

## Introductory Remarks

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‘But I unrolled my maps all the same, and asked him to go over the journey with me, just briefly. And in the lamplight, leaning on the veteran’s shoulder, I felt a peace unknown since my schooldays.

But what a strange geography lesson I was given! Guillaumet didn’t teach me about Spain, he made Spain my friend. He didn’t talk about hidrography, or population figures, or livestock. Instead of talking about Guadix, he spoke of three orange trees at the edge of a field near Guadix: ‘Watch out for those, mark them on your map...’ And from then on the three orange trees had more significance than the Sierra Nevada. He didn’t talk about Lorca, but about an ordinary farm near Lorca. A living farm, with its farmer and its farmer’s wife. And that couple, lost in emptiness a thousand miles away from us, took on an importance beyond measure. Settled there on their mountain slope, they were ready, like lighthouse-keepers under their stars, to give help to men.

From their oblivion, from their inconceivable remoteness we rescued such details, known to no geographer in the world. Only the Ebro, which waters great cities, is of interest to geographers. Not that little stream hidden in the weeds to the west of Motril, that stream that fosters thirty species of flowers. ‘Beware of that stream, it ruins the field for landing... Map that on your map too.’ Oh, I would remember that snake at Motril! It looked like nothing at all, it enchanted no more than a few frogs with its gentle murmur, but it slept with only one eye closed. In the paradise of that emergency landing-field, it lay in wait for me in the grasses, twelve hundred miles away. Given the chance, it would transform me into a sheaf of flames...

And I was braced and ready to meet those thirty fighting sheep, drawn up on the hillside there and ready to charge: ‘You think the meadow is clear, and then wham!— you’ve got thirty sheep running down under your wheels...’ I could only smile in astonishment at such cunning treachery.

Little by little, in the lamplight, the Spain of my map became a fairytale landscape. I marked with a cross the sanctuaries and the traps. Like beacons I charted the farmer, the thirty sheep, the stream. I pinpointed exactly that shepherdess neglected by the geographers.’<sup>1</sup>

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1 Saint-Exupéry 2000:8.

The first time I heard these paragraphs from Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des hommes* I was participating in a seminar on sociological theory at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. It was read to us as an invitation to a journey. Yet it was a different kind of journey. It was not meant to be a journey over Spain by plane, but through the history of sociological theory. It was an invitation to stop and look at the details which escape the attention of most theoreticians, to call evidence into question, to be sensitive to ambiguities, to attend to phenomena which bind human beings together in a durable way; phenomena like friendship, thankfulness, and trust. In the years that followed I learned that sociology has also had its own Guillaumet, an author who looked at things which, at first sight, do not appear to be all that interesting from a sociological perspective: a letter, a secret, a look, a smile, an agreement or a fight. He made his own special map of human relations out of those subtle bonds that exist between two or more people and developed a sociological theory that looked beyond particular individuals and the institutions they create, to concentrate on those invisible threads that bind them together, that is, their reciprocal relations. This author was Georg Simmel (Berlin 1858-Strasbourg 1918). Simmel, a contemporary of Max Weber (1864-1920) and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), has only been rediscovered during the last decades but is now considered a classic author in the field of sociology.<sup>2</sup> The originality and versatility of this philosopher and social and cultural scientist make him difficult to classify within the constraints of a single discipline. His writing style, closer to literature than to science, and the essayistic form of his finest analyses made him seem like a sort of brilliant dilettante beside Weber and Durkheim—and not only to his own generation but, to a certain extent to readers today. Furthermore, his lack of academic success, which meant that he was not able to supervise any doctoral theses or habilitations, hindered him from founding a “school”. As he himself noted, ‘I know that I shall die without spiritual heirs (and that is good). The estate I leave is like cash distributed among

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2 The impressive renaissance of interest in Simmel started in the 1950s. In Germany, this was due above all to Gassen and Landmann's attempts to sketch Simmel's biography and initiate a dialogue about his rich oeuvre, and in the United States by Kurt Wolff, who translated chapters and essays into English and started a debate on the other side of the Atlantic. Yet the crucial impetus for the Simmel renaissance was given by Otthein Rammstedt in the 1980s in Germany, by David Frisby in the United Kingdom and by Donald Levine in the United States. Otthein Rammstedt embarked on the project of editing Simmel's collected works, starting a huge archival research project searching for texts, documents and, above all, letters, engaging scholars from all over the world to work in Bielefeld and excavating the unexplored mines of Simmel's theories.

many heirs, each of whom puts their share to use in some trade that is compatible with *their* nature but which can no longer be recognized as coming from that estate.<sup>3</sup>

All the same, and despite Simmel's methodological and stylistic peculiarities, he was an astute theoretician who delivered highly interesting and, in their own way, systematic theories. This book will concentrate on one of these theories, namely the theory of value developed in *The Philosophy of Money*, and on Simmel's approach to, and conception of, sociology, which made this theory of value possible in the first place. I have named Simmel's approach the "relational approach" or "relational sociology".

