



Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Eds.), *Simmel, le parti-pris du tiers*, Cnrs Éditions, Paris, 2017

Vincenzo Mele

Volume 22, Number 2, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058564ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058564ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Mele, V. (2018). Review of [Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Eds.), *Simmel, le parti-pris du tiers*, Cnrs Éditions, Paris, 2017]. *Simmel Studies*, 22(2), 174–179. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058564ar>

Bruhn's reconstruction of Weber's attitudes during and after WWI. Based on the appraisal of the complete sources of Weber's public work and private life from 1914 to 1920, Bruhn's therefore asks the question whether it is possible to claim that radical nationalism is the only ideal of reference for Weber's whole work. As is to be expected from a trained philologist, the answer is very prudent and complex. Yet, in conclusion it is also clearly negative: namely, the idea that Weber was a radical nationalist throughout his life is simply false. Instead, Weber's central contribution to political thought has to be seen in his sociologically underpinned conception of a strong parliamentary democracy that would be able to restore social equality in Germany (51 ff.) as well as in his conception of a reconstituted balance between the European powers that –for better or worse – looks very similar to the European Union of our time (102). The results of Bruhn's research thus grant a completely new dimension to the debate about Weber's political positions and attitudes towards parliamentary as well as economic democracy, international relations and Europe, so that a resumption of the controversy about Weber's contribution to the theory of politics and especially of democracy can be forecast for the years ahead.

VINCENZO MELE

Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Eds.), *Simmel, le parti-pris du tiers*, Cnrs Éditions, Paris, 2017.

Some collected volumes originate from ritual academic meeting producing not necessarily an improvement in the cultural and scientific debate. This is not the case of the book edited by Denis Thouard and Bénédicte Zimmermann that represents a significant contribution in the French reception of Georg Simmel. Both editors are affiliated with the *Centre Georg Simmel* (EHESS/CNRS) in Paris, an interdisciplinary research centre addressing a range of

questions and issues which – following Simmel – embrace the challenge of thinking a world in transformation through its most characteristic manifestations.

Like the volume's title makes clear, at the very centre stays Simmel's "third thought" ("une pensée tierce", *ivi* p. 11) as a philosophy whose point of honour is to think beyond any restricting dichotomist approach and dualism. For Simmel *tertium datur*: there is always the possibility to think "thirdly" in the philosophical tradition as well as in sociological research. The point of view of "the third" is not a *conciliation* or a *synthesis* (like in the tradition of Hegelian dialectic): it rejects absolutes as well as unilateral points of views. Its task is to explore the ambivalent and paradoxical structure of life in its becoming. The aim of the volume is consequently to explore the "third paths" left unexplored one century after Simmel for the analysis of the present society and the re-vitalization of the debate insides the social sciences. To achieve this goal, the book is divided in six sections, dedicated respectively to Simmel's heritage in France and America (with contributions by Sylvan Laurens and Donald Levine), "the third" approach in sociology (Gregor Fitzi, Denis Thouard, Laurent Thévenot and Bénédicte Zimmermann), work and the genesis of value (Pierre-Michel Menger and André Oréan), confidence and trust in social life (Louis Quéré, Volkhard Krech, Joan Stavo-Debaugé and Jaques Le Rider), Simmel's historical and aesthetical epistemology (Michael Werner, Julien Ségol, Mattieu Amat). It concludes the volume Donald Levine – who passed in 2015 and whom the book is dedicated – with an essay on Simmel's heritage for today.

To have access to the "hidden treasure" of Simmel heritage (*ivi*, p. 22) it is indicated to proceed in a comparative way, reflecting on one time on the French reception of his work and on the other time on different reception, namely that in the United States. The first section (*Berlin – Strasbourg – (Chicago) – Paris*) shows that in a certain way Simmel's intellectual profile constitutes a "third" path between French and German culture, and between European and

American sociology. The chapter of Sylvain Laurens (*Le Simmel de Julien Freund. Sociologie d'une importation selective*) reconstructs the selective reception of Simmel in France during the XXth century. The author critically analyses the political misunderstanding and the selective French translation of his work, in order to propose a new possible reading. During the cold war, the French sociologist Julien Freund used Simmel to produce a political philosophy with the goal of undermining both Marxism and Pacifism. In this theoretical framework Simmel's conception of the inevitability of social conflict and the importance of compromise provide important arguments for a reactionary view of politics and history. Simmel's notion of conflict is read in the Schmidtanian terms of the fundamental relationship friend/enemy on which politics is eminently based, whereas the necessity of compromise is read in anti-utopian terms. In this contest Simmel's notion of "the third" is brutally imported in the international relations debate that oppose different approaches based on *Realpolitik*. From this contribution it also appears that the French Simmel is more oriented toward the right, whereas the Italian Simmel is mostly leftwing (like Claudia Portioli showed in her article of 2012, *Les chemins de la pensée de G. Simmel en Italie, réciprocités sociales*, «Sociologie et sociétés» 44: 263-288). If the dominant sociological thought instrumentalized or marginalized Simmel in France, the situation was sensibly different in United States. Simmel was excluded by Parsons in *The System of Social Action*, but he has been able to generate his own tradition directly established at the University of Chicago by his students (mainly Robert E. Park and Albion W. Small). Donald Levine (together with Ellwood B. Carter and Eleanor Miller Gorman) in the chapter titled *L'influence de Simmel sur la sociologie américaine* examines the diffusion of Simmel's thought among American sociologists and identifies three phases in this dissemination – an early phase 1895-1930, a central (or classic) phase from 1930 to 1950 and late stage 1955-1975 of codification of research traditions – and reconstructed the influence Simmel had on the American attempts to build a general sociological theory: one of the recent – and less known – orientation of

American sociology is Stanford Lyman's and Marvin Scott's *Sociology of the Absurd* (1970), who quote Simmel as a precursor of their work.

