CLASSIC THINKERS

Simmel

Thomas Kemple

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Illustrations

Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations in this book when citing the most readily available or recent editions of Georg Simmel's writings. Whenever I modify an English translation, I also cite the German edition according to volume and page number – e.g. (S: 43; GSG 11: 25). References in the text with dates but no author are by Simmel and are given in the reference list – e.g. (1968). See the Suggestions for Further Reading and table 1 for more information on various editions of Simmel's works.

GSG = (1989–2015) *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe* [Georg Simmel Collected Works], 24 vols, ed. O. Rammstedt et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

ISF = (1971) *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. D. N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

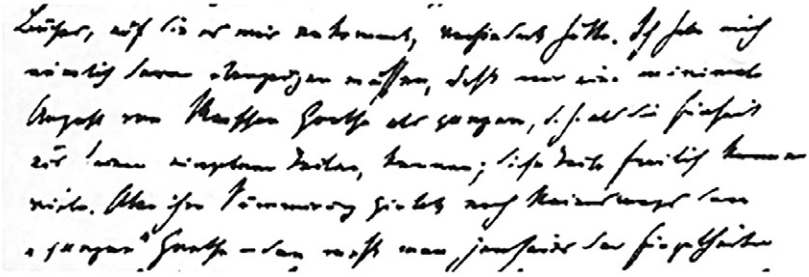
PM = (2004) *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby. London: Routledge

S = (2009) *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, 2 vols, ed. H. Helle, trans. A. J. Blasi, A. K. Jacobs, and M. Kanjirathinkal. Leiden: Brill

SC = (1997) *Simmel on Culture*, ed. D. Frisby and M. Featherstone. London: Sage

VL = (2010) *View of Life*: *Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*, trans. J. A. Y. Andrews and D. N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

For Martha Garland



I have had to convince myself that only a few people know Goethe as a whole, that is, as the unity of his parts; these parts, to be sure, are known to many. But their sum does not yet by any means yield the 'whole' Goethe – for him one must look beyond the particulars.

From a letter Georg Simmel wrote to Marianne Weber,
9 December 1912, to whom he dedicated his book *Goethe*
(GSG 23: 146; facsimile in 1959: 241. Courtesy of Arnold Simmel)

Open house in Berlin's Westend, summer 1914
(courtesy of Cornelia Hahn Oberlander)

Preface and Acknowledgements

An old black and white photograph captures a moment in time, as if to freeze the flow of events under the aspect of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). A woman and two men in their Sunday best are standing in a lush garden, the one on the left talking animatedly and gesticulating with his hands to the man in the dinner jacket and the woman in the large hat and fur stole. They are all smiling, if only for the photographer, but must be very hot in the summer heat. They are evidently not strangers but appear to be familiar with one another, a trio related through friendship, through family, or in other ways. The handwriting on the back of the photograph notes that the man speaking is the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel, and that the setting is an open house in summer 1914 at the home of the economist and historian Ignaz Jastrow, at 14 Nussbaumallee in Berlin's Westend. Jastrow is standing in the centre next to Simmel's wife, Gertrud, and the inscription points out that she wrote books of philosophy under the pseudonym Marie Luise Enckendorff. Simmel is making one of his 'characteristic gestures', as if to grasp an idea from the air and twist it around in his hand. The people in the picture are not at a formal lecture or a scripted seminar at the university, of course, but simply taking part in a sociable gathering and an improvised conversation. As Simmel's son Hans later recalled, exchanges like this one were a regular feature of social life among these circles of colleagues, families, and friends: 'He was a master of conversation, but not interested in "discussion" in the usual sense of the term …. What he found essential and interesting was to fasten on to a word or opinion that would expand the conversation, … or to offer remarks with some constructive new point of view' (H. Simmel 1958: 254; similar

remarks are made by students, in Stewart 1999: 7; Gassen and Lassmann 1958: 160, 228).

