

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Schermer, Henry and David Jary. *Form and Dialectic in Georg Simmel's Sociology. A New Interpretation.* New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 328 pp., \$95.00 (9781137276018)

Although Georg Simmel was introduced to the English speaking world in translation as early as 1896 (the *American Journal of Sociology* will publish 15 of his pieces, between 1896 and 1910, thanks to Albion W. Small's dedicated work), and even if he was an acknowledged influence on authors ranging from Robert E. Park to Donald Levine and beyond, very few recent attempts have been made to provide a systematic, analytic account of Simmel's sociology. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that both "systematic" and "sociology" meet a certain resistance in relation to his work. In any case, only David Frisby's *Georg Simmel*, published in 1984, attempted an analysis that goes beyond the previous, more general (often too general) interpretations of Simmel (by Lewis Coser, Donald Levine or Kurt Wolff, for example). This, in itself, is a good reason to welcome Henry Schermer and David Jary's new book; indeed, their efforts give us a novel, invigorating, and profound interpretation of Simmel's sociological views.

From the beginning, the book offers a clear and systematic project: to expose the core of Simmel's ideas on the interpretation of social life, located primarily in the concept of "reciprocal effect" (*Wechselwirkung*), which is foundational to Simmel's "'relational' and dialectical approach" (2-3). Divided into four parts, and spread over nine chapters, the book covers the essentials of Simmel's "method" of sociological analysis – synthesizing the key points of "fundamental dualism," "general polarities," "dualities of social interaction," "social dualities," and examples of "forms (and types) of interaction/sociation" – through which the authors achieve both an in-depth and encompassing view of Simmel's works. On the surface, these works can appear theoretically dispersed, and have often been labelled as "impressionistic." With books on the philosophy of money, individual and society, and the philosophy of history, as well as essays on religion, culture and philosophy (Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer), Simmel often left his readers with incredible insight, but little sense of the possible further sociological applications of his views. As Schermer and Jary write: "For sociologists such as Simmel and Goffman, flair and 'intuition' (and bricolage), as well as logic or method – in

Simmel's case grounded in the dualities – are certainly integral to the effectiveness of their analysis. Because of this their approaches cannot be readily emulated" (158). While Schermer and Jary do not pretend to entirely resolve this problematic aspect, they at least show that there was an inherent logical coherence among Simmel's contributions to a discipline he helped to establish. They also open up the possibility that sociology may benefit from this extraordinary contribution, since, as they put it in a key passage: "Once made explicit, the approach can of course be applied beyond the areas of social activity examined by Simmel. Duality in his approach is – as the most abstract expression of inner contradictoriness – at the core of every form. For him the resolution of a polarity, of duality, may be either theoretical or practical, the latter when a 'form' or 'form of life' is given content. This is then the method and general context that, we suggest, is the underpinning of what is widely acknowledged as the remarkable insight achieved by Simmel's sociology, in which familiar, and often seemingly trivial and previously underexplored, aspects of social and cultural life are revealed as structured social and cultural forms." (45-46). The strength of their argument lies, then, in an interpretation that tries to organize and systematize the whole of Simmel's thought and work on the basis of the concept of "reciprocal effect." In positioning this reciprocity as the essential motive behind Simmel's evolutionary thinking within a philosophy of life, where the relation between the individual and society is defined as a never-ending flux in which the subjective spirit of personal pursuits runs into the objective spirit of cultural realizations (and vice-versa) – only to renew the forms of their encounter – the authors usefully identify the logic underlying Simmel's sociology. As seen, for example, in Simmel's views on the "tragedy of culture" (whereby the objectified world created by individuals turns against them by alienating their own individualities), this sociology is also tightly connected with its historical circumstances, where the massive shift from modernity toward postmodernity was awaiting significant interpretations. And while Schermer and Jary show how Simmel tried to formulate such interpretations in a way that did not exhaust the diverse possible outcomes (for city life, for historical development, for economy, for the arts, etc.), they also implicitly reveal how his method ultimately proved insufficient to circumvent Weber's pessimistic account of some of the same issues. The "tragedy of culture" as portrayed by Simmel – which Ernst Cassirer would revisit a couple of decades later in order to criticize its lack of dialogical content – remains trapped in its own limits, which largely rest on a misunderstanding of the symbolic character of a human life always able to rebound and reverse its own limitations. This also happened, for instance, with *communication* when it replaced *reason* as a key epi-

stemic concept. In the case of Simmel, it was his own form of Kantian logic and dialectic that prevented him from expressing a new synthesis through a complete transfiguration of social categories – even though he was certainly able to provide analytically innovative ways of interpreting social life, introducing themes that led to many new and productive perceptions of things. As Schermer and Jary clearly show, Simmel was part of an era when the fruitful developments of scientific discourse allowed for the possibility of significant debate among a vast and varied array of authors (philosophers and scientists alike, from Hegel to Nietzsche, from Darwin to Bergson). And yet the epistemological foundations of these debates often remained confused in Kantian and neo-Kantian positions that limited their scope, as the alternative between the “natural sciences” and the “cultural sciences,” to which Simmel adhered, eloquently shows. However, such problems should certainly not prevent us from appreciating Simmel’s sociological views, but they can perhaps alert us in some ways of the limitations of his logical approach to the discipline. This is perhaps one key aspect of Schermer and Jary’s enterprise that they do not carry to its most fruitful conclusions.

While this can be seen as a shortcoming of their book, they certainly do offer a comprehensive and highly valuable review of Simmel’s main achievements, delving in particular into his analysis of fashion, the poor, and secret societies (chapters 3 to 5, the three chapters of Part II, “Exemplifications”). In this section, we are led to a deeper understanding of Simmel’s capacity to touch upon the surface of social life in order to reveal its subtly ordered depth. The same can be said of their examination of “further aspects and implications of Simmel’s method” (Part III), with chapters devoted to “absolute and relative,” “‘fictions’ and social life,” and “evolutionism” (chapters 6 to 8), which offer several instructive and insightful analyses of the Simmelian sociological project. As such, they are not truly “hypotheses” of interpretations of social life, but rather stand on their own as brilliant contributions to the development of a sociology in the making, a sort of *illustration* of the possibilities that this new discipline could offer to those who would venture to seriously take “society” as a scientific object of reflection. Perhaps this is why the authors insist that Simmel’s *sociological aesthetics* should figure as the place where he “comes closest to formulating explicitly the terms of at least some central elements of a general model” (34). If that’s the case, then we might well have in Simmel an example of how the form of analysis (or the *formal* analysis) demonstrates the best of its realizations – to the detriment of its more strictly logical appeal.

In their attempt to locate Simmel within our contemporary sociological context, primarily in the last chapter of the book, Schermer and

Jary provide an excellent overview of Simmel's reception in Europe and North America (mostly in the English speaking world, and key reference to some German authors like Habermas) over the last few decades. They cover a wide range of approaches, from hermeneutics to phenomenology, from structuration theory to critical theory, in order to show both the similarities and differences that Simmel might have with them. All this allows us to appreciate, finally, Simmel's place in the discipline of sociology. David Frisby concluded his 1984 book with Simmel's oft-quoted words: "I know that I shall die without spiritual heirs (and that is good). The estate I leave is like cash distributed among many heirs, each of whom puts his share to use in some trade that is compatible with his nature but which can no longer be recognised as coming from that estate." Then Frisby asks: "Is it not time to challenge Simmel's own judgement on the fate of his work?" (137). Schermer and Jary have indeed responded to this challenge – in a much different way than Frisby himself did – and do a very fine job at that.

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