

with, namely, that the life of the biographer is in this instance more remarkable than that of its subject.

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Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology: the birth of modernity, 1880–1920

Ralph M. Leck; Humanity Books, 2000, pp. 356, ISBN: 1-57392-867-4

When queried about the founders of modern sociology, most people will inevitably cite the names of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Georg Simmel (1858–1918) would probably not rank amongst the founding members of the discipline. And though it is likely that almost everyone familiar with the development of sociological thought would accord Simmel a place of honour in the history of the discipline, it is equally true that few would be sure exactly where to situate him. Simmel's thought emerges in a transitional period in history and in the development of social and political ideas. It is a period marked by the crisis of philosophical idealism, the positivist turn of historical materialism, the rise of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences/humanities), *Lebensphilosophie*, and Husserl's phenomenology. The end of Simmel's life was marked by World War I and the turbulent years to follow, in which the social structures of pre-1914 Europe were shaken to their foundations. Simmel's thought is difficult to classify because his work touches on all of these fields of inquiry and events. *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) directly reflects his attempt to provide Marx's version of historical materialism with a solid philosophical underpinning. His *Sociology* of 1908 is informed by a series of Kantian meditations on the conditions of possibility of social scientific inquiry, encapsulated in the famous chapter 'How is Society Possible?' His later writings on the *Tragedy of Culture* (1912) and the *Vision of Life* (1917) register his increasing concern with Nietzsche, the struggle for new values, and the relationship between "life", on the one hand, and the attempt to give living thought objective form in theoretical concepts and social and political institutions, on the other.

Despite the complexity of Simmel's handling of these subjects, it is still somewhat surprising how little secondary literature has been concerned with explicating his oeuvre. In comparison with the volumes of material on Marx, Durkheim and Weber, Simmel's work has suffered an almost total exegetical neglect, especially in the English-speaking world. Thus Ralph M. Leck's study on the life and work of the Berlin-born philosopher of sociology is a welcome addition to David Frisby's work on Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin (*Fragments of Modernity*, 1986). Leck admirably provides both an analysis of Simmel's main ideas and a vivid

account of their historical background, covering a range of subjects including Simmel's relation to the theories of Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, Simmel's feminism, the urban studies dimension of his sociology, Simmel's impact on Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch, as well as Simmel's contemporary relevance in the debates on modernity and post-modernity. Without doing so explicitly, Leck makes a good case for including Simmel with Marx, Durkheim and Weber as a theorist who anticipates features of social reality long before their actual appearance in social life. That is, Leck shows how Simmel discerned imminent social transformations that today seem almost obviously true 100 years ago, when the suggestion of such developments would have been almost certainly dismissed as absurd by Simmel's contemporaries. In this particular respect it might be argued that he is even more our contemporary than the undisputed founders of sociology, as will be seen below.

In his formulation of sociological questions such as 'How is society possible?', Simmel is clearly indebted to Kant. Yet like Nietzsche and in opposition to neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen and Heinrich Rickert, he resists the idea of grounding ethics in an a priori concept of reason, since formal reason, Simmel argues, can forbid but it cannot prescribe or create. For Simmel ethics arise as new values in confrontation with existing ideologies and institutions. In terms highly suggestive of Foucault's care of the self, Simmel locates the source of this confrontation in the ethically–aesthetically motivated individual determined to accomplish an autonomous conception of self-realisation. Instead of a formal critique based on principles of practical reason, Simmel calls for a sociological critique of existing social and individual values. He does not reject Kant as such, but rather reads him with an acute sensitivity to the material consequences of values in terms of social institutions like money, markets, fashion, manners and competition. Even more than Dilthey, who challenges the idealist notion of the subject with the concrete realities of historical contingency and change, Simmel rejects the Kantian idea of the unity of consciousness of a transcendental subject. Kant contends that self-consciousness is always synthetic; objects are given to us in time and space (the two forms of sensible intuition), and thought by us by way of the twelve categories of the understanding (unity, plurality, causality, etc.) Kant asks, how is experience possible, and concludes that the objects of perception become objects of possible experience through the synthetic faculty of a transcendental subject that brings together the two forms of sensible intuition with the categories of understanding in the phenomenon. In relative ahistorical and atomistic terms, Kant thus posits the possibility of objective phenomena as being mediated through human subjectivity. In his theory of objective spirit, Hegel counters that human subjectivity is itself not static but is mediated through objectivity; new objects of perception help bring about new subjects. Simmel shares this Hegelian insight that objectivity mediates subjectivity and vice versa in more dialectical terms than Kant suggests. But Simmel is also Marxist and materialist enough to see that once established, social relations embedded in the economy and other institutions acquire a material objective reality in the form of social structure that confronts the individual in an at times highly antagonistic manner. This antagonism produces a quest for new values on the part of struggling individuals who find that they are oppressed by forms of life (institutions)

which they are forced to accept or change. Against Hegel and Marx, Simmel is doubtful about the possibility of a *collective* re-appropriation—idealist, materialist or otherwise—of the institutions of social and political life. This is not only because Simmel is also Weberian enough to insist on the irreducibility of the individual social actor to aggregations like social group or social class. It is really because of what Simmel calls a “Wechselwirkung,” which one might translate as a mutual effect or interactive exchange, a concept which needs brief explanation.

