

Georg Simmel and Critical Theory

Introduction: traditional and critical theory

A well-known aphorism contained in Simmel's *Posthumous Diary* goes: 'I know that I will die without spiritual heirs (and this is fine). My inheritance resembles cash to be divided among many heirs, each of whom invests his share in a manner according to his nature, without concerning himself with the origin of such inheritance' (GSG 20, p. 261). Therefore, tracing [Simmel's](#) influence on his direct [disciples](#) as well on others [whom he](#) inspired can be a very difficult, often paradoxical enterprise. In many cases, Simmel's reception is [truly](#) a 'cash legacy', limited to specific concepts or partial aspects of his thought.

[Herein](#) we will investigate Simmel's influence on the first [to fourth](#) generations of critical theorists of the so-called 'Frankfurt School': Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, [and](#) Rahel Jaeggi. This choice [appears](#) justified [for a number of reasons](#). Firstly, these authors represent a school characterized by [both a](#) thematic and [an](#) intellectual affinity. Secondly, [in our view](#), these authors [challenged](#) Simmel [directly](#), and we [believe that some productive insights can be drawn from such challenges](#). Finally, for reasons of space, we [do not delve into Simmel's](#) influence on [proponents](#) of so-called 'Western Marxism', [such as](#) Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer, who [were also](#) direct [disciples of](#) Simmel's, [as doing them justice](#) would require [dedicated in-depth](#) research.

[Before proceeding in this comparison](#), there is an [important](#) historical and conceptual premise [to be made](#). Often comparisons in social theory and philosophy [are](#) conducted [within](#) the empty space of an imaginary contemporaneity. Authors belonging to different historical and political contexts are [envisioned](#) to [carry on a](#) dialogue in the [void](#) of an imaginary contemporaneity. On the contrary, here we must be [well](#) aware of the different historical, philosophical and political constellations which Simmel and the early Frankfurt School belonged to. They lived [through](#) different moments [in](#) European intellectual history, diverse philosophical seasons, [and hence sought](#) to respond to [disparate](#) cultural and social urgencies. Georg Simmel and the early generation of the Frankfurt School assume two representative standpoints on 20th-century thought regarding the relation between subjectivity and mass society, symbolically represented by the *metropolis* as its characteristic social and cultural

manifestation. Their visions of modernity are largely the result of perspectives that are respectively *on the threshold* and *internal* to 20th-century philosophical and sociological discourse on modernity. The most important parts of Simmel's intellectual experience *precedes* 'the short 20th century' (Hobsbawm, 1994), and are hence significant for their *otherness* with respect to the period's affairs and tragedies: indeed, Simmel died in 1918, when the tragedy of the First World War (on which he had taken a activist stance for intervention) and the consequent *cultural* crisis marked a definitive turning point with respect to the previous era. Benjamin's, Horkheimer's and Adorno's perspectives on modern society and culture, on the other hand, were cultivated in complete awareness of the *one-way street* (from the title of Benjamin's book) that European civilization was taking, which, unless some sort of 'emergency brake' was engaged, would inevitably lead it to the catastrophes of fascism and the Second World War. The different historical settings for their reflections could not but have had consequences on their political-philosophical orientation. This is reflected in the very concept of 'critique' and 'criticism' that is implicit in Simmel's and the early Frankfurt School's philosophical thought. While Simmel works in continuity with Kant's notion of critique in the sense of an analysis of the validity and limits of human reason and judgment, the early Frankfurt School – as Max Horkheimer shows in his famous essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* (Horkheimer, 1937, 2002) – intends 'critique' in the sense of Hegel's 'negative determination' and, more specifically, as the 'materialistic turn' imparted by Karl Marx to Hegel's dialectic, as exemplified by his *Critique of Political Economy*. 'Critique' in this sense does not have a merely cognitive and epistemological meaning, but it confronts concepts with their historical realizations and 'sublates' them – the famous crucial German verb used by Hegel is 'aufheben', meaning both to cancel (or negate) and to preserve at the same time – as both logical and practical determinations of a given historical process. In this sense 'critique' is not just an epistemological and cognitive concept, but also a political one. As Horkheimer stated, a 'critical' theory may be distinguished from a 'traditional' theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human 'emancipation from slavery', acts as a 'liberating ... influence', and works 'to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of human beings (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 246). This normative orientation will remain constant through the different personalities and generation of critical theorists, albeit animated by differences in

