



## Croce as Reviewer of Simmel's War Writings

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### Article abstract

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MARTA PICCHIO

## *Croce as Reviewer of Simmel's War Writings*

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Abstract. *This essay comments on Benedetto Croce's review of Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. After illustrating Croce and Simmel's opposing philosophical visions of the Great War, light will be thrown on the reviewer's manipulative choices made to crush his colleague's intellectual stature and writings. Croce's was a prejudiced attitude that ignored the deeply felt evolution of Simmel's thought in the course of the conflict: from his enthusiastic support of the national war effort, manifested in 1914, to the subsequent anguished and critical eye when he perceived that Europe had set out on the road to civil and cultural suicide.*

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### **Foreword**

This essay studies a little known episode concerning the reception by his contemporaries of the writings of Georg Simmel: Benedetto Croce's review of *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen: Reden und Aufsätze*. The essay examines the reasoning behind the negative judgement expressed by Croce, highlighting the rhetorical devices and citation strategies employed by the Italian philosopher to slate his German colleague's war writings and cultural stature. In this review Benedetto Croce, in a manipulative manner, chooses to cast his critical eye above all on only one of the four essays in the collection: the first, dated 1914, in which Simmel's patriotic enthusiasm and his philosophical effort to find positive aspects in the war, was most manifest. Avoiding commenting sufficiently on Simmel's other writings on the war, Croce in fact did not take into consideration the heartfelt evolution of Simmel's thought: from the initial emotive war involvement and ensuing support during the first months of the conflict, to the increasingly anguished and critical

glance when Simmel, from March 1915 onwards, had a clear vision of the civil and cultural suicide that Europe was going to commit. Lastly, with the aim of placing the genesis of the *Der Krieg* review in the historical, political and cultural context of the age, the essay comments on the different personal and professional situations of their lives during the war: Croce was free to convey his thought in Italy, with the strength and prestige of someone who does not worry about critique; while Simmel, a German Jew, animated as Croce was by sincere patriotic ideas, was also tightly bound by the obligations of his role of newly appointed full professor, invited to give a contribution to the national war propaganda, but limited in its freedom of speech from the imperial apparatus of control and censorship. From this comparison, it will emerge a deeper understanding of Simmel's choices and writings during the Great War.

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Occupied by his study of Ludovico Ariosto, which had come to the monograph published by Giovanni Laterza in 1918, on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917 Benedetto Croce (Pescasseroli 1866 - Naples 1952) discharged one of his usual contributions to *Il Giornale d'Italia*, entitling it *La guerra italiana, l'esercito e il socialismo* [*The Italian War, the Army and Socialism*] (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 222-224). In this article Croce opposed the pacifist commitment of antimilitarist socialists, highlighting in the writings of Karl Marx and George Sorel their convinced references to the importance of the military apparatus and the police in ensuring a solid state organization. Pending this reflection the senator of the Kingdom expended words of praise for the army, impressed by victory at the eleventh battle on the Isonzo.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thirty days later, when the Caporetto epic began (24<sup>th</sup> October – 12<sup>th</sup> November), Croce wrote the following emotions in his notebook: “mental paralysis” (27<sup>th</sup> October); “crushed” (28<sup>th</sup> October); “sad, desperate thoughts on the fate of Italy” (30<sup>th</sup> October); “great nervous exhaustion”; “morbid state

Croce eulogized the commanding general Luigi Cadorna, acknowledging him the merit of having redeemed Italians from the fame of being a people indifferent to war.

Another four days of study dedicated to Ariosto passed before the war returned to ink Croce's pen on 29<sup>th</sup> September. The occasion was the "little notice of a slim work by Simmel",<sup>2</sup> *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. Reden und Aufsätze*, brought out in Munich by Duncker & Humblot in April of the same year (Simmel, 1999 [1917]). Writing his review the author adopted the rhetorical artifice of the sharpest criticism: he blandished Simmel, appreciating "the resoluteness of his moral loftiness, impartiality and austerity"; the lunge and thrust followed: the German thinker had made "the effort of squeezing his brain to say profound and new things. But he was squeezing where there was no juice to squeeze; and therefore his observations [...] might at the most be worthwhile only as suggestions for future thoughts, since for the moment they are ungraspable or contestable in their every modulation" (Croce, 1918: 179). Croce's was a sentence without appeal, quite other than an uncommitted "little notice", as the diminutive used by the author in his notebook seemed to suggest. A fearful judge and never indulgent (Lolli, 2001), Croce published his piece in number XVI/1918 of *La Critica*, a magazine of literature, history and philosophy that he founded in 1903 and edited until 1944. It circulated widely in Europe, appreciated for the value of the research and critical contributions it published.

From the four essays on the great war collected in *Der Krieg*, the intellectual of Pescasseroli selected the following thematic starting points: 1) the conviction that the Empire went to war with the "ideal

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increased by insomnia" (1<sup>st</sup> November); "immobility of spirit and body" (7<sup>th</sup> November) (Campochiaro *et al.*, 2002: 7). Words that bear witness to his strong emotional involvement in the events of the war, in spite of his initial neutralist position and opposition.

<sup>2</sup> The information, dated, is in the notebook from which the citation is drawn (*Ibid.*).

motive” of “saving Germany”, surrounded by enemies, by defending its institutions, economy and spiritual and cultural identity;<sup>3</sup> 2) perception of the war (with the consequent social and economic crisis) as barrier and antidote against “Mammonism”: the worship of money which in Simmel’s view had dominated European political and economic choices for half a century;<sup>4</sup> 3) the singularity of the “German character”: a unique spiritual identity, different according to Simmel from the cultural physiognomy of other peoples, which itself also came into play in the conflict;<sup>5</sup> 4) the war as destroyer of the idea of Europe, whatever the final outcome should be in terms of victors and defeated.<sup>6</sup>

In clarifying these themes of reflection Croce wanted to show readers the deep rift, almost an intellectual abyss, that separated his philosophical and political vision of war from that expressed by

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<sup>3</sup> For a profile of the *Zweites Reich* (1871-1918) see Mommsen (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Republishing in the 1917 collection the text of *Deutschlands innere Wandlung* (Simmel, 2003a [1914]), a lecture held on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1914 in the hall of the Aubette in Strasburg, the author added a note replying firmly to accusations of having written illusory words about the end of Mammonism (Simmel, 1999 [1917]: 18-19).

