

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

David Beer. *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thoughts: Worlds, Lives, Fragments.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 197 pp. hardcover (9783030129903), ebook (9783030129910).

The back cover of Georg Simmel's *The View of Life* (1918/2010) quotes Max Horkheimer saying in 1956: "Georg Simmel is the only sociologist one can read anymore." I once asked the late Donald Levine, who led the team that translated the *Lebensanschauung*, about the source of that statement. It was Horkheimer's response when Levine, then a graduate student, told him he was writing his dissertation on Simmel. Levine was one of a handful of scholars who championed Simmel's work, and that circle is now joined by David Beer, professor at University of York and best known for his work on digital media. Beer offers a clear, systematic interpretative introduction to Simmel's two last books, *Rembrandt* and *The View of Life*. But is Horkheimer still right: is Simmel the *only* sociologist one can read, and for whom is he worth reading? Beer reminds me how much I have always been and remain a Simmelian.

The View of Life (VL) was written while Simmel was dying of cancer in 1918 and has the aura of a last testament. The book was translated into English only in 2010, and my review in this journal appeared the following year. VL is both clearly written and profoundly obscure, which is to say, its obscurities confront the reader with limits of what can be said and known. By *life* Simmel sometimes means a vitalist principle, and other times he means the experience of living, being alive. The literally translated subtitle of VL is *Four Metaphysical Essays*, and the sense in which these essays are metaphysical is another depth that cannot ever be plumbed—maybe that is what *metaphysical* means. Most simply, *metaphysical* means that VL is written without anecdote or examples. Its style is philosophical, but its concerns are, to me and other Simmelians, fundamental to what sociology seeks to understand.

Beer writes two chapters on *Rembrandt*, which he tells us was Simmel's best-selling book during his lifetime, and then four chapters laying out the arguments in each of the essays in VL. The concerns of *Rembrandt* are continuous with the argument in VL, and although Beer does not get into Simmel's analyses of specific paintings, readers probably have enough images in their minds to give these chapters an empirical grounding that then carries into the more abstract chapters. Beer is can-

did, to my reading refreshingly so, about when it's difficult to determine exactly what Simmel is talking about. But on the whole, his interest is to explicate Simmel, not to critique him. Beer is also less interested in relating Simmel to his contemporaries, either sociological or philosophical. He gives us an introduction to a book that contains so much, and so much goes by so quickly, that it needs slowing down. After reading Beer, any reader will go to VL, or go back to it, better able to notice more, and that's a fine contribution. Beer would be the first to appreciate that to attempt to contain VL in some critical framework is to miss entirely what Simmel was seeking to tell us in his last testament. Life can never be summed up or finalized; any view invites further views.

Simmel's argument can be stated simply in its most general form (pun intended), and then the complications that follow are endless. The crucial opening premise is that life, in itself, is "formless" (25). The *work*, a frequently repeated word, of consciousness is to give life *form* that will make it comprehensible, manageable to perception, and liveable. Beer begins by quoting Simmel's late essay, "The Conflict in Modern Culture", where Simmel defines *culture* as occurring "whenever life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself: works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws, and innumerable others" (25). The academic and professional faculties into which universities are divided provide one convenient list of what Simmel means by *forms*, and the artificiality of these divisions—the constant need for actual research to breach the boundaries between faculties and disciplines—illustrates the tension that is the dynamic and topic of Simmelian sociology. *Life*, as enacted by humans, produces forms that express life and allow specific realizations, but the forms are too constricting. Life realizes itself through forms, but then it resists them. Beer quotes Simmel: "forms ... do not share the relentless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications" (25). Life is always exceeding the forms it produces to realize itself—that's the fundamental tension for sociology to explore.

The forms that Simmel explored in greatest detail are art and religion, and Rembrandt's art is Beer's main example of life in tension with forms. In my own work, the relevant form is *healthcare*, which among forms claims most specifically to define and to regulate life. The work of Michel Foucault on clinics, definitions of pathology, and governmentality of bodies in the name of health is thus Simmelian: it's about how forms give form to otherwise formless life, but then life *resists*, and Foucault is always writing about this resistance. I am undecided whether it's useful to call this process a *dialectic*; Simmel may have good reasons not to label too precisely the never-ending process of tension between

life and form. Abstract as this process might seem, it indicates a research program: how does the care of life require a form such as healthcare? At which points of tension does that form eventually become too constraining? And how does life break out, in acts of resistance?

As I understand Simmel, and one of Beer's contributions is to remind us how tentative we must be in thinking we ever do understand him, life is both a process *of itself*, and life is what is experienced at the level of individual consciousness and perception. Beer does not, as far as I noticed, use the word *phenomenology*; the term is not in the index. But more in VL than in Simmel's earlier work that is better known to sociologists, he is always concerned with how consciousness organizes what it experiences as perception into what it knows as a *world*, and how worlds then organize the necessarily selective work of perception. That takes us back to forms: a *world* in Simmel's usage is the organization of perception by forms (99, 110, 118, 131, 152, 181). This organizing is about "how the bits combine" (36). We experience life as bits, fragments, which consciousness then has to organize to *produce* a coherent sense of experience. Forms structure that production, but they always leave something out. That remainder is what Simmel understands as what keeps life interesting, vital, never quite expressible. If there is a fundamental error, in everyday life, science, or professional practice it is the belief that any form encompasses all.

At times VL can be read as Simmel turning against sociology. Beer details Simmel's arguments against thinking with types and stages (54, 56, 60), which are what many sociologists consider Simmel's most useful contributions to methodology. They are useful, but their use can conceal what they reduce. Types and stages flatten out, they condense the unique, individual, even eccentric. What is left unseen are the beginnings of resistance to the form expressed by the type. Here, with so much still unsaid, this review can find a tentative ending. Beer doesn't say so directly on my reading, but he led me to understand how sociology itself is a form like other forms. Sociology is a way of life becoming conscious of itself, but that self-consciousness necessarily reduces life, to render it expressible in so many words.

Sociology may be truest to life when some colleagues' observations crack open the sociological forms known as theory and method (the forms within the form). Sociology is most like life in moments of its own overcoming. *Overcoming* is fundamental as both a theme to be described and a value; life depends on overcoming. Understandably given the situation in which Simmel wrote, his longest sustained discussion in VL considers how death is intrinsic to life, especially giving life tem-

poral form. If a book ever wrote its way to overcoming death, it's the *Lebensanschauung*.

We can be grateful to Beer for a most useful introduction to Simmel's last profound gift of a book. Complex as the ideas are, Beer's expression of them would be accessible to advanced undergraduates, although most readers will be specialists in theory. Who reads Simmel anymore depends on who takes seriously the question of life itself and how human consciousness shapes the possibilities for living.

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