The date, summer 1914, is significant for both personal and historical reasons. Simmel and Jastrow, who met in the late 1880s and became best friends and neighbours, had recently been separated when the Simmels moved to Strasbourg a few months earlier (GSG 23: 349–50, 356n). After almost thirty years as a popular lecturer at Berlin University, and despite publishing many well-regarded books and articles, Simmel had finally been called to take up his first post as a full professor. His friend continued to lecture at Berlin University where they had been colleagues, but he had recently been dismissed from his teaching position at the Commercial College he had co-founded, an injustice Simmel vehemently protested in a newspaper editorial as a violation of academic freedom (GSG 17: 115–18, 463–5). Just a few weeks after this photograph was taken, the lives of these individuals and of many others in their social circle would be decisively transformed with the outbreak of the First World War in August 2014. As Simmel reflected melancholically in a letter to the Jastrows almost exactly a year later, 'the war placed a period where I had at first only expected a semicolon. I am convinced that a new world era is beginning … & that I shall belong to the old' (quoted in Goodstein 2017: 338; GSG 23: 534–5).

This book is intended to serve primarily as a short introduction to the work, life, and legacy of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) for undergraduate students and general readers. I try not to assume any prior knowledge of Simmel's work, his social and intellectual circles, or technical issues in philosophy and sociology. Because Simmel often responds to the academic, cultural, and political issues of his time, I situate his work within important historical and cultural events and in the larger field of classical sociological and modern philosophical thought. And since one of the lasting lessons of his work concerns his perspective on what is unique about the modern experience, this book also offers an assessment of the significance of his ideas for understanding some current intellectual debates, cultural issues, and everyday phenomena. Although I cannot present more than a snapshot of Simmel, I invite readers to look beyond the particulars and to imagine the unity of his life and work for his time and for ours, just as Simmel himself had hoped to accomplish in his book on the novelist, poet, playwright and natural scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) (see the epigraph above).

A distinctive feature of my approach consists in connecting the most familiar and influential themes of Simmel's writings which have been the main concern of scholars for over a century – on

money, metropolises, and modernity – to lesser known topics and texts that have come to light in the recent reception of his work. Following Simmel's own method of seeing the whole through the parts, I select key works featured in most English-language anthologies and commentaries, especially his masterpiece on the *Philosophy of Money* (1900, revised in 1907), his famous lecture on 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (published as an essay in 1903), and the chapters of his monumental *Sociology*, including his often cited piece 'The Stranger' (1908). At the same time, I bring these works into conversation with writings that have received less attention: from his early aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical publications to his later metaphysical, sociological, and cultural writings, especially the provocative essays collected in *Philosophical Culture* (1911) and the challenging chapters that make up his *View of Life* (1918). In my Introduction, and in the opening remarks to each of the three parts of this book, I present some relevant details of Simmel's biography and intellectual milieu insofar as they illuminate the life of the thinker within the development of his thought. For example, I consider his popularity and influence on students; his relations with leading cultural figures and artistic movements; the importance of travel, family life, friendships, and colleagues in shaping his ideas; his struggle for institutional recognition and professional security; and his personal tastes and political opinions. In my Suggestions for Further Reading, I offer some practical suggestions on using this text in the classroom or for further study: in conjunction with accessible selections from Simmel's work, with short pieces by other classical and contemporary thinkers, or with useful resources listed in the References.

Simmel's life and work are therefore the main *focus* of this book, but they also serve as *a frame* for rethinking his pivotal place within the 'classical age' of social scientific thought in the 150-year period between 1789 – the French Revolution, which inspired the rise to the modern social sciences – and 1939 – the beginning of the Second World War, which provoked a period of critical rethinking concerning the relevance and scope of philosophy and sociology. An appreciation of the significance of Simmel as a classic thinker is enhanced when he is understood in light of certain key texts, core concepts, and main themes from other classic writers, above all the classic sociological 'trinity' of Karl Marx (an important influence on Simmel's ideas), Max Weber (a valued colleague and friend), and Emile Durkheim (his contemporary and occasional rival). I also touch on the ideas of some young thinkers who studied with him and followed their own intellectual paths later on, particularly the radical cultural philosophers Georg Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer,