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the different interpretation of the concepts of Teutonic *Kultur* and Anglo-French *Zivilisation*, the intellectuals of opposing ranks were involved in a bitter clash of ideas that was defined *Krieg der Geister* (Kellermann, 1915). Thomas Mann (Lübeck, 1875 - Kilchberg, 1955), a lucid exegete of the two concepts and adherent of the *Konservative Revolution*, in 1918 published the *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1915-1918), exalting, against the egalitarian and pacifist values of his enemies, the Teutonic spirit founded on the pillars of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner (Mann, 1997 [1918]). Along the same lines, Max Scheler (Munich, 1874 - Frankfurt am Main, 1928) enjoyed publishing success with *Der Genius des Krieges und der Deutsche Krieg* (1915): on this subject see the analysis of Castelli (2014). Among critics of the Teutonic spirit the considerations of Perrier (1915), Durkheim (1991 [1915]) and Santayana (1916) are exemplary.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XV, who promoted 24 appeals to the belligerents, spoke of the “suicide of Europe” (Tagliaferri, 1993: 219 ff.).

Simmel.<sup>7</sup> In opposition to what his colleague had written, Croce saw no German spirit or identity inspiring the Teutonic belligerents<sup>8</sup> and, on the other hand, “was certainly not inclined in those years to believe that Anglo-French *Zivilisation* was preferable to Germanic *Kultur*” (Cingari, 2003, II: 239) as the Triple Entente upheld, with the backing of thinkers of the calibre of Henri-Louis Bergson<sup>9</sup> and Émile Durkheim.<sup>10</sup> Croce was also in disagreement with Georg

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<sup>7</sup> Denis Thouard offers an interesting reading of Simmel’s vision on the ideal motivations for war, which also marks a turning point in his relativist and relationist approach: “Dans la suite du texte, Simmel aborde la question des motivations de cette guerre: si, du côté français, l’idée dominante est celle de la revanche, il semblerait que, à la différence de 1870 où l’Allemagne aspirait à faire son unité, elle n’ait, cette fois, rien de précis à obtenir. Or l’idée morale qui serait le pendant du revanchisme français se trouve finalement dans la ‘situation absolue’ de l’Allemagne, opposée non seulement à la France, mais ‘pour ainsi dire au monde entier’. L’introduction du qualificatif ‘absolue’ n’est pas faite à la légère: il s’oppose explicitement au monde relatif, dont les parties se conditionnent mutuellement et dont les rapports peuvent être quantifiés par l’argent. C’est manifestement l’adoption d’une conception du temps interne et qualitatif qui rend possible la rupture avec l’approche gradualiste des relations sociales et le décrochage d’avec la sociologie du conflit” (Thouard, 2014: 566).

<sup>8</sup> For the debate on the physiognomy of the Teutonic character and on German national identity and mentality, see Elias (1989); Verhey (2000); Vermeiren (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Henri-Louis Bergson (Paris, 1859 - 1941) saw in the war the conflict between French spirit and culture, which embodied civilization and the force of law, and Prussian militarism and mechanicalness, expression of brute force and uncouthness. In *La philosophie française. Tableau récapitulatif destiné à l’Exposition de San Francisco* (1915a), he maintained the pre-eminence of French philosophy in the evolution of modern thought. For further study of his thought on war, see Trotignon (1994); Zanfi (2013; 2017); Meroi (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Émile Durkheim (Épinal, 1858 - Paris, 1917), in *L’Allemagne au-dessus de tout. La mentalité allemande et la guerre* (1915), also questions himself about the deep motivations that had made the conflict desirable, identifying the peculiar German mentality as the humus from which the bellicose impulse was able to spring. A mentality he defines, in highly critical tones, as sick, pathological and barbaric, characterised by total obedience to the State, by a taste for sacrifice, by the will to rule and by a destructive passion, elements that are always present but concealed during peacetime in the depths of consciousness (Durkheim, 1991 [1915]).

Simmel's sullen vision of the destiny of Europe, refusing to see the war as a deadweight loss for the continent.<sup>11</sup>

A scholar of the political science of Niccolò Machiavelli and the economic science of Karl Marx, Croce conceived the war as the bitter fruit, ineluctable, of the will to power expressed by empires and nations.<sup>12</sup> He accorded no validity to any supreme moral or spiritual principle that justified or ennobled a declaration of war. The decision to trigger a conflict, for Benedetto Croce (1996 [1909]), was traceable to political motives that were in turn rooted in national longings and economic-industrial strategies.

The Italian philosopher was therefore very distant conceptually from the road taken by Simmel, by his attempt to go deeper into the cultural motivations that might lie at the origins of the war in a search to explain it on the basis of the theory of culture.<sup>13</sup> For Croce, what came into play in the war was not a clash of cultures and civilization, of opposing reasons and “ideal motives”, but a conflict

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<sup>11</sup> After 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918, Croce was standard-bearer of a farsighted political line, open to the pacification and progress he hoped for. Croce believed firmly in the rebirth of Germany, as he wrote to Vossler in 1919: “I suffered so deeply during the war for the fate of my country that I was able to feel the pain of the Germans. But like all wise people I am convinced that Germany will recover, sooner than others think, and once more exercise a beneficial effect on European life” (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 211–212). On the eve of his eightieth birthday in 1945, wearied by the second conflict and after having reviewed his unconditional admiration for Germany, Croce had lost hope of again seeing that continent “of peace, of work, of international collaboration” which Europe had been prior to 1914 (Croce, 1993, 1: 276).

