



**David Beer, *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thoughts: Worlds, Lives, Fragments*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 197 pp.**

**Biagio Sarnataro**

Volume 24, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075242ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075242ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sarnataro, B. (2020). Review of [David Beer, *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thoughts: Worlds, Lives, Fragments*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 197 pp.] *Simmel Studies*, 24(1), 159–171. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075242ar>

## REVIEWS

BIAGIO SARNATARO

**David Beer, *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thoughts: Worlds, Lives, Fragments*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 197 pp.**

Published in 2019 at the Palgrave Macmillan publishing house, the text by David Beer, sociologist of the University of York (UK), focuses on the last two publications of Georg Simmel: *Rembrandt: An essay in the philosophy of art* (1916) and *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms* (1918) henceforth referred to as *Rembrandt* and *The View of Life* respectively]. Beer splits his book into two parts. The first part of *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thought. Worlds, Lives, Fragments* which includes chapters 2 and 3, deals with the forms of expression and irreducibility of individual life in relation to Rembrandt's aesthetic work and his compositional poetics, and the way in which Simmel draws on Rembrandt's paintings as a source of inspiration for expanding and enriching his own thinking. The second part of the book, which covers the rest of the chapters without the conclusion (chapter 8), is dedicated to explaining Simmel's final major work: *The View of Life*. It is built around four essays; Beer discusses the content of each, slavishly following the progress of Simmel's text. According to Beer there is both a profound link and a constant echo between *Rembrandt* and *The View of Life*: the first title is the empirical exhibition of the second, while the second offers a rich conceptualization of what can be deduced from the paintings of the Dutch painter.

Throughout Beer's text, reference is often made to the richness of Simmel's writing, even when it becomes enigmatic and aphoristic.

Simmel's writing, Beer claims, is a weapon against all kinds of positivism: not subjected to the pressure of the 'publish or perish' cult, the writing of the German sociologist follows the creative flow of his own pulsating intellectual life and this very process leads him to become aware of being *a life*. As a privileged observer of the contradictions of his time, Simmel reveals to us how the most authentic experience of modernity is an aesthetic experience, and how this type of experience poses sociological problems to the modern intellectual.

Of course, there are in his last two books passages which are hard to decipher, momentary ambiguities and even the occasional crass or crude generalisation, but we can value the opportunities which Simmel's speculations provide whilst still being attentive to their problems and limitations. In this context the Simmelian category of *sociation* becomes an attractive area for contemporary research. 'Sociation' refers to the forms in which individuals grow together with the addition of interest. These interests, whether they are sensory or ideal, momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, causal or teleological, constituting the basis of human societies' form-making.

The continuity of the process of forming individual lives, the idea of a unity made from fragments, the vision of a transcendence which develops within planes of immanence; all provide cues to Simmel's final thoughts, the importance of which are thrown into relief by the pressures of our own time. These ideas, as Beer explains, are highly pertinent in light of the changes wrought by digital forms of expression to contemporary cognition and perception; of the ability of technology to reshape our concepts of life and intelligence; and of the ways in which mass-media performance has changed the communication between individuals and the system of their expectations.

From a sociological perspective, it is possible to outline the characteristics of a method that goes beyond the theory itself developed by Simmel. Talking about *Rembrandt* as a prelude to the more conceptual *The View of Life* does not appear an eccentric

choice: Beer's bibliographic operation acquires the contours of an intellectual battle. He explains through the example of Simmel the need to reorientate the proposals of sociological research, especially of contemporary research. Beer's central thesis is this: that in his final two publications Simmel offers us his speech on the two-act method. We must accept this discourse not as a testament, but as a manifesto.

