



**Mattieu Amat, *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2018, 492 pp.**

**Daide Ruggieri**

Volume 23, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075217ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075217ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ruggieri, D. (2019). Review of [Mattieu Amat, *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2018, 492 pp.] *Simmel Studies*, 23(2), 129–138. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075217ar>

DAVIDE RUGGIERI

**Mattieu Amat, *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2018, 492 pp.**

The year 2018 was very widely celebrated as the centenary of the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel: a series of conferences flourished and new books amass on the desks of scholars from different scientific disciplines. In this regard, from the very variegated perspectives, Simmel certainly represents nowadays a pillar, and if there is a steady truth about his prophecy (i.e. how he wondered his ideas and teachings as an “heritage in cash” in the famous pages of his posthumous diary), well it is sure that you can find mentioned his name in an undefined number of disciplines. However, it remains a recurrent and urgent issue, since many scholars are still questioning on his “identity”, that is whether Simmel has to be considered as sociologist or a philosopher.

This question is resolved by Simmel himself in the early pages of *Philosophische Kultur*. He tells about the story of a farmer who relies on his deathbed to his three children that he had buried a treasure in his field: they begin to dig and to plow the field looking for the treasure that they eventually would have never found. This searching work, the fact of plowing the field, had yielded them indeed a treasure three times bigger than the promised one. Thus, Simmel is likewise convinced that the task of "digging" (no matter if it is done into the field of the philosophy of culture or sociology) satisfies “the necessity and intimate determination of our spirit”.

The ambitious task of Matthieu Amat in his *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture* book belongs this path, and it consists of furnishing a very essential guide to the philosophy of culture in Simmel’s work. Amat hits the target twice: on the one hand, he offers the reader an “horizontal” key to get

access to the “culture” question in Simmel’s work as an issue he explores during all of his life (and Amat does it through a punctual historical reconstruction of this topic as well as exhaustively drawing the *milieu* of the debate on it - and the generative process of Simmel’s ideas); on the other hand, he hints a deep “vertical” dive into the imaginary of such an eclectic author, so he enjoys at ease among the very several essays and papers on culture that Simmel released in his life.

The volume is well balanced and strongly structured. Amat remarks in the early pages of *Introduction* his “relationist” approach towards the interpretation of Simmel’s philosophy of culture (p. 28). He alleges that culture in Simmel’s work has both processual and relational features (and meanings), and he underpins that we are very in debt to the interpreters of Simmel’s questions in regard of three historical-theoretical categories: Neokantism, philosophy of culture, and *Lebensphilosophie*. This is basically the frame within emerges author’s main analysis. Amat’s book consists of three parts, where he finely traces and discusses with a very plenty of bibliographical details the philosophical idea of culture within the whole work of Georg Simmel.

The first part (“The objectivity and the relativity of values”) is a large reconstruction of the debate in the late XIX century on the “philosophy of values” in which Simmel took part among other colleagues and friends (Rickert and Windelband to mention a few). Simmel recognizes in the *Wechselwirkung* a new key to address epistemological as well moral and sociological issues: the “desubstantialization process” of the (epistemic, social, and moral) realm stands beside the quick removal of any (critical) positivistic heritage. Relativism paradigm colonises any aspect of this phase in Simmel’s work: it becomes a principle of knowledge as well as a cosmological-metaphysical principle (as demonstrated by the author in the last part of this volume). The “relativistic image of the