philosophical backgrounds. Although Simmel did not neglect the major political movements of his time – socialism, the women's movement (Simmel, 1892, 1896a, 1897) – and took a moderate social reformist stance (Frisby, 2002, pp. 73-76; Köhnke, 1996, p. 301 ff.), his sociological and philosophical work was not inspired by a normative vision of history. On the contrary, he openly criticized the concept of historical and sociological laws, including those in the positivist version (Comte, Spencer) or in historical materialism (Marx). Simmel forged his intellectual path in an academic environment where Hegel had almost disappeared and which was dominated – albeit not exclusively – by neo-Kantianism (Köhnke, 1984). However, as we will see, Simmel's major importance for the early Frankfurt School lies in his *Kulturpessimismus* and the concept of 'tragedy of culture' – probably the most important inheritance in Horkheimer's social theory (Ruggieri, 2017, p. 66) – as well as in his critique of Kant's logicism. For Simmel, Kant's concept of 'experience' (*Erfahrung*) was rooted in the natural sciences and was inadequate to grasp the 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*) of human beings. The aesthetic sphere, in particular, seemed the ideal grounding place for potential reconciliation of the *aporia* and the contradictions so rampant in the broader cultural context of the German *Gründerjahre*. Simmel turned his inquiry towards a new artistic style that could overcome the division between traditional art, by now autonomous, and the rationalized spheres of daily life. It is in this framework that Simmel's undertaking to formulate a 'sociological aesthetics' matured, as can be gleaned from his 1896 work of the same name (Simmel, 1896b, 1968, 1992). He introduced a design for sociological aesthetics, whose *means* was the literary form of the essay, and whose *end* was the creation of an experimental frame within which different styles of thought and research could be combined fruitfully. It was precisely from the convergence of the aesthetic experience of modernity and the sociological analysis of some particular manifestations of social life, generally city life, that it was possible to decipher the epoch-making nature of modern life, with all its contradictions, conflicts and paradoxes. This, however, without recourse to a 'Project of modernity' (Habermas, 1992, 2018), based on a normative philosophy of history and the characteristic trust in progress, which was slowly eroding as the popularity of positivism was waning. Simmel's entire social and aesthetic thought cannot be easily grouped under the heading of 'sociological aesthetics' – though it can be said that *Philosophy of Money* is a *Capital* written in dialogue with Kant's *Transcendental*

Aesthetic instead of Hegel's *Logic*. Moreover, Simmel's choice to base the nascent discipline on inquiry into 'forms of association' is clearly of (neo)Kantian derivation, given the certainly aesthetic (in Kant's sense) lineage of the concept of *a priori* forms of social interaction. It must however be emphasized that Simmel's project [for](#) a *sociological aesthetics* did not represent a form of sociology of art. [Nor](#) can it be regarded one of those specialist branches of sociology that proliferated subsequently (e.g., the sociology of literature, work, communication), thanks mainly to the ever-growing influence of sociology itself in academic circles. Instead, Simmel's essays, written over a period of nearly thirty years, exhibit all the qualities of a true *aesthetics of modern life*, focusing on a specific 'point of indifference' between art and the sphere of social interactions, and revealing the specific modern nature of the 'reciprocity' between the aesthetic sphere and the social sphere. The result is a research style that focuses on particular day-to-day manifestations of modern social life endowed with a specific aesthetic character and 'epoch-making' significance. He was thus able, [for instance](#), to [correlate](#) the social character of the decorative arts to consumer art, [and](#) vice versa, highlight the specific aesthetic dimension of certain aspects of social life and, as such, describe them both as a single, identical form of experiencing modernity. Simmel was convinced that only the aesthetic sphere can fully capture and represent all modern experience of reality, especially when the focus of attention is not limited exclusively to traditional, autonomous artwork.

[Although](#) during the different phases of his thought [Simmel maintained](#) the (neo-Kantian) distinction between metaphysics, science and theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*), [his](#) project [for](#) a 'sociological aesthetics' emerges even in the preface to his major work, the *Philosophy of Money*, [in which](#) he [advocates](#) for an original 'third position' between art and philosophy. Whereas [philosophy](#) tends to 'the totality of being', art has 'the great advantage' [of setting](#) itself 'a single, narrowly defined problem every time: a person, a landscape, a mood'. In his work on money, conversely, Simmel is [attempting](#) 'to regard the problem as restricted and small in order to do justice to it by extending it to the totality and the highest level of generality' (Simmel, 1989, 1990, pp. 53-54).

Therefore it can be stated that Simmel's philosophical and sociological enterprise is characterized by what later – in another philosophical context – [would](#) be called [the](#) 'world disclosure function of language' (Harrington, 2005; Lehtonen, Turo-Kimmo; Pyyhtinen, 2008). Simmel's thought is constantly searching [for](#) opposite 'dualisms'

(Kant and Goethe, [Schopenhauer](#) and Nietzsche) and ‘problems’ (*Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*, *The Problem of Sociology*, *The [Problem of Style](#)*): to these polarities, his own thinking provides a ‘third’ that proves an underlying unity between the opposite poles and preserves the tension in all its vigour. The ‘third’ does not [however](#) exist independent of dualism, as it manifests itself only in the relation between opposites, or becomes relativized into new dualisms in a never-ending process. Simmel’s approach is still [topical](#) where ‘problem solving’ oriented [approaches](#) to language actually fail, [as they](#) overlook the ‘world disclosing’ functions of language. ‘World-disclosure’, a term [drawn](#) from [the philosophy of](#) Martin Heidegger, indicates [the](#) revealing of contexts of existential inter-relatedness among things in the world – a revealing that imparts truth in the sense of total holistic illumination. Insofar as such world-disclosure is held by Heidegger to refuse any agency of rational critique and simply said to ‘happen’ as an ontological ‘event’ in which language speaks above the heads of individuals, it is a dangerous philosophical confection whose obscurantism Adorno was right to expose (Adorno, 1973). But if we are able to define this idea as a dimension of semantic aesthetic plentitude in language-use capable of opening up novel horizons of perceptual orientation in the world that at the same time *depend on* and *enrich* problem-solving attitudes to language, it [must be concluded that it has been undeservedly](#) neglected by pragmatist and rationalist philosophies. Arguably, without Simmel’s pioneering work, the conceptions of many eminent authors, such as Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and even Theodor Adorno and Georgy Lukács would never have been possible. The work of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi also found – or could have found, in the case of the neglected reception of Habermas – inspiration from Georg Simmel’s work. It is therefore well worth the effort to reconstruct Simmel’s connections and influence with the different generations of critical theorists.

