



## Simmel, our Contemporary

Alessandro Dal Lago

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

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ALESSANDRO DAL LAGO

### *Simmel, our Contemporary*

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*Abstract. The cipher of Simmel's actuality is expressed by the concepts of "tragedy of culture" and "crisis," which still assume profound explanatory value in his opinion. By crisis the author means the end of the absolute claims of metaphysics – according to an interpretation that was already Wilhelm Dilthey's – that is, the discovery of thought's inability to embrace the totality of life and the consequent yielding of the field of philosophy in the face of the development of the natural and human sciences. Simmel is one of the first significant examples of overcoming the traditional language of philosophy and metaphysics thanks to the centrality that "metaphor" assumes in his thought, of which the Philosophy of Money is an excellent example. In fact, monetary relations are taken up here as a metaphor for the whole of modern culture, and this allows Simmel across disciplinary boundaries to discuss decisive aspects of modernity, such as the autonomization of scientific knowledge, changing lifestyles, etc. From this point of view Simmel becomes central to rediscussing the status of the sociological discipline as such. It is not a matter of comparing Simmel with the other classics of sociological theory – making him wear the too narrow shoes of the sociologist – but rather of reading his philosophical and aesthetic contributions also from a sociological perspective. This perspective appears to be not only the hermeneutically most respectful but the one that helps to broaden the often too narrow terrain of social theory.*

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#### **1. Simmel's role in 20th century culture**

Anyone who deals with the thought of the so-called turn of the century, and in particular German culture of the early 20th century, will sooner or later come across the name Simmel. They will find him mentioned in a history of sociological thought or among the exponents of the culture of crisis. They will discover that he was a teacher, either directly or indirectly, to many thinkers of our time, from Lukàcs to Bloch, from Banfi to Kracauer, up to more recent authors like Jankélévitch. They will learn that he was close with Max

Weber, and present in Heidegger's thinking during the writing of *Sein und Zeit*. They will find him among the thinkers close to Stefan George's circle and correspondents with Rilke, among the admirers of Rodin and Böcklin and those that inspired the aesthetics of the *Einfühlung*, but also among the founders of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, together with Weber, Sombart and Tönnies. They can trace his footsteps in the salons of Berlin and in the halls of the Uffizi and the Louvre. They will also discover that he had earned a great reputation in the culture of his time, but that he was opposed by academic philosophy until the end of his life and, finally, that his influence dispersed in many directions: in Germany he was regarded above all as a philosopher of culture and art, in France as an exponent of the philosophy of life, in the United States as a founder of sociology, and in Italy (thanks mainly to Banfi's studies) as a proto-existentialist.

We thus have in Simmel a fine example of intellectual creativity and trans-national reception, but also an obvious puzzle. The feeling of elusiveness that has always accompanied Simmel's thought increases when one considers the disarray in which the editions of his books were found until recently. Since the publication of his complete works only began a few years ago<sup>1</sup>, those who deal with Simmel must try to reconstruct his intellectual journey from unobtainable books, anastatic reprints, anthologies and articles scattered across countless journals, as well as often unreliable translations. If one succeeds in this undertaking, they are faced with an enormous but inhomogeneous production: around thirty books (including monographs and collections of essays) and three hundred original articles, often printed in larger works or deposited

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<sup>1</sup> At the Suhrkamp publishing house in Frankfurt, edited by O. Rammstedt. At the time of writing, three volumes have appeared collecting Simmel's early works as well as the first tome of the fundamental *Einleitung in die Morawissenschaft* (Simmel 1892-1893).

in books<sup>2</sup>. It is a production that covers almost every area of philosophy and *Geisteswissenschaften*: metaphysics, gnoseology, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, art, history and literature – and then sociology, social psychology, sociology of the arts and culture, fashion, economics, the condition of women, the sexes. Every Simmel scholar (almost always someone who transforms from a scholar to an admirer) must have a pinch of madness to be interested in such an eclectic author, capable of moving at ease between Kant and Goethe, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, between the metaphysics of life and the psychology of money, between Rodin and Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Böcklin. And then, those reckless enough to venture into the thousands of pages Simmel wrote find very few footholds, let alone interpretative orientations or erudite pleasures. Throughout Simmel's work, there are fewer footnotes than one would normally find in a single academic essay. Simmel did not quote his contemporaries (with few exceptions, including Bergson, with whom he evidently considered himself akin). When he wrote about philosophy, the names that recur are always the same: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Goethe, Schopenhauer, sometimes Rousseau and Marx, and few others. When he wrote about sociology or current affairs, he seemed equally annoyed by the conventions of the profession: his examples were always cursory, if not occasional, and were never documented by a source – although it is not difficult to retrieve the, especially theoretical, influences – and, in any case, were casual and immediate like those deployed in a learned conversation.