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of Croce's political vision see Montanari (1987) and Cingari (2003). Scarcella (2013) studies Croce's dialogue with Machiavelli. On the relationship between Italian culture and Europe, in both Croce and Gentile, see Ciliberto (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Simmel's studies on the German spirit, style and culture in comparison with Latin, classical and Romanesque culture and art – even the book on Rembrandt – are animated at bottom by the sad desire to throw light on what might be the cultural roots of the great incomprehension between Germany and France which then led to war (Simmel, 2000a [1916]; 2003b [1916]; 2000e [1918]).

of interests (political or economic). Other arguments appeared exploitative and propagandist to him, and he was highly critical of them.

When the drums of war began to roll in Italy, Croce took the side of the “neutralists” (Magherini, 2017), “vehemently railing, and not only once, at interventionists of every colour and credo” (Meroi, 2016). This position was advised not so much by adhesion to pacifist and antimilitaristic culture as by a lucid awareness that Italy was a weak country, unprepared to face the war effort that announced its imminence.<sup>14</sup> Whenever the supreme interests of the country should advise the monarch and the government on Italy’s entry into the theatres of war, Croce made no mystery of considering it natural that they would fight on the side of the Central Powers.<sup>15</sup>

After 24<sup>th</sup> May 1915, when Italy revealed its alliance with the Triple Entente, Benedetto Croce “shouldered his pen” for the homeland,<sup>16</sup> taking a course in which neutralism gave way to

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Giovanni Gentile in December 1914 we read: “I have gathered information and judgements such as to persuade me that to goad Italy into war is an *actual crime* against our country. [...] But the merry young lads want war like children want a toy they’re worked up about.” (Croce, 1981 [1914]: 482). Croce refuted the vision of “war as adventure and flight forward, as a search for an eventful solution to State problems old and new which should instead have been resolved structurally” (Conte, 2013a: 117).

<sup>15</sup> Domenico Conte, who in the editions of the *Pagine sulla guerra* dedicates precious reflections in relation to the evolution of Croce’s dialogue with Germany, observes how the Italian philosopher intended “to confirm the justness and vitality of a whole philosophical tradition of an idealistic-Hegelian matrix which, long before the war, had ratified an alliance between Germany and Italy, not politico-military but spiritual” (Conte, 2013a: 114). On the basis of these affinities, but also in conformity with treaties and politico-economic interests, in the theatre of war it seemed to him preferable to give Italian support to the Germanic front rather than to that of the Entente.

<sup>16</sup> “If one is duty bound to defend the values of culture [...] everyone is required to defend their family heritage, their country, their church and all the institutions to which they belong” (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 32).



patriotism (Meroi, 2016). Georg Simmel did no less, lending his appreciated rhetorical talent to numerous popular events organized to collect donations for the cause. Not only Croce and Simmel but hundreds of intellectuals dedicated themselves to fervent military activity during the war: patriots and partisans from both ranks, called to the front of the *Krieg der Geister*.

In the depths of his ethical and moral identity Benedetto Croce felt himself to be different from – certainly better than – his colleagues who were occupied in giving voice to the megaphone of propaganda. On these he unleashed indignant words, explosive like grenades, accusing them of “falsifying truth under the pretext of serving the country or political party, but in effect for their own smallness of mind and baseness of spirit” (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 5); selling themselves like “Judiths, that is, whores for their country” (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 210). In a 1919 letter to the philologist Karl Vossler, almost expressing an emotional release, abetted by the attempt to knit together a friendship that had come undone in the war years, Croce proclaimed that he had strenuously defended the “political and ethical virtue of Germany”<sup>17</sup> from injurious accusations and from disinformation artfully spread by enemies, himself enduring continual attacks in the press and from Italian public opinion,<sup>18</sup> and bearing the bitterness thereof (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 14).<sup>19</sup> A testimony of his will not to lose sight of the lucidity of judgement in the name of patriotism.

Sustained by his profound knowledge of history and an unshakable faith in the primacy of ratiocination, for Croce the

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<sup>17</sup> For an interpretation of Croce's relationship with Germany see Lönne (2002); Conte (2013a; 2013b); Furnari Luvarà, and Di Bella (2013), Conte (2016).

<sup>18</sup> For an example of crude interventions condemning the Croce's 'neutralist' or 'Germanophile' tendency, see Damerini (1914); Calò (1916); Colajanni (1916); Olgiati (1917).

<sup>19</sup> Salvatore Cingari underscores how Croce, in the last decade of the 19th century, had defended France against the “arrogant Francophobia in Italy” (Cingari, 2003, II: 265).

“nationalism” embraced by many colleagues was a dangerous ideology, capable of inducing governments to choices that were devastating for the future and painful for populations. In Croce’s view, the Great War was a “reduction to the absurd of all nationalisms” (Croce, 1991 [1932]: 435).<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing *Der Krieg*, Croce did not accuse his colleague of having been conditioned by “nationalism” but surmised rather that Simmel, “as a philosopher, has been compelled to speak, and has manoeuvred to avoid coarseness, and he has succeeded, because this manoeuvring is his constant habit, in all his philosophical writings” (Croce, 1918: 179).<sup>21</sup> Also in his review of Thomas Mann’s *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, the Italian philosopher suspected that “they were written under duress, being unable to do otherwise” (Croce, 1928 [1919]: 185), but if he admired the Lübeck writer’s genius and thought, Simmel aroused his perplexity: an “elegant mind”, but with “little philosophical force” who “lacks the historical conception of philosophising” (Croce, 1918: 179). A disdainful judgement to say the least.<sup>22</sup>

The reviewer left no possibilities of dialogue at a distance with his colleague. For all that Simmel was skilled in “playing” with philosophy “as with a foil in the fencing hall”, Croce, caustic,

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<sup>20</sup> For a broad and well-argued reflection about Croce’s position on the war see Cingari (2003, II: 219-260). Other useful sources are found in Croce (2002).