1. Simmel and early critical theory: Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno

The similarity between Simmel and Benjamin’s perspectives on modernity and metropolitan life is significant, yet at times deceptive. Thanks to David Frisby’s fundamental work of rediscovery, Simmel has been interpreted [in](#) ‘Benjaminian’ (and ‘Lukácsian’) [terms](#): Frisby (Frisby, 2013), beginning with the choice of the metaphors of the ‘*flâneur* sociologist’ and ‘sociological impressionism’, reads (and criticizes) Simmel through Benjamin. However, Benjamin’s contact with [Simmel’s](#) work

appears quite marginal. Although Benjamin's friend and mentor Gershom Scholem confirms that Benjamin attended Simmel's classes in Berlin prior to [the](#) First World War (Scholem & Benjamin, 1982, p. 61) and that in 1920 he hoped to apply for admission to 'Troeltsch's seminar on Simmel's philosophy of history' (even if just as a means to use the library!), traces of Simmel's influence on Benjamin's early work is difficult to find. One important [source](#) is *The Origin of German Baroque Drama*, where [in](#) Benjamin draws [the](#) fundamental concept of 'origin' (*Ursprung*) from Simmel's study on *Goethe* (Simmel, 1913). Goethe's morphological and metaphorical thinking [would](#) however [establish](#) an important 'elective affinity' between Simmel and Benjamin (Dodd, 2008): in the incomplete notes of Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (1924-1940), Simmel is cited, often critically, on many occasions. [Benjamin and Adorno's](#) first critical engagement with the work of Georg Simmel takes place [precisely](#) in a correspondence regarding the [development](#) of the *Arcades Project*. In 1938 Benjamin intended to extract and publish an independent piece centred on the figure of Charles Baudelaire [from the project on the Arcades of Paris](#). The [result](#) of this effort was a long essay, almost an independent book, entitled *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. However, this study was destined never to be published in the journal of the Institute for Social Research, [which](#) had commissioned it, and was subjected to a barrage of harsh criticism by Adorno, who focuses particularly on Benjamin's affinity with Simmel. This [episode furnishes some](#) interesting insight into the methodological differences between the different approaches to the theory of culture, with Adorno's strand of thought constituting an undeniably more traditional development of Marx's method of the 'critique of ideology', whereas Simmel and Benjamin were more rooted – with some differences – on what Simmel called 'sociological aesthetics', or in other words, an aesthetical paradigm of knowledge.

Adorno's reaction, upon receiving Benjamin's essay *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, was one of utter dismay, as he expressed to Benjamin in a lengthy letter written in November 1938, [which](#) can be summed [up](#) as a [accusation](#) of naive behavioural sociology. [He](#) [argued](#) that Benjamin tended to derive facts belonging to the cultural 'superstructure' directly from phenomena of an economic nature: '[Let](#) me express my [self here](#) in [as](#) simple and Hegelian manner [as](#) possible. [If](#) I am [not](#) mistaken, [this](#) dialectic lacks one thing: mediation... [This basis, however, is nothing other than that I consider](#) methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual [characteristics](#) from the realm of the superstructure a ["materialistic" twist](#)

by relating them to corresponding characteristics of the substructure in an unmediated and even causal manner. The materialistic determination of cultural characteristics is possible only when mediated by the *total process*' (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 581-582).

Adorno then provides further details, pointing a finger more directly at Georg Simmel, whom Benjamin had cited explicitly. Adorno particularly objected to the Arcades in which 'in-depth theoretical arguments' were replaced by 'metaphor', based on simple analogical associations among phenomena: in other words, the most harshly criticised elements were precisely those that Benjamin shared with Simmel's style of thought and research and which he had promptly espoused. In fact, the phrase Adorno frowned upon was indeed a citation from Simmel's *The Sociology of the Senses* (one of the most brilliant *excursus* of the whole of the *Sociology*), in which Simmel dwells on the issue of seeing and hearing in the city. What is of significance here is not so much Simmel's brilliant and innovative flashes of intuition, as rather the fact that Adorno – unlike Benjamin – did not appreciate what can be considered the innovative aspect of Simmelian *sociological aesthetics*, which resided in laying the groundwork for a general theory on society by starting out from elementary aspects of everyday life, often elements of an aesthetic and sensory nature. What Adorno criticises as deriving from Simmel is precisely 'the appeal to concrete modes of behaviour' (Ivi) for theoretical explanations, which in his view characterised Simmel. In Adorno's vision the interpretation of cultural phenomena (and thus also the attempt at a 'materialistic' formulation of the metropolitan lyricism of a poet) can be undertaken only through the mediation of global historical-social processes. Any 'immediate inference' as regards a link between economic and spiritual phenomena endows phenomena with precisely the type of spontaneity, concreteness and compactness they have lost in the capitalist context. Adorno argued that cultural criticism should not pursue 'the innocuous illustration of concepts through colourful historical objects as Simmel did when he depicted his primitive metaphysics of form and life in the cup handle, the actor, Venice' (Adorno, 1983, p. 231). What Adorno specifically objects to in this approach to social reality is the manner in which the preoccupation with the fragment and the exemplary instance – shared by Benjamin as well – never leads to their historical concretion but rather to their reduction to the eternal realm, to 'simply interchangeable examples for ideas' (Ivi).