In short, Simmel is an author who simultaneously attracts and discourages those who try to come to terms with his thought. And these will end up, sooner or later, asking themselves: “Why is this important? What did he really say?” And conclude that it is

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<sup>2</sup> Among the various bibliographies of Simmel we mention here the main ones: AA. VV. (1958); AA.VV. (1959); Simmel (1968, 256-260); AA.VV. (1976, 277-291). Good bibliographical indexes also in Schnabel (1974, 228-235), Dahme (1981, II, 510-533). In Italian, see the *Bibliographical Note* in the Appendix to Simmel (1976) and the *Bibliographical Note* in Simmel (1984, 59-91).

impossible for him to answer. But it is likely that, precisely in this impossibility, therein lies the importance of this singular thinker. This is not sophistry, nor is it a somewhat snobbish way of accepting the challenge posed by a prolific, elusive, obscure and sometimes irritating author. The fact is, instead, that Simmel's work presents itself at first glance as a fascinating repertory of an entire era of European culture, what we are used to calling, with a now well-worn expression, the culture of crisis. In Simmel we can find what fails to emerge in other thinkers of his time, even those who were deeper or more advanced in their specific fields of research: the attempt to connect the most heterogeneous aspects of a culture into a unitary, if not systematic, vision. A paradox appears here that runs through his entire oeuvre and that makes it so attractive on the whole, even if individual aspects may seem dated or indebted to issues that are now defunct. How is it possible to represent a cultural totality in a unified manner, at the very moment when its disintegration or, in a best case scenario, its undoing is acknowledged? A similar problem, expressed in the formula of a 'disenchanted polytheism,'<sup>3</sup> dramatically concluded Max Weber's great quest for the meaning of Western rationalism. And it will reappear, with different outcomes – often grandiose in their failure, sometimes petty or obtuse in their blindness – in philosophical attempts to emerge from the "crisis": in Jaspers, who in the early 1930s contrasted the glorious notion of *Bildung* to the disintegrating tendencies of European culture and society; in Husserl, who attempted to counter another fundamental philosophical interpretation to the crisis of the sciences (i.e. to their independence from metaphysics); and finally in Heidegger, who from the same crisis arrived at the well-known political mishap of 1933<sup>4</sup>. However, in Simmel – who perhaps did not reach the stature of these authors – the paradox takes on a more global and historically significant

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<sup>3</sup> Here I borrow this definition from Marquard (1981).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the significance of this mishap within German culture of the 1930s, I refer to Dal Lago (1990).

dimension: that of a split between abstract thought and culture. In Simmel, theoretical reflection and socio-historical awareness manage to integrate, something that cannot be said of his illustrious colleagues. His particular talent lies in having accepted the paradox, but exploring its characteristics and consequences in the deepest corners of individual and collective life. In this also consists, in my opinion, the very special and unrepeatable (or at least abandoned) sense of his sociology.

Simmel is therefore a thinker who recognized and accepted the fragmentary and divided nature of culture and experience, without seeking, on the one hand, a return to impossible certainties and foundations, nor, on the other, a leap into utopia, transcendence, or the invention of worlds. A thinker, therefore, of the intermediate, of the relational, of the apparent, in the diagnostic phase of his research; a tragic thinker – here we anticipate the meaning of the present reading – during the last, pessimistic phase of his life. Precisely because of these aspects, his work is both fragmentary, perhaps even dispersive, and unitary. Of course, it would be wrong to make him a double of Nietzsche, or a philosophical double of masters of ambiguity like Musil (with whom, moreover, it would be fair to compare him). Unlike Nietzsche and his literary counterparts, he lacked the almost miraculous capacity to concentrate judgement on his own time in aphoristic writing<sup>5</sup>. Yet if we still want to have an idea of the often unpredictable relationships that run between the most common aspects of everyday life and the dilemmas of metaphysics, between the aesthetic meaning of an object and its social role, we must turn to this strange master. If similar enterprises were attempted in the 20th century (only to then recognize their impossibility, and set their limits in the style of fragmentary thought), this is also due to Simmel's influence: just think of that immense repertoire of dreams, utopias, and realized projects that is Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, or to some of Kracauer's research, an

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<sup>5</sup> Simmel is also the author of brilliant aphorisms on mainly aesthetic and metaphysical subjects. The most important can be found in Simmel (1970).

ironic explorer of intermediate worlds, of the metamorphoses of everyday experience, of the fragments of life (employees, dancers, passers-by and Berlin spectators...) in which the sense of a society is mirrored and condensed<sup>6</sup>. In short, it is in the fecundly paradoxical character of his thought, in his attempt to reconstruct the sense of an epoch in an allusive manner, that Simmel appears to us as the master of ambivalence (and we shall see: also of ambiguity), of the interminable game that is established between the particular and the totality, between any aspect of the world and its opposite, between unity and division. This aspect alone is worth the cost of navigating it.

## 2. Reception

The reception given to Simmel's work by the critics of our century has long oscillated between benevolent curiosity and rejection. As a misunderstood thinker and an unsuccessful academic, Simmel could also fall into that category of men persecuted during their lives by a discreetly malign fate, the *schlemihl* evoked by Hannah Arendt (1981, 69-71 and 105-170) in two essays, dedicated to Heinrich Heine and Walter Benjamin. However, unlike the latter, Simmel did not enjoy even posthumous fame. The traces of his thought in the culture of our time must be sought in indirect references, marginal annotations, individual illuminations of scholars who encountered him casually along their itineraries<sup>7</sup>, or, more frequently, in the youthful interests of students who, having become famous, repudiated him. It is only in recent years, more than seventy after his death; that European culture has begun to recognize in Simmel, after Nietzsche and along with

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Benjamin (1986). Kracauer's debt to Simmel is altogether incalculable. See in general Kracauer (1982).

<sup>7</sup> This is the case, among many, of Worringer (cfr. 1975), whose aesthetic doctrine certainly owes something to the influence of Simmel.

Weber, one of the main theorists and critics of modernity<sup>8</sup>. But again with caution, reserve, and reticence, as if his figure continued to emanate negative influences. Examples of this are the relatively recent resumption of accusations of relativism and aestheticism, already made by Lukàcs in the 1950s, and above all the outright removal, in the critical literature, of a key theme of Simmel's thought, identified in the past as one of his most original contributions, namely the *tragic*<sup>9</sup>.