However, Simmel remains a man of his time, as Beer never fails to remind us. Indeed, he does more than offer reminders: before moving on to the heart of his analysis, he lists a series of criticisms from post-colonial and interstitial environments and sensitivities. It is from these areas of discourse that German sociology is criticized, as it exhibits exactly the problems we might expect of classical social theory: it is dominated by malestrom thought and by problems of gendered language, expression and patriarchal discourse. Moreover it seems that there is in Simmel's thoughts an exclusive view of European decadence, an interest in delineating the European origin of the global process of civilization. Here we can remember the words of another interpreter of Simmel, the expert in post-colonial studies Gurminder Bhambra. According to Bhambra, classical sociological theory is written into that intellectual humus, but rather than responding with censorship we should seek to recognise this inscription and understand its effects, if it is still necessary for sociological theory to refer to that humus in general.

Despite the limitations that have been underlined, the first answer to be given is: in Simmel we can talk about liberating discursive practices. However, it should not be forgotten that authors like Simmel associate the richness of expression and contents with the reference to literature and the imagery of the flourishing literature produced by the false European consciousness, which, not surprisingly, collapsed due to the ontological and political incapacity of reconciling being and thought. This inability perhaps depended on the difficulty in conceiving the hermeneutic and ethical force of the concept of life.

In the book on Rembrandt, life is expression and realization of forms. These act on life: during form-making, life and culture resonate with each other. In this connection, life demonstrates its excess, its protrusion beyond the cultural forms that give it orientation and significance. However, there is no clear divide between internal and external: culture is part of the pulse of life, and vice versa. According to Beer, «In seeking to address and understand these relations between life and culture and between life and form [Simmel] turns for inspiration to the art of Rembrandt» (Beer, 26).

The Dutch painter is taken not only as a problem of art history, but as a moment *par excellence* to expose a problem of the philosophy of art and aesthetics: the question of how a life is depicted through a form of expression such as painting; and more than this, how life finds expression, observed into itself, in general. Here Simmel uses art to breathe vitality into his conceptualisation of life, in such a way that the art helps to animate the theory. In Rembrandt, Beer adds, Simmel looked to art to open up the ideas he would later expand upon in *The View of Life*. There are two questions that Beer asks repeatedly throughout Simmel's analysis: 1) how can art and artist express the depths of life? And 2) what are the guidelines of Rembrandt's poetics that can expand to concepts of a sociological ekphrasis of his works?

We start from what the artist actually *does*, its specific and effective forces, the degree of rigidity or relaxation of the form, the schema of the composition, the use of spatial dimensions, the application of color, the selection of subject matter, and much else. The crux of art is in how we look at this 'much else'. Indeed, art can express «the felt value [Wertempfindungen] that we associate with its art as such» (Beer, 30), an element that Beer translates as sensation or feelings of worth. In the case of Rembrandt, art experiences and shows an accomplishment, but accomplishes neither itself nor life: it establishes a visual and figurative relationship between whole and fragments. It dismembers the object to give it

one and only one form. Art is the exercise of this feeling of completeness in fragmentation and of creative strength.

This is the force of art, but art is not only a force. It is also a choice of a form of representation. And what exactly does art depict? *Einheit*, unity: in its process of creating forms, in relation to the sensation or feelings of value. Rembrandt manages to paint the plurality of what is singular, the singularity of what makes up a plurality. However, it is not necessary to think of the artist as a privileged being in direct connection with pulsating life. There is no such privileged access, but there are historically determined forms of expression - determined, of course, also from the personal history of the artist.

Furthermore, the method of aesthetic totality itself exists as a means of creating a unity of fragments. The issue is as follows: that the fragments operate on the level of the totality and that each totality can be seen as a fragment, a view that replaces life with the sum of the contents of life. Very briefly: «this is understanding life as the accumulation of bits, as the sum of its parts, but recognising the combinations of the fragments produces the particularity of the whole» (Beer, 35). The real - the *life* of life - experiences itself both as a fragment, as perception, and as a fragment, as a *subject*; and therefore in relation to the continuity of experience of the feeling of being *a life*.

According to Beer, Simmel suggests that Rembrandt captures the fragmentary character of the whole of life on one hand and, on the other, the totality in the moment, the wholeness of life.

