



The Case for the Historical Simmel

Efraim Podoksik

Volume 26, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097521ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097521ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Podoksik, E. (2022). The Case for the Historical Simmel. *Simmel Studies*, 26(2), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097521ar>

Résumé de l'article

There is a gap between the particulars of our scholarly knowledge about Georg Simmel and our image of him as a mind in its totality. The existing paradigmatic interpretations of Simmel's thought as a whole are often outdated and driven by anachronistic motivations. The task of the historian is to update these paradigms on the basis of our better and broader knowledge of Simmel and his contexts. My book is one such attempt. The paradigm it puts forward may help us to discard the familiar stereotypes of Simmel, while offering a more nuanced understanding of the main parameters of his thought and its development. It can also serve as a foundation for future non-historical studies of Simmel.

© Efraim Podoksik, 2023



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

éru
dit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

EFRAIM PODOKSIK

The Case for the Historical Simmel

Abstract. There is a gap between the particulars of our scholarly knowledge about Georg Simmel and our image of him as a mind in its totality. The existing paradigmatic interpretations of Simmel's thought as a whole are often outdated and driven by anachronistic motivations. The task of the historian is to update these paradigms on the basis of our better and broader knowledge of Simmel and his contexts. My book is one such attempt. The paradigm it puts forward may help us to discard the familiar stereotypes of Simmel, while offering a more nuanced understanding of the main parameters of his thought and its development. It can also serve as a foundation for future non-historical studies of Simmel.

I Introduction

What does it mean to study a thinker historically? It certainly includes employing a variety of research techniques capable of conducting an impartial investigation of the particular items at our disposal which can count as historical evidence, from which one might infer the specific beliefs and opinions the thinker held and expressed. These items may be his or her own writings as well as other texts from which we can glean relevant contexts: widespread language idioms, ideas, currents of thought, concepts, events, personalities. All these are then dissected, juxtaposed, rearranged and reinterpreted until one reaches a relatively intelligible understanding of the plausible meaning of the text under consideration.

But any attempt to reenact the mind of a thinker must involve something more than simply dissecting, juxtaposing and reinterpreting the particular bits of evidence. Intellectual reality is not merely a collection of disparate expressions. It is, rather, a story

of the interaction of living minds who perceive and intuit themselves, and each other, in a certain manner. One mind's perception of itself, or its perception by another mind, is never fully coherent, complete or impartial. Yet it is always a perception of a mind as a given unity, perception in toto. The mind under investigation is always a 'Thou', to use Simmel's turn of phrase.

Now, precisely because this is an immediate perception of what is given in its totality, this perception transcends analysis. As Simmel argued: "The category itself [the Thou] is incommensurable. The concept of the Thou does not have the same status as all the other objects of my ideas. I am obliged to ascribe a being-for-itself to the Thou. It is the same integrity that I experience exclusively in my own ego – the self, which must be distinguished from everything that is properly an object" (Simmel, 1977: 106). At the same time, since this totality is the necessary presupposition of how an historical mind understands itself, or how other historical minds understand it, any sophisticated intellectual history aims at postulating, inferring and perhaps depicting that totality whose particular items and expressions are but imperfect embodiments, even as one is invariably brought to concede that this totality can never be demonstrated conclusively and the best we can hope to achieve is to apprehend it in approximation.

The degrees of this approximation differ, and it is fair to assume that they depend on the extent of our familiarity with the thinker's mind: the better we know it, the better we grasp its image as a whole. This, however, does not mean that comprehension of a thinker's mind in its totality is always available once the necessary research work has been done. And with regard to the current state of Simmel studies, it appears to me that the field is characterised by a wide gap between the knowledge that we have acquired about his work and thought in its details and our grasp of him in toto; that is, our knowledge of Simmel far outpaces our ability to comprehend him. We still lack sophisticated paradigms which can serve as a reliable guide to our reading of Simmel's writings.

In a certain sense, the gap between the achievements in technical scholarly knowledge concerning an intellectual figure from the past and that figure's image within more general historical narratives is a common and even indelible phenomenon in the field of intellectual history. To speak, for example, about the subfield with which I am most intimately familiar – that of the history of political thought – the conventional physiognomies of its major protagonists, as every scholar knows, are caricatures, if not outright distortions, of what we know about them. Burke, for example, can hardly be called a 'conservative', Hobbes was not an outright authoritarian, Rousseau was something other than an admirer of the 'noble savage', while Fichte was not a racist.