A review of the evaluations expressed about Simmel during this century would constitute a veritable sampler of prejudices. One could choose between simple anti-Semitism (already denounced by Max Weber, discussing the impossibility for Jews to have a normal career in German universities<sup>10</sup>), the usual forms of academic hostility that affected the independent thinker, and much more argued judgments, tinged with malevolence, such as those of Adorno, Bloch, and the late Lukàcs<sup>11</sup>. All this would once again call for some reflection on the need for scapegoats in the more recent

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<sup>8</sup> Important translations of Simmel's works have come out in recent years in France, England, the United States and Italy, while critical essays and re-editions have multiplied in Germany. Among the most recent texts are *AA. VV.* (1984). Very recent is the Italian translation of *Soziologie* (Simmel, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Around the end of the 1960s, Simmel was at the center of a controversy around the supposed theorists of decadence in pre-Nazi culture. Cfr. Lieber (1966). To this criticism, which borrowed the positions of Adorno, Bloch, and Lukàcs, Landmann (1967) responded convincingly. On Simmel's "aestheticism" see also Hübner-Funk (1976).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Weber (1980). It is very likely that Weber was referring precisely to his friend Simmel, whose academic misfortune was proverbial. On the difficult relations between Simmel and the university philosophy of his time see Landmann (1958, 26 ff.) and also Coser (1965, 29 ff.).

<sup>11</sup> The case of Lukàcs is emblematic of Simmel's decline in the philosophical fortunes of our century. In a commemoration, he described him as the "greatest philosopher of the crisis" (Lukàcs, 1918, translated in the appendix to Simmel 1976, 115 ff.). Later, Lukàcs viewed Simmel as a typical philosopher of the dissolution of reason and the philosophy of imperialism (Lukàcs, 1959, II, 445-463).



philosophical tradition. What is it about Simmel's thought that is particularly displeasing, or what is it his critics sought to exorcise by rejecting or minimizing it? The asystematic and essayistic character of his investigations, an unorthodox stance on the problem of scientificity, or some supposed affinity with the irrationalist currents of early 20th-century culture? Irrationalism, the latest specter of philosophical and cultural historiography, thankfully no longer terrorizes anyone. Besides, it makes little sense to bother with labels such as irrationalism or decadentism for an author who always kept out of the great debates, or who took marginal or measured positions in them. It could be shown how Simmel's famous irrationalism – on which thinkers as different, but significantly convergent, as the neo-Kantian Rickert (cf. 1923, 62ff.) and the Marxist Lukàcs insisted – boiled down to very little, or rather concerned something completely different: a theory or a practice of indecision that, far from being the specific weakness of Simmel's methodological or theoretical approach, is the rigorous proposition of a structural problem in contemporary thought.

Or perhaps in Simmel this is precisely that which was rejected (as is evident in his disciples Lukàcs and Bloch), namely the subtle and elusive thinker, the apolitical and detached aesthete, who committed only once in his life to expressing himself in favor of German nationalism in 1914?<sup>12</sup> If so, the disavowal of a philosophy for the unfortunate choice of a philosopher seems short-sighted: especially when one considers that many exponents of the great German culture, academic and otherwise, from Thomas Mann to Max Weber to a champion of university orthodoxy like Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, took similar positions (no different from the other belligerent nations). This conformity evidently increased by contrasting the merits of those who did not get swept away by the myth of the homeland at war. It should be remembered, however, that prominent personalities (just think of Mann) did not

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<sup>12</sup> On the break between Bloch and Simmel at the outbreak of the First World War, see Bloch (1984, 47 ff.).

allow themselves to be blinded by nationalism for long. This was the case with Weber who was, even during the war, a relentless critic of German military policy<sup>13</sup>. But Simmel too, shortly before his death, gave a lecture in which the ideal of a united and healed Europe was reaffirmed in an almost pathetic tone (Simmel 1917, 65-72). In short, the reputation of an irrationalist, reactionary and decadent philosopher that has often accompanied Simmel seems undeserved. Where then can we find reasons for the hostility and philosophical indifference of his contemporaries and, for the most part, later criticism?

A first answer can be found in some remarks that Max Weber never published about his friend. Weber emphasized how Simmel never allowed himself to be absorbed by any philosophical school other than his own, and how he therefore had the philosophy of the schools against him, for reasons that need not be insisted upon:

[...] there are not only a large number of specialists in philosophy who clearly detest him – the typically sectarian character of the “philosophical schools” of this era, to none of which Simmel belongs, makes this all too understandable, but there are also scholars [...] in disciplines bordering Simmel’s field of research who are inclined [...] to recognize his competence in certain details but who reject his work as a whole. Among economists, for example, there are outright outbursts of anger towards him [...] and from the same circle of specialists comes the judgement that Simmel’s talent consists ultimately in “splitting the air and then putting it back together again” (Weber 1972, 156).