For this ability to give voice to the ambivalent essence of life's form-making, Rembrandt is able to transform each portrait into a precipitate of individual life and, as such, as a reflection of universal life, as the attribute of individuality is communicated to everything that lives. The result for Simmel is to find within the works of the Dutch painter an *immanent timelessness*. This is also why Simmel often focuses on the analysis of portraits of the elderly or of religious

figures: in these portraits we can see the difficulty with which the past and future are combined in the becoming of the individual.

The figure emerges from the picture and draws us into its history, not yet concluded. The portrait initiates a hand-to-hand struggle between the subject's life (filtered through that of the artist) and our own life. A sort of hermeneutic circle between the work and these lives is triggered, for which an element of intellectual sacrifice must be accepted: due to the change, and due to our own position within this change, our knowledge of the change can never be definitive. The measure of the unexpected, like that of the lived, is infinite. As Beer emphasizes, from this perspective we can understand how for Simmel Rembrandt's art is a safe harbor for the salvation of individuality. I mean, that is, in relation to everything universal that an individual communicates. Rembrandt makes visible the past in the person's present, but not as a fixed configuration: he depicts the place where the past and the present intersect with a potential future, *as a becoming*. According to Simmel, Rembrandt seeks forms via life.

But what, one may ask at this point, is this form? What is this protrusion of life beyond life? We can answer: on the aesthetic level, it is the emerging figure found within an image; on the metaphysical plane, it is the nascence of one life; in a sociological context, it is the extrusion of individuality from a homogeneity. Life through individuality goes beyond itself *as a limit*. Individuality through life goes beyond itself *as becoming*.

Simmel collects Rembrandt's teaching for two orders of reason: in Beer's opinion we can speak of a methodological and disciplinary acquisition of the Dutch poetics by the German. If we look at methodological speech there is «a depiction of life that stays close enough to have a clear impression whilst also not deiving into the depth of detail and losing a sense of the whole» (Beer, 69). On the other hand, he says, «is a text that sets up the foundational idea that social thinkers and theorists can readily turn to eclectic, unusual and cultural resources for rethinking their practice and prospectives» (Beer, 69). There is, therefore, a profound mirroring between

Rembrandt's art and Simmel's philosophical and sociological thinking: they can be seen as two kinds of thinking challenge arising from a specific *live method*.

Beer explains how the four essays of *The View of Life* revolve around this live method and how Simmel's final book communicates a single thematic core. It concerns the ordering of social life and the enclosures within which life is experienced and performed. The materiality of life is made up of sequences, regularities and their opposite. Everything that is lived is also experienced as removed, abstracted from the creative flow of life. Conceiving both sides of the process is possible, then, only if an observer is sensitive to both senses of the genitive from the expression 'point of view of life': as regards life itself (*an sich*), subjectively, and life by itself (*für sich*), objectively. The reciprocal action of both dimensions defines the areas of activity of a triumvirate of concepts and reproductive segments: *actual*, or *wirkliches*, as the real of reality; *form*, as a unity of meaning; and *ought*, which is translated from the Kantian *Sollen*.

The three apperceptive segments collaborate in the definition of reproductive boundaries. We both possess boundaries and are boundaries: on the one hand, we experience our life as a process, on the other, as an understanding of that process. The issue becomes sociologically important when Simmel approaches this vision with an awareness of the concrete consequences of created constraints over the course of a life. The interplay of various boundaries gives rise to a system through which life is identified. This system locates and orientates our life. Consequently, there is a dialectic set into our experience of boundaries: as conditions of possibility, boundaries enable possibility as a condition of their reproduction. This implies - and it should be emphasized that this is not a secondary function - that boundaries are necessarily sites of tension and that identity, as a defined maximizing formation, is the expression *par excellence* of these tensions - that is, as we know from Rembrandt, it consists in an expressive tension. As well as in chess, following the rules of the game does not prevent us from



continuously inventing new moves; rather, it is precisely through our invention of new moves that the underlying rules are affirmed. Likewise, in the view of life we see the transformative potential of boundaries - which at the same time indicates the transformative potential of awareness of these boundaries. This situation of action and recursion of action determines the paradox of the vitality of life within constraining social systems: we are bounded in every direction, and we are bounded in no direction.

