



Introduction. Heritage from Simmel in Latinamerica

Esteban Vernik

Volume 24, Number 2, 2020

Simmel in Latinamerica

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075564ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075564ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Vernik, E. (2020). Introduction. Heritage from Simmel in Latinamerica. *Simmel Studies*, 24(2), 9–20. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075564ar>

ESTEBAN VERNIK

Introduction. Heritage from Simmel in Latinamerica

I know that I shall die without spiritual heirs (and that is good). The estate I leave is like cash distributed among many heirs, each of whom puts his share to use in some trade that is compatible with his nature but which can no longer be recognized as coming from that estate. Simmel ([1918] 1958: 15).

Simmel was a heretic for orthodox professional philosophy, for the establishment philosophy that Schopenhauer so energetically criticised. It should come as no surprise then, that Heidelberg University did not open its doors to him or grant him a professorship... Astrada (1923: 7).

I.

Simmel's legacy first reached the shores of Latin America in 1923, when – in Córdoba, Argentina – philosopher Carlos Astrada translated and published “The Conflict in Modern Culture”, the lecture the philosopher and sociologist had given in Berlin five years earlier. In his Preface, Astrada introduces Simmel to Latin American readers as

the most legitimate representative of a philosophy that interrogates the spirit of a time, a philosophy whose essential traits are hints, fragments, premonitions, and not yet formulated metaphysical fundaments... (Astrada, 1923: 8).

What most struck Astrada about Simmel was his “philosophical attitude”: “Nothing is more devoid of dogmatism than Simmel's thought. No crystallized concept intercepts its free and lively movement” (Astrada, 1923: 6). The fascination that characterized

that first Latin American reaction to Simmel's thought persisted, as Astrada made subtle and varied use of different segments of Simmel's oeuvre. From the nineteen-twenties through the fifties, Astrada looked mainly to Simmel's books of philosophy; in 1959 he included Simmel's 1908 *Soziologie* on the curriculum of a course in sociology. By then, a number of major Latin American universities had sociology departments, most of them created at the height of developmentalist modernization. Simmel was a marginal figure because seen as outside the new era's scientific canon.

Before continuing this very rough outline of the history of the introduction of Simmel in Latin America¹, I must point out that his ideas found another, less direct, way into the region through early editions of his work in Spain. Before the first Simmel translation by a Latin American—Astrada's—, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* as translated by José Pérez Bances² was published in Madrid in 1915 (Simmel was still alive). Soon thereafter, Pérez Bances took on the task of translating *The Great Sociology*, published in five double issues of the *Revista de Occidente* from 1926-27. That same journal, which had been edited by José Ortega y Gasset since its founding in 1923, had been publishing essays from Simmel's *Philosophische Kultur*. Between those publications that reached the region from Madrid and the copious publications in Buenos Aires—from the re-edition of the Spanish translation of *grösse Soziologie* in 1939 to the publication, in 1950, of four major works by Simmel (a new translation of *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* and first translations of

¹ I discuss this extensively in Vernik (2006, 2010, and 2021); see as well Waizbord (2008) and Sabido Ramos (2016).

² While there is abundant information on Carlos Astrada thanks to biographies and dissertations, little is known about José Pérez Bances, though he was the translator of two important books by Simmel as well as major works by Count Keyserling and of Friedrich Bendixen's *Das Wesen des Geldes*. We do know that he formed part of José Ortega y Gasset's circle. As Natàlia Cantó Milà has pointed out, the fact that Pérez Bances translated Simmel's *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* in 1915 might have allowed Simmel, who spoke Italian well, to monitor the quality of the Spanish translation available -though whether or not that is the case remains to be studied (there are no direct references to it in *Briefe 1912-1918*; cfr. GSG 23).

Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie, Rembrandt. Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch, and Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel)³—Simmel’s ideas circulated widely in those years among the educated elites in a number of Latin American countries, including Brazil. Simmel’s influence is evident in the many references to him in texts from the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties that strove to shed light on the modernity of new Latin American nations. In addition to Astrada, other major contributors along those lines were Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, Brazilian Gilberto Freyre, and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada who came to be called “the Argentine Simmel” because of his frequent reference to Simmel’s ideas.