Weber’s observation (referring to the poor fortune of the *Philosophie des Geldes*: cf. Frisby 1978, 3 ff.) transcends the mere anecdote or affectionate, albeit critical, note dedicated to his talented friend and colleague of stubbornly rejected talent, almost to the end of his life, by a normal academic career. Above all, it does justice to

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<sup>13</sup> This appears especially in his political and polemic writings published during the First World War: see Weber (1974) and Weber (1984).

the usual labels with which Simmel was often catalogued, such as a neo-Kantian, historicist, vitalist, but also exclusively philosopher, or sociologist..., and so on. In reality, if there is a current of thought in which Simmel would recognize himself, at least at a certain stage in his life, it is probably tragic wisdom, the style of thought developed on the fringes of university philosophy which found its greatest expression in the culture of the last century, in those who have been called the “destroyers of tradition”: Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche first and foremost<sup>14</sup>. Significantly, the latter two, together with Kant, are among Simmel’s favorite references, those he undoubtedly considered masters or akin. And yet, however profound – as one might show – Simmel’s affinities with these thinkers were, he differed from them in one decisive aspect: he never assumed the prophetic aspect of Nietzsche or the coruscation of Schopenhauer. We find no heroic or transgressive attitudes in his life. Nor did Simmel ever associate, like Weber, with a certain style, heroic in its own way, of interpreting the role of the intellectual in the age of crisis. Non-academic, without impersonating a sort of prophetic charisma à la Stefan George (with whom he also had an intense, albeit ambiguous relationship), Simmel was the ideal type of intellectual exiled in his homeland, and not only because he was Jewish<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, he embodied like few others the type of observer who so identified with observed reality that he shared its characteristics, despite his aestheticism and detachment – in Simmel’s case, complexity of perspectives, relativism, uncertainty, polytheism of values. Terms that can define the style and atmosphere of late modernity. Simmel was thus the exponent of a mature, but at the same time tired, saturated, and undecided culture: one that in a certain sense is still our own.

Perhaps here we come across the deepest reasons for the antipathy and indifference Simmel received from 20th century

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<sup>14</sup> On the concept of the destruction of tradition, see Arendt (1970, 21-46).

<sup>15</sup> On the relationship between Simmel and Jewish culture, see in general Liebeschütz (1970, 103 ff.).

philosophical criticism: he never had any messages or prophecies to deliver to his contemporaries or to posterity. Nor did he have coherent, cognitive, or practical models with which to reassure his readers against what was already called nihilism in his day. As Ernst Bloch rightly observed, albeit in a decidedly critical context, Simmel is the philosopher of the “maybe” of the *tertium datur*, which never gives rise to a dialectical synthesis, let alone a decision (Bloch 1969, 57-60). Here appears the difficulty of taking up an author who is certainly no antidote to intellectual melancholy. Today, to take an example far removed from Simmel, it is possible to refer to Schmitt even from distant ideological positions, because his work nonetheless proposes a dynamic model of political reality, a system of interpretation that can offer guidelines to praxis. Weber himself, although the split between his philosophical-political conceptions and his practical-political stance remains unresolved, can be taken as a prototype of an intellectual and ethical stance towards the crisis<sup>16</sup>. But what can Simmel offer? Certainly very little on a practical and propositional level. Not only are references to the problems of politics very rare in his work; above all, his overly subtle style of interpretation and curiosity, which seem to disperse into the most disparate fields of knowledge and experience, don’t allow themselves to be reduced to a univocal theoretical position, let alone a philosophical recipe book. The atmosphere of indecision and impasse, that emanate from the thousands of pages of his writings, may therefore seem unpleasant, all the more so if it confirms what many have thought and think about themselves and their times. Half a century early, Simmel prefigured the current condition of the philosophical and cultural imagination<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. Simmel normalised?

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<sup>16</sup> On Weber’s complex ethical position see Dal Lago (1983).

<sup>17</sup> For this notion, with reference to the philosophical path that leads from Nietzsche to Heidegger (and including, in our opinion, Simmel) cf. Vattimo 1985.

Amidst the overall distaste with which the culture of our century has greeted Simmel's work, one exception stands out, that of sociological theory. If philosophical criticism has always seen Simmel as a second-rate author, assimilating him from time to time amongst the ranks of neo-Kantians or the irrationalists of the turn of the century, sociology made him a true founding father<sup>18</sup>. Only a comprehensive history of 20th century thought could account for similar additions, which obviously transcend Simmel's case. Here we can only mention a few reasons why an author who was fundamentally misunderstood in his principal field of activity, philosophy, was assumed into the pantheon of a truly regional ontology like sociology.

It's well known that Simmel published several essays in the United States and that some American scholars attended his courses in Berlin. It's a fact that the translation of some of Simmel's sociological essays in the "American Journal of Sociology" inaugurated a genuine Simmelian tradition in the United States (Coser 1965). Simmel's method and style, very different from the positivism and social Darwinism that prevailed at the time, suggested an alternative method of approaching social phenomena. His interest in social interaction, in the logic of small groups, and also the extreme generalization of his formulations made it possible to deal with realities hitherto neglected by American sociology. Simmel thus entered, together with the philosophers of pragmatism and G. H. Mead, among the main inspirers of the Chicago school. Since this school influenced the formation of American micro-sociology, until relatively recently, Simmel continued to theoretically inspire a sociological method more interested in interpersonal relations than in the study of large social systems, more based on qualitative analysis and participant observation than on surveys and statistical analysis.

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<sup>18</sup> Above all in the American sociology of non-structuralist inspiration. See for example Coser (1988).

