



Georg Simmel (1858 – 1918)

Georg Simmel is known for his contributions to sociology and philosophy. In 1881, Simmel received his PhD from the University of Berlin. (Later, Heidelberg University granted him an honorary doctorate.) His dissertation used the Kantian theory of monads as this pertained to the nature of matter. Unfortunately, there was some debate as to whether his dissertation should be accepted as there were numerous spelling errors, and passages cited in foreign languages that the examining committee could not read.



From 1885 to 1914, the University of Berlin employed Simmel as an unpaid lecturer and then an honorary professor. However, in 1914 the University of Strasbourg gave him a paid professorship in philosophy as he had gained renown for his skill in lecturing. Georg Simmel was prolific in his production of articles that covered a variety of topics including sociology, art, aesthetics, ethics, history, psychology, and literature. Unfortunately, his prodigiousness opened him to the criticism of being a dabbler, even perhaps lacking in overall expertise. This criticism, together with an anti-Semitic undercurrent in the academia of Germany, hindered his professional development.

Despite his expertise in instruction, Simmel felt that he would be “without spiritual heirs” with the exceptions of Max Weber and Simmel’s protégé, Gyorgy Lukacs. Through Lukacs, Simmel’s presence was felt in the Frankfurt School’s particular use of objectivity and rationality. Simmel’s self-assessment has generally been proven to be true in that few people claim direct intellectual heritage from him. However, his influence was felt in the Chicago/Ecological School of sociology which combined ethnography and theory in an urban setting. Even though Simmel did not found a school, great interest has nonetheless been placed in his writings especially in the anglophile world in the 1950s once translations become more readily available.

From 1889 to 1909, Georg Simmel fostered the German Sociological Association into existence despite his lamentations that he was seen as a sociologist since he considered sociology to be an ancillary field of study to that of philosophy. Simmel returned to his primary intellectual interest in 1905 when he revised “The Problems of the Philosophy of History” and then in 1907 when he tackled the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer in a treatise.



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In 1887, Georg Simmel became the first instructor to teach sociological principles at a German university. He attempted to plot a course in sociology that was distinct from the work of Auguste Comte or Herbert Spencer. In this regard, he worked toward a more formal sociology that handled form and content separately. His critics pointed to his insistence on dichotomy and a writing style which obscured the assertion he was attempting to make. Also problematizing Simmel's reputation was the dubious translation of his most important work, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*.

In 1892, Simmel's *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (translated into English as *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*) was published. In this text, Simmel used a Kantian frame to investigate the contemporary world. Eight years later, Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes* (The Philosophy of Money) was released.

Philosophie des Geldes is commonly seen as Simmel's most pivotal work. In it, Simmel utilizes his historical, psychological, political and social lenses to open the subject to as much scrutiny as possible while he looks for the substrata of the "historical materialism" of the subject. Simmel's writings see these undercurrents of the topic as a continuation of metaphysical machinery. Another significant aspect of Simmel's project of Modernism was to continually renew and revise a concept. Such counter positions would later develop into Modern skepticism and Post-Modern cynicism. In this work, Simmel identified currency as "a social function become a substance." He furthered this concept by locating the instability of money, its ability to be transmitted with the dissatisfaction and impulse for movement in Modernity. He argued that money is a cause and effect for the contemporary world. Ultimately Simmel paradoxically identified money as dependent on freedom but also as a source of estrangement. This work met with mixed reviews, and Emile Durkheim derided it as being unsubstantiated although Max Weber praised the importance of the theory and observations.

Although Hegel influenced Georg Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes*, nonetheless much of his work used synecdoche in a dialect in a single direction. This allowed Simmel to better capture the ambiguity of Modernity. Simmel identified the cause of this ambiguousness as the uncertainty that arose from the processes of Modernization. For all of his Metaphysical urges, Georg Simmel's ultimate project was not to find the essential nature behind his subjects but to align various disciplines to its study. However, this project did not exclude the desire for innate meaning of experience. Perhaps the tension between his troubled methodologies and his search for meaning in a fragmentary world was what breathed life into his work.



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Some see Simmel as establishing a phenomenology which was better suited for investigating the Modern individual's nearly-but-not-quite awareness of the deprivation of essential meaning. In one characteristic passage, Elizabeth Goodstein quotes from *Philosophie des Geldes*, in which Simmel's thought become apparent:

I believe that the secret agitation, the restless compulsion just below consciousness that drives the human being of today from socialism to Nietzsche, from Böcklin to Impressionism, from Hegel to Schopenhauer and back again is not simply a consequence of the external haste and excitement of modern life, but that on the contrary it is often the expression, the manifestation, the discharge of that most inner circumstance.

In "Georg Simmel Reappears: 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face,'" James T Siegel acknowledges that "It seems it is Simmel's fate to be dismissed yet still to be recognized." Many view Simmel's work as having an as yet untapped potential, despite the obfuscation of his writing. Even Max Weber, one of the few who embraced Georg Simmel, acknowledged his writing and methodology were flawed. Siegel argued that the innate power of Georg Simmel's work is the power to suggest. More than this, Simmel influenced a new style of reflection, opening subjects to new methods of philosophic interrogation. Some of his readers, however, viewed his style as representing a Modern approach to philosophical writing. If true, this interpretation would fit the framework of Simmel's philosophical view that Modernity was a disconnection and a fragmenting of social identity from its traditional method. Some authors like Elizabeth Goodstein go so far as to argue that Simmel's stylistics reach a Nietzschean fervour that balances with the content to better express the troubled spirit of the Modern age.

In her essay "Style as Substance: Georg Simmel's Phenomonolgy of Culture," Goodstein argues that Simmel was able to link the superficial to the most profound movements. In putting what seemed unimportant to examination, Simmel was able to give voice to the realities of a world in flux. His work was not concerned with the high or low cultural value assigned to a field of study. Georg Simmel's frame of study insisted, true to his Kantian heritage, that the objects and states of modernity reflected a more essential and deeper reality.

Beyond Georg Simmel's professional life, he and his wife, Gertrude Kinel, offered their home to the thinkers and artists of Germany including Ranier Maria Rilke, Lou Andreas-Salome, and Stefan George. Simmel also corresponded with former student, Martin Buber. Moreover, Ernst Cassirer



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studied Immanuel Kant with Simmel. Walter Benjamin also took courses with Georg Simmel, whose work helped shaped Benjamin's philosophy. In this way, amongst others, Georg Simmel's guidance helped many of the best minds of the early twentieth century find their voices. The social influence of Georg Simmel, like his intellectual influence, is remarkable in its scope but unclear in its directness.

The writings of Georg Simmel include *Die Probleme de Geschichtsphilosophie, Einleitung in die Moralphilosophie: Eine Kritik der ethischen Grundbegriffe, Philosophie des Geldes, Soziologie: Untersuchungen uber die Formen der Vergesellschaftung, Uber soziale Differenzierung, Das Problem der Soziologie, Das Problem der Soziologie, and Lebensanschauung: Vier metaphysische Kapital.*

Source: Adapted from <http://www.egs.edu/library/georg-simmel/biography/>



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