world” [*relativistisches Weltbild*] emerges in *fin de siècle* sociological-epistemological papers, in moral discourses and volumes, in philosophical essays, in psycho-social analysis, to finally find a definitive systematization in the masterpiece *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900). This historical-philosophical reconstruction is given through Simmel’s efforts to engage moral challenges (also critically, when he tackles for instance the question toward “the ought as a form”, p. 65 and ff.), strictly disentangling from Psychologism, Neokantianism, and Realism issues – he basically was thinking to a “circularity” of ethical concepts in regard to their foundations and validation. The articulation of this engagement within the debate on moral and ethical questions in the late XIXth century will offer to Simmel a chance to deepen the inquiry toward the values – in this regard, as Amat underpins, it is sure remarkable Simmel’s approach to Friedrich Nietzsche. The struggle for values is also the main argument in the *Auseinandersetzung* between Simmel and Rickert in the same years: both of them articulated their philosophies around the validation of values under a dynamic, relativistic, and interactive validation (the former) or through an absolute axiological anchorage (the latter). The discovery of the very efficacious explaining principle of *Wechselwirkung* – an epistemological, metaphysical, and psychological principle - in Simmel’s early works hints the legitimation of a nominalist and pragmatist epistemology (p. 87), which represents, at the same time, a socio-cultural and hermeneutic category for the understanding [*Verstehen*] of the whole modernity process (towards the idea of a “relative objectivity”). In this period Simmel was elaborating the form as transcendental and cultural function within interactive processes: the desubstantialisation and functionalisation of the realm testify the becoming-forms of functions under the principle of *Wechselwirkung* (p. 110). Forms are “functional formations” and they stand transcendental in order to process the more and more differentiated modern socio-cultural

stage. In *Philosophy of money* Simmel stresses his theory of values arguing for a philosophical assessment of money as a very deep and wide metaphor (symbol) for understanding modern life.

The second part (“The objective spirit and its individual configurations”) tackles the question around the “objective spirit” in Simmel’s writings, namely referring to Dilthey, who introduced this concept, and the *fin de siècle* scientific-philosophical debate as well as the academic *milieu* which Simmel took a specific position into. The objective spirit deals with a type of existence of cultural contents: Amat remarks that this is not correct to exclusively refer to Hegelian tradition (p. 165 and ff.) since Simmel developed in peculiar and original manner the heritage coming from Moritz Lazarus and Hermann Steinthal. Their names are very familiar for the multidimensional discipline named *Völkerpsychologie*: it aimed at investigating intersubjective psychical processes, namely the spiritual substance of folks and crowds. It has to do with the common spirit (*Gemeingeist*) or objective spirit (*objective Geist*) when individuals usually refer to common products of “collectivity” they are persuaded to belong to. The predicates of this “common” deal with language, costumes, arts, law, religion, nation etc. Simmel historicizes the objective spirit, taking a new path in regard to *Völkerpsychologie*: this permits Simmel to gather a theory of values with the science of culture, making possible in other words a “philosophy of culture” (p. 185).

Simmel views that the development of objective spirit into modernity has neither any teleology nor a totalizing process: the objective meaning does not fit anymore to a cultural meaning, and this represents the axiological ambivalence of objective culture (and a path to the tragedy of culture issue) (p. 211). In this regard Amat rightly insists in a very Adornian interpretation of Simmel’s theory on culture, particularly when he points out the construction of an internal validation and legalization of cultural objects: the “primacy

of the object” is a typical issue in Adorno’s *Negative Dialektik* as well as the chapter on “Culture Industry” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. This aspect (and also Simmel’s teaching on “historical individuality”) surely remarks how strong was Simmel’s theoretical impact on the first generation of the Frankfurt School thinkers. And also the idea of the historical formation [*die historische Formung*] as “form of forms” (a second order form) (p. 237 and ff.), emerging among his writings on history and philosophy of history, fits with the historical understanding of human products under the specific perspective lying on “a storey beneath the historical materialism” (as he alleged in *Philosophie des Geldes*): this reflections surely influenced - directly and not - the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School. The “historical formation” is a synthesis between life and objective spirit, it is a “living spirit”: the sharpening and deepening of such intuitions will directly lead Simmel to *Lebensphilosophie* themes in his late writings. The fixation of the life as a stream under a form, under a frame, is the path leading to the dialectics of “more-life” [*Mebr-Leben*] and “more-than-life” [*Mebr-als-Leben*]: behind the scene of these reflections you could catch sight of both portraits of Bergson and Schopenhauer (p. 246).