It's well known, however, that this school has never been dominant in American sociology. Since the mid-1930s, that is since the publication of Talcott Parsons' *The Structures of Social Action* (1968), it has been overwhelmed by structuralist theories and by the latter's ability to offer comprehensive interpretations of modern society. In his book, Talcott Parsons, in an operation it wouldn't be wrong to describe as dogmatic, merged various social and economic theories of European origin (in particular those of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, Weber and other minor ones) into a supposed unified theory of action. Unified here meant, in the first place, expressed in a unified language (in which, for example, the evidently incompatible terminologies of Durkheim and Weber were translated into a third language that was typically Parsonsian, later to become typical functionalist slang) and, in the second, capable of separating the contributions of individual theorists from their biographical and historical contexts. It's general knowledge how, in this operation of homogenization and fusion, it was Weber himself, the most problematic and least interested – if not hostile – to a unified science of society, who had it the worst<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, in an attempt like Parsons', in its own way grandiose albeit hermeneutically dubious, an ambivalent author like Simmel, capable of demonstrating the obverse and the reverse of every phenomenon, even in his typically sociological writings, certainly couldn't be included. In the case of Parsons, who studied in Germany, the omission of Simmel was evidently not accidental; many years later he admitted to excluding Simmel precisely because of his "ambivalence" as well as the impossibility of using him in his own general theory of action (cited in Levine 1985).

While Simmel thus exerted an early influence in the United States, with the advent of structural-functionalism, it was confined to a sociological current – sociological interactionism and the Chicago School – that was increasingly secondary. This process of progressive marginalization was undoubtedly reflected in the

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<sup>19</sup> On the forcing of such an interpretation, we refer again to Dal Lago (1989).

situation of European sociology. Until the Second World War, Simmel remained an almost unknown and uninfluential author in Europe, apart from a few essays by his pupil Kracauer and research, such as that of Elias, in which an echo of the Simmelian method appears – research, moreover, that only enjoyed a certain notoriety after the Second World War<sup>20</sup>.

When a proper sociology was reborn in Europe, it was marked by the prevailing American model, i.e. structural-functionalism, which is why Simmel's sociological work continued to play a largely marginal role. It was only when, towards the end of the 1960s, Parsons' influence waned and the various sociologies of conflict reappeared on the European scene, that interest in Simmel resumed. Since then, his fortunes have been steady. Today, he has become a fixed point of reference for authors, such as Luhmann, who attempted to renew functionalism by adapting it to the second cybernetics. Even Habermas (1984) – who, until a few years ago, followed his teachers Adorno and Horkheimer in their snobbery towards Simmel – has rescued him from oblivion, calling him a *Zeitdiagnostiker*, a diagnostician of his era.

However, in this new sociological fortune, as evidenced by university dissertations, monographs, and a growing critical literature, some pitfalls remain. The first is an overestimation of his sociological contribution. Following the interpretations offered a few decades ago by authors such as Coser (1967) and others, Simmel was seen as the exponent of another type of systematic sociology, of a conception of society seen from below, problematic and open, but still scientific. This reading, by actually repeating the patterns of sociological canonization, minimized the aspects of Simmel's reflection that do not fit into a conventionally scientific framework, eliminated the difficulties and contradictions, and above all the connections with the rest of his thought (which, as we shall

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<sup>20</sup> Elias' analysis of interaction in court societies has often appeared to many commentators as being influenced by the Simmelian theme of *Geselligkeit* (Simmel 1983). However, Elias often tends to downplay such influences.

see, is certainly the most relevant part). In other words, this kind of sociological use transformed Simmel's work into a kind of recipe book. It is a procedure that is all the more widespread the more it satisfies obvious needs for legitimization in a "science" that is ultimately young and still uncertain, after a century, about its foundations<sup>21</sup>.

The second pitfall is the overestimation of Simmel's sociological contributions compared to his overall output, and thus the tendency to make him into a sociologist even when he clearly is not. Compared to his thirty books and large number of essays, Simmel's sociological production is relatively meagre: three books (actually collections of essays, already published, unpublished, and revised) and a number of more or less occasional texts (cf. Dal Lago 1985). In a well-known correspondence with Bouglé, Simmel himself admitted that he regarded sociology as a kind of hobby in relation to his prevailing interests (quoted in Lepenies 1987). Here a rather different attitude appears from that of other sociological classics such as Weber or Sombart. The former in particular always maintained broad reservations towards a systematic sociology but placed the relations between economy, society, and politics at the center of his interests, as his posthumous works show. Simmel, on the other hand, while agreeing to discuss the epistemological foundation of the new social science, considered his contributions in this field as part of a much broader reflection on the status of knowledge. In other words, it is more faithful to his method, and better recognizes his goals, if he is placed in relation to the philosophical-epistemological discussions of his time (however alien or dated they may seem to us) rather than to other sociological currents.

We would like to observe that what is at stake in these assessments is not merely a readjustment of historiographic and interpretative perspectives, but the very consistency of sociological theory. This has shown, over the last two decades, a certain

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<sup>21</sup> On this aspect see the chapter on Simmel in Lepenies (1987).



tendency to exhaust itself and an almost spasmodic need to incorporate problems and terminologies from other fields of knowledge (phenomenology, analytical philosophy, linguistics, ethnography, cybernetics and even literary criticism). Now, Simmel's thought – precisely because of its characteristics of heterogeneity and openness – could constitute an almost ideal model for rediscussing the increasingly narrow canons of sociological theory. His *Philosophy of Money*, for example, constitutes an excellent case of analogical reflection. Monetary relations are taken up there as the common denominator of an entire culture, which allows Simmel – certainly outside the disciplinary canons – to discuss decisive aspects of modern society, such as the autonomization of scientific knowledge, the relationship between the homogenization of lifestyles and the scope of personal freedom, and so on<sup>22</sup>. What Durkheim contemptuously called a type of *bâtarde* speculation is actually a true model of integrated analysis.

