



# The Inimitable Sociologist: Revisiting Georg Simmel's Seminal Texts

Kevin George

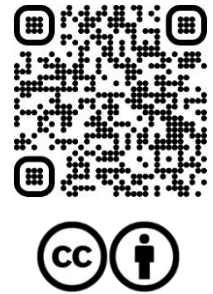
Department of English, K.E College, MG University, Kottayam, Kerala, India

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**Abstract**— In 1858, Georg Simmel was born in Berlin. The conflicts of Germany's unique road to modernity were best exemplified by that metropolis. Financial speculation and rapid urbanisation fueled Berlin's ascent to global prominence. While a young proletariat (Georg Simmel) fought the government and the bourgeoisie for political and economic rights, an avant-garde cultural elite coexisted uncomfortably with the central European aristocracy. The landed Prussian Junker aristocracy, the cornerstone of Bismarck's unified German Reich, was eroded because of the proliferation of modern technologies that created power and riches. The Hohenzollern dynasty, one of the oldest in Europe, ruled over a tumultuous realm while being enamoured with the most contemporary concepts.



**Keywords**— Simmel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Money, Marxism, Lukács

## I. INTRODUCTION

Simmel received his schooling at the University of Berlin, which was rife with the critical, historicist attitude of neo-Kantianism. However, Simmel found it challenging to follow.

Simmel received his schooling at the University of Berlin, which was rife with neo-Kantianism's critical, historicist attitude. Simmel struggled to fit into Germany's stuffy academic society, though. Because it was "speculative, aphoristic, and stylistically careless," his first dissertation on ethnomusicology was rejected. Although he received his PhD and habilitation in 1881 and 1885, his examiners may have had a point when they noted that many of his published writings lacked references and rejected scholarly narrowness. Simmel's contemporary, Gustav von Schmoller, described his manner as preferring to "provide more caviar than black bread" and "illuminate with a firework rather than a study lamp."

Simmel was primarily an essayist and was uncomfortable writing in the treatise, taxonomy, or monograph form. The essay form, in the words of his fellow German academic Theodor Adorno, "does not let its domain be prescribed for

it," The essay does not adhere to established scientific and theoretical principles. Essays often have a stronger impact when they make light gestures towards hidden dimensions and the interconnectedness of events rather than formulating a thorough system. The perception is of a briefly illuminated entire that quickly dims, leaving one with the sensation that more could be found with the help of another burst of brilliance.

Take the opening lines of Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903):

"The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, historical heritage, external culture, and technique of life."

Simmel sets up a thorough investigational framework with ease. In addition to this, we hear from this specific person as well, who battled for survival in a terrible environment. Simmel cherished his world, nevertheless. Later, he thought, "Perhaps I could have accomplished something equally valuable in another city, but this particular achievement, that I have realised over these decades, is

unquestionably bound up with the Berlin milieu." Berlin's self-consciousness can therefore be detected in his articles.

Money and the city are the two intertwined social forms at the focus of the analysis in "The Metropolis and Mental Life." As they gain power, they weaken established social norms and natural production cycles. The fact that money doesn't care about birthrights and just cares about what everyone has in common—the trade value—is liberating. The cost of money, however, is that it turns something that is particularly valued into a number, a price. Fine handcrafted items are equivalent to mass-produced rubbish when the ratio is right. Since nothing that can be purchased is unique, this devalues commodities while driving the hunt for anything truly unique and extraordinarily precious.

The city accelerates the calculable logic of money, encroaching even on our experience of time.

As Simmel wrote:

"If all clocks and watches in Berlin would suddenly go wrong in different ways, even if only by one hour, all economic life and communication in the city would be disrupted for a long time."

Seasons and celestial bodies no longer control time; rather, it is abstracted and measured. Additionally, the city condenses both social and geographical space. Diverse linguistic groups, cultural groups, social classes, and occupations are brought together. The metropolis threatened to engulf Friedrich Nietzsche's magnificent individualism in a mass, which is why, as Simmel noted, he preached furiously against it.