<sup>21</sup> Also in this passage one notes Croce’s habitual reviewing technique when he wants to be cutting: acknowledge a positive aspect – Simmel’s having avoided ‘coarseness’ in writing about war, having succeeded in not lowering himself to the level of the most sickening propaganda – and immediately afterwards put forward a belittling comment in underlining the German’s manoeuvring as a constant habit, in dealing with war as with any other topic. The term “manoeuvre” applied to philosophy is used by Croce in a negative sense, as the somewhat cunning skill of getting out of a fix when faced with thorny questions.

<sup>22</sup> This assessment is in line with other judgements by Croce of the intellectuals of the day, acknowledging the Berliner’s acuteness of thought and brilliant argumentative capacities while likewise expressing reservations about the solidity of his theoretical and methodological apparatus.

pointed out to the readers of *La Critica* that the German's writings on the war were out of time: "on war, while one is fighting, there is nothing to say because there is war to be made"; moreover – a grave reproof when directed at a thinker – they were off the subject: "the proposition itself [the war] rebelled against philosophising" (Croce, 1918: 179). With Thomas Mann the Italian patriot was more indulgent:<sup>23</sup> he did not censure the German's philosophical and cultural positions, in several points close to Simmel's; he did not react irate when Mann defined Italy as a country "full of spaghetti eaters of the spirit"; ignored his unpleasant remarks about the defeat at Caporetto.<sup>24</sup>

Today's exegetes of Simmel's writings on the war,<sup>25</sup> consulting new sources and putting forward convincing reflections, have brought to light the moral and intellectual journey the philosopher lived in those works, slim in consistency but teeming with personal distress. Reading Simmel's private letters of 1914, precious for getting to know the authentic feeling of the man and citizen in comparison with the obligations of the public and popular *maître à penser*, there emerges his sincere adherence, animated by patriotism, to the national war effort (Simmel, 2008). At the outset of the conflict Simmel was very struck, positively impressed and culturally

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<sup>23</sup> For Domenico Conte, in the review of *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* Croce highlights the elements which objectively placed him close to Mann, "at the same time putting the mute on the other elements which, equally objectively, distanced him". The scholar points out that Croce and Mann "raised themselves as paladins of a spiritual attitude that underscored the centrality of power (above all in relations between States), the force of history, historic individualities (single and collective)" (Conte, 2013a: 121-122).

<sup>24</sup> "Did anyone by chance not know that that country, to be serious, would not be up to this war? What balsam, the news in these days! What a sense of freedom, of deliverance, of comfort is produced by 'force', the limpid, majestic action of arms" (Mann, 1997 [1918]: 527).

<sup>25</sup> Among the contributors who have marked this modern exegesis, mention goes to: Watier (1991; 1992; 2015); Kramme (1997); Fitz (1997; 2005); Maniscalco (2013); Thouard (2014).

stimulated by that epoch-making climate of collective and united mobilization of German society to defend national cultural and spiritual values. Faith in this choral breath and in the renewed unity of the Teutonic population induced Simmel to see the war as a painful evil but with extraordinary regenerative potentials: he glimpsed the possibility of constructing a “new” man, no longer separate but reconciled with the superindividual totality, in a “new” Germany, spiritually evolved, free from the overwhelming power of money. War is destructive, but it also destroys what is rotten, sick, and he believes it may give a new ethical impulse, lead to a new synthesis of culture.

This Simmelian attitude should however be placed in time: from August 1914 to the early months of 1915. When it was clear that the conflict, predicted by both sides to be a “lightning war”, would leave a colossal humanitarian tragedy behind it, Simmel was wise and was eager to call his previous positions into question. As Denis Thouard has acutely written: “Simmel s’en prenait à cette ‘atmosphère de mensonge qui empestait l’Europe’ dès sa première intervention d’octobre 1914, sans voir qu’il en était lui-même une victime” (Thouard, 2014: 568). In the essays released just a few months after his adherence to the *geistige Mobilmachung*, Simmel’s eye on the war, on the present and on the future, became more lucid, disenchanted, often critical, but without relenting in his beneficial commitment, keeping faith with his moral commitment to the country and its social community.<sup>26</sup>

As early as March 1915, in the essay *Die Idee Europa*, one notes the personal dismay, the sense of impotence when faced with the tragedy, in the metaphor Simmel declares to have borrowed from Italian and European mediaeval religious history, evoking the image of war as an unstoppable pandemic, a “fever” that makes the body sick and deprives minds of ratiocination, thrusting them towards

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<sup>26</sup> On the idea of nation and Simmel’s change of positions with regard to the war, it is useful to read Esteban Vernik’s interviews with Gregor Fitzi and Otthein Rammstedt (Vernik, 2011; 2012).

delirium. Simmel draws a paragon between his contemporaries and the 14<sup>th</sup> century flagellant movement, describing men out of control, destined to awaken brutally as out of a trance (Simmel, 2000b [1915]: 112; 1999 [1917]: 54). The fact that this gloomy vision – of the war as irrational madness – is posited in alternative with a possible “sensible” outcome, fruit of having turned over the soil of Europe and ploughed it to the depths, causing new developments and values (*Ibidem*) to emerge, does not cancel out the German philosopher and sociologist’s intellectual disheartenment: if the balance of the war was still obscure and uncertain, in his view a loss already appeared clear and undeniable, the idea of Europe, the unitary spiritual form we call Europe, had been shattered and eclipsed, under the impulse of reciprocal hatred between nations which would persist even after the end of the armed conflict.