Nevertheless—and as pointed out above—that impulse to publish Simmel and to grapple with Latin American modernity through his thought was stifled in the second half of the nineteen-fifties due, paradoxically, to the creation of sociology departments in the region’s capital cities. The early sociology curricula at universities in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, systematically left out Simmel’s work, which was considered residual, a lingering taste of impressionism of the earlier era. Under the victory flags of North American structural-functionalism, there was—barring a few social psychology programs influenced by the Chicago School—little room in the classroom for Simmel’s work. Several decades would go by before, in keeping with what was happening outside the region, the silence enveloping Simmel’s thought would be broken. In the second half of the nineties, Simmel was given a prominent place in the social sciences and humanities. Books published decades earlier came to light, and careful re-editions and new translations released. Simmel’s thought finally found safe haven in the region’s academic institutions, as is evident in the international symposia on Simmel held in the first two decades of this century in Buenos Aires (twice), Mexico City,

³ Simmel (1950a, 1950b, 1950c, 1950d); cfr. “Translation of Simmel’s Works and Writings to Spanish and Portuguese (1915-2018)”, at the end of this dossier.

Bogotá and Medellín, and Brazil (twice, both times in Belém do Pará).

This recent resurgence resonates in the research presented here, research on Simmel currently underway at universities in Latin American. These essays are, as our Berliner philosopher and sociologist would have wanted, diverse appropriations of the legacy received. Though each of them re-creates in its own way Simmel's objective culture, they all contribute to understanding our socio-historical present.

The five essays that follow contain identifiable strains of Simmel's legacy, and they engage them freely. The first two are located in the space that spans from *Einleitung in der Moralwissenschaft* to *Philosophie des Geldes*; the following two between the *grösse* and the *kleine Soziologie*; and the last essay between *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* and *Lebensanschauung*. This tribute to Simmel also features an exhaustive bibliography of publications by and on him in Spanish and Portuguese, works that, from the time of their publication, have circulated in Latin America.

II.

Leopoldo Waizbort's essay "Simmel and Knapp: A Gloss on Money" revolves around Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*. It attempts to connect that work and *The State Theory of Money* published by Georg Friedrich Knapp five years later. Waizbort's point of departure is the influence that elements of Simmel's celebrated 1900 treatise had on Chartalism, the state theory of money Knapp formulates. As Waizbort recounts, at the very beginning of *Staatliche Theorie des Geldes* Knapp explains that his aim is to "replace the metalistic view by one founded on Political Science (staatswissenschaftliche)". He admits that that may well lead him "to discover the soul of money."

Waizbort's article does not set out to credit the *Philosophie des Geldes* with foretelling the ideas Knapp expresses in *Staatliche Theorie des Geldes*, though of course the works are similar insofar as they

oppose a metallist conception of money and attempt to desubstantialize it. In chapter 2—“The Value of Money as a Substance”—in particular, Simmel shows that in modernity “money becomes more and more a mere symbol, neutral as regards its intrinsic value” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 150). Simmel’s description of “the historical development of money from substance to function” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 167) leaves no room for doubt. Simmel’s critique of metallism is even more explicit. He asserts that “the inner nature of money is only loosely tied to its material basis; since money is entirely a sociological phenomenon, a form of human interaction....” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 171).

Waizbort’s comparison of the works shows that, since money is first and foremost a relation of credit, everyone is connected to everyone else through indebtedness. The agent that guarantees payment of that debt is the whole, whether that is the State or society. Society is understood as the sum of social relations that embodies the incessant social, but also monetary, flow. It is the whole that guarantees money’s validity, acceptance, and circulation. In other words, the continuous social process is what guarantees money. Thus,

the institutions that perform a central role in Knapp’s theory—the State and the government—are understood by Simmel as “objective formations,” “solid supraindividual formations” that originate logically and historically from the relations established between human beings, social interactions that assume more fixed and less ephemeral forms than, say, a queue to buy a cinema ticket—a good example of what could be understood as ‘*society in status nascens*’—.

