



Nationalism or Europeanism? Simmel's Dilemma

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Résumé de l'article

Despite many different research efforts over the past thirty years, one can still attend a conference and learn that Simmel was a radical nationalist who sang in this chorus throughout the First World War. The main references in this respect are the memories of the younger intellectuals of the time like Lukács and Bloch. There is no attempt at assessment – neither of Simmel's writings nor of his letters. In contrast, the present paper deals with the issue of Simmel's attitude to the war by focusing on its different periods and by reconstructing the twists and turns that changed it. After an analysis of the reasons that led Lukács and Bloch to claim Simmel's treason, it describes the unique aspect of Simmel's early position about the war. In this context, especially the issue of "clearing up" the foreign countries and Simmel's exchange with Albion Small deserve particular attention. The effects of Simmel's change of opinion since the spring of 1915 are then reconstructed with reference to his later war writings, especially the anthology on The War and Decisions of the Spirit (1917) as well as his late reflection on the theory of modernity in the essay on "The Conflict of Modern Culture" (1918).

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Nationalism or Europeanism? Simmel's Dilemma

Abstract. Despite many different research efforts over the past thirty years, one can still attend a conference and learn that Simmel was a radical nationalist who sang in this chorus throughout the First World War. The main references in this respect are the memories of the younger intellectuals of the time like Lukács and Bloch. There is no attempt at assessment – neither of Simmel's writings nor of his letters. In contrast, the present paper deals with the issue of Simmel's attitude to the war by focusing on its different periods and by reconstructing the twists and turns that changed it. After an analysis of the reasons that led Lukács and Bloch to claim Simmel's treason, it describes the unique aspect of Simmel's early position about the war. In this context, especially the issue of "clearing up" the foreign countries and Simmel's exchange with Albion Small deserve particular attention. The effects of Simmel's change of opinion since the spring of 1915 are then reconstructed with reference to his later war writings, especially the anthology on *The War and Decisions of the Spirit* (1917) as well as his late reflection on the theory of modernity in the essay on "The Conflict of Modern Culture" (1918).

Misunderstandings

"Simmel has been imperialist". This is the verdict of the French Simmel specialists. They express the unease that the respected author and focus of their expertise "in some way" pronounced himself in favour of the German aggression against Belgium and France in WWI. However, the question remains unanswered about what precisely Simmel advocated during the first phase of the war from August 1914 until March 1915, that is, before he started to revise his positions. This dilemma played a crucial role in Simmel's reception as a classical author of sociology as well as more generally as a leading intellectual figure of the twentieth

century. The disappointment on the part of Simmel's influential pupils due to his advocacy of the "German cause" in the early months of the conflict was so profound that it moulded the entire secondary literature which followed on "Simmel and WWI" (Lukács, 1973). As the war broke out, Bloch, Jaspers, Lederer, Lukács, Radbruch, and others gathered in Heidelberg, and hoped that Simmel would join them in a critical attitude towards the war, and above all towards the overwhelming intellectual enthusiasm for the conflict (Landmann, 1976: 271). Yet, Simmel, at that time the secret inspiration for the entire younger intellectual generation, did not satisfy these expectations. In their view, this was an unforgivable "*trahison de clercque*" (Benda, 1927).

The main evidence of Simmel's early attitude to the war was that from the outset in August 1914 he was strongly affected by irrational feelings of national belonging that were widely reflected in public opinion (Reithel, 1996). In his eyes, this attitude characterized both the German as well as French youth whom he observed in Strasbourg (GSG 15: 279). Simmel felt deeply involved in this collective emotional experience. But he was not prepared for this. Throughout his life he had been the supernumerary, the discriminated Jewish intellectual, the "relativist", whose academic career coincided with the prejudices of Wilhelmine society (Coser, 1965). He had learned to face these inconveniences by developing the habit of the analytically distanced intellectual, of the philosopher by training who had to become a sociologist to understand the troubles of life in modern societies. Yet, despite himself, since August 1914 Simmel discovered how deeply he felt his belonging to a specific cultural community, which was Germany, as he expressed many times with emotional pathos in his letters (GSG 23: 379, 394). For the first time in his life, he was experiencing the same emotions that allegedly motivated the majority of his fellow citizens. In this circumstance, he could not fall back on any habitual attitude, and he was completely overwhelmed by the recurring uncertainty about the development of the hostilities (GSG 23: 372).

Accordingly, he felt unable to write, because he had lost every analytical distance towards the ongoing events (GSG 23: 371, 375 f.).