Benjamin replied to Adorno's harsh criticism in a well-known letter in December 1938. He made few concessions to Adorno's critique which – in Benjamin's opinion

– was caused by the fact that he had chosen to work on the second part of the Baudelaire study without developing the first or the methodological aspects of the whole construction. Above all, Benjamin put up a strong defence of Simmel's quotation, as well as of Simmel's work in general: 'You look askance at Simmel –. Is it not high time to give him his due as one of the forefathers of cultural Bolshevism (*Kulturbolschewismus*)? [...] I recently looked at his *Philosophy of Money* [*Philosophie des Geldes*]. There is certainly good reason for it to be dedicated to Reinhold and Sabine Lepsius; there is good reason that it stems from the time in which Simmel was permitted to "approach" the circle around George. It is, however, possible to find much that is very interesting in the book if its basic idea is resolutely ignored. I found the critique of value of Marx' value theory remarkable' (Benjamin, 1994, p. 599). *Kulturbolschewismus* is the term which the Nazi minister of culture Goebbels used to define 'degenerate art' (*das entartete Kunt*), that is, the practices and movement of the avant-garde, expressionism in particular. With this reference Benjamin intended to highlight the radicalism of Simmel's position, which was substantially different from the 'dialectic mediation' that forged Adorno's line of reasoning. In this regard, it is in this philosophical space of the description – at once *metaphorical* and *empirical* – of the modern experience where Benjamin met Simmel. Just as is the case of the *Philosophy of Money*, in Benjamin the shift from one sphere of experience to another occurs by metaphorical leaps, which shed a constantly new light on reality. It is for this reason that while Adorno's sociological work becomes trite if it is shorn of its dialectical pathos, the works of Simmel and Benjamin are still full of life. In a later essay (1965) dedicated to a parallel comparison between Simmel and Ernst Bloch, Adorno reconsidered his sharp early judgment in this way: 'Georg Simmel... was, for all his psychological idealism, the first to accomplish the return of philosophy to concrete objects, a shift that remained canonical for everyone dissatisfied with the chattering of epistemology or intellectual history. If we reacted so strongly against Simmel at one time, it was only because he withheld from us the very thing with which he enticed us' (Adorno, 1992, p. 213). This ambivalent judgment reveals that his critique stemmed from an original affinity with Simmel's thought. In fact, looking at Adorno's sociological works, it is surprising to find Simmel mentioned in more than one occasion. In a recently discovered lecture on *Simmel's Theory of Individual Causality*, delivered in 1940 at Columbia University, New York, during his exile in America, Adorno discussed the foundations of the

‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’ (Adorno, 2003). In it he posits that Simmel’s intuition of ‘individual law’ in his *Metaphysics of Life* (1918) is the best example of the paradoxical objectivity that can be reached in cultural analysis. The theory of ‘individual law’ is a law that has necessity and objectivity only in one case. Adorno considers Simmel’s hypothesis (formulated to make Kant’s ideal of categorical imperative productive) to be important also in the epistemology of social sciences, even if it may be difficult to transpose them into workable research methods. What one would need in order to deal with such a difficult (nearly impossible) task beyond the limits of causal objectivity is ‘*Theory*’ (*Theorie*, his italics): ‘the unity of theory functions as a substitute for the universality of the causality theorem’ (Adorno, 2003, p. 54). Theory, in other words, compensates for the lack of scientific evidence by replacing the ‘necessity of substance’ with the ‘necessity of thought’ which imposes itself in a specific situation. Here it appears clear that Adorno shares with Simmel the model of aesthetical objectivity that – contrary to natural science objectivity – concerns the singularity of one aesthetic event: a normativity which derives from the vital process and unity of individual life itself, like a form of ‘*poiesis*’.

