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# Introduction

## Why Simmel?

One hundred years have passed since the death of Georg Simmel (1858–1918), one of the most fascinating minds of the Second German Empire (*Kaiserreich*). Simmel's intellectual brilliance and productivity have never been in doubt, and they are themselves sufficient grounds for writing about him. Indeed, there is no shortage of studies that grapple with various aspects of his thought. Simmel scholarship has recently received fresh impetus with the collection of all his available texts in the monumental twenty-four-volume edition of the *Gesamtausgabe* coordinated and edited by Otthein Rammstedt.

Despite this growing interest, intellectual historians have been slow in appreciating Simmel's significance. The most important studies about him and his work so far were produced by scholars whose primary focus lies in other disciplines, such as social and cultural sciences and philosophy. Many of these works have made important contributions to our knowledge of the historical Simmel and his various contexts. However, the underlying motif and focus of the greater part of them are the question of Simmel's significance for the present day. He is mainly read and studied because it is believed, and often with good reason, that his insights are very helpful for solving our own metaphysical, social and cultural problems. The question of what Simmel meant for his own time, and his relation to it, draws considerably less attention.

I believe this state of affairs is partly the consequence of the stereotypical perception of Simmel as a maverick within his own intellectual setting. This perception is often presented in a favourable light. As a recent study suggests, 'certain figures in the history of thought seem to derive their significance from their marginality'.[1] Yet when an object of study is

[1] Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 1.



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described in this manner, justification of interest in him or her often, even if not always, acquires an unhistorical air. For if someone's ideas were truly 'marginal', then studying them is not likely to shed much light on the *Zeitgeist* of the epoch in which that person lived. Studying an allegedly marginal thinker often serves a double purpose: to reproach the past for its negligence and to employ that thinker's thoughts in the service of the present and future.

This book, however, presents a very different perspective. It presumes that Simmel, far from being a maverick, was a central intellectual figure for the historical moment in which he lived, and it is precisely this status that makes him a worthy object of historical attention. For studying a major thinker historically helps us not only to understand the train of his thought but also – and even more importantly – to partake of the spiritual atmosphere of the age and culture in which he operated, from which he absorbed his key questions and to which he contributed. With specific regard to Simmel, two things are important. First, he was a mind who reflected and synthesised in a profound and encompassing manner the major intellectual currents of German high culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, this reflection was not mere mirroring. Rather, Simmel creatively produced out of a very complex and sometimes chaotic tradition a highly idiosyncratic and at the same time elegant and relatively accessible synthesis that displayed a style of thinking and set of questions which translated the totality of this tradition perhaps better than anything produced by his contemporaries.

This assessment of Simmel is based on two arguments. One is brief and the other is very long. The brief argument appeals to a number of well-known biographical facts from which one unfortunately does not always draw correct inferences. These facts relate to Simmel's cultural role during his lifetime. Educated at the University of Berlin, Simmel quickly became part of the city's cultural elite, socialised on different occasions with almost every person of talent and significance, and even rose to the position of cultural authority, as in the case of the reception of Stefan George's early work. As for the professional realm, he became a highly popular lecturer of philosophy at his alma mater. It is true that for a long time Simmel failed to earn full professional recognition from the academic establishment, as only very late in life – in 1914 – was he awarded a full professorship and this at the University of Strasbourg which was relatively unimportant at that time. This and the many other obstacles he faced in his career are indeed important facts when examining his biography or the social dynamics within the German academia of his time. However, with regard to the

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historical significance and impact of his ideas, the more important fact by far is this: For almost thirty years he taught numerous and very well attended classes in philosophy at one of the most prestigious German universities[2] and this had implications that spread well beyond the walls of that specific university. It was common at that time for German students to change their home university from time to time in order to attend courses by different teachers and in different settings. Given the prestige of the discipline of philosophy and of the University of Berlin, as well as the high enrolment numbers in Simmel's classes, it is safe to assume that many of the most brilliant and philosophically inclined young minds of Germany at that time happened to attend Simmel's lectures at one point or another. Indeed, some of them gave accounts of their experience of being taught by Simmel.