It would not be difficult to show how the real theoretical innovations in sociology, at least since the crisis of positivism, make very extensive use of analogies. What is ultimately the notion of complexity, which is even abused today, if not an analogy drawn from the life sciences? And the same could be said of the analogical meaning that Luhmann (1979) attributed, some years ago, to the notion of communication. In short, by also bringing Simmel's overall thought (not excluding his seemingly distant contributions, such as his metaphysical and aesthetic reflections) back into a sociological perspective, we are not only reintegrating the philosopher into his rightful role, but we are probably helping to broaden the very spectrum of social theory<sup>23</sup>.

#### 4. Simmel the Crisis Thinker

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<sup>22</sup> On the subject of the analogy of money in Simmel, see Blumenberg (1976).

<sup>23</sup> On this potential, see again Lepenies (1987).

If we therefore consider Simmel's work in its complexity, it appears to us – in agreement with an old judgment of Lukàcs (1976) – as a reflection on modernity and its crisis. It is almost superfluous to emphasize how this placement does not enjoy a good reputation in contemporary critical literature, not only for reasons of sociological legitimization already outlined, but above all because the notion of crisis is by now worn out. Lacking, however, a unified perspective, the specific literature on Simmel has preferred, with few exceptions, to break down his work according to its main themes, making him a minor philosopher of historicism, the forerunner of certain existentialist currents, or, as we've seen, a somewhat eclipsed *founding father* of sociology<sup>24</sup>. In this way, interpretations that are more concerned with the continuity of the philosophical tradition or the soundness of the sociological tradition end up dispersing and pulverizing an already unsystematic thought. Sociologists look with embarrassment, if not annoyance, on his philosophical production (which is the preponderant part of his work), while philosophers tend to undervalue his sociological writings as a *divertissement* of an eclectic essayist. It's clear that, in this way, the overall profile of Simmel's thought continues to remain obscure or is distorted. Instead, we believe that a unified reading is possible, beginning precisely from the notion of a crisis of the modern, and this for at least two reasons.

The first is paradoxically linked to the fragmentary and dispersive nature of his work. It shows itself to be extremely differentiated, in terms of the plurality of interests, fields of research, and knowledge explored, and in terms of an evident change that occurred between

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<sup>24</sup> In Italy, for example, the first monographic essay of a certain importance on Simmel was devoted mainly to the philosopher of life (D'Anna 1982). An attempt to read Simmel more globally, with a particular focus on his ethics, was instead made by Accarino (1982). Later, the investigation was extended to aesthetics (Boella 1989). Outside Italy, however, research on Simmel as a sociological thinker is prevalent (Frisby 1981). In Germany, however, there seems to be a revival of interest in Simmel in the complexity of his thought.

his early writings, with their “positivist”<sup>25</sup> tone, and his later work dominated by the metaphysics of life and an undoubtedly tragic *Stimmung*. The attempt to put these differences in order, to find, in short, dominant themes to the detriment of others, seems to me doomed to failure. If one sticks to the letter of the texts, one can find anything and its opposite in Simmel: the positivistic and relativistic orientation of the early books on history, society and morality (not far from Nietzsche’s “Enlightenment” works) and the ecstatic metaphysics of life, the abstract and analogical method of the *Philosophy of Money* and the subtle capacity for empirical observation of the sociological writings and analysis of culture. And then, again, the ambivalence and detachment towards modernity, as seen in the works of his youth as well as maturity, and the almost Spenglerian pessimism of his last essays. This plurality of styles, languages, and perspectives can lead to the formation of pseudo-problems: how, for example, can one reconcile hints at the superior equilibrium of the deepest man – an aesthetic-moral theme in which one can easily discern a Nietzschean echo – with the resigned pessimism of his *Posthumous Diary*? Or, how can one reconcile his metaphysics with his penchant for empirical and micro-sociological curiosity? These sterile questions can be avoided by simply reflecting on the fact that a true thinker, who moreover meditates under the banner of disintegration, cannot fail to make heterogeneous interests coexist, and that the secret of such variety, which can illuminate a fragmentary work in a unitary manner, is not to be sought in some footnote or in improbable new resolutions, but in an external yet immanent focus in the work, in particular in the cultural context with which it inevitably measures itself<sup>26</sup>.

We must therefore remember that the relationship between metaphysics and regional ontologies (i.e. the epistemological fields

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<sup>25</sup> On Simmel as a “positivist” see Wiesehöfer (1975).

<sup>26</sup> We believe that the possibility of linking a work such as Simmel’s to a given cultural context is linked to the hermeneutic method of the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1983)

of the individual sciences) was perhaps the most debated problem in European culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Here, then, the apparent heterogeneity and thematic and stylistic contradictions no longer appear as structural defects of a philosophy, but as the expression of a rift opening up in the entire culture of the time. In particular, the schism between metaphysical and sociological-cultural discourse reflects a radical division in the thought of the early 20th century<sup>27</sup>. It is from this fixed point that Simmel's thought ceases to appear as a more or less happy essayistic exercise, becoming instead the mirror of a much wider conflict. From this perspective, his work proves to be much more fruitful than many current readings, which separate its various aspects, producing portraits of convenience (the decadent philosopher or the sociologist of forms, the brilliant essayist or the forerunner of a current in contemporary thought).