Now: a connecting operation must exist between the two poles, since the process is continuous but not homogeneous. The dialectical operation of distinction and mediation is entrusted to the faculty of imagination: our imagination defines how and what we know of our boundaries and thus delimits the spaces in which we are able to act.

Beer provides us with a schema which clarifies a small doctrine on knowledge in Simmel: the starting point is represented by the perceptive stimulus, which in itself is already limited, because it depends on the nature of our senses. From perception we pass to a first apprehension. At this stage the imagination intervenes: here we recognize the limitations of the initial stimulus and we proceed to the formation of concepts and structures. Philosophical speculation, artistic representations, the religious ideal, all start from this dimension: the ideas of the world, whatever they may be, are an effort to overcome present limits, and replace them with other, different, limits. Overcoming is an activity that depends on the same acquisition of concepts and precepts: however, this process has a beginning in the body. For this reason, Simmel can speak of an overcoming which mixes the logical and the technological plan. It is the imagination which stakes out the spaces in social life – in its logical or technological stage – where the boundaries may be breached. Consequently, because a boundary is the site of tension and imagination is the faculty that presides over it, the imagination is ultimately the faculty of conflict.

At this point, Beer reminds us: «Simmel (...) focused his attention on the changing sensory experiences of boundaries and

the technological alteration of perception» (Beer, 86). The case of the microscope and telescope, for example, is used by Simmel to reaffirm this tendency of mankind to overcome the limits imposed by nature, to the extent of determining an inversion of the teleology of means and ends. Of course, it can be said, this process is done precisely with the technological expansion of sensory perception: with a leap of Simmel-like reasoning Beer would explain that, beyond the Heideggerian or even Debordian stances, this is what actually produces inversion, because it is so seductive and, in our present times, so hegemonic. The point is: «as we see and experience the world differently, our knowledge changes and boundaries become more visible and enter our consciousness in different ways» (Beer, 87). The creation of a system for understanding life oscillates between copy and substitute for life: the idea of the world that helps us orientate ourselves in thought and in society is a continuous adaptation between empirical and conceptual being.

At this point we find ourselves on a typically Kantian ridge: orientation in the social worlds and in thought depends on the ability to be aware of the boundaries in which we move. Being aware means having conscious knowledge of it, which means that if we assume every determination of truth depends on the fact that «a priori categories form the given material of the world into objects of knowledge, what is ‘given’ must nevertheless be able to be formed by these categories» (Beer, 88). Depending on how you change this given material changes the conceptualised object and, at the same time, the conception itself. There is a reciprocal action between imagination and technology: the result is an expanded knowledge. This expansion does not necessarily change what we know immediately, but it certainly changes what we think, and what we think changes what we are.

Now, if we consider time as that from which and in which it is possible to give a succession of past/present/future, in admitting that the first is known, the third is imagined and the second is lived, it must also be noted that reality is something non-temporal: time is not reality, and reality is not time; that is, reality adheres to the

present alone. In relation to this aspect there is neither totality of experiences, nor of reality. In society, the segmentation of parts of life is experienced in the cognition of fragments of time. The past works upon the present in two ways: through concepts and through structures. As a concept and as a structure, the living present consists in the fact that it transcends the present. This transcendence depends on the action of the faculty of judgment and on the teleological character which this bestows on the process of 'presentifying' the present. In this way a connection between past, present and future is created; in broader terms we can talk about tradition, according to which a past actually persists into its present, and the present actually persists into its future.

The division of time, the orientation according to purpose, the actuality and the permanence of undead solutions, is the conceptual block that Simmel uses to reflect on how individual life is contextualized within the framework of generations and social transformation, because the bearers of this process are the individuals. Individuals act because they represent the unity of the fragments: when they operate, they modify the worlds from which they come and towards which they go. The coherence that an individual is able to recognize simultaneously determines his form of knowledge and the form of his non-knowledge. The ideas of the world, based on the continuity of the action that they make possible, the coherence they manage to create, and in relation to the structures to which they give meaning, become actual in the way that social and individual life are organised and lived through them.