Another fact should be added here: From the early 1900s onwards, Simmel's books and essays quickly grew in popularity and were widely read by the educated public. Moreover, in the last decade of his life, Simmel all but reached the status of spiritual guru for a specific segment of young students. As Kurt Gassen recalled:

> For us, Simmel's students in Berlin, it was . . . an irreplaceable loss when in spring 1914 he left the city after being active at the University of Berlin for almost 30 years in order to move to Strasbourg . . . Rarely perhaps has such a farewell ceremony been organised for a university teacher which was so deeply felt inside as for Simmel on that spring day when he spoke to us for the last time on a rostrum decorated with roses. At that moment, each of us became harrowingly aware that this was not merely a change of lecturer and another would now talk about the same factually endorsed problems. Rather, something ended for us for which there was no substitute and we now had to try and see whether we were capable of continuing to think and work in his spirit without his presence. Only this explains the ardent suspense and enthusiasm with which we anticipated and took possession of Simmel's every new book.[3]

It is no accident that in 1920, when Heinrich Rickert launched his critique against the new and fashionable trend of life-philosophy, he mentioned Simmel together with Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Nietzsche as one of its leading proponents.[4]

[2] Simmel's first lecture on the ethical teaching of Kant was delivered in the summer semester of 1885. See Kurt Gassen and Michael Landmann (eds.), *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1958), p. 345.

[3] Kurt Gassen, 'Erinnerungen an Simmel', in Gassen and Landmann (eds.), *Buch des Dankes*, p. 302.

[4] Cf. Heinrich Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens: Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1920), p. 28.

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That was the brief argument on behalf of my claim. The long one is embedded in my book as a whole. For the book's aim is indeed to reveal the extent to which Simmel's thought was integrated within the intellectual discourses of his time, occasionally pushing them to their limits and taking them to hitherto unexplored territories. My central task is therefore to identify those cultural and discursive patterns of the German intellectual tradition that were absorbed and transformed by Simmel in the course of his constructive dialogue with his contemporaries. Even if this study is not about Simmel's reception but rather about Simmel itself and, therefore, does not touch on the long-term impact of his ideas, the knowledgeable and inquiring reader will nonetheless easily spot those moments that testify to Simmel's legacy for the leading minds of the following generations.

This impact could have been even broader and more explicit but for a historical contingency: the German intellectual elite's loss of confidence in its own tradition following Germany's defeat in 1918, as many of the major figures broke with the cultural spirit of the *Kaiserreich* and succumbed to shallow radical fashions of different stripes. It is partly because of this loss of nerve by the intellectual mainstream that Simmel, who in many respects embodied the cultural yearnings of the *Kaiserreich* age, later began to be anachronistically treated as a maverick. One can only wonder what his intellectual legacy would have been had the country emerged victorious from the war. The defeat – and subsequent rise of National Socialism – had a distorting effect on our perception of the intellectual world of the Wilhelmine period. One of the tasks of the intellectual historian is, however, to treat the age under investigation as open-ended and to ignore what one knows about the future still to come.

This approach by no means dismisses the significance of reading Simmel through the lens of present concerns. However, it suggests that before doing this, one would be well-advised to take a step back and look carefully into the figure of the historical Simmel in the context of the German social and philosophical thought of his time. A contextually informed understanding of Simmel as a thinker is indeed a prerequisite for answering the question of what in his thought remains relevant for us today.

## Why Simmel as a German?

Exploring the German intellectual context will enable us to understand Simmel better. However, the opposite is also true. If I am correct in my suggestion that Simmel was among the most important thinkers of his time, then understanding his thought properly is crucial for a better

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understanding of the 'German mind' in general. I see Simmel as a thinker who performed the synthetic work of organising the various and disparate currents and ideas before him in a more or less coherent structure of mutually related conceptual distinctions and philosophical problems. He filtered the incessant stream of chaotic cultural and intellectual activity into patterns that can be outlined, schematised and analysed. He took the most fundamental concerns of the German educated classes of his time (or at least of their Protestant segment), their ways of perceiving the spiritual and social reality among and around them, and elevated them to a very sophisticated degree of reflection.

Simmel was exceptionally suited to this role because he was an academic philosopher who also spoke and appealed to a broader audience. In Germany, to be a philosopher had for a long time entailed much more than just being a philosopher. Philosophy in modern Germany was a major cultural marker. Philosophy and its emerging canon formed the core of national cultural identity. Philosophical literacy came to be considered a necessary component of general cultivation, and philosophical habits of mind penetrated other fields of culture, such as poetic expression.