Indeed, in respect of these, as well as many other figures, intellectual historians have managed to produce fine and nuanced paradigmatic interpretations which are consistent with up-to-date scholarly knowledge about them. The persistence of the aforementioned caricaturised images is not the failure of interpretation but the failure of its dissemination beyond the circle of the expert community. With Simmel, however, the situation seems to be more problematic. Given the complexity and breadth of his work, we as scholars are still struggling with developing sophisticated and coherent paradigmatic readings of his mind. We are indeed more familiar today with the entire corpus of his oeuvre, including his essays in forgotten magazines, letters to newspapers and surviving correspondence; we immerse ourselves in meticulous analysis of the influences, interactions and similarities between him and other thinkers or groups of thinkers; perhaps we are even better at performing nuanced textual exegesis on his work or at drawing bold metaphysical conclusions from its insights. Yet in the absence of general interpretations of his thought as a whole that integrate the most recent achievements of scholarship into paradigmatic images, we are often prone to adopting – consciously or not – those paradigms that were developed and suggested a long time ago, and that fall short of today's standards, being products of a time when the state of Simmel scholarship was far less advanced, and when

motivations for studying him were by and large anachronistic, either springing from the demands of a scientific discipline looking for founding fathers, such as sociology, or from an ideological cause, be it liberalism, feminism or ‘post-modernity’.

This is the gap I have attempted to close in my study: the gap between the particulars of what we know about Simmel, on the one hand, and our very imperfect image of Simmel as a mind in its totality, on the other. In my book, I offered a general interpretative paradigm that may be of assistance to readers and scholars of Simmel. One qualification should be made at the outset: I do not claim to have developed the definitive paradigmatic interpretation of Simmel’s thought. From what has been said, it is quite clear that I do not believe that it is possible to impose any one such paradigm. It is more likely that at any given stage of research, there can and should co-exist a plurality of several equally powerful interpretations, and we certainly need more of these with regard to Simmel. What I do believe, though, is that my interpretation removes many shortcomings of the previous widely spread images of Simmel, which are often accepted in scholarship without due criticism and scrutiny. Therefore, before summarising the main positive claims of my work, I would like to highlight its critical underpinnings by drawing attention to some crude but persisting stereotypes about Simmel which are, in my view, outdated.

II Anachronistic Simmels

Several images of Simmel repeatedly crop up among Simmelians and non-Simmelians, scholars and dilettantes alike. While often overlapping with each other and buttressing one another, each comes from a somewhat different angle. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to them separately under different subheadings.

Simmel the fragmented

The view of Simmel as a highly fragmented writer and thinker is perhaps the most persistent. Its origins lie in Simmel’s own time, as

fragmentariness was occasionally attributed to him by contemporary critics and even admirers, and it can also be found in Simmel's occasional statements about his own work. Fragmentariness is not necessarily a pejorative word. In later times it was even turned into a virtue by those scholars and commentators who wished to assimilate Simmel into the tradition of critical theory or incipient 'post-modernism'. And it also appealed and continues to appeal to many conscientious scholars who are methodologically worried about imposing any integrative reading on a thinker, rightly fearing the anachronism and arbitrariness that may lurk behind such general interpretations.

The primary problem with this approach, however, is that it misses the way the 'historical' Simmel considered his own cultural mission, notwithstanding his occasional despairing remarks about the fragmented character of his own thinking. There was hardly any other writer in his time and milieu who was so obsessed with the very notion of *Einheit* ('unity'). This word and idea is present almost everywhere in Simmel. For him, the ability to reach unity was the principal test of a great mind, and certainly of a great philosopher. What matters in philosophising, he argued, was 'the achievement of that *unity* that the mind needs in the face of the immeasurable multiplicity, the variegated and unreconciled shreds, of the world' (Simmel, 1959: 302). And since Simmel gradually came to regard himself as a mind who was making an important 'philosophical' contribution to his own time and to posterity, it was unavoidable that the question of developing a unified philosophical *Weltanschauung* stood before him as a personal task in all its gravity.

One can indeed arrive at the conclusion, ideally after carefully examining Simmel's works and weighing the arguments to the contrary, that he failed in this mission and that there is nothing more to his corpus than a series of brilliant fragments lacking in overall coherence. But such a claim cannot be advanced without first doing full justice to Simmel's own search for the unity of thought. No paradigmatic study of Simmel can *start* with the a priori assumption of the fragmentariness of his thinking. Even if the final result is

deemed a failure, one cannot avoid closely following Simmel's path to unity. Declaring him to be a philosopher of fragments means rejecting what was in fact the central aspect of his self-understanding as a thinker.