We can briefly anticipate that the point of view of the crisis of modernity, of which the epistemological question is only one aspect, allows us to interpret Simmel's work as one of the most interesting, and underestimated, documents of the transition between the age of foundations and that of the development of single specialized sciences. It is a transition that, in a sense, has not ended, or that still remains a structural condition of contemporary thought. In this sense, one of the main outcomes of Simmel's thought, the tragic theory of culture, is not only original with respect to the era in which it was elaborated, but still retains the capacity to produce theoretical problems. This is not only true for the epistemological sphere (in which, as Dilthey (1932) said, taking up Simmel's theses, thought discovers that it cannot embrace the totality of life), but also for culture in general. Tragic is, structurally for Simmel, the condition of modern man insofar as he is incapable of escaping the destiny he has created for himself, namely that of rationalization. In this sense,

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<sup>27</sup> The importance of the theme of tragedy, in this context, lies in the fact that it also apparently underlies scientific cultural currents such as classical social theory. Szondi's (1976) perspective on this issue remains fundamental.

he gives philosophical form to a theme that in Weber is only hinted at, or only occasionally appears as the culmination of comparative-historical investigations. It can be said that Simmel, beyond methodological differences (which should not be overestimated) constitutes a sort of philosophical double of Max Weber. Naturally, the theme of the tragic is not a constant in Simmel's work. But it does, however, appear in the last phase of his philosophical-sociological production, giving meaning, in our opinion, to his entire oeuvre, allowing us to dissolve that ambivalence that has been widely identified as the true -mark of his thought (Levine 1985).

The use of the notions of crisis and tragedy makes a further clarification necessary. These are undoubtedly overused terms in recent philosophical literature, but they still seem indispensable. It should be qualified that we do not attach pathetic or nostalgic connotations to them, in the sense of so many exercises on *finis Austriae*, on the world of yesterday, or the loss of the center. Rather, by crisis two far-reaching phenomena are intended. First, the aforementioned problem of the end of the absolutist claims of metaphysics. Dilthey (1974, 449) defined this problem as "the dissolution of man's metaphysical attitude in the face of effected reality," i.e. the subsidence of metaphysical thinking in the face of developments in the individual natural and human sciences. It is no exaggeration to claim that twentieth-century philosophy, in its most relevant achievements, consists of an attempt to respond affirmatively to this dissolution. This applies to Bergson's philosophy of life and neo-Kantianism, which had some influence on Simmel, but also on Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger's early philosophy. These are, in every case, reactions to the physicalism of the natural sciences or the methodological objectivism of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Thus, the definition of these movements of thought as "philosophies in the age of crisis" does not imply any negative or apologetic judgement. Instead, it refers to the proposition of a problem that is both theoretical and meta-philosophical: is autonomous thinking possible in the age of science and rationalization? And if so, how is it legitimized? It is within this

framework, the radical reflection of European, and particularly German, thought about itself and its own legitimacy, that Simmel interests us. In his work, in fact, decisive themes emerge such as the status of the subject, the relationship between formalized knowledge and intuition, the deconstruction of ethics, the legitimacy of the human-social sciences, the possibility of non-positivist theories of culture: in short, issues that are still at the center of debate today under the heading of the crisis of classical systems of representation.

But there is a second meaning to the notion of crisis, perhaps even more suggestive, with which Simmel's name must be associated. By this we refer to that season in which European culture, in its literary and artistic aspects, reflects on its own foundations. To indicate this second meaning, one can look to crucial texts like Hofmannsthal's Letters of Lord Chandos or the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge by R. M. Rilke, and in general to those literary works in which the awareness of the crisis of language, of death, of the withering away of artistic expression, is transformed into a reflection on the tragic element inherent in modern culture. In this context, Simmel is decisive not only because he found himself at the center of a complex network of relationships with the exponents of that culture<sup>28</sup>, but because some decisive parts of his work constitute the theoretical translation (both philosophical and sociological-cultural) of the crisis expressed by so much poetic and literary meditation of his time. Take, for example, the analysis of the condition of metropolitan man in *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben* (Simmel 1979). It reproduces, almost literally, several passages from the Notebooks, in which Rilke describes his Parisian days, reconnecting with a tradition of analysis of the urban spleen (Baudelaire, Poe, and then Nietzsche, Bourget...). We have

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<sup>28</sup> Lepenies (1987). The epistolary exchange between Rilke and Simmel is published in AA. VV. (1958, 119-125). Interesting insights into Simmel and the literature of his time are offered by Curtius, who was his pupil (Curtius 1984). On Simmel and George in particular, see Landmann (1984, 147-173).

here a different case from Weber's relationship with the literature of his time. While in reality, as the cases of Thomas Mann, Hofmannsthal and Gundolf show, Weber became a spiritual model for the literature of his time<sup>29</sup>, Simmel often took literary and artistic motifs as insights into his own reflection.

One can see then, by developing these aspects, that certain outcomes of Simmel's thought, such as the mysticism of some of his texts, or the tragic itself (outcomes that secondary literature tends to neglect or devalue) acquire a new meaning. They no longer, or not only, constitute the aporias of a philosophy that seeks to transcend traditional gnoseology, but the transposition of interests and stylistic modules of the great literature of his time – into the field of philosophy. Simmel's work thus flows into the debate on the transformation and overcoming of metaphysical language. This does not only apply to certain characteristic aspects of his style (such as his predilection for analogy or the contamination between different genres: just think of his sociological aesthetics<sup>30</sup>), but also to the role that metaphors play in his thought (cf. Blumenberg 1976). It is from this perspective that one should reread some of his works such as the *Philosophy of Money* or *Sociology*, and it is in this sense, if one thinks of the recent debates on the relations between literature, philosophy, and the human sciences, that Simmel uniquely appears to us as one of our – contemporaries.

