



Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe (Eds.), *Thinker in a Modern World - An Anthology of Georg Simmel*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2021

Wu Yu Shan

Volume 26, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091337ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091337ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Shan, W. Y. (2022). Review of [Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe (Eds.), *Thinker in a Modern World - An Anthology of Georg Simmel*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2021]. *Simmel Studies*, 26(1), 141–147. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091337ar>

new field of action and struggle in which what is at stake is that of conscious choice and control of different modes of human experience, not deterministically assigned to the blind forces of technology and the market.

Crary, J. (1991). *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Simmel, G. (1991). The Berlin Trade Exhibition, *Theory, Culture & Society*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 8(3), pp. 119–123. doi: 10.1177/026327691008003008.

Simmel, G. (2021). The metropolis and the life of spirit by Georg Simmel: A new translation, *Journal of Classical Sociology*. SAGE Publications, 21(2), pp. 188–202. doi: 10.1177/1468795X20980638.

WU YU SHAN

Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe (Eds.), *Thinker in a Modern World - An Anthology of Georg Simmel*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2021

In this book, Chief Editors Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe aim to aggregate Georg Simmel's theories into 14 research papers across four major topics. This book also contains the works of several Asian and European researchers who dedicated their lives to studying Simmel's theories. Together, the two parts of this book provide a rare anthology of Simmel's academic works in Chinese.

As the title of this book suggests, Simmel was undoubtedly one of the greatest thinkers of the modern world. His arguments were based on his unique logical and philosophical perspectives of sociology. Simmel stepped out of the confines of academism and provided his micro-level analysis of society in a series of prose

writings. Even though his writings were created in Europe, the universality and commonality of the content profoundly impact Chinese-speaking societies to this day. Interestingly, the influence of Simmel's works does not originate from his sublime and enigmatic theories. Rather, it lies in his subjective and detailed observations of everyday life, or "form" in the words of Simmel himself. Simmel's charm centers on the dynamics of introspection and epiphany.

This book covers four topics: form, experience, differentiation, and reality. In the "Form" chapter, Simmel's ideological system is converted into a spectral image covering philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, and life philosophy. Simmel defined modernity as a fluid, indeterminate, and dynamic process. How, then, is it possible to master modernity? In an attempt to answer this question, we considered the following: if we acknowledge the modernity of society, how do we capture the features of social development and construction at a macroscopic level while elucidating the plurality of individuals at the microscopic level? Wang Yun provided valid explanations to these questions in his article, *The Crisis of Simmel's Sociological Theory and the Methodological Basis of Formal Sociology*. Specifically, the theoretical crisis caused by unclear research subjects is a direct consequence of the long-term lack of acknowledgment of the importance of psychological factors to subject construction and the understanding of practical content and phenomena. Formal sociology proposed by Simmel emphasized the construction of knowledge through the accumulation and advancement of objects and their psychological mechanisms and the dense networks formed by human interactions. Therefore, even when modernity is described as the fluidity of things,¹ subjects of society (sociology) should be based on the understanding of the repeated and endogenous factors of social life, and different disciplines should be connected through unique methodologies. Therefore, Simmel's sociological perspective was based on highlighting the construction of social forms and the differences between them. A key factor that

¹ Simmel on Culture, (ed by D. Frisby). London: Sage, 1997, p.254.

constitutes social forms is the plurality of individuals' drivers (i.e., psychological impulses and interests) that interact with and motivate one another. These factors are refined through the social processes of integration and opposition into a medium of knowledge: form. Becoming the subject of formal sociology is a process of achieving scientific objectivity. Simmel used people as the subjects. His ideologies became the model for resolving the theoretical crises of social problems.

Worldly experiences are vital for the development of life. Simmel understood that interpersonal interaction and connection are unavoidable in society and that they define the meaning of life and impact personality, gender, space-time, and social relationships. Money is another key factor influencing the experiences of modernity. On the one hand, the monetary economy reflects the value of labor. On the other hand, it deteriorates the division of labor by gender. The male-dominant division of labor and other rational/intellectual concepts impact social differentiation in the labor market and public space, particularly the image of "the modern man"² shaped by masculinity. Individuality, rationality, objectivity, social differentiation, division of labor, modern professionalism and subject-object separation are the causes of problems in Simmel's diagnosis of modernity. Regarding gender, Simmel examined the dynamic cultural processes driven by the relative and absolute forms of the sexes to explain the gender discrepancies of many sociologists. Yong-Nu Chen's article, "Simmel's Gender Theory," inherited the above point of view and compared Simmel's gender theory with feminist theories based on the struggle for gender equality. Simmel emphasized the metaphysical existence of ideological difference and explored the pursuit of gender equality and women's rights in a male-dominant world. The latter theories focused on analyzing and demonstrating power dynamics. Chen believed that Simmel's gender theory was

² Klaus Lichtblau, *Eros and culture: gender theory in Simmel, Tönnies and Weber*. *Telos Pr*, 1989, p.92.