Simmel the blogger

To this view corresponds a certain manner of assigning relative significance to Simmel's various texts, in which priority is given to his shorter works, be they medium-size essays or even brief vignettes, such as the ones he published as snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*. This image of Simmel as an essayist fits neatly into the image of the fragmented Simmel. It emphasises the absence of hard-core metaphysical commitments, a certain evasiveness of thinking, some sort of 'impressionism'. From this perspective, Simmel turns out to be what we would today call a blogger: a brilliant observer of minute details, an inventor of some very sharp arguments but certainly not a system-builder.

As a result, Simmel's larger treatises are often sidelined or ignored altogether, despite the advances made in this respect in more recent scholarship. Indeed, if Simmel is a fragmentary writer, then attention should be focused on those genres where fragmentariness is beautiful and appropriate, and not where it looks defective, such as in long philosophical volumes.

The thing is, however, that Simmel's major works are not fragmentary at all. The architectonics of their arguments are generally elaborate and well thought through. Indeed, these architectonics are quite complex and at first, difficult to grasp. His treatises do sometimes include much that may be secondary and superfluous to the principal structure. But this structure is present and becomes quite visible once our attention is drawn away from Simmel's sideline remarks and numerous excursions and detours and towards what is central to his argument. That is why in my book I occasionally present short summaries of the content of Simmel's treatises, such as *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1890) and *Goethe* (1913),

(Podoksik, 2021: 229-330) assuming that once the structure of these works is made clear, the unity of their arguments too becomes apparent.

Simmel the author of The Stranger and Metropolis

Two essays have become especially salient in Simmel reception, especially among non-experts: *Exkurs über den Fremden* (1908) and *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903). These two texts play a pivotal role in maintaining the image of Simmel as a pariah diagnostician of urban modernity and its discontents. Here, the motif of fragmentariness refers not only to our perception of Simmel's corpus but also to the way we interpret his life experience and his self-understanding.

Yet the story of Simmel reception is not the same as the story of the historical Simmel, and it is quite certain that Simmel would have not thought of himself as preeminently the author of *The Stranger* and *Metropolis*. Curiously, one can even advance the claim that the excursion on the stranger was one of Simmel's least important pieces in his own eyes. Of all the texts that comprise the treatise *Soziologie* (1908), *The Stranger* is the only one which was not published by Simmel elsewhere, either as an independent essay or as part of some other work. This excursion, therefore, is itself a sort of pariah within *Soziologie*. Putting it at the forefront of Simmel's intellectual legacy is as such a very ambitious act of willful interpretation that has little objective justification.

Likewise, the significance of the text on the metropolis is overblown. Unlike *The Stranger*, though, it does draw on the analysis of the modern city life advanced in a larger volume, *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), and so it is not a text apart. But when taken out of the context of Simmel's oeuvre as a whole, it does distort our view of Simmel's attitude towards urbanity, as it sidelines the more optimistic aspects of his approach equally present in *Philosophie des Geldes*, and leads us to ignore altogether his other writings on the cultural significance of cities, for example, his essays on Italy.

Simmel the Jew

The theme of Simmel as a pariah leads us to the body of literature that deals with Simmel's Jewishness. Some of this literature is concerned with the biographical aspects of the topic, including the impact of anti-Semitism on Simmel's academic career. Other elements focus on the interpretation of his thought in light of his Jewishness, either ascribing to it a preoccupation with the experience of being a Jew in Europe and Germany (hence the importance of the notion of 'strangeness') or searching for Jewish cultural undercurrents in his philosophy. These interpretations are frequently part of a broader trend of recreating and rethinking the intellectual and biographical destinies of assimilated Jewish intellectuals in Central Europe during the twentieth century. Very often they are anachronistically informed by the Holocaust.

Still, insofar as our concern is not biographical or philosophical but is solely with intellectual history, it is unclear what might be gained by emphasis on Simmel's Jewishness. Simmel was certainly conscious of his Jewish ethnicity, yet it is difficult to establish a clear relationship between this facet of his identity and the content of his ideas. Historically speaking, his philosophical texts are an integral part of the German cultural and philosophical canon, on which they directly build, with which they are in dialogue and which they try to elucidate. If any religious spirit is traceable there at all, it is the standard discourse of liberal Protestantism. The place of Jewish themes in Simmel's work is, by contrast, unremarkable. His engagement with Jewishness consists mainly of occasional anthropological observations about the Jews alongside remarks about other peoples and cultural groups.