In his letters since summer 1914, Simmel returned several times to the feelings of commitment provoked by the conflict. As a doctor, his son Hans immediately joined the military hospital service. Simmel's wife, Gertrud, trained as a nurse. Only Georg could not join them because of chronic rheumatism that made him unable to bend over and lift, so that he could not be appointed as a caregiver (GSG 23: 378). Later on, he found a role in the telegraph offices, yet there was not so much to do, so that Simmel spent his time brooding about his forced idleness vis-à-vis the emotional tension concerning the uncertain development of the war (GSG 23: 371, 375). He claimed that this situation made him feel in a dizzying sense his belonging to the nation and prevented him from working scientifically (Simmel, 1941/42-2008: 112; GSG 23: 371, 393). Furthermore, Simmel felt extremely isolated. Strasbourg was declared a "border fortress". Access to and exits from the city were limited. Only postcards or open letters were allowed. The city was extremely silent and calm, and there was hardly any interaction with the rest of the country (GSG 23: 359, 370). This must have been a torment for a person who had lived his whole life in the tempestuous rhythm of the fast-growing metropolis of Berlin (GSG 23: 386).

Under the pressure of this emotional mood, Simmel completely uncritically believed the thesis of the alleged aggression of the *Triple Entente* against the *Central Powers*, which the German Emperor proclaimed in the notorious speeches from the balcony of Berlin City Palace on 31 July and 1 August 1914 (Kriegs-Rundschau, 1915: 37). The question whether the German side could also have had responsibility for the outbreak of the war did not occupy Simmel at all. Accordingly, he considered the consequent formation of a large "emotional community" (*emotionale Vergemeinschaftung*) in Germany during the so-called *August Experience* a positive development (Fitz, 2015: 308; 2017).

He was convinced that the willingness for sacrifice of the young people volunteering for the front would give a new moral impulsion to the development of the whole country. This “inner transformation” of Germany could be interpreted as a sign that the overwhelming predominance of the wider concern with material interests that characterized the period of rapid capitalist development in Germany since the unification of the *Kaiserreich* in 1871 could come to an end (GSG 15: 271–285; Watier, 1991). Simmel was not alone in this expectation. The entire capitalist critical intellectual scene in Germany – from the members of the *Verein für Socialpolitik* to a social-catholic philosopher like Max Scheler – was convinced that the material and ethical efforts for the war could establish a “third way” between the uncontrolled development of the monetary economy and the Marxist project of a socialist society (Bruhns, 2018: 117; Scheler, 1914).

During the war polemics between the French and German intellectuals, which involved Bergson, Hauptmann, Rolland and finally Ludwig Fulda, who formulated the “Appeal to the Cultural World” to which Simmel did not subscribe (Ungern-Sternberg, 2014), the idea of “foreign aggression” against the German world was then transformed into the conception of a fight of principle between cultures. The supposedly “modern technical and scientific civilization” of the allies was thus instrumentally opposed to the allegedly eternal values of “German culture” (Fitzi, 2015: 305 ff.). As a reaction to the German aggression against neutral Belgium, on 8 August 1914, Bergson presented the fight against Germany as the “very struggle of civilization against barbarism”¹ (Bergson, 1972: 1102). On this count, on August 26 Hauptmann attacked him as a hypocrite, a “false philosopher” (*Salonphilosophen*) (Hauptmann, 1914). Simmel disagreed in principle with the tone and content of the war polemic, so that on 1 September 1914 he wrote an intervention to restore Bergson’s honour, even if he only published it on 1 November 1914 under the title “Bergson and the

¹ Unless otherwise specified, the quotations are the author’s translation.

German Cynicism” (GSG 17: 121–123). Simmel’s point here was that if even “a Bergson”, who was the strongest intellectual of the living generation, did not understand the “situation of distress” out of which Germany “had to act”, then the intellectuals had to engage in “clearing up” the foreign countries about the “good grounds” of the German engagement in the war.

Simmel’s early attitude to the war came thus to the fore. He was convinced that Germany was defending itself in a war that it did not want and, moreover, that the allies’ intention was to obliterate German culture from central Europe (GSG 23: 399 f.). Hence, Germany had to struggle for its “soul” (GSG 23: 393). In terms of content Simmel thus followed quite uncritically German mainstream public opinion and believed the official portrayal of the war. Yet, concerning the modalities of reacting and engaging with the hostilities on an intellectual level, he pursued a completely different intent than his German and French colleagues. For Simmel, intellectuals should not just leave the decision about the outcome of the war to the battlefields, by remaining silent or alternatively engage in the propaganda regardless of the truthfulness of their statements. His concern was that because of this approach too many decisive aspects of the scientific exchange were lost in which the republic of letters – and he himself consistently – had been engaged before the war (Fitzi, 2002: 19–54). Rather, intellectuals should meet on the level of scientific discussion and continue their exchange based on the truthfulness of their arguments. The polemical argument that Simmel had with the pupils of the poet Stefan George shows in more detail what he meant (Popp and Rammstedt, 1995).