Finally, the third part (“From the philosophy of culture to the philosophical culture: the relationism in its «cosmic concept» and practical vocation”) is clearly presented by Amat recollecting books and essays in which Simmel seems to tackle the question of culture under a metaphysical meaning. In other words, the idea of a “culture cosmology” stands for the impossibility of a systematic philosophical foundations because of the existence of a plurality of *worlds*. This Simmelian conviction is given within the frame of a very philosophy of culture: cosmology means in fact a general theory on world and it has a specific task, assuming that we experience a series of “worlds” (artistic, ethical, juridical, technical, economical). This idea will be coherently and finally alleged by Simmel in his late

masterpiece *Lebensanschauung* (1918) (p. 308). The new articulation of modernity crosses a new kind of articulation for a cultural critique of plural worlds we are destined to live in, and these cultural worlds – remarks Amat – are always historical and contingent (p. 316). Culture as an “original phenomenon”, intertwined with social processes, is a very deep intuition in Simmel’s thought, and maybe the most meaningful heritage of this idea will surely flourish in Karl Mannheim’s foundations of “sociology of culture” and *Wissenssoziologie* as a new kind of view on cultural products and objectivations.

Also in this regard, a very topical challenge in Simmel’s work, as rightly Amat underpins, is played by a wide reassessment of subject/object dialectics, namely a sociological and philosophical deconstruction of the modern features of “individuality”. Thanks to a very innovative and central interpretation of Goethe, Simmel engages a deep analysis on generative mechanisms and effects of the “objectivating subjects” and “desubjectivating individualities” (that is the typical character of modernity) (p. 351). This deconstruction is also played within a new sociological assessment of what is commonly meant for “personality”: it is processed as “function” for individualities (p. 331-332).

Goethe’s interpretation permits Simmel to assume a new conceptualization for the notion of “interiority”: it does not represent a peculiar inner individual space, but rather a “spiritual environment” in which external things eventually can find order or develop according “their own” norms (p. 354). It recurs the conviction that “*la mise en form*” [*Formierung*] is always an activity given by a subjective impulse: *Kant and Goethe*, thus, represent two ideal-types of an irreducible double metaphysical configuration, since it is not possible to admit to be only on the side of the subject (Kant) or of the object (Goethe): it is a constant renegotiation between both of them.

Goethe is a decisive referent in Simmel's work also in regard to the clarification of the definitive (pragmatist-vitalist) position on truth: it will be assumed as adequacy of its content in function of its value for life itself. According to a relationist frame, Simmel releases a "representational" and functional idea of truth in which it has only consistency in regard to its finality to the life.

This idea is recurrent in the fourth chapter *Das individuelle Gesetz* of *Lebensanschauung*: the "law of the individual" consists of a "living ought" which is beyond the opposition between life and moral principles (p. 370). The main question concerns how to determine the contents of this ought; the law of individual roots its normativity on the realm, on the being. It is an "individualised" categorical imperative, that is a singular configuration avoiding any form of abstract universalism or ethical formalism – as Simmel already alleged in his *Kant* (1904). In this regard, Amat opportunely remarks that the "law of individual" is very close to Nietzsche's ethical conclusions due to his Eternal Return metaphysical premises (p. 374).

The money culture (that is modernity interpreted under the philosophical category of money as pure exchange symbol and generator) permits the overwhelming of the strong opposition between subject and object towards the "individual": due to the ambivalence of the modernity (money), the individuals conquer their negative liberty, that is the chance to self-determination as subjects beyond personal or communitarian linkages (p. 390). This idea is very close indeed, in my opinion, also to some central statements of Habermas' theory of communicative action: the rehabilitation of rationality as form of intersubjective practices deals with some aspects like self-fulfilment, self-determination and self-consciousness, which are primarily given only if we get ourselves more and more in reciprocal action [*Wechselwirkung*] with others. Reciprocity and interdependence do not necessarily lead to a grey



level of mediocrity or are the sign of the increased objectification of something that should be not (“the social life”) like a colonization of the economical- technical formal language unto *Lebenswelten*.