Twenty years later Adorno mentions Simmel’s as the *only* alternative model of non-reductionist sociology in the celebrated dispute on *Dialectics and Positivism in Sociology*, held in Germany in the 1960s. Here, defending his dialectical vision of society *vis-à-vis* positivism – which demands greater ‘micrological’ attention to individual concrete elements – Adorno himself always holds the aesthetical approach in high esteem. In Adorno’s view unregulated experience is the first condition for the possibility of sociological knowledge. Indeed, he argued that ‘Knowledge of society which does not commence with the physiognomic view is poverty-stricken’ (Adorno, 1976, p. 33). Adorno’s empirical sociological analysis (*On Jazz* as well as *The Authoritarian Personality*) essentially consists of an attempt, by means of a stylized ideal-typical construction of the surface appearances of our form of life, to draw out its fundamental property, the social deformation of our rational endowments. But the concept of ‘physiognomy’ also possesses a further-reaching meaning connected to Adorno’s conviction that mental abilities are reflected in the corporeal nature of human beings: gestures, mimicry, modes of practical intercourse in and with the world are always as much an expression of the special profile of rational activity as they, in turn, represent reaction formations to the pressures of nature. Because nature and mind are restricted in this way, for Adorno what is needed is an expansion of

social analysis beyond [the](#) traditional object domain. In contrast to Simmel and Benjamin, he tried to formulate his own model of sociological aesthetics or physiognomy, drawing inspiration not from art imagery, but from musical composition. As a composer and musicologist, he clearly found his own experience to be prototypical of cognitive experience in general. However, Adorno remains firmly convinced that aesthetic models, whether in music or art imagery, cannot carry the whole weight of rational practice. Aesthetics can provide a corrective measure for positivism and pseudo-scientific rationalism (which Popper was also right to denounce in the *Positivist Dispute*), which did violence to the individuality of objects by consuming them within an abstract conceptual schema. Philosophical interpretation cannot go beyond the immediate appearances of reality without the theory and concepts developed by the sciences. For Adorno, science and art, concept and image, analysis and expression form the two poles of rationality.

2. The [lacking](#) reception of Jürgen Habermas

One generation [later](#), Jürgen Habermas dedicated to Simmel only one meaningful essay (Habermas, 1983), [a fact](#) that can be probably understood as a form of compensation [for Simmel's](#) exclusion from his major work, *Theory of communicative action* (Habermas, 1984). However, we will see that Simmel's theory is more important for what could [it](#) have [brought](#) to Habermas' theory than [for](#) what it has actually brought. [As](#) David Frisby rightly stated '... had Habermas taken up Simmel's theory of modernity, he would have been confronted with a conception of modernity that sought to demonstrate the grounding of the aesthetic sphere in the modern life-world, rather than establish its separation from other spheres of life' (Frisby, 1985, p. 52). Habermas' highly proceduralist and rationalist conception of public opinion could have benefitted [from](#) Simmel's conception of sociability. In other words, what Habermas' theory of public opinion seems to neglect is the emotional, aesthetic complexity of everyday social interaction. There can be at least a double reason for Habermas neglecting Simmel's sociology. *First*, Habermas' fundamental research question is quite [distant from](#) Simmel's: following Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he [set](#) at the very centre of his philosophical and sociological investigation the *rationality* of modernity. Even though Habermas [would put](#) increasing distance between his project [for](#) critical theory and that of the first

generation of the Frankfurt School, his project would not call into question a normative concept of reason (on a communicative and pragmatist base), which remained quite distinct from Simmel's approach. *Second*, Habermas, in contrast to his philosophical master Adorno, dedicated relatively few, sporadic writings and little attention to art and aesthetics. However, this does not mean that Habermas' attention to aesthetics is irrelevant in the general economy of his thought. After a remarkable essay on Walter Benjamin of 1972, entitled 'Consciousness-raising or Redemptive Criticism' (Habermas, 1972), Habermas retreats from any thematically central role for aesthetics (Duvenage, 2003, p. 29). In these years his work enters a second phase marked by his working on the neo-Kantian theory of validity-domains for which he is best known. When Habermas extends his discussion of modernity beyond the aesthetic realm ('Modernity – an Unfinished Project', 1981b), he relies upon Max Weber for his definition of cultural modernity (D. Frisby, 1985, p. 52). Weber sees cultural modernity as having its origins in the modern separation and differentiation of 'the values-spheres' of science, ethics and art which were earlier bound together. Consequently, in *Theory of Communicative Action*, art is relatively demoted in importance to the circumscribed sphere of 'aesthetic-expressive validity', alongside the more conceptually dominant spheres of 'scientific-theoretical validity' and 'moral-practical validity'. A third phase of Habermas' thought on aesthetics is represented by his 1984 work *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. This study can be considered Habermas' personal version of Lukács 'The Destruction of Reason', this time directed against contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, George Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, all heirs of Nietzsche's 'totalizing aesthetic critique of reason'. In this book, an important chapter is dedicated to highlighting the substantial difference between literature and philosophy, which all French post-structuralist authors tend to overcome. It is therefore clear that from the standpoint of a rigorous neo-Kantian theory of validity-domains (reinforced by Popper's three-worlds theory of knowledge), Habermas could hardly accept Simmel's aesthetic approach to social reality. In this sense, the 'postscript' Habermas dedicated to the new German edition of Georg Simmel's *Philosophische Kultur* in 1983 is quite symptomatic of the orientation Habermas' thought took. This can be summed up as privileging the problem solving function of language (deriving from Popper and the positivist dispute) over the 'world disclosure' attempted in various ways by Simmel, Benjamin