Simmel read Nietzsche extensively and shared his romantic fascination with "an endless succession of contrasts," but he kept his distance from the latter's aristocratic radicalism. Simmel didn't find the extremes he was looking for in the Sils Maria mountains, but rather in the urban multitude, where one might experience the peculiarly contemporary loneliness of passing a thousand faces without identifying a friend. Noble heights and deplorable depths were formed by Nietzsche's peaks and valleys. Instead, Simmel's city fostered blasé citizens who, out of fear of being absorbed, set themselves apart with an outward air of cold indifference.

Simmel claimed that blasé people look for quality in their final refuge - individuality - after becoming disillusioned by advertising and overstimulation:

"Man is tempted to adopt the most tendentious peculiarities, that is, the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, preciousness ... the meaning of these extravagances ... [lies] in its form of

'being different', of standing out strikingly and thereby attracting attention."

The symbolist poet Stefan George and author, psychiatrist, and former Nietzsche favourite Lou Andreas-Salomé were guests of Simmel. Simmel provided this cultural elite with a mirror in exchange for their financial support. The brightest of central Europe's intelligentsia attended his much-praised public talks. Before the First World War, people as disparate as Leon Trotsky, Siegfried Kracauer, Karl Mannheim, Georg Lukács, Karl Jaspers, and Emil Lask knelt at Simmel's lectures for a brief period.

He found an audience in Chicago as early as the 1890s, and his global impact was easily comparable to that of Simmel's colleagues Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. But he consistently lost out on academic promotion. Simmel was given a guardian because his father had passed away when he was still a little child and had left him a sizeable income to support his intellectual endeavours. Simmel remained a Privatdozent, a lecturer whose compensation is based on their ability to draw pupils, from 1885 to 1900. Simmel did not discriminate because of his wealth, and in defiance of social norms, he invited women to his lectures.

Simmel associated with socialist groups in the 1890s and even contributed to their newspaper, *Vorwärts*, despite antisocialist legislation from the Bismarck era. The fact that he mixed with the wrong crowd and drew the wrong students created further obstacles to academic success.

Finally, in 1898, he was elevated to the exceptional title of "professor without a chair," *Ausserordentlicher Professor*, which was paid at half the rate. Simmel was also prohibited from hiring PhD students because of this. He may have believed that his masterpiece, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), would conclusively prove his qualifications for a full professorship.

One year after the publication of the updated edition of *The Philosophy of Money*, a 100-mark Reichsbanknote from 1908 that is closely examined reveals a lot. The '100' is the first thing that catches the attention, followed by the crimson serial numbers and the Reichsbankdirektorium seal. The value of the note is once again stated in elegant blackletter form between these signatures, which are also accompanied by promises of authenticity and the date the note was issued. The design alludes to Germany's romantically tinged nationalism and is significantly distinct from the Enlightenment elements found on French or American banknotes. On the reverse, a woman representing Imperial Germany rests among symbols of art, science, and industry while being well-armed but at peace.

An old oak that represents Donar, the German name for Thor, stands behind her, while in the distance, a procession of coal-powered battleships passes.

These aesthetics blend the abstract with the concrete: a numerical number is on one pole, images of a country's wealth and virtues are on the other, and in between are meaningless, borderline mystical legal assurances. All of this is appropriate. Money is a special kind of social object that is meaningless on its own but is given power by a government-run bank and is historically backed by gold. Money can be used to represent real commodities as diverse as healthcare, commerce, or even the cultural pleasure (and sub-Dionysian revelry) one could anticipate for the cost of a Bayreuth Ring Cycle ticket.

Money is nothing, but it flows everywhere and mediates everything. In keeping with this mysterious quasi-transcendental status, Simmel's method combined aesthetics and philosophy.

The "great advantage of art over philosophy", he explained:

"is that it sets itself a single, narrowly defined problem every time: a person, a landscape, a mood. Every extension of one of these to the general, every addition of bold touches of feeling for the world is made to appear as an enrichment, a gift, an undeserved benefit."