The majority of the French and German intellectuals who were engaged in the war polemics did not really care about the truthfulness of their statements. Their purpose was simply to contribute to the war effort of their countries through the intellectual mobilization, so helping to achieve the final goal of victory. Their engagement was a matter of propaganda, and above all of neutralizing the enemies’ propaganda. Simmel disagreed

completely with this attitude, as he observed during his exchange with Friedrich Gundolf and Karl Wolfskehl (GSG 17: 119–120). For him there was a matter of “clearing up” the foreign countries about what he then implied as the truth about the war and not merely formulating whatever statement seemed necessary to win the propaganda battle. This attitude allowed Simmel simultaneously to prove two things. On the one hand, he distinguished himself as rather politically naive in that he imagined one could intervene in the war polemics without becoming an instrument or a victim of the ongoing propaganda. Yet, on the other hand, Simmel also expressed the intention to pursue the exchange with his fellow intellectuals abroad on a scientific level, where the value of the argument had to be measured based on its truth. The problem was, however, that Simmel grounded his argument on the assumption that he knew the truth about the “good reasons” for Germany’s entrance in WWI. Yet, during his engagement for so-called “clearing up of the foreign countries” he had to realize that he was wrong.

Gradual awakening

In the context of his activities for “clearing up” the public of the neutral countries, Simmel wrote a number of letters to his friends and colleagues abroad in the hope of realigning the alleged truth about the war. We have an example of Simmel’s argument in the letter that he sent to Harald Höffding on 2 October 1914 (GSG 23: 398–400). Here, he argued that Germany was spun in a network of lies and slander by its enemies, so that every German had the duty to become active and inform the neutral foreign countries about the good reasons for the German warfare. With implicit reference to Rolland’s allegations vis-à-vis the destruction of the library of Louvain by the German armies, Simmel implied that he had no need to prove to Höffding that Germans were not Huns because he was a connoisseur of German culture. Yet, knowing that “many of the very best”, which was an implicit reference to Bergson, bore grudges against Germany because of

their belief that it had been the cause of the dreadful war, he felt obliged to make a statement. In the interest of truth, which is paramount for scientists, Simmel asked Höffding to be convinced of the absolute falsehood of those beliefs. He concluded his letter with a protest that Germany would never have initiated the war, if it had not been compelled to. Moreover, he reported in a completely uncritical way the theme of the aggression that France and England would have perpetrated by setting the “Russian hordes” upon German territory. Simmel must have sent a similar letter to Albion Small who was his best contact in the US, which was still neutral, and he had translated into English all of his papers that were published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Small’s answer to Simmel’s letter, however, must have become a pivotal experience for Simmel and the evolution of his more critical attitude towards the causes and perspectives of the war since 1915.

Albion Small’s letter is dated 29 October 1914. Yet, the original letter is missing. What we have is the English letter as it was published in April 1915 in England by *The Sociological Review* (Small, 1915). Originally, the letter may have been written in German, as the editors of Simmel’s correspondence suggest, because the English text reveals different Germanisms (GSG 23: 451). In the opening of the letter, Small is very kind in the way he answers Simmel’s appeal, but he also resolutely endeavours to show where the assumptions of Simmel’s letter for “clearing up the neutrals” about Germany are wrong. Small states “a message from you is always welcome” and underlines that his sympathy for Germany is not obliterated by the war and the news about the German warfare, yet he also points out that Americans do not accept the way German intellectuals “pronounce German civilization as a whole superior to other civilizations” (GSG 23: 444). Small therefore signals acceptance for taking part in a debate that is conducted on the level of scientific exchange within a republic of letters, as it was before the war, and not on the level of the ongoing war polemics in Europe. Nevertheless, he very clearly

expresses his dissent towards the way in which the German intellectuals – and Simmel too – present the war situation.

Simmel addressed Small as a leading representative of public opinion in the US, so that Small at first portrays the way Americans deal with the news concerning the warfare. He underlines that “it would be a great mistake for Germans to suppose that Americans are relatively misinformed about the great outstanding facts in the European situation” (GSG 23: 445). As a sociologist, he describes the competition taking place between the major American newspapers in order to publish the greatest amount of details concerning the war in Europe and states “our newspapers are the greediest in the world of news” (Ibid.). A proud defence follows of the professional quality of the press in the US by underlining that they are “purveyors of the most complete and accurate reports”, and that “the sources of these reports are carefully indicated” (GSG 23: 446). The description of the quality of the information in the US also contains a clear message for Simmel, as Small writes that “not being at war we have no censorship, as each of the belligerent must have” (Ibid.). Small formulates very prudently and concedes that from the US he cannot know in detail how strong censorship is in Germany. Yet, he invites Simmel to reflect on the circumstance that he cannot simply take for granted what the German newspapers publish, because he cannot assume that they are absolutely committed to the scientific truth he cherishes so much.