Simmel the progressive

The search for Jewishness in Simmel is often goes hand in hand with attempts to effect his political 'idealisation'. This usually happens when scholars who are openly committed to one version or another of 'left-wing' politics or ideology explore Simmel as yet

another forefather of such positions. Hence, we have a body of scholarly literature that attributes to Simmel a good old individualistic liberalism of the Anglo-American variety or inserts Simmel among the early proponents of more radical trends: feminism, artistic avant-garde and even vegetarianism.

Biographically speaking, Simmel was certainly part of the left-liberal Berlin bourgeoisie who voted for left-wing non-socialist parties. But the connection between this personal stance and the nature of his philosophical thinking is not as direct as it may seem. Simmel's philosophy was influenced more by his admiration for and sense of belonging to the mainstream German intellectual fashions that he identified with already during his student years than by his occasional 'progressive' agenda.

His approach to the feminist question is a good case in point. During the 1890s and 1900s, Simmel supported numerous public initiatives in favour of women's equality, especially in the field of education. At the same time, his philosophical texts on the subject of femininity cling to all the misogynist stereotypes that can be found in abundance in mainstream nineteenth-century German thinking on the subject. The implications of his philosophy of women run counter to his own stance on women's education. Due to this, he was criticised even by some of his feminist contemporaries, such as Marianne Weber, whose own stance was far from radical (Weber, 1919: 95-133).

Similarly, Simmel's texts on freedom have little in common with the tradition of 'negative' freedom. Rather, they explore the familiar German topoi on the subject. And Simmel the 'progressive' or 'liberal' certainly evaporates after the First World War breaks out. His writings, and especially letters, of that period indicate a clear turn towards right-wing patriotism. His opinions become quite similar to those espoused by the right-wing aesthetes who develop the sense of patriotic commitment, such as the George circle or his friend Graf von Keyserling.

Simmel the unpopular

Out of all these stereotypes emerges perhaps the most problematic one from an historical point of view: that of the marginality of Simmel. Much has been made of Simmel's grievances as to his being insufficiently appreciated by his colleagues and his career being impeded, such that his only consolation was, allegedly, his popularity among similarly 'outsider' audiences, like Jews and women. And how could this have been otherwise, given Simmel's alleged 'fragmentariness', his unconventional way of writing, his Jewish origins and his 'progressive' beliefs? Again, this marginality is sometimes presented as a virtue. As a recent study suggests, 'certain figures in the history of thought seem to derive their significance from their marginality' (Goodstein, 2017: 1).

The problem with this perception is that it turns the feeling of 'rejection' – occasionally projected by Simmel himself, and occasionally by his friends or enemies – into an objective reality of rejection. Objectively speaking, however, Simmel was one of the most consequential and widely appreciated intellectuals in Wilhelmine Germany. It is often noted that he was a popular lecturer, but the implications of this simple fact are just as often omitted. For what this means is that for a quarter of century, he was able to disseminate his thought to audiences of hundreds of students at a very prestigious faculty in a leading German university. Who were these students? Given the peculiarity of the German university system, in which students travelled for a semester or more to take classes at a different university, one can safely assume that a considerable number of the future shaper of intellectual opinion in Germany had the opportunity to hear Simmel. Many of them indeed recorded their impressions and memories of attending and becoming fascinated with Simmel's lectures. And they were representative of a much larger group, which listened to or at least read him. Indeed, even a cursory examination of the ideas of the next generation of German intellectuals reveals the direct and strong impact of various aspects of Simmel's thought. In his celebrated

study of the young Simmel, Ch.-K. Köhnke explored his place within his network of academic and collegial ties (Köhnke, 1996). Perhaps the time has come for an even more ambitious project: that of mapping the ties of the older Simmel and his influences on both his contemporaries and the younger generation.