The 'infinite reciprocity' of the reason is what philosophy, on the other hand, demands this aesthetic heuristic surrender to. As a result, a critical money philosophy is produced, which is honest about its subjective, aesthetic basis and necessary incompleteness.

The central premise of Simmel's work is the conceptualization of exchange, which he defines as a "third term, an ideal concept which enters into the duality but is not exhausted by it," or an act between two persons that produces value. Value can take on a life of its own in the form of money because of this irreducibility, which Simmel calls "the reification of exchange among people, the embodiment of pure function." No one ever promised that trade would always be equitable; as bandits and health insurance providers know, people will do anything to survive. However, as exchanges increase, prices and currencies rationalise and standardise value.

Like Heraclitus' river, money always moves while being unchanged. Money is a non-economic value because it has no purpose other than to circulate. However, as the market expands, the 'teleological chain' of transactions grows longer, pushing nonmonetary goals further away and increasing their value. Consider love as an example. Love, which seeks to bridge the gap between the self and the loved one, flourishes as we become more nameless and

removed from one another. According to Simmel, "Love is the true human condition for man, who is always striving, never satisfied, and always becoming." This is also the reason that, as he points out in his essay on prostitution, money may buy sex but not love.

Money fosters a need for quality time by turning time into a quantifiable amount, like an hourly income. This could be a night out, a vacation, or a period during which time passes quickly or during which one simply loses track of time. An adventurer is someone who designs his life around qualitative time, as Simmel contends in his article "The Adventure." Although it could seem like the explorer has talent, all he does is aestheticize the blind, careless chance that makes such a life possible. Therefore, failure or retirement—which are essentially the same—marks the end of every experience. The true escape for the adventurer is romance, which promises to make everyday life wonderful.

Simmel didn't glorify the monetary economy. Not only did he link it with disenchantment, but he was also aware of its victims: with the extension of the economy, a 'larger proportion of civilised man remains forever enslaved, in every sense of the word, in the interest in technics'. In such passages, we can see Karl Marx's influence on Simmel, and Simmel's on both Lukács and Martin Heidegger. While Simmel avoided the radical politics associated with these two, his character types become more radical. For instance, Simmel speaks of the modern cynic, who is intoxicated by the awareness that money can reduce the highest and the lowest qualities to the same basic form:

The nurseries of cynicism are therefore those places with huge turnovers, exemplified in stock exchange dealings, where money is available in huge quantities and changes owners easily.

Cynics, who are spiritually worn down, have persuaded themselves that only base commerce and consumption are true.

Every cynic is a lover who was dumped. The individual with a blasé attitude, on the other hand, is aware that it is preferable to have loved and lost. The blasé are one step away from letting go of their apathy and becoming the sanguine enthusiast, the cynic's antithesis, the moment that love seems feasible once more.

Simmel argues for absolute relativism in *The Philosophy of Money*. This was in line with widespread neo-Kantian sensibilities, which were scorched by the failure of Hegelian absolute idealism in the middle of the 19th century and now focused on the reliability of specific, constrained facts. One correct statement does, however, presuppose several dependent meanings, assumptions, and

assertions, whereas one swallow might not make it to spring.

It would be necessary to fully understand this endless chain of truth, which is an object that is too large to comprehend or to start at the beginning, with the most basic truths from which all others flow, albeit doing so runs the risk of reductionism. Simmel disapproved of both tactics.

Instead, he concluded that "truth is valid, precisely on account of its relativity, not despite it." Simmel predicted that the individual's search for the truth would ultimately fall short and turn out to be just as viciously cyclical as the flow of money. Relativism, a concept of perpetual change, was therefore the only workable absolute. The expropriator will now be expropriated, as Marx writes of a process that is comparable in form, and nothing left except the relativistic breakdown of objects into relations and processes, according to Simmel, who saw this as liberating. There is a tragic component to this, though, because loving the truth means loving something we feel compelled to pursue even though it is constantly out of reach. Like Herman Hesse's protagonist in *Steppenwolf* (1927), Simmel chased an elusive absolute.