Notwithstanding every esteem for the willingness for sacrifice involved in the war effort, which could be observed in Germany, for Small this could not impede a sober evaluation of the causes of the war. “We now know that the Germans are making one of the most wonderful exhibitions of national unity in the history of the world. We also admire the spirit of this unity while we believe the course of the reasoning upon which it is based is one of the most deplorable mistakes in history” (GSG 23: 447). Consequently, for Small the grounding assumptions for Simmel’s engagement in “clearing up the foreign countries” had to be revised. “Because of

what I have already said you may be able to see at once that two things are quite probable: first that the lies which have been told about Germany have not had the influence in America that you suppose; secondly, that you do not sufficiently take into account the effect which lies told in Germany about the other nations have had upon the minds of Germans” (GSG 23: 447). For Small, the fact that war propaganda subsisted in every country involved in the conflict made it extremely difficult for national public opinions to distinguish truth and falsehood, and this applied of course also to Germany. “The German people will some time discover that at least one lie has been in circulation in Germany about the other peoples of the world for every lie that has been invented elsewhere about the Germans” (GSG 23: 447). Small’s implicit advice to Simmel was thus to revise his impetus in “clearing up the foreign countries” because it was based on premises that did not satisfy the criteria of a scientific discussion about the war he postulated. “All that I urge is that it would be extremely hazardous for the Germans to assume that they have a clear white light about the other nations, while the other nations are befogged about the Germans” (GSG 23: 448).

This statement was followed by a critical analysis of militarism that could have compelled Durkheim to pursue the study of Treitschke’s oeuvre as the main source of German militarism (Durkheim, 1915). “The essential thing, as we [Americans] see it, is that all Europe is living on a militaristic basis, and is sacrificing the interests of the citizens as human beings to an arbitrary monster of ‘military necessity’” (GSG 23: 448 f.). The aggression of neutral Belgium and the successive destruction of the library of Louvain are, for Small, war crimes that other nations could also have perpetrated, yet this circumstance does not affect the moral judgement of the facts. “We do not believe the political morality of Germany is either higher or lower than that of England or France”, probably if France, England, or the US were in the same situation, they would have acted in a similar way. “Not being directly concerned in the complications, however, we [Americans]

can see that in fact it was an appalling confession of the essential barbarism of a militaristic civilization” (GSG 23: 449). According to Small, the fact that there is strong militarism in Germany is something that cannot be denied because the German elites openly claim it in their own statements, as the works of Treitschke or Bernhardt demonstrate. “In this country all but a feeble minority regard the militaristic conception as a betrayal of reason and an appeal to chaos as the ultimate cosmic principle” (GSG 23: 450). Militarism means the creed that war is the foremost means of national self-realization, and that the “interests of the state justify the making of war by a stronger nation upon a weaker” (Ibid.).

Simmel asked Small to relate the feelings that Americans have towards Germany in 1914. Thus, concluding his letter, he states that Americans “do not want Germany humbled, but *they do want this hideous cult [of militarism G.F.] so discredited that no nation in Europe will profess it after this war is done*” (GSG 23: 450). Accordingly, Small’s letter ends with a plain antimilitaristic statement, that reflects the dominant position of the American public before the sinking of the Lusitania by a German U-boat on 7 May 1915: “we hope the war will result in an absolute stalemate” (GSG 23: 450 f.). Small’s wish of a democratic way out of the war sounds like a suggestion of what critical German intellectuals could then also have possibly done to overcome militarism. “We should be delighted if every bit of military and naval equipment of all the nations were to be wiped out of existence tomorrow, without the loss of another life, and if the cabinets should then be forced by the respective peoples to do what was their duty in the first place – join in a candid and rational adjustment of a *modus vivendi*?” (GSG 23: 451).

We do not know if Simmel received Small’s original letter in October 1914 or if German military censorship sent it back to the sender. Yet, at the latest when the English text was published in *The Sociological Review* in April 1915, Simmel must have become acquainted with its content that, despite the censorship, was released in the public domain. What we know for sure is that

Simmel suddenly abandoned every activity for the so-called “clearing up of the foreign countries” without even referring to the decision in his letters. Nor did he mention this activity as a proof of his “patriotic engagement” when he was indicted for anti-German activities after the publication of the essay “Europe and America” on 4 July 1915 (GSG 13: 138-142; GSG 24: 417–429). Since the beginning of 1915, Simmel had changed his mind. Furthermore, the awareness that a consistent number of his pupils were dying in the battles, as well as the shock about the death of Emil Lask, who was one of the major promising figures of German philosophy of the time (GSG 23: 531), strongly influenced Simmel’s mood. The entrance of Italy into the war on 24 May 1915 and thereby the end of every expectation that the war could end soon profoundly changed Simmel’s attitude, so that he could gain more distance towards the ongoing events. On this difficult path, Simmel regained the terrain of scientific thought, so that the experience of the war had a crucial effect on his late work on social ethics as well as on his theory of modernity, even if not with the political implications that Small hoped. Simmel presented the results of this reflection in his late essay on “The Conflict of Modern Culture” (GSG 16: 181–207).