and Adorno. Habermas' opinion in this essay is that Simmel – as compared to the other prominent intellectuals of his generation such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Henri Bergson, who similarly initiated *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), or Durkheim (born in the same year as Simmel, 1858), George Herbert Mead (born in 1863) and Max Weber (born in 1864) – did not manage to become a 'classic' precisely because his essayistic and aesthetical intellectual orientation did not predestine him to be so. In this regard, Habermas writes 'Simmel was a creative although not a systematic thinker – a philosophical diagnostician of the times with a social-scientific bent rather than a philosopher or sociologist solidly placed in the academic profession' (Habermas, 1996, p. 405). Habermas was aware that it was not just this intellectual attitude that created a 'disturbed' relationship with the world of the German universities; accusations of relativism and anti-Semitism played an important role. However, 'what distanced him from the academic world was Simmel's mentality' (*Ibidem*). Habermas, in other words, recognized – sharing Adorno's appreciation – Simmel as the precursor of the scholarly essay and he who encouraged students to think 'concretely', while at the same time accusing him of remaining undecided between essay and scientific treatise, between the spheres of 'aesthetic-expressive validity' and 'scientific-theoretical validity'. What Habermas seems to exclude is that there can be a meaningful relationship between these two spheres, in other words, that aesthetic experience can stimulate and become a source of theoretical scientific knowledge. Embracing and making definitive the distinction between science and literature, Habermas – as his intellectual production shows, with his definitive renouncing of the essay as a form and with the synthesis of his work produced in *Theory of communicative action* – clearly orients himself toward the Parsonian scientific model of the sociological treatise, whereas an important part of American sociology (Charles Wright-Mills's *Sociological Imagination*, Randall Collins, Lewis Coser and, above all, the Chicago school's ethnographic approach) and authors in English cultural studies (David Frisby, Mike Featherstone) would follow and creatively continue Simmel's heritage.

Some questions can be raised about Habermas attributing less importance to sociological aesthetics in general and, consequently, to Simmel's approach in particular. For example, why is this sphere of human experience less prominent in his work in comparison to the earlier Frankfurt School? Would aesthetics have undermined the internal consistency of the theory of communicative action? What

role could have [been](#) played in this reception [by](#) Simmel, who among the classics – [in contrast to](#) Max Weber – sought to demonstrate the grounding of the aesthetic sphere in the modern life-world, rather than establish its separation from other spheres of life? In Georg Simmel's sociology we can [find](#) more than one stimulus to integrate Habermas' rationalistic, discursive theory of [the](#) public sphere. Simmel constantly shows how boundaries between public and private are uncertain and regulated by emotions such as shame, discretion, courtesy and other emotions. In Simmel's *sociology* of 1908 we find an important chapter [entitled](#) *The Secret and the Secret Society*, whose [essential message](#) can be summarized as follows: 'If human interaction is conditioned by the ability to speak, it is shaped by the ability to keep silent' (Simmel, 2009, p. 340). The importance of this chapter is to [counterpoise](#) Habermas' philosophical interest toward the ideal condition of communication, which is based on the more or less explicit metaphysical assumption of truth in human relationships. [For](#) Simmel on the [other hand, the social actor](#) is a being who hides truth, instead of revealing it. [As stated by](#) Simmel: 'all that which we share with another in words or perhaps in some other way, even the most subjective, the most impulsive, the most intimate, is a selection from the actual mental totality whose absolutely accurate disclosure in terms of content and sequence would bring any person—if a paradoxical expression is permitted—into the insane asylum' (Ivi, p. 310). Simmel is very well aware that the space for secrets is [becoming](#) progressively restricted in modern society, but [at](#) the same time he [opines](#) that the progress of science and intellectualism in general does [not necessarily](#) mean progress [in](#) rational communication, transparency and understanding. Moreover, in modern life there is [ever](#)-increasing space for trust. One important consequence of [the](#) 'tragedy of modern culture' for Simmel is that 'things' became much more cultivated than 'people', with the consequence that we live in a world made of technical artifacts – [including](#) social forms and interactions – that we only partially understand and dominate. Habermas was aware of this when he spoke of [the](#) colonization of life worlds and 'expert knowledge'. However Simmel can help us to better orientate in the modern world of 'fake news' and technical untransparency. For Simmel uncertainty and ignorance are the foundations of social world. Thus, *truth*, understanding and consensus [cannot be](#) the [bases](#) of social life. Agreement, consensus and truth [constitute](#) a status [that](#) is quite rare to [find](#) in social life: Simmel observes that only [overt](#) religions and secret societies are actually interested in sharing 'truths'). In most societies – included the