On the basis of these comparisons, the article convincingly argues that Knapp’s *The State Theory of Money* is a “modeling” of the *Philosophy of Money*. Waizbort could perfectly well have ended his article with that conclusion. But his findings become even more significant when his analysis suddenly changes course by looking to the common theoretical antecedents of Simmel and Knapp. In its

examination of the tradition of the German historical school of political economics, the article provides us with a remark that S.P. Altmann made on in the *Festschrift* for the 70th anniversary of Gustav Schmoller, published in 1908. From there, our attention is drawn to Adam Müller and Fichte’s work in the framework early-nineteenth-century debates—and that is where we find the primary elements that fed Simmel and Knapp’s theories.

Müller’s work is particularly relevant. Waizbord leads us to his 1816 *Versuche einer neuen Theorie des Geldes, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Grossbritannien*, and also takes us even further back to his 1809 *Elemente der Staatskunst* (we dive into them as if into an old chest of precious relics). In Müller, we find motifs fundamental to Simmel’s later thinking. The term *Wechselwirkung* (processes of interaction) — key to understanding not only *Philosophie des Geldes* but Simmel’s relational sociology more generally—is used emphatically by Adam Müller. Müller’s status as precursor to Simmel is thus justified, though

the proximity between Müller and Simmel becomes denser still when we turn to Müller’s theory of oppositions, his conception of oppositions, the *Urpolarität allen Lebens* (originary polarity of all life), his recurrent use of the ‘double nature’ of phenomena, which are very similar to Simmelian dualism, widely developed both in *Philosophie des Geldes*, and in later writings...

Lionel Lewkow’s contribution, “On Georg Simmel’s *Einleitung in die Morawissenschaft*: Preliminary methods, problems, and concepts for a critique of modern monetary economics”, also revolves around *Philosophie des Geldes*, and how it desubstantializes objects of knowledge. Here, the comparison is between Simmel’s celebrated 1900 treatise and— “the most voluminous work of his legacy” — his earlier two-volume *Einleitung in der Morawissenschaft* (Introduction to the Moral Science) from 1892-93; which has not received much attention. Because of this reason, the article dedicates more space to introducing the work from 1892–93. It does, however, address both

treatises and what they have in common, namely how the method in the first is reused in the second.

The starting point for both texts is identical: a critique of substantialism. In *Introduction to the Moral Science*, specifically in the chapter entitled “Das Sollen” (Duty), Simmel begins “by criticizing the naive belief in the existence of a principle that inherently bears morality.” And in *The Philosophy of Money* he makes that same assertion on economic value. In “Wert und Geld” (Value and Money), the first chapter of *The Philosophy of Money*, “Simmel points out that there is no object that, by virtue of its intrinsic properties, is valuable *per se*.” This comparison of morality and value leads Simmel to assert that “hypostasized phenomena” have “psychological and sociological roots, both in everyday life and in theoretical perspectives.”

By considering the two works together, the article sheds light on Simmel’s effort

“to dismantle substantialist perspectives, both of moral duty and of economic value”. Rather than structures of ‘constant values,’ the article shows that ‘moral doctrines’ are networks of ‘functional values,’ that is, they are social, relative, historical, and valid “until further notice.” And something very similar is said in *The Philosophy of Money* in relation to the fact that there is no object that inherently constitutes an economic value.

As the conclusion shows, the methodology used by the author in both works is basically the same. But the article also invites us to explore how central the moral question, insofar as search for fundamental ethical principles, is throughout Simmel’s oeuvre. Lewkow, then, describes Simmel’s work as a whole not solely in aesthetic terms -as so many do- but also in ethical terms.

Let’s now turn briefly from *The Philosophy of Money* to the *Sociology* of 1908 to assess, in the next two articles, the ability of Simmel’s theory to develop a relational sociology of senses and emotions.

That is the task that Olga Sabido Ramos’s article “The Metropolis and Nose Life: Sensory Memories, Odors and

Emotions” puts before us. As part of empirical research that has been underway in Mexico City for a number of years, Sabido Ramos studies the place of the senses and emotions in ways of being with others in a perspective informed by Simmel’s *Soziologie*. In this essay, she reflects on “how our experience in large cities is associated with the sensory memory of smells”.