based on essentialism, stating that it had clear, almost opposing, distinctions between genders. Therefore, she asserted that Simmel elevated gender to a metaphysical and epistemological level rather than fixating on gender identity from a cultural sense. Different from Simmel, Marianne Weber examined social equality and awareness through the lens of gender inequality and focused on specific actions for addressing political issues concerning gender equality. Despite the differences, the arguments of both researchers were essentially based on comparing the ideologies of bourgeois women. In an attempt to overthrow the devaluation of women in a traditional culture completely, Simmel not only promoted feminism but also publicized that his

feminist axiology was based on elitism, arguing that women are superior to men in quality. It is worth mentioning that a number of articles examining Simmel's gender theory were consolidated into a special edition of *Simmel Studies* titled *Simmel and Love* published in 2021.³

Simmel's encyclopedic-style writing seldom deviated from his fundamental thesis. Nonetheless, Simmel's diverging viewpoints undoubtedly enrich the diversity of philosophy and sociology. For example, Erwan Dianteill discussed the differences in the concepts of solidarity and conflict in the theories proposed by Durkheim and Simmel, asserting that the paradox between the two researchers, to some extent, led to the convergence of Mauss' and Simmel's theories. Wei-Zhou Zhang compared the differences between the ethical worldviews of Tönnies and Simmel, the founders of the original structure that established the ethical mission of German sociology. Zhang's article focused on the development of German sociology by examining how German sociologists studied modern life based on a collection of diverse and complex values during the birth of sociology. The two researchers developed distinct theories through different and opposing sociological approaches. Zhang merged these theories to develop the social ethics (soziale Ethik)

³ S. Paulina & S. Swen. Simmel and Love. *Simmel Studies* 25(2), 2021.

and cultural ethics (kulturelle Ethik) framework and apply the two schools of German sociology to validate the idealism of Hegelian and Goethe. Tönnies pursued Hobbes' law of nature while upholding Bachofen's theory of ancient matriarchy. He based his social ethics on family emotions. The core argument was that individuals are bound to labor cooperatives, such as families, and pursue the establishment of spiritual communities. Tönnies' assessment of Nietzsche's ethical legacy became the core disagreement between the two researchers. Simmel offered his unique point of view in response to Tönnies' misunderstanding. Moreover, the real fission between Simmel and Tönnies lay in the former's concern for the inherent dilemma of social ethics, while the core of the latter's theory centered on social norms. Specifically, Simmel's moral philosophy centered on individual life and existence itself. As a form of transcendence, life reveals the origin of ethical conduct. Morality derives from life and is closely linked to fate/destiny. The moral sense is a personal experience associated with human conditions. Therefore, morality is cultural ethics in the broadest sense. Simmel transformed the contradictions of traditional moral philosophy into a dual existence of reality and Sollen of life, advocating that life, in the context of moral philosophy, is a subjective process. Sollen is a continuous process that links moments into an endless stream of emotion. Individuals are responsible for re-evaluating morality when faced with objectivity. Simmel discussed the differences in *Über soziale Differenzierung. Sociologische und psychologische Untersuchungen* and Tönnies' ideologies conveyed in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* by highlighting the relationship between psychology and the outside world, the implications of politics in modern civilization, and universal social transformation. In Zhang's analysis, Simmel's and Tönnies' personal experiences reflected the general sentiment at the time, and their writings were also closely influenced by the political background at the time.

As Simmel's philosophy evolved into the construction of individuals' reality, the concept of "Stranger" in modernity became

increasingly useful for explaining the challenges of the cross-border mobility of refugees and Engaged Buddhism. Ji Zhe's article focused on Buddhist organizations based in France. Village des pruniers field studies reinterpreted how traditional religions retained their importance through creative reforms under fluid modernity conceived by Bauman. Specifically, communal societies that accepted the coexistence of different organizational logic emerged concurrently with the rise of individualism and privatization. The text begins with Durkheim's proposal that the greatest challenge to religion is the rise of individualism. Thomas Luckmann elaborated on the study of individualism and religion and proposed that the marginalization and privatization of church-oriented religion were the primary drivers of religious reform in modern Western society. Ji explained how ecclesiastical societies with singular values and common goals responded to the challenges of mobility (spatial-temporal reorganization and differentiation of individual roles) depending heavily on adjusting the pace of activities, coordinating religious practices, and developing organizational practices based on different structural principles. Village des pruniers emphasized the establishment of personalized and adaptable stranger relationships by participating in and acknowledging mobility reform. Simmel defined "Stranger" as wanderers that come today and stay until tomorrow or an outsider that introduces new elements to a group. Strangers are mobile. They can be included as well as excluded from the group, and the associations between group members and strangers are more general. Simmel asserted that all people are connected to strangers through a universal awareness of humanity. These connections are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Strangers, based on the definition of Simmel, are not individuals. Rather, they are a special group of people that form unique relationships with individuals in their everyday lives. Ji maintained that Simmel's definition of "Stranger" is a suitable definition of modern people and appropriately explains the close relationship between activities and strangers proposed by Village des pruniers.

Simmel observed society through a microscopic lens. His unique viewpoints have become a source of inspiration for later scholars and have profoundly influenced academia. His blasé urbanite has coincided with the unstoppable advancement of modern society. Simmel believed that nerves atrophy with the continuous bombardment of stimuli, and life goals are abundant but short-lived. He argued that cultural contradictions are formed by the turmoil, materialism, pursuit of pleasures, and loss of personal value derived from commonality and unreasonable goals. How can we deny that Simmel's microscopic critique is fitting for diagnosing the macroscopic crises and sufferings brought about by international situations and war?