modern one – what counts is the existence of ‘common sense’ as a form of general trust about the existence of things, structures, [and](#) values that most people do [not](#) really know and [which](#) they are even not interested in knowing. Social forms are *opaque*, and human beings – except for very rare and exceptional experiences such as *love* or *mysticism* – do [not](#) really know each other, but [have](#) interactions [mediated](#) by typifications, generalization, etiquette, etc. [At](#) the same time, personal knowledge always presupposes [maintaining](#) secrecy and [is](#) concretely manifested through [the](#) complex tactics of discretion, shame, tact, etc. In his pivotal essay on the *Sociology of sociability* ([1917] Press, 2013), Simmel gives us another example of an aesthetic, emotional, not merely proceduralistic and problem-solving oriented conception of public sphere. Drawing from Simmel’s theory, Richard Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man* (Sennett, 1977) argues that the growth and decline of the public sphere must be linked to the individual’s ability to express emotions in public. The fundamental concept of ‘society as a theatre’ has always aimed to fulfil a fundamental ethical function: to separate human ‘nature’ –intended as the authentic essence of the individual – from social action. The theatre separates the alleged ‘natural identity’ from the ‘role’, because an actor’s performance in another work or in another scene appears to us under a completely different guise and thus reveals a completely different personality. In Sennett’s opinion, the consumeristic nature of modern cities tends to remove the artistic dimension from daily life, which renders the individual ‘an actor deprived of his art’, subject to the ‘tyranny of intimacy’. Such intimist tyranny manifests itself in contemporary culture through the substantial atrophy of the public sphere and its roles, together with an [ever more widely](#) spreading culture of narcissism which encounters difficulty in expressing ‘passions’ in the public sphere. Thus, he arrives at the hypothesis that theatricality has a special, hostile relation to intimacy, [while](#) theatricality has an equally special, friendly relation to a solid public sphere (Sennett, 1977, [p. 37](#)). It can thus be seen that theatricality has a particular, hostile relationship with intimacy, as well as an equally particular affinity to a solid public life. Simmel’s essays on the actor (published posthumously) reveal that he was well aware of the special ‘social’ importance of theatrical art. [So](#) much so that he dedicated a specific study, which upon close inspection can be seen to enhance and complete his analyses of sociability and ‘play-forms of association’. Above and beyond the opposition between reality and appearance, Simmel expressed great praise for the actor: ‘the creator of a new world’(Simmel, 2017, [p. 36](#)). [‘While every other](#)

art transports the reality of life into an objective, otherworldly creation, the actor does just the opposite... his task now is to make this purely ideal, purely spiritual work of the play real, to reconvert it into an expression of reality' (Ivi). What is freeing about the actor's art is the same thing that the 'thoughtful man' feels in sociability, that is, just as art and play are pretenses, so is sociability, but it is nevertheless an expression of life to the fullest. It sublimates life and distills it into an extract endowed with greater wealth and autonomy than 'true life' itself. If we wanted to translate Simmel's observations into psychoanalytical language, we would state that the actor projects his own drives onto the public sphere of interactions with others, into social forms and conviviality; he practices the necessary art of living in society.

3. The late recognition of Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi: paradoxes of individualization in postmodern culture and the critique of life forms

The 'third' and the 'fourth' generation of the Frankfurt School, which can be identified with its leading figures Axel Honneth and his student Rahel Jaeggi, were certainly more receptive of Simmel's thought, since they tried to redirect critical theory out of the 'ice-desert of abstraction' (Adorno, 1992a, p. 224) and proceduralism back to social philosophy and a possible concept of 'good life'.

Honneth took seriously the characterization of Simmel as *Zeitdiagnostiker* (already recognized by Habermas) and set Simmel's *Fragestellung* (fundamental research question) at the very centre of his investigation: the pathologies of individualization in the contest of modern and postmodern life. Honneth considered Simmel's focus on individuality in the ambivalent game of interaction as a distinctive characteristic amongst the classical sociologists. However, unlike many sociologists and *Kulturkritiker* of the early 20th century, Simmel does not limit himself to issuing the umpteenth lament over the end of the individual or the dominion of *techné*, but inquisitively analyses what individuals do to live up to the possibilities offered by the 'luxuriant development of the objective culture' ('The Metropolis and Mental Life', GSG 7, p. 128). In a brief, but highly cogent and well-documented essay, Axel Honneth delineated the 'fragments' (*Bruchstück*) of a 'sociological diagnosis of the time' containing some essential aspects elaborated by Simmel in the *Philosophy of Money* with particular regard to 'style of life' in the monetary culture. Honneth re-

elaborated this concept to include the three fundamental circles of experience that describe the phenomenon of the ‘aestheticization of daily life’.

Firstly, the technological innovation that came about in the late 20th century, together with the extensive process of internationalization of capital, has led to a massive entry of culture into the processes of economic evaluation, whose most prominent manifestation is the growth of mass media and advertising. This, in turn, has led to a phenomenon that has become daily experience for modern westerners (and not only), that is, the ever-increasing flow of electronically produced information and images that enters our homes daily through TV screens and computers. One result of this is the ‘trend to erosion of the aesthetic means of communication of the world of social life’ (Honneth, 1994, [p. 12](#)). To put it in other, simpler terms, cultural activities lose their particular nature as the means to communicate a symbolic representation of the living world of men, and instead take on the characteristics of an electronically reproduced ‘technical environment’ designed exclusively for amusement and entertainment. Secondly, this process of erosion of the media goes hand in hand with a process of erosion of the normative bonds of the world of social life itself, a phenomenon that the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has described perfectly as ‘the end of the great narrations’. Finally, this ‘erosion’ of the social also involves a weakening of individuals’ communicative and relational capacities, which indicates a tendency towards the ‘atomization’ of the individual and erosion of the social bonds through which social groups expressively and normatively reproduce. The definitive ‘erosion’ (*Auflösung*) within the ‘social’ milieu has some important consequences on the development of individual subjectivity: in contemporary reality, instead of traditional 19th-20th-century models of *self-realization*, based upon more or less sound interior subjective motivations, fictitious biographies are constructed aesthetically through the virtual culture of electronic media. Thusly defined, the transition to the post-modern represents nothing more than the pessimistic cultural diagnosis that Adorno and Horkheimer formulated in the chapter on the *Cultural Industry* of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The difference however resides in the fact that, contrary to these latter, post-modern authors judge the cultural erosion and loss of individual authenticity positively. [Hence](#), according to Honneth, the transition from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *post-modern* theories and cultural diagnosis can be meaningfully compared to what