It is true that by the end of the nineteenth century widespread concern had grown that the ongoing professionalisation of the academic world threatened to narrow the horizons of philosophy, potentially leading to it losing in significance for broad cultivation. Nevertheless, despite these worries, respect for philosophy still remained high and its presence in cultural pursuits of all kinds still visible. Yet this was a contingent situation. Philosophy was not necessarily born to play such a role. Moreover, it was quite unlikely for it to acquire such stature, given the degree of mental refinement and complexity required for good philosophical thinking. Indeed, if one looks at other contemporary societies, one finds that the role of principal cultural marker was played by cultural fields of other kinds. In France and Russia, for example, literature was by far more important; Italy assigned prominence to theatre and opera, while in Britain classical antiquity and moral philosophy seemed to be the primary path to cultivation. In Germany, however, philosophy and metaphysics emerged, together with music, as the main criteria of sophisticated cultivation. As a result, German general culture of the time was imbued with allusions to philosophers, their famous texts and their argumentation, which was emulated, if not in content, then at least in its formal patterns, such as dialectics – hence the propensity of German cultural discourse of the time to abstractness or, more precisely, to the constant combination of the immediately given and the metaphysical. For when the philosophical

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frame of mind governs every cultural sphere, from the minutest interaction to the highest achievements of artistic life, there can be no distance between everyday experience and the most refined philosophical abstraction. When Johann Gottlieb Fichte described the German language as peculiarly suitable for the pursuit of philosophy, due to the fact that its abstractions are derived from and based on the concreteness of the linguistic stems signifying empirical images in everyday language, he was simply expressing in the form of a theoretical argument what was intuitively familiar to German cultural self-understanding.[5]

In the early twentieth century, it was Simmel who most faithfully maintained philosophy's role as a cultural marker. In a situation in which a gap had begun to emerge between philosophy and culture in general, he was the custodian of the long-established alliance between the two. Simmel was, of course, an academic expert in philosophy by training. He interpreted the philosophical thought of others and took part in philosophical activities himself. As a young man, he displayed pride in philosophical professionalism, asserting that only 'once philosophy is recognised as a specialist science, which in its immanent course concerns in the first instance only the specialists, will it be able to navigate away from the anarchy that dominated and still dominates its output towards paths that are clear and set in their own existence'.[6] For a long time, historians of philosophy underestimated his philosophical importance,[7] yet more recent studies have remedied this omission to some degree, revealing the breadth of Simmel's philosophical contributions. These ranged from an unjustly forgotten early treatise on ethics entitled *Introduction to Moral Sciences* (1892/1893), to the dialectical architectonics of his *Philosophy of Money* (1900) and a popular exposition of the main philosophical dichotomies in his *Main Problems of Philosophy* (1910), to his final masterpiece *The View of Life* (1918), which produced an original synthesis of life-philosophy, Schopenhauerianism and neo-Kantianism.[8]

[5] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. G. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 37–49.
[6] 'Eine neue Popularisirung Kants' [1883], GSG 1, p. 181.
[7] There is an exception here: Simmel's reception in France. From the very beginning, Simmel's commentators in France acknowledged him as a philosopher of the first order, and the most comprehensive and penetrating studies of Simmel as a philosopher thus far were written in French. See A. Mamelet, *Le relativisme philosophique chez Georg Simmel* (Paris: Félix Aclan, 1914); François Léger, *La Pensée de Georg Simmel: Contribution à l'histoire des idées en Allemagne au début du XXe siècle* (Paris: Kime, 1989); Matthieu Amat, *Le relationisme philosophique de Georg Simmel: Une idée de la culture* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018).
[8] On Simmel's philosophy of life in the philosophical context, see Gregor Fitzi, *Soziale Erfahrung und Lebensphilosophie: Georg Simmels Beziehung zu Henri Bergson* (Constance: UVK, 2002); Olli Pyyhtinen,

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However, Simmel was not just a philosopher in the professional sense, and he very soon abandoned the scholarly snobbery expressed in the above quotation. He was also a philosopher in a much broader sense, employing his formidable dialectical abilities to reflect, often at the highest level of abstraction, on the burning issues of modern culture in general and of modern German culture in particular. In other words, he was a philosopher not only by profession but also by cultivation.

