



**Gregor Fitzi (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, Routledge, 2021, 420 pp.**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## REVIEWS

CHIARA VISENTIN

**Gregor Fitzi (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, Routledge, 2021, 420 pp.**

Many features make this Handbook an invaluable contribution to the current “cycle of rediscovery” (p. 1) of Simmel’s work, and an ideal springboard for further exploration. The liveliness and inexhaustibility of Simmel’s legacy are conveyed by the very rich range of voices represented and aspects covered, and at the same time an underlying network of thematic threads and reciprocal and common references holds the collective discussion together. This book both argues and concretely illustrates how, beyond the “piecemeal and propositional uptake” (p. 367) typical of dominant strands of American sociology, Simmelian thought, with its ongoing interpretation and appropriation, can still be at the center of vital research communities and programs in its own right.

A tool like this cannot but greatly aid in furthering these efforts spanning national and disciplinary boundaries. As Gregor Fitzi states in the General Introduction, the Handbook seeks to combine diversity and coherence, offer a common vocabulary, and gather and make widely accessible scattered achievements of recent Simmel research, synthesising the varied interdisciplinary landscape of current perspectives on Simmel’s multifaceted oeuvre that recently became available in complete edition. The result can serve as both an introduction to, and a map of, the state of the art thereon.

One of its key qualities is interdisciplinarity, embraced as an imperative to be able to grasp the meanings and significance of Simmel's "liquid" reflection and legacy, that, in spite of his own famous attempt at disciplinary boundary drawing for sociology, it would be misleading and limiting to pigeon-hole following today's institutionalized academic partitions. As far as formal disciplinary affiliations are concerned – imperfect an indicator as they might be –, of the book's 26 contributors, 14 come from sociology, 9 from philosophy and aesthetics, 2 from literature, and 1 from religious studies. Furthermore, this Handbook stands out for the amount and variety of Simmelian sources deployed, many of which have been relatively unknown in the academic mainstream and un- or under-explored thus far.

The book is made up of eight parts, featuring contributions from and on different areas of interest, depicting at the same time the rich variety and dynamism, the internal consistency and articulation, and the contextual frameworks of Simmel's decades long intellectual activity. In the first part, devoted to Simmel's biography, Fitzi sketches the contours of a life embedded in multiple important networks and environments, that can still be regarded as, as he puts it, "an unexplored continent" (p. 17). A section on the most canonical field of Simmelian reception, i.e. sociology, follows. Olli Pyyhtinen maps the main points of resonance between Simmel and developments in contemporary sociology, focusing on economic and urban sociology, and, above all, relational sociology, a promising program in which a Simmelian social ontology is central. The relationality at the core of Simmel's thought is also the focus of Davide Ruggeri's contribution, who articulates its relevance with reference to many influential contemporary social theorists. Natalia Cantò-Milà analyzes the concept of boundary, another deeply relational notion, in Simmel's thought on life, time and space. Finally, Fitzi formulates and clarifies elements of an organic and still topical theory of social differentiation and integration in modernity to be found in Simmel's work. Overall, this section is mostly dedicated to Simmel's significance for social theory, highlighting

some of his still not fully tapped foundational or overarching theoretical insights.

In light of the historical combination of Simmel's self-identification as a philosopher and his overwhelmingly sociological reception, that has long kept his philosophical work, and his work as philosophical, in the shade, it is not surprising that social philosophical aspects are found to be among the most stimulating in today's Simmel scholarship. His rediscovery in academic philosophy has only recently begun to gain ground, with very interesting results of which the Handbook offers a compelling sample. In the third part, devoted to philosophy, Matthieu Amat masterfully reconstructs Simmel's relativist philosophical program showing its depth, originality and soundness, in dialogue with his philosophical points of reference and shared core puzzles. Denis Thouard values Simmel's drive toward complexity, expressed for instance in dialectical dissolutions of dualisms and the focus on reciprocal relations, and the road he points to for the foundations of hermeneutics. Hans Blumenberg has been a major figure in contemporary philosophy unconventionally assigning Simmel a central place, and his reflections on the latter's philosophical anthropology are examined here by Andrea Borsari. Fitz's contribution focuses on Simmel's late life work on the philosophy of life as providing a framework for answering central traditional philosophical, anthropological and ethical questions in light of the modern condition, with the accompanying need to incorporate the social and its dynamics, and the conditions of possibility thereof.