In a way, writing about Simmel's relational sociology is my response to and acknowledgement of the special invitation to sociology that my fellow students and I received in our first seminar on sociological theory. To Joan Estruch, the teacher that taught that course and so many others that have shaped my understanding of what it means to be a sociologist, I am deeply grateful; I am also, of course, grateful for his patient and critical reading of several versions of this work. Otthein Rammstedt, my *Doktorvater*, undoubtedly played the key role in the genesis of this book, since it was he who, after my initial reluctance, persuaded me with a calm "Fine... but do have another look at *The Philosophy of Money*," to take a closer look at Georg Simmel and thus awoke in me a profound interest in this author. Marco Iorio, Cécile Rol and Karin Werner (my editor) have read the whole manuscript and confronted me with interesting critiques. My intellectual debt to Marco Iorio is present in almost every line of this book. Peter Boenning, María Jesús Izquierdo, Yasemin Niephaus, Christian Papilloud, Carlota Solé, Antje Vetterlein and Georg Vobruba have read chapters of this work at several stages of its development and also helped me with their comments and critiques. Pat Skorge and Paxton Helms have read it from the very first word to the final full stop, improving its English. Thomas Melde has helped bring the manuscript into its final form, and Gero Wierichs from transcript Publishers has accompanied these transformations with valuable pieces of advice.

I am also indebted to Shu-er Wei and Gregor Fitzi, who accompanied my first readings of Georg Simmel, and patiently answered hundreds of questions. Justine Swierkot spent some sleepless nights listening to my new ideas, and managed to give the impression that it was all very interesting, even at four o'clock in the morning. Sandra Sequeira

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3 Cited in Frisby 1990: XXV, translated from the German original '*Anfang einer unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung*' (Simmel 1993:121).

also supported and commented on my newest theses and ideas in long spring and summer walks through various Bielefeld parks. Their patience and kindness were a precious gift. They are wonderful friends.

Antoni Estradé listened patiently and proposed hundreds of books that “I should certainly read”, and always responded to my e-mail inquiries with impressive helpfulness and knowledge. Montserrat Treserra and Lluís Sàez encouraged me in long, pleasant conversations in this and that café during the past few Catalan summers. Vincenzo Mele, Claudia Portioli, Angela Rammstedt, and David Stockelberg were colleagues with whom I had the chance to fruitfully discuss some of my ideas. Peter Wagner oriented and encouraged me at a very early stage of this work, and gave me hints and stimuli that have accompanied me until today. The innumerable questions of my students at the University of Bielefeld forced me to think over some of the theses I wanted to develop in my work, and even forced me to rewrite the odd chapter. A big thank you goes to them, too.

La Fundació La Caixa and the DAAD allowed me to visit Germany on a research scholarship for two years. Although the topic I was researching at that time had nothing to do with Simmel, this scholarship was what gave me the opportunity to make an acquaintance with his oeuvre, and made my work with Otthein Rammstedt and the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld possible. To these institutions, and to the University of Bielefeld where I spent a total of six highly intellectually stimulating years, I am therefore in debt.

Last but not least, Núria Milà has been there for me from the moment I was born. Her words of encouragement and support—and also of criticism—have always had wonderful effects on me and on the work I have done over the years. Marco Iorio has read this manuscript from the very first to the very last word, and has criticized almost every one of them. For his meticulous reading, innumerable pieces of advice, and above all for making my life wonderful I am so grateful to him. And Dàrio has greeted me with a smile every time I have raised my eyes from the computer screen, and thus made my work more difficult, for the desire to play with him has often been much stronger than the desire to do good work. I thank him for his patience and for distracting me so pleasurably. These three people have given me real-life examples of what I have been writing about: the strength and vital importance of the subtle threads that bind people together and turn them into what they are.

This work seeks, on the one hand, to offer an overview of Simmel's conception of and approach to sociology; on the other hand, it tries to systematically analyse the theory of value sketched out in *The Philosophy of Money*.<sup>4</sup> These two aims have neither been chosen arbitrarily, nor can they be understood independent of each other. The relational perspective that Simmel turned into the trademark of his sociology (and social philosophy) is the epistemological foundation of his theory of value. Moreover, through the development of his theory of value (as well as of money, exchange and lifestyle) Simmel was seeking to prove the rightness of his relational approach.