and Ernst Bloch. I show that his writings complement the work of his contemporaries in sociology as well, including Herbert Spencer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W. E. B. Du Bois, Karl Mannheim, Marcel Mauss, Robert Park, and George Herbert Mead. Rather than distract from the core issues and texts by Simmel that are my main concern, I address these thinkers in pairs in a few brief digressions or 'excurses', a device Simmel himself used in tracing thematic connections, examples, or departures from his main topic of study. These excurses highlight Simmel's remarkable influence in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere (astonishingly, his work was extensively translated into English, French, Russian, Polish, and Italian in his own lifetime). They also help us trace his importance for later developments in urban sociology and social network analysis, phenomenology and metaphysics, cultural criticism, and the study of everyday life in the modern world.

Although my aim is to provide a conventional reading of the life and work of this important modernist thinker, I also hope to capture some of the innovative spirit of Simmel's unique method of thinking and observing as well as his original way of reading and writing. In each chapter I display some key concepts and main themes in a series of simple diagrams that take the shape of objects and images that he himself uses as simple examples and analogies, such as a door, a vending machine, a mirror, and a bridge. I present these figures as ways of thinking through Simmel's theoretical problems in verbal and visual ways, or to borrow from Simmel's description of his own method of forming concepts, as 'geometrical sketches' that take 'the unavoidably accidental and crude form of all drawings' (S: 24; ISF: 31).* Presenting Simmel's life and work in this book reveals a tension with the approach he takes in his writings on Rembrandt and Rodin, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, or Kant and Goethe.

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*The figures are meant primarily to provide a quick overview of the key concepts discussed in the chapters rather than to make a separate point or an original argument on their own. Figures 1 and 10 present the frame of the book as a whole, and figures 2, 5, 6, and 8 give chapter outlines of the main works by Simmel on which I focus in each of the three parts. All diagrams depict the relationships between significant ideas, analogies, or images that Simmel uses in the works under discussion and therefore serve as 'thinking pictures' (Swedberg 2016). To make my sources more accessible for the general reader and to the student new to Simmel, I use parenthetical references rather than footnotes, and each excursus can be read either on its own or in connection with the topics discussed in the chapter.

For him, these artists, writers, and thinkers are embodiments of the modern worldview, and to some extent they also present portraits of himself, just as Simmel sometimes serves this purpose for me in this book (and in Kemple 1995: 224–6; 2014: 206–8). My aim is not to present his life and work merely as exemplary instances of the aimless wanderer (the philosophical *flâneur*) or the intellectual tinkerer (the sociological *bricoleur*), as some commentators have argued (Frisby 1986; Weinstein and Weinstein 1991). Even though I cannot present the whole Simmel in this book, my aim is to approach his work as a model for how systematic study and methodical thought can address the deepest problems of modern experience.

* * *

I owe an incalculable debt to many undergraduate students over the years, including those in my social theory classes, in my Arts One seminars, and especially in my course on Simmel and social media, where the outlines of this book were first worked out (unbeknownst to me or them). Rayka Kumru, a student in that class, led me to the photograph of Simmel presented above after befriending an old woman by chance on the ski slopes of Whistler, British Columbia: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, the renowned landscape architect and Ignaz Jastrow's granddaughter (Herrington 2013). I am grateful to Mrs Oberlander for permission to reproduce this photograph and to Arnold Simmel for permission to use his grandfather's letter to Marianne Weber. My undergraduate research assistant, Jastej Luddu, has given me valuable feedback on making this manuscript more accessible and interesting for newcomers to Simmel, as have my former undergraduate students Babak Amini, Andrew Brown, Jennifer Diep, and Justin Kong, among others. As always, many graduate students and teaching assistants have offered me their encouragement, critical insight, and expertise in making these ideas useful for further study and in helping me draw my diagrams, especially Caitlin Forsey, Heather Holroyd, Mo Ismailzai, Katherine Lyon, and Rachael Sullivan. (All figures are drawn by me, and images taken from internet websites such as www.ecosia.org are free to share, modify, or use commercially.) My colleagues Sylvia Berryman, Dawn Currie, Brandon Konoval, Renisa Mawani, Carla Nappi, Gavin Paul, and Mike Zeitlin offered compelling advice at the right moments as I considered alternative approaches to this book.