Emotional nationalism and transnational rationalism

The parabola of Simmel’s moods and attitudes during the first months of WWI seems to be reflected in his literary production. After a phase of unproductivity until November 1914, Simmel first started to articulate his perception of the diffused feelings of national belonging vis-à-vis the alleged menace of the destruction of German culture as well as of its chance of constituting a starting point for an ethical renewal of German society (GSG 15: 271–285). Then, his attention shifted to the fact that the war was destroying the set of values related to the existence of the ideal of Europe as a common orientation of the countries involved in the war. Simmel cherished this ideal together with his French colleagues before the war and that was the basis for his

cooperation with Bouglé, Halévy, Durkheim, and later on Bergson (GSG 13: 112–116; Fitzi 2002: 19–54). Yet, Simmel's approach to the issues related to the war was always declined in terms of a reflection on social ethics and theory of culture, but never regarding a sociological or political analysis of the conflict.

The fact that in modern societies no ethics seems possible any longer, so that it is capable of overcoming the socially determined heteronomy of the moral subject depended for Simmel on the situation that moral judgements are a direct expression of individuals' lives and cannot be added to externally by following some abstract, general rules, as traditional ethics pretends (GSG 16: 349). Thus, duty cannot prevail in contrast to individual life. It is rather a modality of life performance, so making possible an autonomous normative legislation of individuality. Simmel's project of the "individual law", therefore, aimed at reconciling the creative impulses of complex modern personalities with an ethical principle of obligation towards the community, by making the biographies of great artists a model expression of this process (GSG 7: 49–56; GSG 16: 367). Accordingly, Simmel's conception of individual law is characterized by the idea of "normative temporality" which represents a decisive compensation of his profoundly liberal social ethics in communitarian terms. Every self-determined individuality is firmly anchored in its obligation-history, so that moral judgement must always take it into account (GSG 16: 392 f.). An individual-ethical life conduct, thus, does not provoke the triumph of hedonistic amoralism or blasé artistic egoism, as Simmel observed them in his diagnosis of the Wilhelmine age (GSG 18: 167–202). Individuals do not find themselves in an ethical vacuum, but within a network of constitutive ethical obligations that they contracted during the previous ethical life and that demand them to be consistent. Beyond the dichotomy between the subjective moral and the objective ethical obligation, a third dimension of life conduct thus becomes decisive: the objective obligation that the normative history of the individuality represents for the present moral

judgement (GSG 16: 408). Consequently, if the individuals trace back the causal chain of experiences, which constitutes their moral life, they become aware of a long series of passages connecting them to the nation-state of which they are the citizen. These ties cannot be simply forgotten or cut; rather they have to be taken into account to construct the ethical project of the individuality.

At the time of the first publication of the essay on “Individual Law”, before WWI, Simmel already exemplified this conception of social ethics by resorting to the analysis of the relationship of an antimilitarist to his motherland (GSG 12: 417–470). Simmel’s point is the following. The objectivity of the individual normative history is so deeply rooted in the temporal sequence of life that the call of the homeland to military service would also apply to the antimilitarist. He is a citizen of the nation-state and cannot take leave of the debt he contracted towards the political community, even if from a moral point of view he may refuse the use of arms (GSG 12: 458; GSG 16: 409). Under the semblances of the nation, thus, for Simmel, the life-history of the individuality appeals to him with an ethical objectivity that it cannot deny without instantly calling into question its own existence. The outbreak of WWI confronted Simmel with the full gravity of this conception of political obligation.

On the one hand, Simmel was aware that the war instantly destroyed half of his life work, as represented by the relationships of scientific cooperation, which he developed with his French colleagues. Moreover, fifty years were needed to rebuild what one single day in 1914 had destroyed (Simmel 1941/42-2008: 111). On the other hand, the emergence of strong feelings of national solidarity led him to hope for a moral renewal through the experience of the war. The “mammonism” that dominated pre-war Germany and imposed the evaluation of all worldly items as commodities seemed to come to an end through the ethical and political imperatives of the general mobilization. Reversing the cynicism of modern capitalism through the normativity of national belonging seemed finally possible (Watier, 1991). Accordingly, the

topic of the alleged ethical change due to the war experience forms the core of Simmel's first public intervention during the war in the speech on the "Inner Transformation of Germany" (*Deutschlands innere Wandlung*), which he delivered quite late, i.e. on 7 November 1914 at the *Salle de l'Aubette* in Strasbourg (GSG 15: 271–285). With the continuation of the war, however, Simmel became more sceptical about the possible positive effects of the conflict and began to articulate his critique towards the irrevocable destruction of the human, material and cultural patrimony provoked by the war. From March 1915, he began to publish interventions on the ideal of Europe which subjected him to trial for anti-German activities (GSG 13: 112–116; 138–142; GSG 24: 417–429).