From a perspective that, though based in Simmel’s sociology, draws on contemporary sociology, Sabido Ramos makes use of the notion of “sensory memory” to address “the sensations and emotions that have persisted in our sensitive bodies”. She uses the concept as a methodological resource as well,

since it allows the recording of narratives that evoke sensations, emotions and feelings that in some way affected the body and are associated with certain places, artifacts, people and non-human entities that persist beyond a particular interaction.

That device was applied to over one hundred middle-class young people in Mexico City to register a host of sensory impressions and emotions associated with certain smells. Sabido Ramos’s analysis does not lead to the conclusion that the sense of smell is a “dissociating sense”, as Simmel claims, but rather a sense capable of evoking “significant references, as well as the relationship with nostalgia and childhood”, even in large cities.

By means of Simmelian reasoning – “the meaning attributed to smells refers to social relationships and ways of coexisting with others”–, Sabido Ramos’s work provides a theoretical and methodological framework to relate senses and emotions. She explores elements of Simmel’s sociology along with current perspectives that go beyond it, reactivating Simmel’s legacy for the “here and now” analysis of life in a large metropolis like Mexico City.

Something similar is at play in Fernando Artavía’s essay “Humiliation: A Dark Emotion”, which also develops a relational sociology of emotions. It delves into largely unexplored zones of

grösse Soziologie and looks to Simmel's early text "Zur Psychologie der Scham." That study of shame provides Artavía with theoretical and practical guidance in his inquiry into humiliation.

Artavía's text points out how relevant Simmel's *Soziologie* is to the study of emotions, mostly for two reasons. First, *Soziologie's* relational perspective: the starting point is not the isolated individual or the hypostasis of society as something static that transcends individuals. Simmel's work eschews both psychological atomism and sociologism. His sociological object of analysis is the result of interactions or reciprocal actions (*Wechselwirkungen*). Second, Simmel's is fundamentally a "pure or formal sociology." Influenced by the Kantian distinction between "content" and "form," it seeks to apply this new type of scientific abstraction to the study of social reality. The reasons or particular purposes, in short the "contents," interest Simmel less than the varied "forms" of their social realization. The various configurations our being assumes with others, for others, or against others constitute the focus of attention of his sociology.

Thus, Artavía formulates a strategy to analyze emotions by pursuing two basic questions. The first is how the multiple interactions that constitute our social life can generate certain kinds of emotions. Here, the fundamental question revolves around the social conditioning of our ways of feeling. And the second question is how certain emotions in turn influence our social life. In this case, the question points in the opposite direction. It inquires into the effects that emotions may have on our life in society.

On the basis of these aspects of Simmel's sociology, the article's analysis detects different social effects of this "dark feeling." Humiliation produces, among other things, resentment and a thirst for revenge. It heightens conflict and can contribute to a new balance of forces, as well as isolation on the part of the one humiliated, which in turn can lead to stigmatization. One aspect of this far-reaching and detailed discussion of humiliation is particularly unsettling, namely its "public character", which

usually involves the participation of a third party that witnesses the demeaning action. The minimum nucleus of the social constellation is completed with that spectator, whose mere presence, physical or virtual, transforms the dynamic between the humiliator and the humiliated...

Artavía's contribution, then, confronts us with this dark emotion -"an all too human phenomenon"- and offers a sociological frame to reflect on its conditions of possibility and possible social effects.

Finally, our attention is drawn to the temporality of the present. In their article "On the Extension of the Present Time: Accounts for a Temporally Oriented Sociology with Georg Simmel. Insights from a Research Experience", Einer Mosquera and Augusto Botia present experiences and reflections that arise from sociological research on future imaginaries of former members of the FARC guerrilla group who are currently engaged in Medellín in -what is called- the pacification process. At stake is transition from a recent past of active participation in guerrilla warfare to a present and future where the fight continues by other means. From weapons to words. The focus of the inquiry, then, is the linkage between what has happened and what will happen.