Simmel had already stated regarding the cultural transition from *Schopenhauer* to *Nietzsche* (described in his 1907 book):

‘While one [Schopenhauer] still remains oriented to the idea of an objective goal (Zweckgebundenheit) of human life, in the light of his definitive insolubility, but also in the pessimism of his Metaphysics of the will, the other [Nietzsche] can free himself from such negativism by dissociating himself from the idea of fulfillment of human life and internalizing it to the mere growth of its possibilities; in place of an idea of ‘self-realization’, the image (*Vorstellung*) emerges of an experimental invention of the self (*Selbsterfindung*)’ (Honneth, 1994, pp. 15-16).

If we accept the scheme proposed by Honneth and consider Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as two points of fundamental oscillation of the cultural dialectics of the 20th-century modern and post-modern – from both the general philosophical point of view as well as the sociological point of view due to its effects on what has been defined as an ‘erosion’ of the social (or ‘aestheticization of daily life’) –, then Simmel provides the necessary reference points for delineating the models, sometimes converging, other times diverging, regarding representation of the individual and its possible autonomy in the context of the postmodern ‘metropolization of social life’. In a later article on *Organized Self-Realization. Some Paradoxes of Individualization* (2004) Honneth completes his analysis of the pathologies of the ‘postmodern’ form of social life. With the help of Simmel, Honneth differentiates four different meanings of the notion of individualization: the growing individualization of biographies and life styles made possible by the modern money economy; the growing isolation of individual actors, related to the tendency of individuals to become even more lonely as the network of anonymous social contacts expands; the increase in individuals’ powers of reflection; increasing personal autonomy. Considering what the distinctive characteristics of individualism are nowadays, Honneth states that individuals seem to be confronting the new burden of ‘authenticity’ and compulsion to ‘self-realization’.

The individualism of self-realization, which Simmel traced to Romanticism, re-emerged over the past fifty years to become an instrument of economic development in the context of postmodern consumer-oriented capitalism, spreading standardization and fictionalized lifestyles under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper. The ideal of a style of life, the idea that one’s life

should be as creative and original as possible, was constantly [reinforced](#) thanks to consumerism and electronic media. It is therefore not entirely [improper](#) to discern in these processes the tendency to transform the mounting claim to self-realization into a productive force in the capitalist economy. Honneth's thesis is that we are [faced with](#) a 'paradox' (which is actually typical of Simmel's thought): the cultural and economic processes of modernity that once promised [greater](#) qualitative freedom [have been](#) reversed in [an](#) ideological legitimization of de-institutionalization, with the emergence of forms of pathological individualism, such as [feelings of](#) inner emptiness, superfluousness, and the absence of purpose. Increasingly, individuals have been confronted with the social expectation of being 'flexible' and willing to develop themselves if they want to [succeed](#) in their profession. Honneth arrived at the conclusion that we are currently faced with [the](#) rapid rise of what Simmel described more than one century ago as 'exaggerated individualism': 'urged from all sides to show that they are open to authentic self-discovery and its impulses, there remains for individuals only the alternative of simulating authenticity or of falling into a full-blown depression, of staging personal originality for strategic reasons or of pathologically shutting down' (Honneth 2004, p. 475).

Drawing from – and [renewing](#) – Honneth's analysis of [the](#) social pathologies of recognition, Rahel Jaeggi attempts to elaborate a *Critique of forms of life* (Jaeggi, 2018; Ruggieri, 2019). Jaeggi is convinced that Habermas' exclusive attention to the question of ethics and normativism has produced [an](#) analytic neutralisation toward any form of individual life and all its potential emancipative properties. [Her](#) critique begins precisely where problems, crisis and conflicts arise, even if they are not overtly manifest. Within this conceptual frame the critique of form of life is not conducted from an [external](#) authoritarian perspective, but from an immanent perspective. [Like](#) Simmel, we should consider [the](#) forms of social life [as](#) arising from the reciprocal relations of intentional individual actions. In every form there is an 'immanent transcendence', strictly connected to the process of life: the dialectics of 'more life' – the immanent side of life – and 'more-than-life' – the transcendent one. These are two complementary aspects of life within a dialectical scheme which is open and tragic, since it never ends and [has](#) no final synthesis. Even if Jaeggi seems to disempower Simmel's possible contribution to an immanent critique of forms due to her pragmatist approach in terms [of a](#) 'problem-solving' attitude [towards](#) life – life is [viewed](#) as a process of accumulated experiences that does [not](#) know 'springs' [or](#) 'new

beginnings' – at the same time her form of criticism intends to be immanent and transformative: it is immanent because it starts from the immanent crisis of social practices and institutions; it is transformative, as it allows for a transcendence of context.

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