the other, how the preoccupation for the individual and its consideration as an object of experience (Rammstedt 2015: 29) allowed Simmel to adjust the theoretical position of his 1908 sociology (Rammstedt 2015: 26). Deepening the matters displayed in the two prior symposiums, we must highlight Rammstedt's exposition on how the relation between individual and society maintains its distinction among the three fundamental fields of Simmelian sociology: general sociology, formal sociology and philosophical sociology (Rammstedt 2015: 30-32).

Altogether, what Rammstedt proposes in the panoramic view offered by Simmelian sociology is that, as suggested by the Berliner himself, society should be tackled not as a hypostatized entity, but as a "vital form of humanity" (Rammstedt 1996: 120) resulting from the "constituent productivity" of individuals, whose ways of mutually affecting and modifying each other by coming into relation is the fugacity that—in vitalist key—sociology seeks to apprehend. From the beginning, Simmel considered that this perspective for tackling the social totality, which, as we indicated is a "dynamic process", opened an "inexhaustible end fructified"

field for future generations of sociologists (Rammstedt 1996: 141; Rammstedt, Cantó Milá 2007: 120), just as Rammstedt endeavored himself to highlight.

This would be Simmel's first contribution to the development of the spirit. The second, according to Simmel—and as Otthein Rammstedt emphasized—has to do with listening to “the heartbeat of things” (Rammstedt 2007: 128); i.e., the inductive methodology developed by Simmel in his *sub specie aeternitatis*, which consists in “explaining the complete interior and exterior evolution of culture within the development of a single cultural element” (Rammstedt 2015: 36) that is, to throw a probe to the “depths of what is human” from what is apparently trivial, fugacious, quotidian, just as from money Simmel penetrates the sense of modern life's nonsense.

Here it is of utmost importance to give account of the fact that both the quest of distilling the substance from the apparently superfluous and anodyne, of knowing how to find “in each detail of life the totality of its sense” (Rammstedt 2007: 130), as well as the intention of capturing the ethereal forms in which human beings unite with one another, are a product—as Rammstedt identifies following what Simmel himself points out—of a yearning (Rammstedt 2007: 135; Rammstedt 2015: 36). And this yearning is one of metaphysical order.

And here we find ourselves with the historical moment that Simmel experienced through his last days. After months of discomfort and uncertainty as a result of the outbreak of World War One, Simmel “woke up” from that “fever of the present” (Rammstedt 2015: 36) that afflicted him as much as the generation that witnessed the crumbling of their world. After that awakening, conscious of being also at the end of his life, he asked himself about his legacy, the methodology he used for his contributions to *Jugend*—and that would later be the “starting point of his cultural philosophy and his sociology” (Rammstedt 2007: 132)—, and a third “methodical motive”; he found these motives linked by a

“metaphysical nostalgia” born from the need of finding sense and unity.

This moment, with Otthein Rammstedt gone, is similar. We don’t know of his last reflections, but following the agenda that can be glimpsed through his direct contributions to scholars and students of Simmel’s works in Spanish, we have, as a legacy, a sociology that keeps opening unexplored paths, as well as a method that seeks to elucidate the hidden sense in the quotidian. Precisely in times of uncertainty such as our current ones, this legacy promises necessary clarifications.

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