I am grateful to Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, Scott Lash, Nick Gane, and other members of the editorial board of *Theory,*

Culture & Society for their valuable support and suggestions on two special issues on Simmel (Kemple 2007; Harrington and Kemple 2012). Austin Harrington and I have sustained an inspiring friendship and productive collaboration through our shared interests in Weber, Simmel, and Berlin (Harrington and Kemple 2013; Kemple and Harrington 2016), and he has generously shared the draft of his forthcoming collection of translations of Simmel's writings on art and aesthetics along with his extensive introduction. Bryan Turner invited me to edit *The Anthem Companion to Simmel*, which led to a collegial relationship and wonderful friendship with Olli Pyyhtinen, who opened my eyes to the expanding world of Simmel studies beyond the English-speaking world (Kemple and Pyyhtinen 2016; Kemple 2016), in addition to giving me scrupulous comments on this manuscript. Through Olli I was able to connect with Natália Cantó-Milà, Gregor Fitzi, Nigel Thrift, and many other inspiring new Simmel scholars. A belated reading of the excellent book by Ralph Leck (2000) gave me a new perspective on Simmel's intellectual, political, and personal milieu, as well as a new friend. I never met the late David Frisby personally, although his work on Simmel and theories of modernity infuses much of the approach I take here (Kemple 2010), and I am grateful to the late Donald Levine for inviting me to the conference on Simmel's legacy in Chicago after reading my papers in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (Kemple 2009 and 2011). Stimulating discussions at colloquia in Montreal, Irvine, Edinburgh, Oñati, and Vancouver (the last in a pivotal paper co-authored with Zohreh Bayatrizi) led to articles in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *UC Irvine Law Review*, and *Sociologie et sociétés*, several ideas from which have made their way into the present book (Kemple 2014a and 2013; Bayatrizi and Kemple 2012). Through the hospitality of Sanjeev Routray and Ravinder Kaur, I was able to present some of these ideas to graduate students at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, and I also benefited from stimulating discussions with Hubert Knoblauch, Arnold Windeler, Nina Baur, and above all Robert Jungmann at the Technische Universität in Berlin during my summer there as a DAAD fellow. I thank the reviewers at Polity Press, and my editor George Owers, who has been patient and helpful in pushing me to clarify the ideas and simplify the presentation of this book through several iterations, each (hopefully) better than the preceding one.

My intersecting circles of friends – especially David Chacon, Gilles Beaudin, Scot Ritchie, and Wolf Drägestein – keep me in touch with all things strange and familiar in Vancouver. As always, Stephen Guy-Bray is the heart and soul of everything I do.

1

Introduction: The Problem of Fitting in and Standing Out

In the summer of 1904 Georg Simmel took his young son Hans on a trip to the Swiss Alps, in the course of which the father told some of his signature stories. When they returned home Hans wrote out one of the more fanciful of these fairy tales, which Simmel himself later expanded on (Simmel 2009–10; GSG 20: 302–3, 547–9, 618–27; Hans Simmel 1958: 255). It recounts the life of little Grülp, a colour who cannot find his complement anywhere in the world, not even in the rainbow. A magician, an old owl named Colorum who could only see at night, is also unable to find a place for little Grülp, declaring him 'the colour that doesn't exist'. Eventually little Grülp visits the Paris studio of the painter Clixorine, who is delighted to make use of him in his work. But when Clixorine can no longer sell his paintings he starves to death. In despair, little Grülp visits the Opal's house, where he finds a home among other colours that do not exist. But, at this point, our storyteller breaks off, unable to understand the name that little Grülp was given in his new family.