In order to grasp the extent of this impact, one should realise that our sense of the German intellectual life of Simmel's time is often anachronistically distorted by the series of subsequent ruptures in German history. As the events proceeded very quickly, what was relevant and important in the 1910s became largely forgotten in the turbulent 1920s and completely annihilated during the years of National Socialism. This should not come as a surprise. Looking just a few years back today, one notices that the intellectual questions of the recent past rapidly lost their urgency in the face of the COVID pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War. Something similar, but on an even larger and more tragic scale, happened in Germany after the First World War. But this happened only after Simmel died, and neither Simmel nor his contemporaries could have foreseen the path of future events. One can assume with great deal of certainty that in the absence of those cataclysms, Simmel's statue within the German intellectual tradition would have been quite central. And it is this *expectation* of Simmel's future significance by many of his contemporaries which bears on our understanding of the importance of the *historical* Simmel, prior to the evaporation of the questions regarded in his time as most crucial into a state of irrelevance. What were those questions?

III Simmel and the Discontents of Modernity

On the most abstract level, a major theme that troubled the leading German minds of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the notion that modern times had opened a chasm between the ideal of unity and harmony, on the one hand, and an ever-growing variety and specialisation, on the other. This fracture was perceived as the main reason for modern spiritual and social discontent, and many of the intellectuals of the time considered it

to be their task and duty to diagnose this condition and, if possible, to offer a solution. Be it the philosophy of Windelband, the sociology of Tönnies, the theology of Harnack or the theory of art of Wölfflin, all touched on this specific problem in all its acuteness.

The peculiarity of Simmel in this story was that his thought did not merely touch on this problem but turned it into its underlying *Leitmotif*. Partly, this was enabled by the versatility of his thinking. Simmel wrote about almost everything of concern to the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, of which he was a quintessential representative. This apparent lack of focus and specialisation might seem like a disadvantage from a purely academic point of view, but it actually helped Simmel acquire the role of a universalist diagnostician capable of dealing with the question of unity versus variety in all the manifoldness of its expressions in the intellectual life of the German *Kaiserreich*. Whenever and from whatever angle the question arose – be it religion or economics, literature or gender – Simmel was right there to offer his own reflections. For in writing about everything – be it God or a handle, society or the Alps – he in fact wrote about one major thing: the tension between the unified and harmonious, on the one hand, and the peculiar and multi-faceted, on the other. In other words, he took upon himself the task of conceptualising the intellectual debates of his time and place, and arranging them into a series of dilemmas, tensions and antinomies that reflected the fundamental conflict of modernity as he understood it.

This, then, is the principal difference between the historical Simmel and numerous anachronistic Simmels. Each anachronistic Simmel is a Simmel of one fragment among many, perhaps the originator of a certain idea or insight that would later acquire a physiognomy which the historical Simmel could not foresee and would hardly have been prepared to acquiesce to. The historical Simmel, conversely, is a thinker in totality, for whom specific topics served as occasional illustrations of a bigger problem which may look banal, artificial or outdated in our age, but was of the utmost intellectual and existential importance in Simmel's time and broader milieu. Therefore, the most fruitful form of inquiry into the *historical*

Simmel is one in which none of the particular topics he dealt with – be it society, art, religion or metaphysics – is given priority, but in which they all serve as exemplifications of his engagement with the problem of unity, to which he sought a solution.

IV The chronology of Simmel's intellectual development

This approach to Simmel also suggests a way in which the development of his thought can be conceptualised and divided into different periods. There is a common tripartite division of Simmel's intellectual development. This division has been challenged by commentators here and there, who offered adjustments: some stressed the overall unity of Simmel's thought, while others subdivided it into even more periods. These controversies are inevitable, since every periodisation is an a posteriori abstraction out of an incessant stream of thought, and the choice of landmarks within this stream is almost always arbitrary. But it is never *fully* arbitrary, because it is based on our intuitive sense of the changes in patterns of writing and thinking once we have become familiar with the overall corpus. The nature of these changes may not be easy to grasp, but their presence is clearly felt.

Therefore, I do not see any major problem with the initial tripartite periodisation. The fault, in my view, lies rather in the manner in which this division is conceptualised. Very often, it is described by way of the dates of Simmel's principal works, the themes most salient in one period or another or the thinkers by whom he was influenced. Thus, Simmel's early period is said to be defined by the influence of positivism, interest in questions of society and money or engagement with Kant; the middle period is characterised as aesthetic, 'impressionistic', 'culture-philosophical'; and the later period is interpreted in terms of a turn towards life-philosophy or the influence of Bergson. Some distinguish the war years as a distinct period informed by the marked influence of phenomenology, on the one hand, and an outburst of decisionism, on the other.