For the Simmelian philosophy of history, the present is an expanding point where past and future are constantly aggregated in an uninterrupted flow of forms. Only the present is reality, but the present is not static; versions of it are incessantly produced, and in them past and future constantly collide. This research takes into account as well Simmel's reflections on the experience of creating social bonds throughout time. "Simmel reminds us precisely that the study of social temporality requires paying attention to the crossings between past and future in a constantly deployed present."

By articulating the multiple relations between historical experience, collective and cultural memory, and social imaginary, — as a result of their analysis—Mosquera and Botia conclude that a key characteristic of the current Colombian regime of temporality is the effort to work through the traumas of a threatening past...

This dossier closes with two Bibliographies in Spanish and Portuguese (1915-2018) compiled by Lucía Wegelin. The first contains translations of Simmel; the second contains publications on Simmel. These two Simmel bibliographies expand on earlier works—the one assembled by David Lazcano and Yolanda Mutiloa (2000) on the one hundredth anniversary of *Philosophie des Geldes*; and the one compiled by Gonzalo Cataño (2008) on the hundredth anniversary of *grösse Soziologie*—to reflect all the materials available on Simmel on the one hundredth anniversary of his death.

References

- Astrada C. (1923). “Preface”, in: Simmel G. [1918] *El conflicto de la cultura moderna*, transl. by C. Astrada. Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.
- Cataño G. (2008). “Bibliografía de Georg Simmel en castellano”, in: *Revista Colombiana de Sociología*, n. 31, pp. 83-89.
- GSG 23* (2008). *Briefe 1912-1918. Jugendbriefe*. Ed. by Otthein and Angela Rammstedt. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Lazcano D., and Y. Mutiloa, (2000). “Los escritos de Georg Simmel”, in: *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 89, pp. 269-286.
- Sabido Ramos, O., (2016). ‘El significado de la obra sociológica de Georg Simmel en lengua castellana como efecto de una red (2002-2015). Reporte de investigación’, https://www.academia.edu/31341759/El_significado_de_la_obra_sociol%C3%B3gica_de_Georg_Simmel_en_lengua_castellana_como_efecto_de_una_red_2002-2015._Reporte_de_investigaci%C3%B3n?auto=download
- Simmel G. [1907] (1915). *Schopenhauer y Nietzsche*, transl. by J. Pérez Bances. Madrid: Beltrán.
- Simmel G. [1918] (1923). *El conflicto de la cultura moderna*, transl. by C. Astrada. Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.

- Simmel G. [1908] (1939). *Sociología. Estudios sobre las formas de socialización*, transl. by J. Pérez Bances. Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe.
- Simmel G. [1915] (1950a). *Schopenhauer y Nietzsche*, transl. by F. Ayala. Buenos Aires: Anaconda.
- Simmel G. [1916](1950b). *Rembrandt. Ensayo de filosofía del arte*, transl. by E. Estiú. Buenos Aires: Nova.
- Simmel G. [1917] (1950c). *Problemas de filosofía de la historia*, transl. by E. Tabernig. Buenos Aires: Nova.
- Simmel G. [1918] (1950d). *Intuición de la vida. Cuatro capítulos de metafísica*, transl. by J. Rovira Armengol. Buenos Aires: Nova.
- Simmel G. [1918] (1958). “Anfang einer unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung”, in: Gassen K., and M. Landmann (Ed.). *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie. Zu seinem 100. Geburtstag am 1. März 1958*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- Simmel G. [1900] (2004). *The Philosophy of Money*, transl. by T. Bottmore and D. Frisby. London and New York: Routledge.
- Vernik E. (2006). “Georg Simmel’s Reception in Southamerica. Translation, Existence and Nation”, in: *Simmel Studies*, n. 16, 1, pp. 75-92.
- Vernik E. (2011). “Recepción de Simmel en Hispanoamérica”, in: Clemencia Tejeiro Sarmiento (Ed.). *Georg Simmel y la modernidad*, pp. 29-45. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Vernik E. (2020). “Traces of Simmel in Latinamerica. Modernity, nation and memory”, in: Gregor Fitzi (Ed.). *International Handbook for Simmel Studies*, pp. 353-395. London and New York: Routledge.
- Waizbord L. (2008). “Simmel no Brasil”, in: *Dados*, n. 50, v. 1, pp. 11-48.