Diverging from the contemporary sociological projects of Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Toennies, Gregor Fitz's chapter (included in section two, *Le tiers parti sociologique*) clarifies Simmel's theoretical position. Simmel sees the "problem of sociology" neither from the point of view of the modern natural right who conceives society as created by the free will of its individual components bonded together by an ideal social contract, nor from the holistic approach that presupposes society as a complex and surmounting entity. Fitz's contribution shows that the focus of Simmel's sociology is on one both sides of the Durkheimian Homo duplex – namely the individual beyond his social roles. Simmel considers the fact that the objective structure of society made of anonymous roles enters in tension with the individual desire of uniqueness. The challenge of the third *a priori* of his sociology is to find a cultural synthesis between social role and personality, between the creativity of social action and the logic of social structure. The study of Denis Thouard goes in the same direction, reading the "third way" of Simmel social epistemology beyond subjectivism and objectivism. The originality of Simmel's project lays in its constitutive plurality: not only society is an "object" composed by "subjects", also knowledge is in itself pluralized through the game of the three *a priori*. They are not just relevant for sociology of knowledge but they introduce a plurality principle in epistemology of science. Instead of being based on a unique and universal transcendental subject (or its surrogates), knowledge should include a plurality of cognitive functions integrating reciprocity of social actions.

In section three (*Le travail et la genèse de la valeur*), Pierre-Michel Menger and André Orléan analyze the importance and the consequences of Simmel's third position in the theory of value: also here Simmel finds himself in a third position between the classic (objective) conception of labour value (Ricardo, Marx) and the

neoclassic marginalistic theory of utility value (subjectivistic). P. M. Menger analysis the conception of labour underlying the genesis of value, starting from the analysis of artistic and intellectual labour, by which the evaluation of time and energy invested to reach the result is quite delicate to define. A. Orléan follows the perspective of exchange economics and develops a relational theory of value. For him the original contribution of Simmel's theory of value consists in the foundation on a theory based on the estimation as a form of recognition. Value becomes a kind of "third category", super-individual beyond the exchange process.

Section four (*Croyances sociales*) is about confidence and trust in social life. Here confidence is considered a sort of meta-category implied in every form of interaction, from the I-You relationship (the couple) to the institutionalized religions. The more the society becomes differentiated, the more it needs trust to work. Quéré, Krech, Stavo-Debaugé and Le Rider are writing on this topic, analyzing Simmel's sociology of secret, religion, and the sphere of intimacy.

Section five (*Épistémologie de l'individuation: l'historicité de l'art et des pratiques*) is a rich selection of contributions on Simmel's historical and aesthetical epistemology. Michael Werner contribution regards Rembrandt and Goethe on the work of art as model of the dynamic of life; Julien Ségol reflects on the heuristic consequences of Simmel's essays on the actor; finally, Mattieu Amat deals with Simmel's pedagogical writings, analyzing the relationship of society with its future as a form of pedagogical project.

Concluding the volume, Levine describes a picture of a thinker able to interpret vital energy of contemporary society and its potential of criticism of the present normative compromise. Simmel's theory of culture is of great help to understand social movement – namely *Occupy Wall Street* – that resist or revolt against the imposed forms of objective culture represented by the money economy. For Simmel the conflict of modern culture is represented from the conflict between life and form: once the forms are created, they oppress life and create a movement toward

the creation of new forms that one day will be oppressive once again, in a *perpetuum mobile* which is the stream of modern life. Objective culture frees and oppresses individuality *in the same time*. The revolt of the *Occupy Wall Street Movement* against money culture was however possible thanks to the technology – iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, etc. – created by the money culture and used by the government to control and spy the protesters themselves. “Which better symbol of this tension of the rituals, during the vicissitudes of the *Occupy* movement, raised to pay homage to Steve Jobs?” (ivi., p. 399). For Levine Simmel’s vitalist theory of culture has still a predictive and analytical potential.

ANDREA BORSARI

Georg Simmel and the field of architecture. International conference (Paris-Strasbourg, 14-16 Mars 2018)

1. Organized and supported by the Department and the Doctoral School of Architecture and Cultures of project of the University of Bologna, the National School of Architecture – Paris La Villette (Ensapl), the National School of Architecture (Ensas) and the National Institute of Applied Sciences – Strasbourg, and the University of Paris Nanterre, an international conference on “Georg Simmel and the field of architecture” took place in Strasbourg and Paris on March 14th-16th 2018. On the occasion of the centenary of the death of the great philosopher and sociologist, a group of philosophers and social researchers working on aesthetics and the philosophy of architecture within the various institutions involved decided to question Simmel’s relationship with the phenomena of the city, the forms of sociability and urban life, the analysis of the elements projected and built within it, as well as the artificial and designed objects that populate our everyday life.