As I will argue later, Simmel delivered an intrinsically sociological approach to values with his theory of value precisely because he stuck to this relational paradigm in its development. In fact, he saw values as social constructions, thereby distancing himself from the theories of value which were embraced in his day. Moreover, as we will see in detail later, for Simmel values are not social constructions in the sense that they can be constructed in this way or that depending on the will of particular individuals. Values attain an objective character which imposes itself upon individuals, serving as eyeglasses through which they apprehend and evaluate their world. Glasses which Simmel doubted socialized human beings could ever completely take off.

My account of Simmel's approach to sociology and his theory of value is divided into two parts. Part I ('Georg Simmel as a Social Scientist') delivers a general introduction to the work and person of Georg Simmel, and then focuses on the way in which his interest in sociology was awakened, on the influences to which he was exposed and on the particular theoretical proposals that he offered for concretizing the discipline (chapters 1 and 2). It also looks at the concrete circumstances, influences, and motivations that led Simmel to write *The Philosophy of Money*, as well as the lines of continuity and divergence with respect to his previous works (chapter 3). Part II ('Georg Simmel's Theory of Value') offers an analysis of the theory of value which Simmel laid out in *The Philosophy of Money*. I have organized my depiction and discussion of this theory of value by following the structure of Simmel's monograph as much as possible. It is not always possible since, despite the fact that its first chapter is completely devoted to the theory of value, many thoughts and analyses of value appear scattered throughout the

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4 Simmel developed a theory of value that aimed at being a general theory that would grasp the emergence and consolidation of all types of values, be they economic, ethical, aesthetic or of whatever other kind. These concrete types of value would then be special cases (with special features) of the one and the same general concept of value.

other five chapters even though they are also pillars of his theory of value

In my interpretation the theory of value should be understood as the central motif of *The Philosophy of Money*.<sup>5</sup> A reading of this monograph through the lens of the theory of value imbues it with much more internal coherence than the focus on the issue of money. If the focus is on money alone, *The Philosophy of Money* appears to be a sort of melting pot of thoughts and ideas; it is only sewn together by its theme, a key in which the most varied motifs are played. Turn the focus to the theory of value, however, and it becomes a meticulously structured work.<sup>6</sup> Hence, and in accordance with Simmel's division of his monograph into an analytical and a synthetic part, I have distilled out an analytical theory of value and a synthetic theory of value. The first delivers a general theory of value and, based on this, a special theory of economic values (chapter 4). The second seeks to illustrate the consequences that the modern generalization of monetary economies have had on the very conception of economic values and, as an extension of the first, on values in general (chapter 6). The necessary link between these two chapters, Simmel's analyses of money (its conditions of emergence, its function, and its social consequences), makes up chapter 5.

At the end of each part I have added a digression or an epilogue. The digression at the end of part I elaborates on Simmel's discussion of Marx's theory of value, linking Simmel's most relevant influences and the history of the writing of *The Philosophy of Money*—which was partially stimulated by the publication of the third volume of *Capital* in 1894—with the discussion of his theory of value. The epilogue at the end seeks to relate Simmel's theory of culture to his theory of value, sketching hypotheses about Simmel's theory of modernity.

Although this work does offer an introduction to the sociology of Georg Simmel and, especially, to the monograph *The Philosophy of Money*, it can by no means substitute for a direct reading of Simmel himself. There are many reasons. First, it is obvious that one must read an author directly, and not rely exclusively on secondary interpretations to know what he or she meant; second, because a narration about what a classic author has to say can never be the wonderful reading that the

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5 Despite the intense work of Simmel scholars on his theory of value, none of them has yet presented it as being the main axis of *The Philosophy of Money*, that is, as the central theme that actually gives it a systematic structure. See, among others, Cavalli 1993, Flotow 1995, Lichtblau 2000, Merz 1990, Rammstedt 2003.

6 As I will illustrate in the three chapters that compose the second part of this book.

classic itself is. It is also because my priority in this project has been as much to present Simmel's sociological approach and his theory of value as to discuss them, and, on many occasions, to criticize them or to remould them. Sometimes I have sought to impose clearer analytical contours upon them—an undertaking that is certainly more modest than it might sound. Thus I have allowed myself a great deal of freedom in interpreting Simmel's works, and as a result offer here not only an introduction to this author and to *The Philosophy of Money*, but also an interpretation of Simmel's sociological approach as well as of his monograph—the latter interpretative effort emerging from a systematization of the sociologically highly interesting theory of value which resides in its pages. All the same, I have attempted to be accurate in my presentation so that the reader may easily distinguish the passages in which I have presented Simmel's theses from those in which I have introduced my own proposals and arguments. Although this task is not always easy to accomplish without interrupting the flow of thought and breaking the rhythm of the prose, I hope that I have been able to find a balance between accuracy and a pleasant writing style.