Writing in 1917 and publishing the review in 1918, Benedetto Croce did not recognize this critical and self-critical evolution of Simmel’s thought, under way at least since March 1915. With a patently exploitative choice aimed at cutting Simmel down culturally, Croce commented on and opposed mainly what Simmel wrote in *Deutschlands innere Wandlung* (2003a [1914]; 1999 [1917]: 13-29), just three months after the outbreak of war, and made only passing reference to the other essays in the miscellany.<sup>27</sup>

Many felt that the considerations expressed by Simmel at the beginning of the conflict sounded “out of key” with the rest of his production. To be suitably understood they should moreover be set in the climate, situations and events of the age: on the one hand we are faced with a man who, for all his life, as an assimilated Jew, had problems of integration (at least in some fields, such as the

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<sup>27</sup> Presenting *Der Krieg*, Croce initially skips *Die Krisis der Kultur* (Simmel, 2000c [1916]; 1999 [1917]: 37-53), then makes a brief reference to it, declaring imprecisely and hastily that Simmel “also speaks about the crisis of philosophy”. Croce devoted only a short sentence also to *Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes* (Simmel, 2000a [1916]; 1999 [1917]: 30-36) and *Die Idee Europa* (Simmel, 2000b [1915]; 1999 [1917]: 54-58).

academic), who on the outbreak of war discovers the nation, feels he belongs, feels he has a country<sup>28</sup>, feels emotionally involved (it is therefore reductive to surmise simply, as Croce does, that he “had been compelled to speak”); on the other hand we have the institutional pressures, obligations bound to his role, speaking and propaganda needs that had to correspond to precise directives, the control and suppression apparatus regarding interventions not considered to be in line with national interests. Between these two poles, principally, we should understand Simmel’s actions, choices and writings during the war. To cast greater light on this interweave between adherence and duties, we shall retrace the stages of Simmel’s first public appearances in support of the war. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1914 he signed *Die Erklärung der Hochschullehrer des Deutschen Reiches*,<sup>29</sup> which committed Imperial teachers to the “philosophical crusade” against the Triple Entente.<sup>30</sup> Shortly afterwards, although he deemed Henri-Louis Bergson the most eminent philosopher of

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<sup>28</sup> As is well known, Simmel’s writings on the war were read as “a desperate effort by a man who had always regarded himself as a ‘stranger’ in the land to become immersed in the patriotic community” (Coser, 1977: 198). That feeling he had a country, in his situation, could not be taken for granted and was probably fruit of his involvement with the country at war, is borne out by a letter of 1907 to Edmund Husserl, himself also an assimilated German-Jew, in which Simmel says: “Florence is my country, the homeland of my soul, inasmuch as people like us can have such a place” (Rammstedt, 1994: 151).

<sup>29</sup> The document attracted more than three thousand signatures, sign of a united response from the professors of the German Empire to intellectual mobilization for the country. Invaluable reflections on the *geistige Mobilmachung* are found in Mommsen (1997); Flasch (2000); Dimitriev (2002) and Fitzzi (2005). The absence of Georg Simmel from the signatories of the manifesto of the 93 intellectuals, *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*, signed on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1914 and published the following day in the main daily papers, could be an indication of the still negligible weight of his academic stature or, in any case, the existence of unwritten problems – such as antisemitic prejudice – concerning him as a person that resulted in exclusion from the list of intellectuals and artists considered the most illustrious and representative of Germany, especially as seen from an international viewpoint.

<sup>30</sup> The expression “philosophical crusade” was coined in 1916 by Étienne-Émile Boutroux (Montrouge, 1845 - Paris, 1921) (1916: 241).

his time,<sup>31</sup> Simmel replied vigorously to the arrows the Frenchman loosed against Germany.<sup>32</sup> When the community of the Kaiser-Wilhelms Universität in Strasburg chose to oppose the war commitment of the *Union sacrée des intellectuels*,<sup>33</sup> organizing a cycle of public lectures, Simmel stepped up on the podium at L'Aubette on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1914. Looking at the other speakers invited (following the chronological order in which they spoke at L'Aubette), we find that Eduard Schwartz,<sup>34</sup> Harry Bresslau,<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Caterina Zanfi observes that "Simmel's interest in Bergson's work grew out of the question of knowledge and the shared anti-Kantian stance of their philosophies which propose an overcoming of intellectualism founded on a reconsideration of the relationship between life and the categories of intellect" (Zanfi, 2013: 98).

<sup>32</sup> Bergson, president of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, in the proslusion *The Meaning of the War* on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1914, accused the German Empire of a brutal thirst for dominion, sustained by interests in industrial expansion (Bergson, 1915b). On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1914 Simmel responded with *Bergson und der deutsche "Zynismus"* (Simmel, 2004 [1914]). He considered it grave that Bergson, "the strongest intellect among living philosophers", should be so unjust about the Germans, resignedly affirming "the desperate inability of the French to understand the German essence". On the theme of philosophical, cultural and human relations between Bergson and Simmel, the works of Fitzi (2002) and Zanfi (2013) are invaluable.

<sup>33</sup> On French cultural mobilization, see Hanna (1996); Prochasson, and Rasmussen (1996).

<sup>34</sup> Eduard Schwartz (Kiel, 1858 - Munich, 1940) was a well-known classical philologist, rector of Strasburg University 1915-1916. For the text of the conference of 24<sup>th</sup> October, see Schwartz (1914).

<sup>35</sup> Harry Bresslau (Dannenberg, 1848 - Heidelberg, 1926) was a historian and palaeographer then famous in Europe whose name was linked to the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. A Liberal and a Jew, he was a fierce opponent of the antisemitic theories of his colleague Heinrich Gothard von Treitschke (Dresden, 1834 - Berlin, 1896). Committed to upholding the rights and integration of German Jews in Germany, in December 1918 he was among the teachers expelled from the university and driven out of Strasburg by the French, with the accusation of being militant in the 'pan-Germanic' movement. In his lecture of 31<sup>st</sup> October 1914 he strongly attacked France (Bresslau, 1914). For a biographical profile: <http://www.alsace-histoire.org/fr/notices-netdba/bresslau-harry.html/>

Martin Spahn<sup>36</sup> and Hermann Rehm<sup>37</sup> represented the same number of political and cultural physiognomies that carried influence in university life at Strasburg (Maurer, 2015), far more unbalanced than Simmel on the nationalist and pan-Germanic front. As becomes evident, the “last arrival” Georg Simmel, notwithstanding personal freedom of thought, was not in the professional condition to tackle conflict or misunderstandings with this rocklike academic potentate and risked losing the chair to which he had been appointed only a few months earlier (Becher, 2008).