These descriptions are all usually on to something, yet when they are taken as the central criteria for periodisation, they become exposed to numerous challenges, since many of them do not fit well into the chronology of Simmel's texts. For example, statements that sound fairly 'life-philosophical' can be found even in his early texts and his engagement with certain key thinkers often spreads far beyond the periods to which those thinker's influences are assigned.

A more conducive approach, necessitating fewer caveats and interpretative compromises, would be to look for changes in the fundamental patterns of Simmel's thinking across all the themes he dealt with. These pattern changes reflect Simmel's evolving attitude towards solving the principal tension of modernity: the chasm between unity and variety. And the different kinds of dialectics invoked to address this chasm are the best markers of Simmel's thought in each period.

The categories of these different kinds of dialectics can be derived from Simmel's own distinctions between different ways of reconciling between unity and variety, found in one of his latest works – *Rembrandt* (1916) (Simmel, 2005: 6). In my book, I describe them as the notions of unity *in* variety, unity *versus* variety and unity *above* variety.

Each of the three constitutes one specific answer to the problem of reconciling unity with variety after the primordial unity was lost. The first answer considers the contradictions of modernity as a complicated but solvable problem. The resulting solution envisages the specifically modern unity that emerges out of modern differentiation. This was the spirit of Simmel's writings leading to the *Philosophie des Geldes* this is the philosophical view Simmel attributed to Kant; and its practical implication could be observed in the functioning of the modern society, where the growing individualisation of its parts strengthens the social whole. In that period, Simmel subscribed to the optimism of the older *Bildung* tradition with regard to the possibility of the formation of

harmonious modern individuals, even though cultural optimism was at that time going out of fashion.

Very soon, however, Simmel began to catch up with the new pessimism. This cultural pessimism characterises his ‘second period’. During that period, he regarded the very possibility of a reconciliation between unity and variety with great scepticism. Instead, he came up with a tentative solution of retreating into inwardness and cherishing one’s own harmony at the expense of pursuing an encompassing reconciliation of individuality with the multi-faceted universe. The philosophers who led Simmel in this path were Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and the general philosophical scheme under which this retreat into the unity of inwardness was undertaken involved the idea that our experience can produce modal forms, each of which constitutes a world unto itself. These forms, or worlds, can be those of beauty, religion, law, science, etc.

This second period lasted about a decade – from *Philosophie des Geldes* to *Soziologie* – and then it gradually mutated into the third one, in which yet another answer to the problem of unity and variety became dominant. This third answer was the most complex one, for it pointed to two contrary poles that drew on the same logic. Both implied a transcending of the very distinction between unity and variety. But this transcending could lead either to some kind of revolutionary ecumenical unity or, on the contrary, the entire quest for unity could be seen as having reached an impasse and so had to be abandoned altogether. The third answer was thus an act of victory and despair at the same time. Considered against the background of the First World War, it can be linked to Simmel’s discovery of the ethics of decision, to his abandonment of the ideal of an all-encompassing culture, but also, simultaneously, to his expressions of a desperate hope that a new man will emerge on the ruins of the old world and bring about a transformation of all humanity, or at least the cultural and social unification of Europe.

V What can the historical Simmel be to us?

The historical Simmel thus emerges as a stranger and more distant figure than we often believe him to be. If the earlier motivation for the revival of scholarly interest in Simmel was to attempt to learn from him, an historical investigation reveals his essential irrelevance to our concerns. For better or for worse, the primary problems Simmel addressed are not those of our contemporary world. Today, the tension between unity and variety does not appear to be the paramount existential dilemma, or perhaps it is a dilemma that contemporary society considers already solved, with a clear victory for fragmentariness and specialisation. In this sense, our society may indeed appear ‘post-modern’, but precisely because of this, Simmel does not have much to offer it: counter to the persistent stereotype, he was much more of a classicist, of a *Bildung* bourgeois, than an iconoclast.

This does not mean, however, that historical investigation leaves no room for fruitful ahistorical inquiry. On the contrary, by better comprehending what was temporary in Simmel, that is, what was peculiar to his own time and place, we can also better understand the elements of Simmel that remain relevant to us. I can recommend at least three possible directions for studying Simmel ahistorically.

Simmel the philosopher

The question of unity may have receded in existential significance for our culture as a whole. But it is destined to remain the major question for those among us who also happen to be philosophers. The philosophical drive is, by definition, a drive towards unity of mind, and as long as philosophy in its proper sense lives, the striving for unity does, as well.