Simmel as a professional philosopher can be an important object of study for philosophers and historians of philosophy, but Simmel as a philosopher by cultivation is of especial interest to the intellectual historian, who is generally less concerned with the technical achievements and failures of a philosophical argument and whose main task is to understand the intellectual aspirations of a certain age through the prism of the innermost thoughts of its major thinkers. The philosophical brilliance of such minds simply serves here as a vehicle for re-enacting in the most condensed and coherent form the often incoherent hopes and demands, yearnings and doubts, thoughts and imaginations of manifold writers and thinkers of a more conventional or mediocre sort. Simmel the philosopher in this sense was just a translator and a voice for those thoughts and yearnings. He was an articulate witness to the principal questions and dilemmas that troubled the Germans of his – and of preceding – times.

In this respect a few words should be said regarding the issue of Simmel's Jewishness, a topic which has been treated extensively by prominent commentators such as Klaus Christian Köhnke and Amos Morris-Reich.[9] My approach is, to put it briefly, that Simmel was culturally and linguistically German, confessionally Protestant (up to his last years) and ethnically Jewish. This means that his Jewish identity had little if any role in his philosophical and cultural pursuits – he had no interest whatsoever in the Jewish cultural heritage and the Jewish religion, and he turned a cold shoulder to the Zionist aspirations. His writings on religiosity, for example, drew almost exclusively on the standard cultural Protestant discourse of the time. Jews occasionally figure as examples in his sociological publications, but not very often and certainly not with any more emphasis than other peoples and ethnic groups. To some prominent Jewish philosophers and sociologists Simmel felt close, for example, his teacher Moritz Lazarus and

'Life, Death and Individuation: Simmel on the Problem of Life Itself', *Theory, Culture & Society* 29(7–8), 2012, pp. 78–100.

[9] Cf. Klaus Christian Köhnke, 'Georg Simmel als Jude', *Simmel Newsletter* 5(1), 1995, pp. 53–72; Amos Morris-Reich, 'Georg Simmel's Logic of the Future: "The Stranger", Zionism, and "Bounded Contingency"', *Theory, Culture & Society* 36(5), 2019, pp. 71–94.

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his younger colleague Martin Buber. For these intellectuals, as for many others, Jewishness constituted an important part of their identity as thinkers. But not for Simmel.

Yet, while being indifferent to Jewishness culturally, Simmel was aware of himself as being Jewish ethnically and as being perceived as such. He socialised within a Jewish bourgeois milieu and was not shy about acknowledging his Jewish 'look' or poking fun at Jewish themes. Anti-Semites in turn disliked what they considered to be the peculiarly Jewish traits of his mind. Towards the end of his life Simmel gave voice to bitterness about anti-Semitic prejudice which, he believed, placed obstacles in the way of his academic career.[10]

This distinction between the two levels of identity – cultural and ethnic – has implications for Simmel research. Simmel as a Jew is indeed a fitting subject for any historical study that either puts a central emphasis on Simmel's personality and professional biography or treats him in the context of examining the role of Jews in the intellectual life of the German *Kaiserreich*.

This subject can also give rise to some ambitious philosophical interpretations. Indeed Jewish philosophical features were occasionally attributed to Simmel's ideas. Thus just after his death, legal and social theorist Elias Hurwicz referred to his 'dialectical' style as the most important mark of his being a 'Jewish thinker'.[11] And since then a number of studies have been published that examine Simmel's thought through the lens of Jewish philosophy or Jewish themes.[12] As long as these studies remain on the level of philosophical extrapolation, such interpretations are valid and fruitful. For an intellectual historian, however, they are too far-reaching. With a few exceptions, there is not much in Simmel's texts that can be positively attributed to any specifically Jewish concerns or cultural patterns. And it would be methodologically wrong to assume a priori that all aspects of the author's life experience are necessarily related to his ideas. One should always allow that ideas may develop autonomously from identity and that they are often determined by a logic of their own, and all the more so in refined thinkers.

[10] E.g., his letter to Heinrich Rickert, 13 December 1915, GSG 23, p. 578.
[11] Elias Hurwicz, 'Georg Simmel als jüdischer Denker', *Neue jüdische Monatshefte* 3, 1918/1919, pp. 196–198.
[12] E.g., Hans Liebeschütz, *Von Georg Simmel zu Franz Rosenzweig: Studien zum Jüdischen Denken im deutschen Kulturbereich* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970), pp. 103–141; Amos Morris-Reich, 'The Beautiful Jew Is a Moneylender: Money and Individuality in Simmel's Rehabilitation of the "Jew"', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(4), 2003, pp. 127–142; idem, 'Three Paradigms of "The Negative Jew": Identity from Simmel to Žižek', *Jewish Social Studies* 10(2), 2004, pp. 179–214.

