



## **Simmel: A 'Contemporary of His Contemporaries'. On Denis Thouard. Simmel une orientation. Belval, Circé, 2020, 232 pp.**

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bewegt, während Simmel eine eher metaphysische und existenziale Ebene bevorzugt, erweist sich die entscheidende Bedeutung der Empathie als Dialog zwischen Subjekt und Objekt, wobei die Spannung – im Sinne einer Dualität – zwischen Geistesleben und physischer Welt erhalten bleibt.

Der internationale und interdisziplinäre Austausch wird mit dem nächsten Begegnungstreffen in Villa Vigoni im Herbst 2023 fortgesetzt. Damit verbindet sich der Wunsch, dazu beizutragen, dass – „auf den Schultern von Riesen“ – weitere interdisziplinäre Untersuchungsansätze innerhalb der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften angeregt und ermöglicht werden, oder wie man frei nach Simmel sagen könnte, innerhalb der Wissenschaften der Freiheit, und zwar weil ihnen die ‚*Wechselwirkung*‘ zwischen individueller und gesellschaftlicher Dimension am Herzen liegt.

GREGOR FITZI

**Simmel: A ‘Contemporary of His Contemporaries’. On Denis Thouard. *Simmel une orientation*. Belval, Circé, 2020, 232 pp.**

In the field of sociology and social philosophy, we experience a profound transformation of the concept of ‘classic authors’. Marx, Durkheim, Simmel or Weber are considered as such, not just because each generation of scholars refers to them in a historical continuum of reception. Rather, they are repeatedly forgotten and subsequently rediscovered from completely different viewpoints. Simmel, together with Troeltsch and Weber, represent school cases in this respect. After being almost forgotten under the cultural hegemony of ‘*völkisch* sociology’ in the 1930–40s, and partially rediscovered during the 1950s, over the last 40 years they have become the eponymous heroes of as many critical work editions. Their recent rediscovery is thus largely due to the publishing efforts



of German academies or scientific institutions, like the *German Research Foundation* (DFG). In other countries, too, the reception of the ‘classics’ of sociology and social philosophy has often followed tortuous paths. France is a case in point in this respect. The reception of Weber’s and especially of Simmel’s works has been characterised by successive waves of rediscovery, rejection and oblivion, dominated by the most contradictory reading approaches. In Simmel’s case the interpretative keys were not only very nuanced; they were also dominated by specific political visions of what Simmel’s sociology should have meant.

The history of Simmel’s French reception still has to be written. Yet, a brief resumé could proceed as follows. In its very beginning, at the end of the 1890s, the interest in Simmel’s oeuvre was spurred on by younger French sociologists, above all by Célestin Bouglé (Bouglé, 1894; 1896), who saw in Simmel the best partner for the enterprise of *L’année Sociologique*. The cooperation between Durkheim and Simmel failed for different reasons that have been widely investigated in recent years (Rammstedt, 1998; Fitzi, 2017). Accordingly, Simmel ‘the sociologist’ rapidly went out of fashion in France. Yet, a few years later a philosophical reception had begun. Bergson, who wanted to return Simmel the favour for his engagement in the German translation of his works, advocated the publication of an anthology of Simmel’s writings in French. Yet, they were presented under a quite antagonistic label: *Mélanges de philosophie relativiste*. The selection of Simmel’s texts, which Alix Guillaumin translated at Bergson’s request, presented itself as an approach to ‘philosophical culture’ – something that was controversial in itself. In addition, however, it did so from a viewpoint that had already attracted the attacks of the most conservative German academia that Simmel’s academic career in Heidelberg.

On the other hand, another reality hid behind the façade of the *Mélanges de philosophie relativiste*. After the first interest of the Durkheimian school in Simmel’s work, a political reorientation came about in the French reception, as Olivier Agard has recently



observed with historiographical acumen (2020). Simmel was no longer read within the framework of a sociologically objectivated reconstruction of modernity, but from the perspective of a culture-critical reflection. Whatever the auspices might have been for the reintroduction of Simmel's thought in France, a philosophical debate concerning Simmel's relativist approach to philosophy of culture took place thanks to Albert Mamelet's studies, which first appeared in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* and later as a monograph (Mamelet, 1914). This gave rise to an innovative approach to the philosophy of culture, which is of central interest for contemporary culture sciences, as Matthieu Amat showed in his brilliant reconstruction (2018). This history of reception radiated out until the critical reading of Simmel's work – unfortunately still rather neglected in scholarly studies – presented by Vladimir Jankelevitch about a decade later. Jankelevitch was the only philosopher of the time to have published on both Bergson and Simmel (Jankelevitch, 1925).