If I am correct in my assessment that Simmel’s preeminent concern was with the question of unity and, moreover, that a significant degree of dynamic coherence can be discerned in his thought as a whole, this means that Simmel as a philosopher should

be taken seriously. One may even attempt to make a case for his inclusion in the mainstream philosophical canon. Simmel's major philosophical works – *Philosophie des Geldes*, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1910) and especially *Lebensanschauung* (1918) – should be considered momentous and bold contributions to twentieth-century philosophy, not only in terms of the particular ideas set forth in them but also in terms of their systematic metaphysics. There have been important studies that point to this direction. I might mention, for example, an older but excellent monograph by Rudolph Weingartner, *Experience and Culture: The Philosophy of Georg Simmel* (Weingartner, 1962), or Uta Gerhardt's analysis of dialectic in the structure of *Philosophie des Geldes* (Gerhardt, 2003: 117-157). But much still needs to be done before Simmel takes his place in the general philosophical canon. Taken from this angle, historical study of his thought may serve as the necessary groundwork for *philosophical* investigation of the coherence of his metaphysical worldview.

Simmel the methodologist

The historical perspective also furnishes us with interpretative modesty. One often learns that contemporaries and immediate successors knew and understood a thinker better than the high-brow commentators of a more distant future. This may be relevant to our view of Simmel's contribution to the science of society. This implies abandoning impressionist or post-modernist interpretations and focusing on what Simmel and his disciples considered to be his main contribution: the elaboration of the principles of 'formal' sociology.

Simmel indeed denied being himself a 'sociologist'. Nevertheless, he did develop recommendations as to the proper way of doing sociology (Spykman, 1965). His approach has long been regarded a failure. Over the course of the twentieth century, the science of society moved in other methodological directions, away from formal sociology. But the case can be made that true formal sociology has never been tried. Perhaps the time was not ripe

for it, as it presupposed research techniques that were unavailable to past generations, whereas today, network theory and the methods of data analysis invite us to give Simmel's methodological insights another try. In the end, Simmel may turn out to be, among other things, the father of a scientific method (Hollstein, 2021: 44-59).

Simmel the warning

Finally, the study of Simmel as one of the leading German minds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may highlight anew the problematics of cultural pessimism, allowing us to examine the dynamics of self-destructive discontent with civilisation, and not in its caricaturised proto-fascist form, but as embodied in a serious and humane philosopher.

The contemporary world faces a somewhat similar situation of a growing cultural discontent accompanied by ever bolder attacks on the fundamental principles of liberal civilisation. Many of these attacks draw on the intellectual heritage of cultural pessimism as it was developed more than one hundred years ago. The development of Simmel's ideas, his increasing adoption of a rhetoric of decisionism, his cultural despair – may help us better understand the dynamics of that idea-feeling, to use Dostoevsky's term, that awakens destructive tendencies even in impeccably philanthropic minds. Simmel's example, and especially the evolution of his ideas during the First World War, may serve as a warning to us all.

References

- Uta Gerhardt (2003). 'Dialektik', in O. Rammstedt (ed.), *Georg Simmels Philosophie des Geldes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Elizabeth S. Goodstein (2017). *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Betina Hollstein (2021). 'Georg Simmel's Contribution to Social Network Research', in M. Small et al. (eds.), *Personal Networks*:

- Classic Readings and New Directions in Egocentric Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klaus Christian Köhnke (1996). *Der junge Simmel: in Theoriebeziehungen und sozialen Bewegungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Efraim Podoksik (2021). *Georg Simmel and Modern Culture: Unity, Variety and Modern Discontents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Georg Simmel (1959). 'On the Nature of Philosophy', in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, trans. R.H. Weingartner. New York: Harper & Row.
- Georg Simmel (1977). 'On the Nature of Historical Understanding', in *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*, trans. G. Oakes. New York: The Free Press.
- Georg Simmel (2005). *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, trans. A. Scott & H. Staubmann. New York: Routledge.
- Nicholas J. Spykman (1965). *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Marianne Weber (1919). 'Die Frau und die objektive Kultur', in *Frauenfragen und Frauengedanken: Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, pp. 95-133.
- Rudolph H. Weingartner (1962). *Experience and Culture: The Philosophy of Georg Simmel*. Middletown, CO: Wesleyan University Press.