The final part of the volume is very challenging in this regard, assuming culture as reciprocal development of the *worlds*: the conflictual images of the world are very fertile in order to let flourish new configurations. To stay within Habermasian suggestions, I guess that it is the case to mention Seyla Benhabib who hints to consider the “claims of culture” as an anthropological exercise of maintain possible an “active universalism” despite of (due to) the pluralistic and conflictual character of the cultural diversity. After all, we learn from Simmel’s philosophy that it is even possible a dialectics without synthesis.

In conclusion, from an all-embracing perspective, I guess that Amat very exhaustively engages the question of relativism in Simmel’s work, and this is probably the very core of his sociological and philosophical theory. We may peacefully admit that Simmel was the prophet of the “relation” – the molecule of social realm, the pillar of his theory of modernity and his philosophy of culture– which is considered like the “effect-getting-a-form” of a mutual interaction among individuals (this is basically the idea of *Wechselwirkung*, which became a metaphysical principle *tout court*). This intuition is nowadays shared among many sociologists who argue for a “relational sociology” or “a relational theory of society”: some defend a processual or transactional configuration of relational aspects into social realm, whereas others allege a structural view of relational issues. Some are defined “relationists”, others “relational”, and this demarcation principle – as Pierpaolo Donati does – is adopted to distinguish between reductionist approaches (processual/transactional/interactional) and authentic relational approaches which maintain the promise to consider the relation as

the proper analytical level as well as the very substance of social facts.

Simmel was not so very clear and coherent on this topic. Even if he sustained a relativistic position from the publication of *Philosophy of Money* (1900), and basically shared in his cultural and historical-philosophical essays, this conviction is not so evident among his sociological papers and volumes. In *Soziologie*, for instance, he is strongly persuaded that relation is the achievement of a practice producing identities instead of a simple objectivation or crystallization of practices.

The scientific program of Georg Simmel's theoretical inquiry is given in a kind of manifesto he shared in a letter with Bouglé during the years of the publication of *Philosophie des Geldes*, claiming that he was focussing on a "philosophy of social and historical life". Amat underpins Simmel's authentic philosophical vocation, particularly emerging in a defence of his philosophical program from various forms of "sociologisms" or "psychologisms". Thus, he argues that Simmel's unsystematic theory perfectly fits with relativism (experienced in the form of essayism) as an organizing principle towards cosmogonic, epistemological, and metaphysical explaining issue. In his *Selbstdarstellung* Simmel indeed adopted "Wechselwirkung" as unifying principle, and this surely makes things more complicated. Extremely hard is the task, again and again, of clarifying if Simmel belongs to the field of philosophers or sociologists: we would need several pages to list and discuss how many authors have been dealing with this topic. But it really stands as a questionable issue.

Reading the pages of these volume, I was wondering on a very trivial question indeed: what difference thus should really lie between a sociology of culture and a philosophy of culture in Simmel's whole work? Simmel plays a strange effect on the scientific communities: on the one hand, sociologists commonly have been

persuaded from the very beginning to consider Simmel a philosopher, so they sometimes “stigmatise” his weakness towards a systematic theory or a clear methodology, sometimes invoking a real *dammatio memoriae* (Talcott Parsons, to name maybe the most representative example); on the other hand, philosophers have been looking at Simmel with deep suspect because of his engagement with sociological affairs and due to his strong relativism (in this regard, it is good enough to recall some opinions from Windelband and Rickert to the present).

What is clear is that Simmel definitively dismisses any substantialist assertion from a very longitudinal perspective: there is no reason to questioning furthermore on categorical belonging. Relation is the keyword, and *tertium datur* sounds like a good resonance to a possible answer (to any trivial question): in this regard, this book is a good invitation in order to maintain this belief and to keep the promise, and after all maybe the only way to be really faithful to Simmel’s teachings.