Afterwards, a long period of oblivion followed. This was suddenly interrupted by the 'rediscovery' of Simmel's work from a completely different interpretive angle, which took shape again under the auspices of social and political sciences. In the 1980s Simmel became one of the tutelary deities of Julien Freund's theory of conflict (Freund, 1983). This rather tarnished his sociology and it generally made a non-biased reading of his works in France very difficult (Laurens, 2017). In the wake of this reception line, Simmel also became the eponymous founder of the 'methodological individualism' advocated by Boudon's sociological approach (1984). Since then, the opposition of Bourdieu's school to Boudon's sociological teaching also included an official reluctance to acknowledge Simmel's work in the left-wing sociological milieu. Yet, behind the scenes, things were probably different as some ongoing studies of Bourdieu's correspondence seem to show. Bourdieu himself had indeed a good knowledge of Weber's as well as of Simmel's writings, whose contribution to sociological theory he valued, even if he externally maintained a more critical position



that was due to the doctrinal conflict lines between sociological schools in France.

The most specific effect of Freund's and Boudon's Simmel interpretation was related to their conservative political orientation, so that French sociologists tended to characterise Simmel as a right-wing liberal intellectual. The divergence from other political interpretations of Simmel's thought provoked the most astonishing debates in the international conferences ahead. The contradiction was particularly evident in relation to Simmel scholars coming from Italy, where a younger generation of critical Marxists turned to Simmel to find an alternative to Marx's interpretation of modernity and defended the idea of Simmel as a left-liberal intellectual (Dal Lago, 1994). The hermeneutics of contraposition, however, did not last forever. Since the 1980s, Patrick Watier established a solid tradition of sociological Simmel reception in Strasbourg thanks to the cooperation with the Simmel edition in Bielefeld (Watier, 1986; Rammstedt, Watier, 1992; Deroche-Gurcel, Watier 2002). In recent years, innovative lines of reception have been initiated in France by a new generation of Simmel scholars, recording a growing interest of different schools of thought in Simmel's work (Thouard, Zimmermann, 2017). Different approaches to aspects and parts of Simmel work became thus possible. A complete reconstruction of Simmel's reception in France is, nevertheless, still a desideratum of research.

This further emphasises the importance of the operation which Denis Thouard's *Simmel une orientation* conducts by extensively broadening the reception frame of Simmel's oeuvre for French philosophical and sociological culture. Thouard moves from a radical questioning: what is the specificity of Simmel's thought? The question has both hermeneutical and philological relevance. Yet, in order to address it, it needs to be translated into a concrete research practice. According to Thouard, this means to understand how to read Simmel from today's perspective. Simmel's thought is often cast in the form of the essay, which he almost invented, in order to get out of dire straits due to his existence as a private lecturer at the



Friedrich-Wilhelms-University in Berlin and to reach a broader audience. His reflection thus appears easily accessible, often light-hearted and partly ironic. This appearance, however, is deceptive; it leads to interpretations that miss the centre of Simmel's thought. One must therefore open the way to the contents that lie behind it. Thouard's proposal is to break with the idea of Simmelian frivolity and overcome the bad reputation of the essay. Unlike Durkheim and Weber, Simmel never wrote a textbook on sociology or the philosophy of culture. His work nevertheless presents a complex theoretical contribution to both subjects. It is thus necessary to make it accessible to the reader. This is the hermeneutic work to which *Simmel une orientation* is dedicated.

Thouard shows how Simmel substantially breaks with the academic universe of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He embarked on his research path because he believed that the simple accumulation of historical notions – the rule in Wilhelminian academia – produced a complete disorientation of culture. Thereby the more profound epistemological reasons come to light both for the style of Simmel's writing and his choice of contents. Thouard shows how in this respect Simmel shares the appeal that will characterise the phenomenological method of his friend and colleague Husserl. Yet, Simmel not only goes 'back to the things'. He also directly addresses the reader in his life situation and almost experimentally proposes to reflect together on the reality of modern life and its uncertainties. That is why he introduced the expressive form of the essay by giving rise to a tradition that strongly influenced social and cultural science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Building on the analysis of money as the founding institution of modernity, Simmel plunges the analysis of life reality into the proxemic of relationships between the social actors and the things (institutions, commodities, objects and places) that tend to rebel against their producers. The centrepiece of Simmel's episteme thus becomes the analysis of the 'objective spirit'. This makes him part of a great tradition of thought that moves from Hegel and the Hegelian schools through Lazarus' and Steynthal's psychology of



peoples just to the neo-Kantian debates. In Thouard's analysis, however, Simmel stands out for the originality of his approach. He emphasises the processes whereby things, be they cultural contents or social institutions, autonomise and transform themselves by establishing their dominance over social action. Yet, even if this analysis is highly critical to modernity, it does not lead to cultural pessimism. For Simmel, while very accurately recording the dimensions of the tragedy and conflict in modern culture, also emphasises its positive impact as well as its often unactualized potential for emancipation.