Consider a tree that has been raised over many years from wild stock to produce lots of wonderful fruit. Now contrast it with the mast of a ship that was made from the same tree. The latter has undergone a thorough transformation. It results from instrumental reasoning. The fruit tree, on the other hand, was created by human invention, but its result "ultimately springs from the tree's motive forces and only fulfils the possibilities which are sketched out in its tendencies," according to the author. The fruit tree is grown by a type of reason capable of appreciating nature as precious in and of itself, whereas the mast is formed by destroying a tree for an external purpose.

Simmel's essay, "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture," centres on this metaphor. He holds an Aristotelian perspective on culture, saying that humans are like trees in that they require tending to develop. As our tree matures, our fruit gets smaller, less plentiful, harder to get, and less nutritive. However, as Simmel observes, culture expands, it crystallises and becomes fragmented, specialised, and unsuited to cultivation. Culture runs the risk of dying if it can't feed us spiritually. Only because we develop it and are nourished by it does culture exist.

Simmel abandoned his prior relativism in favour of a philosophy of life in his final book, *The View of Life* (1918). Life gave me a fresh, more complex heuristic. In the metaphysical conflict between subject and object as well as between the past and the present, both money and

culture shine. However, as the financial crisis plunged Europe into a clash of cultures, it became obvious that nihilism lay beneath the relativism of money and culture. Instead, Simmel argued that all transcendent values originate from life itself. Boundaries are created by life—whether it be human, animal, or plant—and are constantly crossed by growth, consumption, reproduction, and death. Boundaries are created between oneself and others, here and there, and this and that. It's true, money and culture both bridge between past and future in their ways – but, by themselves, they can't guarantee a rich existence. Instead, Simmel writes:

"Life is the unique mode of existence for whose actuality this separation [between past and future] does not hold ... Time is real only for life alone."

Instead of the sanguine dogmatist who hides finitude behind a brittle absolute and the cynical absolute relativist, Simmel came to understand that the truth must be finite to be true, and in realizing this, we grasp the infinite as our own. This is a fantastic accomplishment. Both the sanguine enthusiast and the cynic find their purpose outside of their own lives. Simmel's theory of life contends that we possess the truth not despite but rather because of our limitations. We overcome these boundaries as soon as we acknowledge them: "By our highest, self-transcending consciousness at any given moment, we are the absolute above our relativity."

Simmel de-sublimates religious ideas that locate the ultimate significance outside of this world by revealing their foundation in existence. For instance, we are continually experiencing the transmigration of souls, which is a concept found in Buddhist cosmology; each soul mixes change and permanence at every moment of life. Similar to this, Christian zeal for moral perfection is a confession of goodness' existence in this world and an aloof cry of mourning for a fallen world. When viewed in this light, dogmatic systems of valuation might shed their detached form and discover their true meaning in our finite world. By taking part in the polyrhythmic harmony of social life, we can influence whether life is an etude, nocturne, or mazurka, opening a way to tangible spiritual freedom.

Simmel's life was spent vacillating between familiarity and distance. It also helped him focus his thoughts and efforts since he approached it with unwavering intellectual integrity. Since sociology is historically bound by place and time, yet has a large reach, his ideas spill over the rim of the cup. He described his legacy in his book of aphorisms with the same humility he was known for:



"I am aware that I will not leave any spiritual successors behind, which is ideal. My bequest is split among numerous heirs like a sum of money."

However, Simmel made a mistake here. At the very least, interest in his legacy has grown. Simmel's philosophical sociology is more relevant than ever in our day of uncontrolled financialization and surging nationalism. His philosophy of life is urgent given the dangers of catastrophic climate change and pandemics.

In Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (1907), Simmel wrote:

"Being and becoming are the most general, formal, and inclusive formulations of the basic dualism that patterns all human beings: all great philosophy is engaged in founding a new reconciliation between them, or a new way of giving decisive primacy to one over the other."

Simmel himself is partly accountable for this. He eventually found a way of life, that of the philosopher, that could bring his uniqueness and the universe together by exposing his soul to these extremes. By doing this, he made a philosophical contribution to our society that enriches and broadens our understanding as well as improves our quality of life.

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