Together with, and related to, Simmel's philosophical theorizing, his thought on art and aesthetics also stimulates multiple re-readings. The fourth part of the book covers these themes. It includes Claudia Portioli's reconstruction of the gnoseological implications and value of art for Simmel, followed by her analysis of the entanglement of his writing style and forms on the one hand, and his intellectual stances on the other. Barbara Carnevali and Andrea Pinotti present Simmel as a major pioneer of social aesthetic, "the study of the aesthetic dimension of society" (170),

through his work on issues like social and aesthetic forms, the senses, fashion, display, and style. Ingo Meyer critically examines Simmel's philosophical discussion of the fine arts and its reception, including the meaning of the work of art and the significance of individual great artists like Rembrandt. The latter issue is also taken up by Thomas Kemple, who in Simmel's work on the Dutch genius sees the expression of a peculiar conception of modernity. The fifth part zooms in on literature and theatre. Monika Tokarzewska delves into Simmel's literary endeavours, bringing to light a creative writer of short stories and aphorisms overshadowed by, but at the same time intimately linked to, the theoretician, in an effort to start filling a more general scholarly gap that exists on "the immanent relations of literature and sociology" (214). Paola Giacomini then examines the substantial significance of Goethe's legacy for Simmel's thought, with an emphasis on the epistemological and methodological views contained in the former's scientific writings, in particular with respect to notions of form. As regards theatre, François Thomas lays out Simmel's reflections on actors and their problematic relation to their roles, helping bring into focus basic features of sociality in general and of modern society in particular.

Part six of the book on essayism and critical theory traces Simmel's relationships to these two traditions that are themselves hard to circumscribe within disciplinary boundaries. Barbara Thériault uncovers Simmel's influence on the genre of "newspaper sociology", i.e. "the feuilleton, or cultural pages" (231) of which paradigmatic examples are those published in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s by Sigfried Kracauer, Kurt Tucholsky, Egon E. Kisch, and the like, who shared marked affinities with the author of *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*. On the other hand, Vincenzo Mele tackles the important and complex issue Simmel's legacy in critical theory, covering the whole trajectory of this program from Benjamin and Adorno's contested engagement, through Habermas's "lacking reception" (267), until the reappropriation by Honneth and affinities with Jaeggi, and very interestingly stressing the role of the "world disclosure function of language" (263) found

in Simmel, as opposed to pragmatist and rationalist perspectives, in these developments.

Simmel's contributions to a variety of central issues of contemporary debate are uncovered in part seven. Monica Martinelli takes up Simmel's views on freedom from an anthropological and a moral point of view, and their implications with respect to Berlin's and Bauman's landmark theories thereof. Volkhard Krech reconstructs Simmel's fascinating theory of religion, showing how it is organically integrated in his broader thinking on society, culture and life, that it in turn helps clarify. Patrick Watier analyses Simmel's wartime writings in which the "great experience" (314) inspires a discourse shaped by enthusiasm for the nation and the renovating impulse of war, and the problematic vision of Europe and Germany's role in it articulated by him then. Simmel's critique of cosmopolitanism in this context is also focused on by Austin Harrington, who sees in it a call for less abstract and homogenising forms of international rapprochement respectful of national individualities. Arthur Bueno, finally, analyses Simmel's social psychological diagnoses of the "economic pathologies" of modern life, from avarice to blasé indifference, in the frame of the colonisation of ends by means, underlining their analogy with today's burnout and depression issues.

Part eight concludes the volume with three studies on the reception of Simmel's work. Milos Brocic and Daniel Silver map Simmel's American reception across disciplines and subdisciplines, highlighting in particular the prevalence of a "piece-meal and propositional uptake" (p. 367) in mainstream currents of American sociology imposing narrow disciplinary boundaries and conventions, as opposed to holistic recognitions of his philosophical sociology more widespread in cultural studies, and the shared attribution to Simmel of the status of classic tied to an appreciation of his formalism in radically diverging methodological traditions. Gary D. Jaworski traces how both Goffman and Schutz drew inspiration from the intriguing Simmelian notion of "the secret of the other", which, however, did not go on to become an

accepted conceptual tool in the discipline. Finally, Esteban Vernik reconstructs the paths of reception and circulation of Simmel's writings in Latin America and their recognised and potential relevance for grappling with core issues related to modernity, nation and memory from the local perspective.

While it is impossible to do full justice to the richness of these single contributions and their ensemble in this limited space, hopefully this brief sketch will convey a sense of the very high value and relevance of this Handbook and of the ongoing research and discussions on Simmel coalescing in it.

JOHN MCCOLE

**Francesca E. S. Montemaggi, *Authenticity and Religion in a Pluralistic Age: A Simmelian Study of Christian Evangelicals and New Monastics*, London, Lexington Books, 2019, 215 pages.**

Francesca Montemaggi has a bracingly broad ambition: to develop “an original concept of authenticity to better understand the transformation of Christian self-identity in pluralistic times” (x). Her study approaches this big issue by blending two more specific aims. The first is to explore contemporary Christian identity through case studies of the small groups that were the subjects of her fieldwork, primarily an unconventional “conservative evangelical church” (xi) in Wales, and more briefly several loosely self-described “new monastic” movement groups in Great Britain and North America. Her second aim is to employ Georg Simmel's theories of religiosity and relational identity to make sense of her subjects' self-understandings and practices and, at the same time, to provide the core of her own conception of authentic identity in general, and Christian authenticity in particular. The result is both a rich theoretical model for understanding authenticity in relational