Besides offering an amusing glimpse into Simmel's own family life, this odd tale expresses some of Simmel's own ideas and can stand as a charming portrait of the man himself. In this regard, it bears some resemblance to Simmel's famous short piece on 'The Stranger', which many have argued is partly autobiographical. They note that Simmel himself is like the one who 'comes today and stays tomorrow', settling into various social and intellectual circles while remaining both an insider and an outsider in each of them (S: 601–5; ISF: 143–9, 296–330; Levine et al. 1976; Goodstein 2017: 296–330; Coser 1965: 29–42). Although I consider the theme of

Table 1 Simmel's life and work

Date	Simmel's Life	Simmel's Works	Intellectual-Historical Context
1858 to 1890	◆ Born 1 March 1858 in Berlin, the youngest of 7 ◆ Father dies (1874); Julius Friedländer sponsors his university studies in history, psychology, Italian, and philosophy ◆ Lecturer *[Privatdozent]* at Berlin University (1885)	◆ Dissertation on yodelling rejected; doctorate later granted for his prizewinning essay on *Kant's Physical Monadology* (1881) ◆ 'Psychological & Ethnological Studies of Music' (1882) ◆ 'Dante's Psychology' (1884) ◆ Post-doctoral lecture-essay on Kant's theory of space-time rejected, later accepted (1885)	◆ Durkheim (born 1858) ◆ Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) (dies 1882) ◆ Schopenhauer (d. 1860) ◆ Weber (b. 1864) ◆ Marx's *Capital* (1867) (d. 1883) ◆ Nietzsche's major works published; suffers a nervous breakdown in 1889 (d. 1900) ◆ Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), economic boom *(Gründerzeit)*
1890 to 1900	◆ Marries Gertrud Kinel (1890), who later writes under the pseudonym Marie Luise Enckendorff; son Hans born (1891) ◆ Appointed Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy without salary at Berlin University (1900); colleagues with Dilthey	◆ *On Social Differentiation* (1890) ◆ *Problems in the Philosophy of History* (1892; revised 1905) ◆ *Introduction to Moral Science* (1892–93) ◆ Writings for *Jugend* (1897–1907) and other avant-garde and scholarly journals ◆ *Philosophy of Money* (1900; revised 1907)	◆ Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies, Tarde, Veblen, Gilman, Du Bois, and Cooley publish early sociological writings ◆ *American Journal of Sociology* (founded 1895) and *Année sociologique* (founded 1898) publish translations of Simmel's early work ◆ Berlin Trade Exhibition (1896)

1900 to 1908	◆ Exchanges with Rilke, George, Ernst, Rodin, Buber, Husserl, Rickert, Bergson, and other major cultural figures ◆ Park, Hiller, Stöcker, and others attend popular Berlin lectures ◆ Heidelberg Professorship rejected, despite Weber's support	◆ 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) ◆ *Kant* (1904) ◆ *Kant and Goethe* (1906; revised 1916) ◆ *Religion* (1906; revised 1912) ◆ *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1907) ◆ *Sociology* (1908)	◆ Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) ◆ Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900–01) ◆ Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05) ◆ Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907) ◆ Expressionist, Naturalist, Feminist, and Activismus movements gain in prominence
1908 to 1918	◆ Lukács, Bloch, Kracauer, and others attend salons in Berlin Westend home ◆ Appointed Professor at Kaiser-Wilhelm University in Strasbourg (1914) ◆ Simmel dies of liver cancer 26 September 1918 in Strasbourg	◆ *Main Problems in Philosophy* (1910) ◆ *Philosophical Culture* (1911) ◆ *Goethe* (1913) ◆ *Rembrandt* (1916) ◆ *The War and Our Spiritual Decisions* (1917) ◆ *Fundamental Questions of Sociology* (1917) ◆ *View of Life* (1918)	◆ First meeting of German Sociological Association in Frankfurt (1910) ◆ *Logos* journal founded (1910) ◆ Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) (d. 1917) ◆ World War (August 1914–November 1918)