In 1917, when at least in Germany everyone was beginning to wonder about the possible outcomes of the conflict, Simmel published a collection of his war writings entitled *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* ("The War and Decisions of the Spirit"; GSG 16: 7–58). The short book was a montage of those interventions on the war that were not banned from re-publication. Simmel's intention was to outline an ideal spectrum. Hence, the ordering of his selected texts did not respect the chronology of their first publication. Starting with Germany's "inner transformation" ("*Deutschlands innerer Wandlung*," November 1914), he came to the longings of the German spirit for the cultural contents that are diametrically opposed to it ("*Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes*," September 1916. GSG 13: 224–230) and then faced the issue of the crisis of culture ("*Die Krisis der Kultur*," February 1916. GSG 13: 190–201). He concluded the collection with the loss of the European ideal ("*Die Idee Europa*," March 1915. GSG 13: 112–116). Simmel could also have appended to his essay collection the short study entitled "*Europa und Amerika*" ("Europe and America") of 4 July 1915 (GSG 13: 138–142). However, this final text did not make it into the collection (GSG 24: 417–429). Rather tellingly, Simmel was forbidden from re-publishing the contribution because in the essay he expressed his opinion on the Alsace question as follows: "in

terms of world history, it is largely indifferent whether these four thousand square kilometres of Alsace-Lorraine [...] are German or French” (GSG 13: 141).

One wonders, however, what the message is that Simmel wanted to convey with *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen*. The point of departure for the reflection was “the inner transformation of Germany”. The accelerated capitalist development, the strong social differentiation and the weakening of the bond of political obligation that Germany went through since 1870 seemed to have ceased upon the outbreak of the war. Confronted with this situation, Simmel thematized the state of disarray, which he allegedly shared with the elder generation, and quite apart from which the overall outcome of the war could have been. The country that he had experienced throughout his lifetime in Berlin before August 1914 did not exist anymore because the emotional process of community-building in the first weeks of the war cemented the existential link between the individuals and the nation-state. This state of exception, which Simmel called the “absolute situation”, brought important material losses with it. However, the question arose as to whether this change would at least bring an “inner enrichment” and reorganization of values according to a new feeling of national solidarity.

Simmel’s arguments in this regard developed as follows. After losing the war of 1870/71, France had become morally superior to Germany thanks to a strong idea of revenge, which gave shape to the nationalism of the young French people, whom Simmel praised in his speech (GSG 15: 279). In 1914, however, the belief that Germany’s existence was threatened – a position that Simmel then shared in an uncritical way – seemed to produce a new, leading idea that united the nation in terms of a highly emotional conception of belonging. Under its influence, a criticism of modern mammonism became possible which attempted to attain Rousseau’s ideal of the “new man”. Yet, Simmel’s last word on this topic in 1917 is not an apology of the ethical specifics of the German nation in the state of exception, because he links the

reflection on emotional belonging to the nation with the assessment of the “longings of the German spirit” for whatever it conflicts with.

Simmel devotes to this topic his text on the *Dialektik des deutschen Geistes* (“The Dialectic of the German Spirit”; GSG 13: 224–230), so providing a reflection on the necessary transnational ties that connect the European nations. The ideal of a strong national identity characterizes, according to Simmel, both England and France. In contrast, the German national ideal seems to be dominated – so Simmel in September 1916! – by the desire of simultaneously being oneself, while also being the most distant from oneself. This must be seen as the reason for the German longing for Italy and the Italian lifestyle, which are in direct contrast to what may be called a “German attitude to life”. Due to this sentimental nostalgia for the other and for the foreigner, German national consciousness is constantly at risk of losing itself either to individual fragmentation or to superficial cosmopolitanism. Historically, this instability was later to become the basis for a radical identitarian reaction, so fighting this uncertainty by building virulent racist nationalism, as Plessner pointed out in 1935 in his study on the so-called *The Belated Nation*, by reviving some aspects of Simmel’s reflection (Plessner 1935/1959). Yet, according to Simmel, only a recurrent synthesis of the opposition between nationality and transnationality could constitute the basis for a kind of “German national consciousness”, which explicitly takes into account the contradictory tendencies of its being.

Simmel, however, knew that such a synthesis between Western and German culture became increasingly difficult in a time of crisis, as modernity is. This observation is the starting point for the third study included in *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen*, i.e. *Die Krisis der Kultur* (“The Crisis of Culture”), first published in February 1916 (GSG 13: 190–201). Here Simmel wonders again, if the war could introduce a path leading towards a solution of the modern cultural crisis. Unlike in 1914, however, the answer is

utterly negative. Simmel presents the experience of the war as a strong disenchantment, which may help to face the future in times of destruction, but is equally unable to end the crisis of culture. The strong feelings of solidarity provoked by the emotional community of the early weeks of war had reduced the divide between the culture of things and the culture of the person. The gap between them, however, is to resume as soon as the links of the international economy are reactivated in the aftermath of the forthcoming armistice. The war indeed showed that the omnipotence of money has its limits; nevertheless, Simmel expected it to regain its position of centrality in post-war society.

