



**Gregor Fitzi, *The Challenge of Modernity. Simmel's Sociological Theory*, London: Routledge, 2019, 184 pp.**

**Hans-Peter Müller**

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Otherwise, without attention, the concepts will be blunted by time and outdated by form» (Beer, 187).

What is found in Simmel's concluding thought is a radical sociology of life. It is radical in a twofold sense: because it places the impression of life at the root of the experience of the modern individual, and because it poses to the researcher the radical question of why, notwithstanding life, modernity is the era in which we witness the lack of reconciliation between individual and society. The era of a shipwreck with spectators.

HANS-PETER MÜLLER

**Gregor Fitzi, *The Challenge of Modernity. Simmel's Sociological Theory*, London: Routledge, 2019, 184 pp.**

The establishment of a complete edition of his work finally made it abundantly clear: Georg Simmel is a sociological classic. But a classic of what? “Sociological impressionism” as David Frisby held? A German cultural sociology in the wake of Dilthey and Scheler or Weber and Tönnies? Fragments of a social theory in a very peculiar way? In his new book, the preeminent Simmel-scholar Gregor Fitzi makes a convincing attempt to present Simmel's social theory. In order to do so he divides the oeuvre into five building blocks: a theory of modernity, a sociological epistemology, a sociology of culture, a sociological anthropology and a social ethics. As a kind of conclusion after each chapter he confronts Simmel with other classics like Marx (chapter 1), Durkheim (chapter 2), Weber (chapter 3), Plessner (chapter 4) or Kant and Goethe (chapter 5). Since Fitzi tries to expose the entire oeuvre and its logic in 169 densely packed pages, the best way to understand his ambitious enterprise is to neatly reconstruct the five chapters one by one.

After a concise introduction in which he discusses criteria what makes a social theory he sets out with Simmel's theory of modernity. Starting with social differentiation and monetary economy as the

social-structural backbone of modern society he discusses Simmel's observations of the cultural reification, urbanization, neurasthenia, women's emancipation and fashion. The asymmetrical relationship between the hypertrophy of objective culture and the atrophy of subjective culture constitutes the typical problem of modernity no ideology of reconciliation will ever be able to change, moderate or overcome. It is a tragedy of culture but a tragedy that has to be endured. Growing urbanization generates the perils of neurasthenia for urban dwellers or in today's parlance burnout and depression. Women's movements challenge the world of male domination and fight for a new gender contract. Fashion is a means and mechanism to fulfill the dual needs of imitation and distinction of human beings: To be like all the others fulfills needs of integration and cohesion; to be other than the rest meets the aspiration of difference and distinction. Under modern conditions, fashion is no longer class-based but in line with social mobility a question of competition and success. Simmel shares with Marx the observation of a growing estrangement. But in Simmel's eyes this is not due to capitalism *per se* but due to the modern culture of a fully commercialized money economy. The other side of the coin of alienation and indifference is the growth of freedom and individuality.

In the second chapter Fitzi gives a detailed account of Simmel's sociological epistemology. Neither holism and collectivism nor nominalism and individualism describe his point of view but a "third" focusing on "social validity" ("Geltung") instead of falling back onto a social ontology. The famous excursus "How is society possible?" with its three Apriori formulates his epistemological solution. Not society in an ontological sense but sociation ("Vergesellschaftung") in a dynamic sense is the focus. Processes and forms of social interaction ("soziale Wechselwirkung") are the subject-matter of his sociology. In Fitzi's eyes, Simmel presents a solid solution to the coordination of social action and social structure or the micro-macro-problem by focusing on social mechanisms like space, social closure, conflict and social reproduction in various forms. In concluding this chapter, Fitzi

gives a neat account of how the failed cooperation between Durkheim and Simmel drove Simmel to specify his sociological epistemology to counter Durkheim's allegation of "individualistic psychologism" (p. 79).

In his third chapter, Fitzi explicates Simmel's sociology of culture. "Modern societies fall into various spheres, which are structured according to different logics." (p. 90) Fitzi calls this approach "qualitative societal differentiation". This unusual term is meant to separate Simmel from the classical tradition of the division of labor since Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer on the one hand, functional differentiation in the footsteps of Talcott Parsons on the other hand. No realm can claim primacy neither the economy or capitalism as in Marx's terms, nor politics and domination as in Weber's terms or any other sphere. Therefore, "Simmel undertakes an analysis of the parallel qualitative differentiation of societal structure and of the individual personality in complex societies by strongly accentuating the creative potential of social action." (p. 92) What that means in detail, Fitzi spells out with respect to the economy and the social realm, politics, religion, art and eroticism. Maybe love is a telling example. Fitzi delineates the erotic movement after the turn of the century which was ready to undermine the bourgeois morality of marriage and family. Both Weber and Simmel cultivated in due course extramarital relationships – Weber with Mina Tobler and Else Jaffé von Richthofen, Simmel with his former student Gertrud Kantorowicz who gave birth to their common child Angela in Bologna 1907. Simmel is surprised that philosophy has bypassed love as a primary category and one of the strongest forces of human existence. Besides the intimate relationship of the couple and universal philanthropy, "only the idea of Christian love achieves a complex 'axial rotation' of love as a moral sentiment because it becomes a dogma, so that the life conduct of the believer must conform to it." (p. 117) Simmel and Weber developed sociology as a science of culture in which sense and meaning of social phenomena play a pivotal role. Close friends and allies in the founding of the German

