

**Natàlia Cantó Milà.**

**A Sociological Theory of Value: Georg Simmel's Sociological Relationism.**

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It is with trepidation that one approaches a volume with as dry a title as Cantó Milà's and with diminished expectation that the detailed reconstruction of Simmel's classic *The Philosophy of Money* that she promises therein will provide any valuable returns for contemporary thought. On the other hand, the subject is Simmel — a figure whose prolific and unruly *oeuvre* is often cited as a classical source of sociological theory and yet whose place in the canon, at the time when he was living as well as today, is always uncertain. He is a singular thinker and although his ideas have become part of the common conceptual language of sociology there is still something elusive and important about his characterization of the social as movement, multiplicity, and relationality. His analyses lead to a very effective mode of immanent critique and an insistence that the coming to presence of forms of life be in the forefront of sociological thinking. His work is thus of continuing interest today.

There is also a purely pragmatic value to a book like this, namely that someone has taken the time to carefully reread Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* and to isolate its generative concepts, as this work runs to over 500 pages and has not generally been noted for its systematicity or coherence. Cantó Milà organizes Simmel's major work for the reader around the key themes that mark the uniqueness of his contribution to sociology and provides an account of the intellectual context of 19th and early 20th scholarship within which, and against which Simmel wrote. She does this very competently and sometimes with brilliant clarity. Her opening chapter on Simmel's "Life and Work" is as good a summary as any on Simmel's sociological problematic and would be a useful addition to classical social theory syllabi.

The central thesis of Cantó Milà's book is that Simmel's diverse reflections on money, society and modernity in *The Philosophy of Money* have to be understood in the context of his sociological theory of value. *Contra* the economists who debated whether money itself or only the commodities it could buy were intrinsically valuable, the neo-Kantians who sought transcendental criteria to ground the validity of values, and Marx who saw labour as the source of value, Simmel argued that value has no stable, objective or transcendental determinants. Value of any sort (economic, aesthetic, moral, etc.) is purely "relational" in the sense that it emerges and becomes stable only on the basis of its place within the reciprocal exchanges that constitute social relations. The value attributed to money is derived from its function as a special type of tool or medium that enables exchange between individuals (p. 106). Money in fact is simply the "reification of the social function of exchange" (p. 174). Thus money becomes the paradigmatic case which enables Simmel to explore the social sources of value/valuation in general and in the end to formulate a theory of "the ultimate significance and values of all that is human" (p. 120). It is with respect to the specific qualities of money as a measure of value — its generality, characterlessness, impersonality, divisibility, etc. — that Simmel is able to develop a diagnosis of the culture of modernity from the point of view of the money economy that binds it together.

This sociological theory of value in turn has to be understood in terms of Simmel's own developing sociological concepts, the 19th century schools and thinkers that influenced him (Cantó Milà discusses Kant, Marx, Spencer, Rickert, *Völkerpsychologie*, and National Economy) and in particular his attempts to work out a position that could respond to (and against) the problem of value as it was articulated by the dominant neo-Kantian school in Germany at the time. In the best

tradition of intellectual history, Cantó Milà argues persuasively that some of the problems that Simmel experienced in securing a professorship and that also make *The Philosophy of Money* seem inconsistent in places follow from his progressive (but incomplete) rejection of the academically established influences of Spencer, *Völkerpsychologie*, and National Economy on one hand, and his attempt to forward a relativist or “relational” theory of values against the neo-Kantian position on the other. The relativity of his position for example was seen as an indication of the unacceptable “Jewishness” of his thought.

Cantó Milà constructs a hierarchy of Simmelian concepts which she follows with some rigour to show amongst other things that his sociological theory of value is a sub-category of a much broader and more ambitious theorization of the social. In fact as Simmel’s goal in *The Philosophy of Money* is to understand “the ultimate significance and values of all that is human,” understanding money is only a means to account for human evaluation more generally. This hierarchy begins with what for Simmel is the primary instance of sociality: the *Wechselwirkung*, or the “reciprocal actions and effects” (p. 44) that constitute human social existence within the process of exchanges of various sorts. This in turn is the basis of Simmel’s ontological “relationism” (Cantó Milà’s term). Relationism is the idea that the meaning, place or stable existence of any social phenomenon at all (e.g. money, value, poverty) has to be understood in terms of its relation to the other elements in the social exchange. What is specifically social is the relations between people rather than the people themselves or the products of these relations (values, institutions, society itself, etc.). In this perspective, social phenomena have no independent or absolute basis of existence, nor values validity, outside these relations and they are therefore subject to flux (p. 43).