The fact that the self-preservation of the nation took precedence over the self-preservation of the individual during the war strongly marked people's minds. Consequently, the attitude towards the predominance of money in modern society would probably no longer be the same for the "lost generation" that had fought the war. Nothing, however, will prevent a return to the relativity of social ties in the market economy, which elevates the means of existence, and above all money, to the dignity of an end in itself. WWI represented for Simmel the most dramatic event in European history after the French Revolution because it had a remarkable impact on the reification processes of modern society. Yet, it remained an episode in the broader drama of culture, a temporary turning point of modernity without any real completion. After the "collective effervescence" of the nationalist emotion during the summer of 1914 and its later failure, it was therefore necessary to question what the possible further developments of culture could be. To answer the question Simmel completed the miscellany on *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* with the short study entitled *Die Idee Europa*, ("The Idea of Europe"), which first appeared in March 1915 (GSG 13: 112–116).

In "The Idea of Europe", Simmel posed the question for the last time about the meaning of WWI. Whilst rejecting every kind of justification, which was apparently necessarily based on the

terms of the philosophy of history, Simmel described the war as the product of the blindness and the frivolity of a minority of men in Europe (GSG 16: 55). In its early days, war had spawned a wave of will to sacrifice that deserved respect. Meanwhile, however, Simmel found in its place the “well-known German selfishness”, as he formulates it for the 1917 book publication with an implicit criticism of the so-called *Seeberg-Adresse* (GSG 16: 55). According to Simmel, no one could say how future generations would judge WWI. As early as March 1915, however, there was no doubt that beneath the material destruction and death, it caused at least one symbolic loss without any appeal. The “idea of Europe”, or a “constellation of the spirit” (*Geistige Einheitsgebilde*), which his generation had worshipped, was irrevocably lost. This event could not be transfigured as the price that had to be paid to strengthen and purify the German national conscience, as many other German intellectuals argued.

For Simmel, the maintenance of national identity was no reason to rely on the renunciation of Europeanism. The latter does not contrast with national identity because it lies beyond every nation and is thus compatible with each particular national spirit. Moreover, the idea of Europe was a venue of spiritual values for every man of culture, for whom national being was an inalienable property, yet no blinding narrow-mindedness. The experiences of the war showed, however, into what kind of pitiful condition the idea of Europe had been forced, for after 1914 it found very few advocates. Simmel's leading statement at the heart of WWI thus highlighted how because of the hatred, which had taken hold of European minds, he expected that the ideal of Europe would no longer exist for quite some time. However, not everything was lost for him. Simmel trusted in the dialectic of the German spirit and expressed the belief that the longings for Europe, which were also his own, would finally bring Germany back to the European family, like the “prodigal son” of the biblical parable.

Ways out of the war

During WWI, Simmel remained a man of his time. That is to say of the period from 1872 to 1914, which was characterized by a long phase of European peace, the tumultuous change of modern society, and yet also by the challenging presence of Germany's imperial pretensions. He was the witness to the irresistible development of young German capitalism, of rapid urbanization processes in Berlin and of modern normative relativism. He undertook to explain those phenomena and their mechanisms in his sociological studies. Since 1914, however, Simmel did not provide an economic or sociological analysis of the war as a process of destruction, which supported the augmented value of capital, as Marxists did, and nor did he have a political conception of Europe as a balance of the nation state's powers, as did Weber. He merely proposed a cultural-sociological approach to think through the normative limits of the nation state and its possible integration within a European normative order. This was Simmel's conception of a way out of the war. Modern qualitative differentiated societies produce the regulative power of the nation state, but they equally overcome its limitations by being linked to each other in supranational sociation processes. In Simmel's view, this dual development could become the object of a sociological inquiry into the relationship between nation-state building and transnational societal processes (GSG 13: 112–116).