Both Simmel and Croce, though setting out from different visions on the war and on the role an intellectual should play in such circumstances, were animated by patriotism and committed to writing in support of their respective nations. But an important difference between the Italian and the German must be underlined: it lies in the different degree of freedom of expression guaranteed to senator Croce by the Kingdom of Italy and that which was granted to professor Simmel by the Empire. Crystallizing time at 1914, in actual fact Simmel’s professional position was weaker than that of his reviewer. Benedetto Croce had sat in the Senate for four years by now, honoured by the Kingdom of Italy with the highest civic and cultural consecration. Whereas Simmel had become a full professor at 56 and been obliged to leave his beloved Berlin for an

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<sup>36</sup> Johann Martin Spahn (Marienburg, 1875 - Seewalchen am Attersee, 1945) was a historian and conservative politician of Catholic faith. In 1901, at the age of 26, William II nominated him for the second chair of contemporary history at Strasburg, eliciting a protest from Theodor Mommsen which spread throughout Germany and became known as “Fall Spahn” (Weber, 1980). Mommsen claimed that nominating a believer to the chair was an attack on the freedom of scientific research, but the Imperial aim was to create a Catholic faculty in Strasburg to integrate the members of this faith who represented 80% of the city’s population. Parliamentarian in the Reichstag in 1910-1912 and from 1924 until his death, he founded a college of political training in 1920, opening up to rightwing nationalism. In 1933 he joined the National Socialist party. For the text of his lecture on 14<sup>th</sup> November, see Spahn (1914).

<sup>37</sup> Hermann Rehm (Habsburg, 1862 - Strasburg, 1917) was an admired jurist. For the text of his lecture on 28<sup>th</sup> November, see Rehm (1914).



outlying seat like Strasburg after a troubled academic career, held back by the mistrust of an influential grouping of colleagues, by envy of his success with the non-academic public and by antisemitic prejudices, although born into a family that had converted to Christianity. Widespread and creeping antisemitism, abetted by the pre-war climate of tension that Germany was experiencing and by nationalist propaganda, threatened him right to the last, when his professorship was in view, with the risk of compromising his Imperial teaching licence.<sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding this problematic condition Simmel, no less than his Italian colleague, demonstrated his honesty and intellectual freedom. If Croce defended the dignity of Germany at the cost of attacks from Italian nationalists, Simmel did the same with France. Since the Empire forbade its subjects to make any sign of public manifestation favourable to the enemy, Simmel was severely criticised for his statements, considered Francophile, made during an interview published on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1915 by the daily *Svenska Dagbladet*. In particular he was attacked for having referred to the “ingenious French nation”. Less than two months later, on 4<sup>th</sup> July, on publication of the article “Europa und Amerika” in the *Berliner Tageblatt* (Simmel, 2000d [1915]), a sentence of his on the possible future destiny of Alsace,<sup>39</sup> considered anti-German, aggravated the situation to such an extent that in August he risked going to trial as demanded by the head of military command in Strasburg

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<sup>38</sup> His nomination as professor at Strasburg “had been the subject of debate in the Alsace-Lorraine regional parliament [...] where it was insinuated ‘that his negative teachings on religious and moral matters were well known’ and his being Jewish was ‘highly evident’” (Rammstedt, 1994: 151).

<sup>39</sup> The ‘incriminating’ sentence is as follows: “As much as Germany must hold on to Alsace to the last man, and will do so, it is a matter of near indifference in world-historical terms as to whether these 14,000 square kilometres of Alsace-Lorraine (in territory and population equal to about one-fortieth of Germany) are to be deemed German or French – almost as indifferent as the question of whether the Trentino belongs to Austria or to Italy” (Simmel, 2000d [1915]: 141; the quotation is from the English translation: Simmel, 2005: 71).

(Rammstedt, 1999: 429-431). As is well known, Simmel – certainly not to justify himself – appealed to the imperial governor of Alsace-Lorraine, claiming the value of his civil commitment in favour of the country, and the case was dismissed. After these episodes Simmel grew more cautious,<sup>40</sup> and when Croce wrote the review of *Der Krieg* he was almost certainly unaware that the German had probably imposed preventive self-censorship,<sup>41</sup> removing from the collection the essays he thought “politically risky”.<sup>42</sup>

In brief, Georg Simmel issued “Francophile” statements that were more sporadic and moderate than Croce’s in favour of

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<sup>40</sup> Denis Thouard offers a lucid reading of these choices: “À partir de 1915 et des réactions très critiques à ses réponses au journaliste suédois [...] et à son texte sur l’Europe et l’Amérique qui fut compris comme anti-allemand, Simmel fut soumis à une procédure disciplinaire. C’est manifestement la raison pour laquelle il ne reprit pas le texte incriminé dans son recueil de 1917. En revanche, il est instructif de constater qu’il y inverse l’ordre de publication des textes: on va de l’Allemagne à l’Europe au terme d’un diagnostic de crise de l’Allemagne” (Thouard, 2014: 564-565).

<sup>41</sup> It should be acknowledged that it would have been hard for Croce, in Italy, to know in real time about the whole vast production of his colleague, especially the works for local distribution.

<sup>42</sup> The expunged essays were: Simmel (2000f [1915]); Simmel (2000d [1915]). Moreover, among the writings on the war, the attempt to investigate the roots of cultural and artistic opposition between the various European countries takes on importance, also Simmel (2000e [1918]). Simmel’s farsighted reflection on the importance of relations between the United States and Europe – showing how, from the divisions of the old continent, from its imminent “suicide”, the United States would profit, the new rising star in world history – did not however complete the geopolitical itinerary that lives in *Der Krieg*. The book in fact begins with two essays centred on Germany and the German spirit, then it tackles the theme of the culture crisis, which distinguishes modernity and involves Germany but also transcends national frontiers, and lastly comes to the idea of Europe, broken up by the war. Simmel’s decision not to follow the chronological sequence of the essays – in editing *Der Krieg*, he shifted *Die Idee Europa* to the end – might have been functional to underscoring the importance of the European dimension in future political and cultural scenarios. Lingering almost exclusively over the first essay, as Croce does, fails to do justice to Simmel’s intellectual journey.