From these premises Simmel argued that the proper object of sociology was not the individual nor society *sui generis* but the famous “forms of sociation” of his formal sociology. Society is the sum of these forms, not an object in itself nor the sum of its individual members (p. 45). Forms are the immanent or emergent rules that come to govern or “clothe” individual emotions, motives, intentions, or goals (i.e. the “contents”) of interaction and condition the manner of their expression in social situations. What has value, including money, emerges only within the context of a form of sociation. A central thesis in *The Philosophy of Money* is that the generalization of the money economy in the modern era enables the form taken by economic exchange to penetrate and replace other, non-economic forms of exchange and evaluation (in culture, aesthetics, morality, intimacy, etc.). Money, which allows the comparison of otherwise incommensurable objects, also enables us to consider friendship or parenthood in terms of the time one has ‘invested’ in a relationship or to calculate the compensation for the death of an individual (pp. 209-210).

Finally, in line with Simmel’s concept of the tragedy of culture, the generalization of the money economy also entails an objectification and devaluation of values in modernity. Key to Simmel’s concept of tragedy is the idea that the products of objective culture (books, art, values, knowledge, tools, cities, etc.) accumulate without bounds or definitive duration while the subject’s capacity to assimilate these products into his or her life is restricted. The subject in modernity experiences objective culture as simultaneously liberating, alienating, and overwhelming. Money is one of these products of objective culture, one which greatly expands the scope and tempo of human sociality. But it is also one which operates in complete indifference to the subjective qualities, needs and identities of individuals or to the objects exchanged. It levels the value of things to the lowest common denominator (i.e. their monetary value). Taken as an end in itself money also short circuits the process of “cultivation” by which individuals re-incorporate the alienated products of human activity into their lives. This leads Simmel to enumerate a number of lifestyles or attitudes that develop in modernity on the basis of mistaking money for an end in itself: the miser, the capitalist,

the ascetic, the profligate, the cynic and the blasé individual (pp. 193-198).

To bring this back to the sociological theory of value, Simmel articulates an immanent critique of the money economy by showing how money as essentially a medium of exchange becomes reified, valued for itself and the power it provides, and then expands limitlessly beyond all bounds (given by the forms of sociation) to incorporate potentially any production of human sociality (p. 222). The fixation on money disrupts the integrity of the forms of life and the process of cultivation which Simmel described as “the path of the soul to itself” (p. 219).

Cantó Milà does a fine job of outlining the central themes that mark the uniqueness of Simmel's contribution to sociology. Occasionally one would wish for a more detailed account of the intellectual context of certain of Simmel's ideas but she does provide a good, if brief, picture of his responses to Kant, the Neo-Kantians, Spencer, Marx and Bergson. Oddly absent from her discussion however is Nietzsche, who is one of the few individuals Simmel cites in his work and whose views on the value of values would seem key to the way Simmel formulated his problems. Cantó Milà's reconstruction of *The Philosophy of Money* itself is good but will perhaps be mostly of interest to Simmel scholars and those working specifically with the sociological classics. There is no question here that she has formulated her book as an exercise in foundation building and systemization and not as a platform to theorize contemporary life nor to interrogate contemporary theory. It is a project to recast Simmel's *oeuvre* and ultimately to re-found sociology with respect to some specific social substance (Simmel's “relationism”) that might serve as the unambiguous referent for the discipline. This is a rather narrow task. Admittedly her efforts to analyze the present through Simmel are slight and relatively marginal to her main goal of writing an intellectual history, but her systematizing approach to Simmel is not without its ironies and its losses. The sociological theory of value might be the key to reading *The Philosophy of Money*, but it is his description of the restlessness at the heart of the forms of life that makes Simmel both an anti-systematizing thinker and an important thinker for sociologists today.

Final concerns for the reader are the lack of an index in the book and the use of the German edition of Simmel's collected works for citations throughout (without English cross references).

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