the stranger in later chapters, the tale of little Grülp's efforts to find his complement might serve just as well as a statement of Simmel's struggles to find a place in the university, if not also my own attempt here to fit him into the history of classic thinkers. Simmel's life and work are likewise mirrored in the attempts of the old owl Colorum to explain the unexplainable and to account for what does not seem to exist in reality. His frustrations with academic life are also reflected in the ambition of the obsessive painter Clixorine to produce some unknown masterpiece out of materials which have not yet been discovered, and even to represent the unrepresentable (Kemple 1995: 113–25). As a philosopher and sociologist, and as a theorist of art and life who was also a popular writer, Simmel often appears strange from the perspective of established academic disciplines or out of place with respect to recognizable literary genres. Like a colour we cannot name, or which at first might not even seem to exist, his work does not appear as a substantial contribution to any one field. His uniqueness and originality are thus a bit like little Grülp, who at first either stands out or seems invisible but may unexpectedly find a home somewhere.

In this introductory chapter I give an overview of Simmel's life and work by considering his career-long concern with combining sociological observation and philosophical speculation on modern experience. After reviewing some of his own personal struggles with fitting in and standing out in the academic world, I consider how many of his most interesting ideas are announced or anticipated in his early writings. These works from the 1890s include his first book, *On Social Differentiation*, his two-volume *Introduction to Moral Science*, and several shorter pieces that attempt to bridge philosophy and social science. Without abandoning his academic training in philosophy, Simmel developed his own approach to social life in the years when sociology was just beginning to establish its own journals, professional associations, and university departments. Later on, he expands on the relationship between 'association and differentiation' as his main problem (*Hauptproblem*) or basic question (*Grundfrage*), which the philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), as well as the sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), first inspired him to formulate: 'How is society possible?' (S: 40–52; ISF: 6–22). Simmel's question concerns how people, events, and things stand out from one another as singular, unique, and purposeful, and also how they fit together as types, members, and parts of a whole. To situate his early work in the context of

other major intellectual trends of the late nineteenth century, I include a short excursus on how Simmel's approach to 'social evolution' contrasts with that of other major thinkers of his day, namely Spencer and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). The key themes that I highlight in my discussion of these early writings are anticipated in the chapters that follow on the complications of the money economy, the complexities of metropolitan society, and the unintended consequences of modern life.

Early Life and Work

Although Simmel himself resisted writing out the details of his personal life, we can identify a number of significant events and turning points that illuminate the development of his ideas and the evolving shape of his work (see table 1). Since there is no complete biography of Simmel, these notes are based on letters, memoirs written by others, public documents, and other materials relating to his life (especially Helle 2013: 181–7; Köhnke 1996; Landmann 1958: 11–14; Pyyhtinen 2018: vii–x; and H. Simmel 1958). Thus we could at most call them 'biographemes' or mere fragments of a biography (Barthes 1989: 9). Simmel was born on 1 March 1858, the last of seven children, in a house that stood on the northwest corner of Friedrichstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse in central Berlin. As he grew up, the world around his childhood home changed rapidly in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War of 1871–2, which inaugurated a period of tremendous industrial and political development and led to the foundation of a unified German nation and the economic boom called the *Gründerzeit*. The opera, theatres, concert halls, museums, parliament, churches, markets, the castle, and the university, as well as countless restaurants, bars, and new venues of mass entertainment – all were within walking distance. As his good friend the poet, philosopher, and literary critic Margarete Susman (1872–1966) later reflected, 'not just the time but also the place of his birth were decisive for his life and thought, a Berlin already on its way to becoming a lively and bustling metropolis' (Susman 1992: 32).

Simmel's parents had migrated to Berlin from Breslau shortly after marrying, and both came from Jewish families that had converted to Christianity. Simmel was baptized a Protestant and regularly attended services until his final years, when he chose to pursue a more private and independent expression of his faith. His father, who co-founded a successful chocolate factory, died in 1874 when