In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel suggests that there is objective form without transcendental idealist or collective materialist subjectivity (examples of collective materialist subjectivity might include Feuerbach’s humanism which is subsequently radicalised first by Marx and then particularly by Lukács’s theory of class). To this extent Simmel follows and then proceeds beyond Kant, for whom the forms of our knowledge, captured in concepts, are not the same thing as the objects themselves. Kant maintains that even without knowledge of the things in themselves we have objective knowledge of the phenomena of perception through concepts. Form mediates between subjectivity and objectivity and is, as such, more real for us in epistemological terms than either of those two poles taken by themselves. But whereas Kant relies on a transcendental subject which is subsequently historicised by Dilthey, humanised by Feuerbach and materialised by thinkers in the Marxist tradition, Simmel retains conceptual form while leaving subjectivity open as a plural, contingent, and not necessarily normative possibility. He makes a convincing case for the reality of objective form whilst shedding the notion of human essence conceived in either transcendental, humanist, class or communicative terms. Aspects of this analysis can be found, albeit in completely different theoretical terminology, in the post-metaphysical philosophy of thinkers like Heidegger, systems theory, and post-structuralism. There has even been talk of a post-modern Simmel, as Leck observes (p. 19).

In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel argues that to think philosophically and sociologically rather than naturalistically or mechanically means, among other things, to bear in mind that causality is never mono-directional, and that the social whole, at any given moment, is a series of ongoing, plural processes rather than a totality in the Hegelian–Marxist sense (Leck, pp. 90–91). He attempts to illustrate this dynamism with the rise of money and its role in separating ownership from actual physical presence or occupation of land. Simmel notes that money, which originally functions as a means of exchange and expresses a social relationship, develops into more than a mere means. This is due to the various interactive exchanges that money sets in motion. Money facilitates a separation between people and land, such that land ownership is no longer directly associated with the person whose status is immediately determined by their rank in a naturalised order. For example the feudal system is based on a hierarchy in which land ownership, personal status and rank-specific privilege are bound together in an order legitimised in terms of customs, laws and traditions deemed to have an ultimately natural or divine origin. The seeming naturalness in the established order is accompanied by very stable forms of hierarchy rooted in honour and obligation, and a relatively slow pace of life with relatively little geographical mobility—or even none for those whose

status binds them to the land, as in the case of serfs. An economy based on the exchange of money and the investment of capital introduces an element of dynamism and instability which threaten the feudal system. But, Simmel hastens to add, this dynamism and instability are not simply by-products of economic changes, just as economic changes are not simply reducible to increased social and geographical mobility.

It is in this context Simmel develops his theory of the plural-directional interactive exchange. To argue that the introduction of money in the place of barter directly results in social mobility and political demands for democratic-parliamentary instead of feudal-aristocratic government would be to espouse a positivist historical materialism with which he would have had little sympathy. Simmel's attempt to enrich Marx's version of historical materialism in non-reductionist terms is an attempt to analyse the processes and institutions regulating acts of trade as specific instances of an exchange of value. The result of exchange is neither simply a use-value or an exchange-value, but rather a social value. This social value is a third element created by the two trading partners that neither could foresee, and, as far as a possible Marx-Simmel synthesis is concerned, a third element which acquires an independent life of its own as social form. The parallel between the objectivity of social form in Simmel and Marx's concepts of alienation and reification stops precisely at the point where Simmel reckons that any re-appropriation of alienated labour power is not possible—we cannot directly re-appropriate form as if it were human essence. Form exists as a value objectified in economic and non-economic institutions such as family, market and state. Thus form for Simmel is akin to a sociological *a priori* that cannot be re-appropriated or seized as such, because it is expressed in institutions as a relation, not as an object or essence. For Simmel, following Nietzsche, revolutions are always revolutions in values, and values, Simmel argues, are created through exchange in a more than strictly economic sense. Indeed, what is exchanged and what subsequently assumes objectivity as institutional form, is far from just goods for money or labour power for wages. Embodied in exchange for Simmel is an ensemble of complex codes related to how we regard ourselves, nature, life, and the world of objects. Exchange in this extended sense of value implies the will to communicate and dominate, the need to survive, and the ambition to set ourselves apart from others and at the same time to find forms of integration and community.

These and other issues come to life in *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology*. In the year of his death Simmel lamented that “My legacy will be like cash, which is distributed to many heirs, each transforming his portion into a profit that conforms to his nature: this profit will no longer reveal its derivation from my legacy.” This is no doubt true to some extent. If one re-reads Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935) after reading Simmel, it is difficult to imagine that Benjamin's concept of aura is not in large measure influenced by Simmel's account of the purely functional and subjective dimension that money introduces into our relations with objects in general and works of art in particular. Indeed, what Benjamin in other writings decries as the profanation achieved by the separation of things and their names is illuminated in subtler and more nuanced

terms in Simmel's essay on the division of labour and the concomitant separation of objective and subjective culture (1900). Yet Simmel's impact on specific components of Benjamin's thought has been overlooked. This is just one of many examples in which Simmel's influence and legacy need to be re-evaluated. It is one of the great merits of Ralph Leck's book that it provides students not already familiar with Simmel's ideas to begin work on this reconstruction.

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