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As I see it, then, the proper cultural and intellectual context for analysing Simmel's thought is those ideas, images and cultural patterns which apparently exercised the greatest and most lasting impact on his own. And as my study will try to show, these were unmistakably the sets of ideas and convictions that constituted the mainstream German cultural and philosophical canon.

## How to Understand Simmel?

The historical study of Simmel must be contextual and aim at the maximum degree of coherence in interpretation. As for the former, only a contextual study will allow us to understand both the recurring motifs in Simmel's thought and their adequacy for the dilemmas of his age. One should, however, be clear from the outset about the kind of contextual perspective one wishes to adopt. Scholars and theorists in the last decades have correctly stressed the futility of attempts to write intellectual history as a story of a series of influences between specific authors. Yet since leading studies in the field of intellectual history focused on periods such as early modernity, in which the scope of the relevant material, however wide it may have been, still allowed for a more or less comprehensive account of intertextual networks, this important methodological observation has often remained somewhat blurred in practice. By contrast, when one comes to the study of more recent times, such comprehensiveness is out of the question, given the sheer number of authors, texts and readers, the growing fragmentation of discursive communities, and the acceleration and intensification of reading practices.

It is occasionally possible to identify specific texts or personalities that directly influenced Simmel. Many such influences have already been discovered, and the present study will add its own share of findings. Nevertheless, focusing merely on connections between individual texts and personalities can hardly be adequate. Simmel lived and was active at a time when extensive reading of diverse texts became a cultural habit. He was himself an avid reader who became familiar with almost every publication of importance, ranging from periodicals to scholarly monographs. Besides, he had an ecumenical mind which aimed to do justice to the entirety of the intellectual life of his time. For this reason, it is more important to identify not the specific textual fragments which may or may not have borne direct influence on his thought but instead the set of relevant discourses, or patterns of thinking, in relation to which his ideas

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can be made intelligible.[13] The role of the intellectual historian here is, broadly speaking, that of a translator rather than a biographer or philosopher. It is to make the thinker's texts readable, or at least less puzzling or misleading, by elucidating the specific languages he spoke to present-day readers for whom those languages are at best comprehended imperfectly. What I therefore strive to do is to identify the set of intellectual languages that are relevant for understanding Simmel's own thought and vice versa, to better understand those languages by studying Simmel as one of their most interesting and influential practitioners.

As for the question of coherence, it is related to contextualism understood as the examination of intellectual languages because no language, being to a certain extent a system, can entirely lack in inner coherence. Therefore, the historical study of Simmel, supported by contextual analysis of the relevant intellectual languages, must aim at revealing the scope of inner coherence that can be assigned to his thought as it evolved while practising those languages.

There is a stereotype that Simmel was a fragmentary thinker who failed to develop a coherent philosophical worldview of his own. This reading, voiced already during Simmel's lifetime and further propagated by the younger generation of critics with fratricidal inclinations, is often accepted at face value by modern-day commentators. To take just one recent example, a study of Simmel's thought from the standpoint of his aesthetics begins with the assertion that Simmel's writings do not form a whole and that he was a heterogeneous thinker whose contradictions cannot be brought to a common ground.[14] This assertion is an important correction to the superficial attempts to derive a formal unity from Simmel's thought by either subsuming his writings under one master idea, such as interaction, life or culture, or by reducing them to one master field, so that they are presented as aspects of a grand sociological, culturological or metaphysical theory. A danger of this focus on heterogeneity is, however, that it may end in a one-sided understanding of Simmel's thought as a whole or even lead to a distorted view of the particular field under investigation. For none of Simmel's works or notions are self-contained and self-explanatory. They

[13] I am influenced here by the methodological outlook espoused by J. G. A. Pocock in 'Languages and Their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought', in *Politics, Language & Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 3–41. Cf. my own exposition of this approach in Efraim Podoksik, 'How Is Modern Intellectual History Possible?', *European Political Science* 9(3), 2010, pp. 304–315.

[14] Ingo Meyer, *Georg Simmels Ästhetik: Autonomiepostulat und soziologische Referenz* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2017), p. 11.

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