Germany, but the Italian philosopher did not have to face any legal or professional problems whatever. Quite a considerable difference.

In Benedetto Croce's review of *Der Krieg*, light should be thrown on another note that bears witness to the Italian's prejudiced and unpleasant attitude towards Simmel. Croce devoted almost half of the review text to translation and to comment on a passage from *Deutschlands innere Wandlung* (Croce, 1918: 180; Simmel, 1999 [1917]: 19-20). In those lines the German philosopher and sociologist comments on the proliferation of scientific and literary activities in Germany linked to the increase of material prosperity, whose consequence is senseless specialization, overproduction in publishing, parasitic knowledge, the waste of energies on irrelevant problems and a superfluous knowing that is no longer connected to what is really worthy of being known. Faced with these degenerative tendencies Simmel hopes that the war will carry out a forced selection, a beneficial destruction, favouring a change of people and mentality so that "in the future" science may be practised only by the few who truly possess the "interior means" to do so, producing works restricted to "that which is really worthy of being known and is essential". Firstly, with his usual ironic indulgence, Croce appreciates a "noble desire" in Georg Simmel, although in the German's words of hope the Italian philosopher sees "a half utopia". Immediately afterwards, in his usual caustic spirit, he shifts away brusquely. The senator in fact wonders what "tradesmen and imbeciles" would do in the world if the Berlin professor's coveted selection should come about. The solution that Croce proposes is the opposite of what Simmel hopes for: they should be left alone, selection will be carried out by time.

Finding comfort in the millenary becoming of the mythological tradition, which tells of an old man occupied in throwing plaques bearing the names of the dead into the river Lethe, Croce delivered his review of *Der Krieg* to the printers, giving life to the image of an old man who "unloads and loses" in the river of oblivion "the works born in spite of Minerva" (Croce, 1918: 180). Most obviously, the implacable reviewer grasped Simmel's arguments in order to twist

them: there's no need for the purifying action of war, one need only wait for time to take its course and the weakest works of the human spirit will disappear. One hundred years ago Benedetto Croce, to illustrate this striking metaphor of his, reminded *La Critica* readers of his beloved *Orlando Furioso*, but neglecting one detail: Ludovico Ariosto set the river Lethe not on this earth but on the moon.

## APPENDIX

Benedetto Croce, *Review of Georg Simmel, Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen: Reden und Aufsätze, München u. Leipzig, Duncker u. Humblot, 1917, published in: La Critica. Rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia, XVI, 1918, pp. 179-180* [translated by Marta Picchio]

Simmel is what they call an elegant spirit, but with little philosophical force, and it seems that with philosophy he plays as with a foil in the fencing hall. And this time the proposition itself rebelled against philosophising, and those wishing confirmation of what we have already had occasion to note, that “on war, while one is fighting, there is nothing to say because there is war to be made”, should read this little book by an author who has never lacked either resoluteness of moral loftiness, impartiality and austerity, or the effort of squeezing his brain to say profound and new things. But he was squeezing where there was no juice to squeeze; and therefore his observations on the “ideal motive” which Germany lacked in the war, where France had it in *revanche*, and which Germany suddenly found also in her possession in the idea of the “salvation

of Germany”; – or on the “Mammonism” which dominated for half a century and whose nullity was demonstrated by the war; – or on the German character which, unlike those of other European peoples, always seeks the “complement in its opposite”; – and on the “Europe idea” which has long been destroyed and will represent a net loss contributed by this land; and similar, – they are indeed subtle and, as we said, elegant, but might at the most be worthwhile only as suggestions for future thoughts, since for the moment they are ungraspable or contestable in their every modulation. Almost as if the author, as a philosopher, has been compelled to speak, and has manoeuvred to avoid coarseness, and he has succeeded, because this manoeuvring is his constant habit, in all his philosophical writings. He also speaks of the crisis of Philosophy (pp. 54-55), being of the opinion that each philosophical category has its antithesis beside it and only rarely do the two resolve into a *tertium* and as a whole they certainly aspire to a *tertium*, but this cannot be formulated yet. But Simmel lacks the historical conception of philosophising, so we read in him propositions of this kind: “The idea of truth loses nothing of its consistency and luminosity, even if we all err, and the idea of God is quite untouched by the world acknowledging God or by turning its back on him” (p. 70): which is a plain and simple heresy. For those whom it may please, I translate a page, in confirmation of what I have several times hinted at, which is to say that the evils of naturalized and pedant-ridden science are lamented in Germany, more than elsewhere, by persons of healthy taste. [180] So Simmel writes (pp. 16-17): “What Germany owes to its scientific work is unquestionable; but on the other hand one must not conceal the fact that our science is translated, as one used to say about manual work. Science, which originally grew up as a field of activity for relatively few men with great dedication, cannot extend its sphere of sensible and legitimate problems so rapidly as to bring about the torrent of those who now practise it: the great torrent to which its material prosperity has opened the floodgates. The consequence of this inundation of the scientific and literary field (and be it also guided in this riverbed by tendencies of the German spirit precious in themselves) is senseless specialization, literary

overproduction, the waste of many efforts on remote problems that lie outside the true values of knowledge. In relation to the esteem (right in its place, but absolutely not in every place) afforded to the ‘cult of the small’, the ‘modest cart-driver’s work’, the ‘useful factory stones’, we need to have the courage to declare: that there is also superficial knowledge, that there are cognitions in a certain way parasitic which have no relation to what is truly worthy of being known but enjoy an illegitimate esteem only through the effect of the formal equality of methods, and because in other cases the apparently irrelevant may carry much weight. If, in the future, exterior means no longer allow many to become doctors of philosophy or associate professors or writers in general, it is to be hoped that only those whose interior means permit it, or rather command it, will devote themselves to science; and first and foremost, that work will always be restricted to that which is truly worthy of being known and is essential.” It is a noble desire, although perhaps a half utopia, because what would tradesmen and imbeciles then do in the world? Would they perhaps go back to writing sonnets for weddings and funerals to earn a crust, as in the days when science belonged to a narrower circle? I would say: Leave them alone; to carry out the choice there’s a certain old man whom Ariosto talks about: “old of face and yet of so slender limb” who, filling his cloak with names and running fast as a deer, “to the river that Lethe is named”, unloads and loses “the rich burden” of works that are born in spite of Minerva.

