



Book review

Pedro Caetano and Maria Manuela Mendes, Eds.

Simmel and Beyond: The Contemporary Relevance of Simmel's Thought

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The authors of this book's chapters seek to demonstrate that the categories first postulated by Simmel should continue to be used to explore contemporary issues, namely developing societies that are more inclusive, reflective, creative, and sustainable. The book shows, through reference to Simmel, how to study the social phenomena of multicultural societies, the problems associated with the social exclusion of ethnic groups and climate change, and the emergence of populism, among other issues. For Simmel, actuality is only one option. Through this relativization of actuality, Simmel appeals to the need for pluralistic and flexible perspectives on reality. His illustrative method enables new perspectives on the most pressing issues of contemporary times since our analyses must be free of determinism and the temptation to postulate prophecies—indeed, they should serve as a basis for dealing with tensions and building other worldviews. In terms of Simmel's search for reconciliation between the scientific and intellectual fields, using the metaphor of the “bridge,” he saw it as crucial to create conditions to achieve unity (but not unanimity) with regard to solving problems. This is a present-day struggle, given the constant appeals (not always fulfilled) for an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach in the social sciences. This book thus surpasses the best Simmelian traditions.

Also, crucial to dealing with today's problems is the subjective relationship between the individual and society. For Simmel, a rupture exists between the different worlds of individuals and between them and their worlds. Unity between nature and mind has been lost, as has the ability to fully integrate our spiritual, technological, political, and aesthetic resources, and thus achieve our full knowledge potential. It is not surprising that the last decade has seen numerous reprints of Simmel's books, as well as works analyzing Simmel as both a philosopher and sociologist. This book focuses on the analysis of relevant social dimensions in Western societies through re-readings of Simmel's work. The book has three parts, corresponding to three different societal challenges in society.

Part I, “Inclusive Societies,” focuses on social cohesion, solidarity, and cooperation between different social groups and the persistence of marginalization and social exclusion. As a Jew in early twentieth century Germany, Simmel felt this marginalization and inability to fully integrate into German society. Three of the four chapters in Part I, “Inclusive Societies,” look at the “stranger within”: The Roma (gypsy). If Simmel's concept of the “stranger” was the Jew, these authors argue that it is essential to understand the reality of Europe's Roma community, viewed as the “canary in the coal mine.” Chapter 1, by Pedro Caetano and Maria Manuela Mendes, and Chapter 2, by Stefânia Toma, begin with the concept of social distance between the non-gypsy population and the gypsy, then analyse the practices of

approximation—the Simmelian “bridge”—designed to create common symbolic and material spaces between the two communities. Chapter 3, by Maria Manuela Mendes and Olga Magano, examines the Roma as strangers in Portuguese society. The part ends with Michael Nollert’s reflection in Chapter 4 that no societies are without conflict.

Part II, “Innovative Societies,” focuses on sustainability and innovation in the democratic sphere, particularly the structural transformations that come with the digitalization of culture and the economy. It looks at our constantly interconnected society and its consequences at the political level, including the quality of democracy, the strengthening or decline of civil society, and the artificialization of territory. Chapter 5, by Philippe Boudes, tells us about Simmel’s importance for overcoming the nature/culture dichotomy, and listening. In Chapter 6, Catarina Delaunay examines the impact of complexification of society on families, specifically couples using assisted reproduction techniques, and the tensions between distance/approximation, strange/close, and couples and donors. In Chapter 7, Martti Siisiainen addresses massification in Finland. Mediation associations, the social circles between the center and the periphery, are disappearing, with impacts on the political system through populist movements. Chapter 8, by Jacob Hardy, explores the Simmelian digital metropolis, which was only a first step with the emergence of the “stranger” and the fading of primary groups.

Part III, “Reflective Societies,” explores the transformations that modified the “spirit of the West.” In Chapter 9, Barbara Markowska-Marczak, establishing a dialogue between Marx and Simmel, reflects on the transformation of capitalism, looking at the increasing erosion of barriers between the moral and economic spheres. In Chapter 10, Michal Warchala establishes a dialogue between Simmel and Weber that actually existed during their lives, and explores the relationship between science and religion. Thomas Sealy (Chapter 11) analyses the religious identity of Europeans recently converted to Islam. The Simmelian approach to religion is particularly important for studying how converts sought to reconcile aspects of continuity and change in their trajectories.

We see the relevance of Simmel’s multidimensional view of an “idea of Europe” and its relationship with the world in light of the European Union’s concern with social cohesion and the creation of a European collective heritage to overcome barriers between countries, to establish a united Europe. A strong theoretical rigor anchored in robust empirical data enables this book to show how a classic can be reinterpreted to apply to societal problems, particularly in fragmented societies. Editors Pedro Caetano and Maria Manuela Mendes have achieved what Simmel did throughout his academic career, despite difficulties accessing the academic field because of his Jewish status and later his indifference to academic rigidity. We can now take advantage of the Simmelian approach, whether in the study of assisted reproduction, in relation to the Roma community in Portugal, or in understanding new Islamic converts. This book demonstrates the scope of plural and decolonial analysis in Simmel’s work. Finally, it shows the importance of returning to Simmel at a time of tremendous technological impetus, increased political and religious populism, a *fin-de-siècle* cultural crisis and post-pandemic drift.