There is an important and innovative element in the way in which Thouard conducts this analysis. Thanks to the *Gesamtausgabe*, Simmel's works are finally available for readers. Innovative 'reading paths' must thus be developed to grasp their core. Thouard's proposal in this sense is to read Simmel as a 'contemporary of his contemporaries' to rediscover the thread of a *Zeitgeist* that has often motivated his analyses, but which seen from today is not immediately perceptible. On this track the book develops lecture itineraries that traverse the *topoi* that have become classic for Simmel's reception (the essay, the money, the big city, art and its interpretation), yet by illuminating them with a new optic that reaches fewer known aspects. The first step in this sense is a critical analysis of the transformation of time and space in societies grounded on the monetary economy. The locus of analysis here is the metropolitan condensation site of social differentiation, an object that the book addresses by showing how Simmel shares it with Karl Bücher, Henri Pirenne, Werner Sombart and Max Weber.

Thouard delves into the complexity of modern life and culture, by reconstructing the disorienting experiences due to the progressive erosion of spatial and temporal boundaries of experience and dealing with the thematic communities and differences that Simmel's analyses evidence with respect to Bergson's and Proust's reflection. The questioning of the specific historical character of culture then introduces the comparison between Simmel's reading of Michelangelo's sculptural work and



Freud's reconstruction of its psychoanalytical problematic in the analysis of Michelangelo's Moses. Thouard holds that the common conclusion of Freud and Simmel is that Michelangelo is the witness to a significant braking point within cultural development. This makes him a point of reference for the future development of Simmel's theory of art, whose further junctions will be represented by the artistic creation of Rembrandt and Rodin. These epochal crossings in the development of culture are seen as the profound expression of the transformation of society that Simmel's analytical reflection not only thematises but traverses, by making him a *promeneur* going through the ruins of culture. This attitude qualifies him as the 'ancestor of cultural Bolshevism', making the *flâneur*, Benjamin, his direct inheritor.

Yet, *comprendre ce n'est pas tout pardonner*. The Great War called into question all that modernity, to which Simmel dedicated his analyses of the *Philosophy of Money* and the metropolis, so that his episteme capitulated before the war, especially its emotional impact. Thouard approaches this thorny and contradictory part of Simmel's oeuvre with the watchful eye of the philologist. If it is undeniable that Simmel got caught up in the irrational consensus of intellectual mobilisation for war, it is also important that the interpreter, in turn, does not sink into the consensus of an undifferentiated interpretative position that is not based on a critical reading of Simmel's war texts. Again, here Thouard does not regard Simmel as an isolated witness of his time, but in the context of his contemporaries, among others Max Scheler, Werner Sombart and Rudolf Eucken.

Simmel's text on the 'interior transformation of Germany', as a result of the conflict, recovers the theme of the emotional community of the first months of the war. Yet, it also evidences differences from the other positions characterising the German intellectual mainstream, as is shown among others by the controversy with Friedrich Gundolf. Furthermore, and relying on the tools of Simmel's sociology of conflict, Thouard shows that the more mature treatment of the conflict that Simmel presents in 1917



with his collected writing on ‘war and the decisions of the spirit’ takes a different view of the whole question. Here, the path of reflection leads from the spirit of the nation to that of Europe, or to be more precise, of the lost idea of Europe. What is important is that in this endeavour Simmel is not alone either. Thouard draws our attention to the fact that there are important parallelisms in the treatment of this issue between Simmel, Karl Kraus, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal and Paul Valéry. Again, Simmel is the ‘contemporary of his contemporaries’. He participates in a public debate, shares the perception of an historical transformation and contributes to the reflection on how to overcome its constraints.

What then can be the conclusion of a reorientation in the reading of a classical author? Following Thouard the indeterminacy of some Simmelian analyses and their presentation in the experimental form of the essay are determined by the extreme plasticity of their object. Modernity, breaking through the spatiotemporal boundaries of life, can only be grasped by ‘promenading’ into it. Yet, an attentive comparison with Benjamin’s much-admired revolutionary melancholy eventually allows Thouard to emphasise the topicality of Simmel’s essayistic thought that transcends any definition of its episteme as merely impressionistic undertaking. With all the ambivalence that characterises his reflections on both money and war, there is at least a positive note: the tragedy of culture can also have an emancipatory line of development. Thouard’s book not only provides the elements to pose this question and contributes an innovative answer to it. Furthermore, it provides an important tool to broaden the field of reading Simmel’s work and takes it beyond the received ideas that dominated its reception, not only in France.

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LORENZO BARBANERA

### **Simmel and the Möbius Strip.**

We shall not cease from exploration And  
the end of all our exploring Will be to  
arrive where we started And know the  
place for the first time.

(T.S. Eliot)

If one were to sum up in one word all the qualities of Georg Simmel's thought, that word would be “persistence”. Indeed, the German sociologist's theorizing has continued to germinate on both fruitful and inhospitable grounds over the time, so that often, even when no one would expect it, it is easy to find oneself on Simmel's trail or, as a famous saying goes, on his shoulders. In addition to providing evidence of his acumen in grasping the fundamental elements that make society possible, this also allows us to appreciate the transversality of his ideas and insights (Lombardo, 2015: 13). They are able to transcend not only the different theoretical and methodological approaches in sociology, but also the limitations associated with the historicity of thought, which maintains its fertility without time limits.

These premises make it possible to analyze Simmel from multiple different perspectives while at the same time trying to