## 5. Problems of Interpretation

We have emphasized that Simmel's work, underestimated or reduced to some of its components in the prevailing reception, can be read today in a unified manner, accepting (with an all too apparent paradox) its fragmentary character as a necessary expression of the crisis of the modern. We will mention in conclusion some methodological aspects of this reading. First of all,

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<sup>29</sup> On the relationship between Weber and Mann, now see Goldman (1988).

<sup>30</sup> See the essays collected in Simmel (1985).

there is no need to present the interpretation proposed here as objective or impartial. Indeed, it would seem that one of the most relevant limits of the literature on Simmel is the claim of constructing a neutral, sympathetic, in short, paternal image of him. One usually behaves with Simmel as one does with so many minor or neglected thinkers who, through the mysterious vicissitudes of philosophical or literary fortune, re-emerge to the attention of the contemporary public. They are cultivated, pampered, delighted by the tiniest anecdotes concerning them, and linger in futile, bibliographical or erudite battles around the periphery of their thought. One is careful, however, to interpret them, which means not only elaborating their dictation, trying to put oneself in their shoes to explicate their thought (an evidently utopian undertaking...), but also forcing them, distilling a spirit that cannot only be that of their time. It is clear that approaching an author considered today, rightly or wrongly, as a classic entails a certain forcing. But it seems to us that in this field the choice is not between the truth or falsity of interpretation, but between different degrees of untruth<sup>31</sup>. Often, readings that one would like to be dispassionate about end up being the least useful and the most subtly arbitrary, because they hide their forcings – which are inevitable, if only because of the temporal gap separating the interpreter from the interpreted texts – behind the reassuring defense of adherence to the texts and philology.

In other words, in the sense of interpretation proposed here, the pretense of establishing “what an author really said” is renounced, preferring instead to search his texts for what matters to us. This is a procedure that is undoubtedly risky, and perhaps arbitrary, but which makes it possible to undermine, if not dissolve, the patina of scholastic and conventional interpretations with which a work always ends up being covered. For this to be possible and productive, it is necessary to have a fulcrum, a problem-guide with

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<sup>31</sup> We refer here to the brilliant notes on the problem of truth in interpretation in Barthes (1964).



which to distance oneself from the “heart of the literature,” as Simmel himself said (1970, 4) in one of his aphorisms, emphasizing the distance between genuine thought and mere academic exercise on the thought of others. Rather than attempting, therefore, an impossible task of recovering the integrity of his thought, it seems appropriate and more interesting to highlight some connections to the contemporary debate on the intentionality of classical systems of representation in philosophy and the social sciences. In this sense, the fulcrum of interpretation we propose here is the idea of the tragedy of the modern.

Now, in what sense can this notion, which in our view imparts a definitive meaning to Simmel’s work, be more than a mere label when it defines our cultural condition? In what sense, that is, is the problem enunciated by Simmel still our problem? The answer must, of course, be differentiated, depending on whether one refers to the philosophical or the social science sphere. On a philosophical level, the tragedy – which marks the outcomes of German thought – has given rise, as an impossibility of synthesis, to a pluralization of schools, perspectives, and points of view which today no longer seem possible to put back together. It can be argued that a philosophy no longer exists today, if not as a reference to a more or less mythical tradition (cf. Marquard 1986). The babelic scene that has come to constitute philosophy – whereby schools, doctrines, and languages compete without communicating – fulfills a situation that Simmel (1925) had already predicted at the beginning of the century. On the level of the social sciences, and sociology in particular, the issue is complicated by the claims of these fields of knowledge to constitute substantially founded and self-sufficient epistemological fields. This is not the place to discuss this point, but we can observe that the mere necessity of recalling the classics (by constantly proposing new interpretations) seems to contradict this claim alone. We are evidently not talking about normal sociology, so to speak – as a complex of research methods and techniques or more or less institutional concepts – but of sociological theory. In

this field a plurality of languages, often communicable, dominates, not unlike the philosophical scene.

Simmel's function in the formation phase of sociological theory was to show that a different kind of theory was perhaps possible – that is, an open, plural, non-codifiable knowledge, open to contamination, at least on a theoretical level, with other types of knowledge, primarily those of philosophical discourse. A knowledge, moreover, never conclusive in its formulations inasmuch as it is subject to that open life/form dialectic – the literal contrast devoid of a definitive meaning between becoming and its innumerable historical concretions – which constituted for Simmel (1936) the secret of every living organism, not excluding society.

Finally, a few words on the appropriateness of presenting Simmel's thought under the banner of the tragic. Some careful observers of his time identified Simmel as the greatest thinker on ambiguity (Mann 1986). But what does ambiguity mean? Certainly not only a spiritual attitude or style of thinking: above all, the formulation of a fundamental philosophical problem. Necessarily any reflection that takes note, as was the case in the culture of the turn of the century, of the illegitimacy of unitary philosophical syntheses, first and foremost the dialectic, is ambiguous. From here the impossibility of representing the foundations and the processes and objects of thought as a unity: the subject, the world, society, history. But in the tension established between theoretical activity and the recognition of this limitation a tragic position is already implicit. Reconstructing this process, for which acceptance of ambiguity leads to schism does not only assume historiographical significance. On the one hand, it means retracing a fundamental stage in the prehistory of contemporary culture, without which certain decisive turning points in 20th century thought are unthinkable. On the other, it means questioning the very foundations of sociology of which Simmel is, after all, a founding father, albeit a unique one. Simmel's work is still capable of showing us how it is possible to talk about the world by renouncing claims of integration and totality. Accepting, with Simmel, the tragic

inherent in our culture is thus not a point of arrival but a problematic point of departure.

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