Sociological Association when it came to value freedom notwithstanding, Weber criticized Simmel's approach heavily for separating form from content, making overabundant use of the method of analogy (instead of causality) and employing an elegant but essayistic style of writing. According to Fitzi, their biggest commonality though was the approach he calls qualitative social differentiation. "Accordingly, the economy, law, politics, religion, art, eroticism and the social sphere had to be explained starting with their leading logic and then correlated in a theory of qualitative differentiation of society." (p. 122) Apart from the "polytheism of values" and rationalism as a "world of antinomies" Weber never explicitly delineated how the conduct of life under such circumstances would be able to combine the different worlds we live in. In a similar vein, Simmel does so too but complements his reflections in an anthropological and ethic direction. In fact, he is on the way to a "metaphysical sociology".

Consequently, the fourth chapter discusses the anthropology of social action, social structure and social validity. In Fitzi's eyes this amounts to "a research project about the 'a priori of the a priori' of social action in the different domains of qualitative differentiated societies." (p. 126) As a foundational project it shares commonalities with philosophical anthropology. Plessner finds the apt term of "eccentric positionality" to explain man's status in the cosmos. Both Simmel and Plessner favor society over community, distance over intimacy, freedom over equality by all means in their own world-view. Yet both "plead for a reconciliation between intimacy and the public sphere, i.e. between solidarity and competition in modern society." (p. 143)

What does that mean for the modern individual? An answer to this question tries to give the fifth chapter on social ethics. "The individual law" is Simmel's solution. The "tragedy of modern culture" poses a huge challenge "to the inventiveness of the individual social actors". (p. 145) Since modernity is in constant flux, the individual law is not like the categorical imperative of Kant, the one and for all moral solution at all times and in every situation.

Rather, “the only way to escape from the dilemma of the modern conflict between objective and subjective normative logics therefore lies in the capacity of the moral subjects to link the contradictory objective normative expectations which they are confronted with in a synthesis of life conduct, which makes sense on a subjective level of moral judgement. [...] Yet, to realise the cultural work of this normative third a priori of sociation is anything but self-evident (GSG 11: 59).” (p. 150 f.) Simmel couched this dilemma in his reflections on Kant and Goethe. “Hence, a sound foundation of the individual law needs, on the one hand, to contrast Kant’s radical negation of the idea of self-fulfillment by embracing Goethe’s artistic conception of life.” (p. 162)

In his conclusion, Fitzi recounts the history of reception between oblivion and rediscovery. Simmel’s answer to the situation of our modernity today as “solid liquidity” (p. 168) though testifies to the continuous actuality of his thought. His problems are still ours a century later. By structuring the oeuvre into five building blocks, Fitzi puts forward a convincing argument for the existence of a social theory in Simmel equivalent to his status as a sociological classic. Central for this reading is the concept of “qualitative social differentiation” that should be analytically developed in a much richer way as the narrow format of Routledge allowed. Fitzi subsumes Simmel and Weber under this term. It seems as if “axial rotation” (Achsendrehung) as well as the establishment of a distinct institutional realm following its own “rationality” in Weber’s parlance provide the defining criteria. Weber distinguishes between value sphere and life order. Love, for instance, forms the erotic sphere but fails to institutionalize a life order as Weber observes in Ascona and in the erotic movement. How does the early Simmel with the distinction of content and form or the late Simmel with the conceptual make-up of life and form develop a theory of institutions as a backbone for “qualified social differentiation” which his meso-sociological approach would have encouraged? How Simmel’s road to a “metaphysical sociology” would have looked like we do not know because of his premature death. If he

ever even wanted to live up to the criteria of a solid social theory Fitzi developed in his introduction is an equally open question though. In my view (Müller/Reitz 2018), Simmel never had the inclination to develop a theoretical system. Instead, he built his oeuvre on three pillars or if you prefer in Simmelian terms upon the basis of three apriori: philosophy, sociology and aesthetics. Life as eternal becoming requires an open, flexible and adaptable conceptual make-up, more geared to an analytical tool-kit (Swidler) than an elaborated but fixed theory. Simmel opts for a meso-sociological approach (“interaction”) and did not pay very much attention to the micro-macro-problem or the problem of structure and agency in which Fitzi elaborates his argument in the five building blocks. If we would like to read Simmel as a clandestine grand theorist, then Fitzi’s reconstruction is probably the best choice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far. In pursuing this idea as a red thread he advances pretty far in his well-versed interpretation. But even if one does not share the overall framing as a grand theorist, Fitzi manages to provide us with a neat and balanced systematic overview of Simmel’s oeuvre. In addition, the inner debate with other classics at the end of each chapter allows Simmel to be embedded in the discourse of his time. Versatile Simmel though allows for a diversity of readings – an alternative with which the sociological classic would have been more than happy. Why a booklet in hard back of 183 pages has to charge £ 120 though remains the capitalist secret of the publishing house. The intellectually noble intention to provide a state-of-the-art assessment of Simmel and his reception for the students of this classic somehow contradicts the ridiculously elevated pricing. Unfortunately, an author today has completely lost any control over the publication of his intellectual product let alone the terms of trade of his remuneration – a big difference to Simmel’s time who made considerable money with his books and defined very precisely the terms of trade under which his scholarly output was allowed by him to be published by a book company of his choice.