A world includes and exceeds unity; fragmentation is not the only approach to understanding and representing it. There is also that which reveals and exhibits the transcendent character of life, the *more than life*. Therefore, the argument moves towards the presentation of two questions:

The investigation of how individuals imagine the world in terms of forces beyond the individual becomes the real task of Simmel's work: the possibility of understanding where the transcendence of the flow of life comes into play as the actuality of the fragment;

As a philosopher of history, Beer explains, Simmel looks at the contiguous formation of means and ends, or seeks to understand the role played by purpose and goal, because both contribute to provoke our feeling of freedom.

For these two points the result concerns the entanglements of emancipation. In the conceptualization of the world, horizons of meaning constantly change our way of life. Simmel does not explain why some of these concepts become hegemonic, but we can conclude by saying that: the idea of the world emerges from life, and this idea feeds back and is applied to establish norms and expectations.

In the third essay of *The View of Life*, the theme of generalizations is applied directly to Rembrandt's paintings. Abstractions guide understanding and action: they operate on individuals especially when these abstractions bear the names of death, immortality, and fate. All three structures of understanding work so that what appears to be alien to life becomes understandable. An immanence within each living body, the idea of death is an element of understanding which can result from science, technology, culture or common sense – or, usually, through the sum of these elements. These concepts work upon and stimulate the limits of life. Thus, it becomes clear that the distance between the different elements – life, form, ought – and life's actuality in relation to life's identity, show infinite gradations. Form and law, flow and awareness, the ideal and the actual work on the becoming life, and vice versa. Simmel affirms that this process is always taking place, knowledge and ethics are therefore challenged from the point of view of life to change and organize themselves.

The dialectic that is established between the empirical being and the conceptual being in Simmel is the basis of 'reversal': the individuals are only actual; by contrast, the ideal cannot be anything individual but must be something universal.

In relation to empirical beings and conceptual beings, between actual and ideal, Simmel situates the tension between individual and

society. The way that ideas fold into lived experiences is the engine of what we call history. History is composed as a symphonic melody by individual acts and by individual laws, but in the sense of individuality to which we have just referred. The law of individuality follows the forms of the Kantian *Sollen*. Back in the realm of ends, however, Beer is convinced of the viewpoint that life operates as an extension of the domain which once belonged to *Pure Reason*. On the other hand, Beer uses the last pages of the second part to demonstrate how the law is a product of the life-formation process.

The study of Beer is important for the attention it gives to two emblematic texts by Simmel - emblematic, we may add, thanks to the light in which Beer has placed them. However, Beer's text is also important because it redefines the canon of use of Simmel's concepts and method. Maybe the best definition of philosophers and interpreters regarding Simmel's contribution belongs to Ernst Bloch. He remarked that Simmel was 'the philosopher of perhaps'. Simmel arouses the reader and pushes him to complete a work that is by definition open, much as happens to an observer contemplating Rembrandt's canvases. Simmel proposes - he does not conclude.

Regarding this it is not enough to say that Simmel is a philosophical *flaneur*, who is wandering about the *decadence* of the European metropolis, another example of unhappy bourgeois conscience; nor is it enough to say that he is a sort of sociological *bricoleur*. He does encompass the figures of these modern spirits, but in a rigorous sense that cannot fail to take into account the following three aspects, emphasized by Beer: in relation to the style of writing; to a theory of immanence and fragmentation as the completeness of the incomplete; in comparison to an idea of aesthetics of modern society. «The concepts need,» Beer says, «to be given new life rather than simply being applied. The passage of time, the shifity of content and the occasional ambiguity of Simmel's own explanations means that working with these concepts need not stay 'true' to any original but needs to become a tool in the hands of the reader.

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

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

HANS-PETER MÜLLER

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

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

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