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Il Simmel è quel che si dice un ingegno elegante, ma di poca forza filosofica, e sembra che con la filosofia giochi come con un fioretto in sala di scherma. Questa volta poi l'assunto stesso si ribellava al filosofare, e chi desiderasse una riprova di quanto già abbiamo avuto occasione di avvertire, che « sulla guerra, mentre si combatte, non c'è niente da dire, perchè c'è da farla », dovrebbe leggere questo libretto di un autore a cui non sono mancati nè il proposito della elevatezza e spassionatezza ed austerità morale, nè lo sforzo di spremersi il cervello per dir cose profonde e nuove. Ma egli spremeva dove non era succo da spremere; e perciò le sue osservazioni sul « motivo ideale », che alla Germania sarebbe mancato nella guerra, laddove la Francia lo aveva nella *revanche*, e di cui poi la Germania si è trovata a un tratto anche lei in possesso nella idea della « salvezza della Germania »; — o sul « mammonismo », che ha dominato per mezzo secolo e di cui la guerra ha dimostrato la nullità; — o sul carattere tedesco, che, diversamente da quelli degli altri popoli di Europa, cerca sempre il « complemento nel suo opposto »; — e sulla « idea Europa », che è stata ormai distrutta per lungo tempo e rappresenterà una perdita netta, apportata da questa guerra; e simili, — sono bensì sottili, e, come dicevamo, eleganti, ma possono tutt'al più valere solamente come suggestioni di futuri pensieri, tanto per ora sono inafferrabili o contestabili in ogni loro movenza. Par quasi che all'autore, in quanto filosofo, sia stato imposto di parlare, ed egli si sia destreggiato per evitare trivialità, e in ciò sia riuscito, perchè questo destreggiarsi è l'abito suo costante, in ogni suo scritto filosofico. Parla anche della crisi della filosofia (pp. 54-5), essendo egli d'avviso che ogni categoria filosofica ha accanto la sua antitesi, e che di rado le due si risolvono in un *tertium*, e nel complesso aspirano bensì a un *tertium*, ma questo è ancora informolabile. Ma al Simmel fa difetto la concezione storica del filosofare, onde si leggono presso di lui proposizioni di questa sorta: « L'idea della Verità non perde nulla della sua consistenza e della sua luminosità anche se noi tutti erriamo, e l'idea di Dio non è toccata in nulla, sia che il mondo riconosca Dio, sia che gli volti le spalle » (p. 70): che è una bella e buona eresia. Per chi può averne piacere, traduco una pagina, a conferma di quel che ho più volte accennato, cioè che i mali della scienza naturalizzata e impedita sono lamentati in Germania più che altrove, dalle persone di sano gusto.

Scrive dunque il Simmel (pp. 16-17): « Quel che la Germania deve al suo lavoro scientifico, è fuori questione; ma, d'altra parte, non bisogna nascondere che la nostra scienza è, come una volta si diceva del lavoro manovale, tradotta. La scienza, sorta in origine come il campo di attività di uomini relativamente pochi di numero e ricchi di devozione, non può così rapidamente allargare la cerchia dei suoi problemi sensati e legittimi, da far luogo al torrente di quelli che di essa si occupano: al gran torrente al quale la nostra prosperità materiale ha levate le chiuse. La conseguenza di questa inondazione del campo scientifico e letterario (e sia anche guidata, in questo letto, da tendenze dello spirito tedesco pregevoli per sè prese) è lo specialismo privo di senso, la sovrapproduzione letteraria, lo spreco di molte forze intorno a remoti problemi, che sono tagliati fuori dei veri valori della conoscenza. Di fronte alla stima (giusta a posto suo, ma non assolutamente in ogni posto), che si fa del « culto del piccolo », del « modesto lavoro da carrettiere », delle « utili pietre da fabbrica », bisognerebbe avere il coraggio di affermare: che c'è anche un sapere superfluo, che vi sono cognizioni in certo modo parassitarie, le quali non hanno alcun rapporto con ciò che è realmente degno di esser saputo, ma godono di una illegittima stima solo per effetto della formale eguaglianza dei metodi, e perchè in altri casi l'apparentemente irrilevante può essere di molto peso. Se in avvenire i mezzi esterni non permetteranno più a molti di diventare dottori in filosofia o privati docenti, o in genere scrittori, è da sperare che si dedicheranno alla scienza solo quelli ai quali i loro mezzi interiori lo permetteranno. o piuttosto, lo comanderanno; e, anzitutto, che i lavori si circoscriveranno sempre a ciò che è realmente degno di esser saputo ed è essenziale ». È un nobile desiderio, sebbene sia forse una mezza utopia, perchè cosa farebbero allora al mondo i mestieranti e gl'imbecilli? Tornerebbero forse a scrivere sonetti per nozze e funerali a fin di guadagnarsi il pane, come nei tempi in cui la scienza apparteneva a più ristretta cerchia? Io direi: Lasciateli fare; c'è, ad eseguire la scelta, quel tale vecchio, di cui parla l'Ariosto: « vecchio di faccia e sì di membra snello », che, riempiendosi il mantello di nomi e correndo veloce come cervo, « in quel fiume che Lete si noma », scarica e perde « la ricca soma », delle opere che nascono a dispetto di Minerva.

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