Accordingly, if there was a cultural sphere delivering the value orientation that permitted overcoming the war, that would be Europe. Yet, since 1914, that value was completely disrupted. Above all Germany, the European prodigal son, had to find its path back to Europe. In this respect, territorial concessions were a matter of course, as Simmel formulated in his sentence about Alsace (GSG 13: 141). Like Durkheim, Simmel died before the end of WWI, even if only six weeks before the armistice, so that both could not evaluate the full range of the consequences of the conflict. Yet, like Max Weber, they formulated a conception of the risks and the possible ways out of WWI. As Karsanti observes in

the introduction to the new edition of Durkheim's study on Germany and the war (Karsanti, 2015: translated in this special issue; Durkheim, 1915), the particularity of his diagnosis for the misguided development of German political science is the fact that it expresses a problem which applies to all European countries. The self-image of the states as mere potency seduces them to narcissism and expansionist policies. That this came to pass in Germany on the eve of WWI is to be attributed to the inability of German political science under the influence of Treitschke's conception of imperialist politics to establish a "moral sociological theory" of the state's tasks as well as the limits of its sphere of action in international law. However, German social sciences also developed alternatives, which in Durkheim's view, could be applied to found a different theory of state and society. He introduced them in France in his early studies on the moral sciences in Germany (Durkheim, 1887). This German intellectual heritage was decisive for Durkheim. In France and Europe as a whole, it contributed to the ongoing development of sociology as the grounding social science to deter state theory from the path of folly that Treitschke proposed. Through the influential effect of scholarship and scientific thought on politics the individual states, in future, could have avoided an imperialist development such as occurred in Germany.

As Weber expressed it in 1916 in his lecture on "*Deutschland unter den europäischen Weltmächten*" ("Germany among the European World Powers"): upon founding the Empire in 1871, when Germany surrendered her existence as a collation of small states, it accepted the responsibility of playing its part in maintaining the balance of European Great Powers (MWG I/15: 153-194). Yet, this was not to be understood in the expansionist sense and needed not necessarily to lead to conflict. A way out of the war was only possible, however, if Germany continued to play its part for the European balance of Great Powers and did not strive to become the land of poets and thinkers it was before the unification of 1870/1. Simmel regarded WWI as the most

dramatic event in European history after the French Revolution. It had a radical impact on the process of modern reification; however, it remained for him an episode in the superordinate drama of modern culture. Consequently, the question emerged about the potential developments of culture after the “collective effervescence” of the summer of 1914 that could design a way out of the war. For this reason, *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* concluded with Simmel’s essay on Europe. The war was the product of the frivolity and the blindness of a minority in Europe, Simmel argued here. In the early stages, it encouraged a readiness to sacrifice oneself that was worthy of respect, but it soon became an arena for the familiar “German egoisms” to usurp that noble energy. There was no way of knowing how future generations would judge the war, yet since 1915 for Simmel one thing was already clear: the ideal of Europe, which his generation of intellectuals had seen as a point of orientation, was lost. According to Simmel, no national identity might be founded on a refusal of Europeanness, for Europe was not in contrast to, but beyond every national spirit: thus, it was compatible with every form of national life. The European ideal represented the synthesis of intellectual values that cultivated and civilized people of the *Belle Époque* had oriented themselves towards, as long as their national character was for them an inalienable good, yet not a blinding straitjacket.

Simmel was forbidden from re-publishing the short study entitled “Europa und Amerika” (“Europe and America”) of 4 July 1915 (GSG 13: 138-142). Here, his reflection on the sense and senselessness of WWI demonstrated that he saw the limits of territorial nationalism and oriented himself towards the common European cultural heritage that above all unified France and Germany. However, this transnational aspect of Simmel’s war writings remained in a state of suspense. The tension-ridden relationship between the emotionally felt national belonging and rationally understood intellectual values, which he shared with his French friends and colleagues such as Célestin Bouglé, Émile

Durkheim, Élie Halévy or Henri Bergson, did not get resolved in a political programme.

Instead, the theoretical lesson of the war moulded Simmel's late reflection on modernity, as he formulated it in the essay on "The Conflict of Modern Culture" a few months before his death (GSG 16: 181–207). The development of modern culture in the long phase of European peace from 1872 to 1914 showed a substantial incapacity of overcoming the existing forms of culture and society and producing a new synthesis. Marx had recognized this development rhythm of capitalist societies and formulated it as the conflict between productive forces and the relations of production. Yet, despite Marx, the history of modern society before WWI showed that there was no dialectical movement leading to the formation of a superior type of society. Modernity oscillated between phases of rapid development, characterized by consistent qualitative differentiation, and phases of regression, when society was incapable of progressing further and started to destroy its human and cultural patrimony. The war had exemplified in a dramatic way what this intermittent development rhythm of modernity meant. Accordingly, social and political theory deserved the task of developing the analytical means to explain these processes and contribute to avoid their excesses. This was the quintessential meaning of Simmel's late "life and forms paradigm" that he presented in his last book, *The View of Life (Lebensanschauung)* (GSG 16: 209–425). Simmel did not have the time to develop it into all its consequences for sociocultural theory. Yet, the idea of overcoming the destructive side of modernity by integrating its differentiating and de-differentiating forces in a more complex common form represented to some extent the final result of Simmel's reflection on the tension-fraught relationship between emotional nationalism and rational Europeanism as he experienced them during WWI.

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