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Ottheim Rammstedt and the Bliss of Sociability

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Early one morning in fall of 2002, I met Ottheim Rammstedt and Angela Rammstedt at the Buenos Aires airport. In the evening, I picked them up at their hotel, and we walked a few blocks before going into a bar. Professor Rammstedt ordered us each a Campari and orange juice (one part Campari to three parts juice, the formula—he explained—used in many Italian cities for evening aperitifs). From the moment the drinks came until well after midnight, we talked nonstop about Simmel. For the most part, I asked questions and Rammstedt provided generous and thorough responses, sometimes with the encouragement of Angela. Our conversation began with Simmel's travels in Italy, and then his essay on the experience of sharing spiritual meals and drinks¹. It continued with possible Spanish-language editions of Simmel's works, and culminated with the idea of doing a sociological study of the current Cuban embargo according to Simmel's theory of conflict.

That final idea was tied to something else, something broader, that Rammstedt cared a great deal about, something that, since our conversation, I have tried to apply to my own work and relationship with students. In addition to striving to aptly explain and analyze Simmel's work and publish worthy critical editions of it, it is essential to apply his thinking to the problems of our times. To usher his work into the present, to bring his theory to productive life, to use it to broaden the horizon of problems that continue into our present. The idea of applying Simmel's sociology

¹ "Soziologie der Mahlzeit", in *GSG 12*, pp. 140-147.

to the conflict between Cuba and the United States, to international relations, was, then, a possible way to keep it alive.

And, during the week he spent in Buenos Aires for the Colloquium, Rammstedt insisted on that idea: it was more important to enact Simmel's thinking than to devise exegetic readings of his work. And he was not alone in that conviction: the title of Colloquium was "Simmel's Thinking Today"².

Professor Rammstedt was an enthusiastic participant in different discussions at the Colloquium. He presented two books by Simmel launched during the event³. His lecture that closed the Colloquium was titled "Sociology and the Sciences of Culture." Thanks to the intensity of his various contributions, Professor Rammstedt said jokingly when he took the microphone to begin his final lecture, "I feel like the life of the party." On the basis of my memory of that closing midday lecture and the only material available on it⁴, I will speak of its contents, as well as one of Rammstedt's previous interventions in the context of the discussion after the presentations at a roundtable on art.

In the middle of debates on the implications of Simmel's aesthetic theory, Otthein Rammstedt stated that Simmel

² Primeras Jornadas Internacionales "Actualidad del pensamiento de Simmel", May 21-23, 2002. In addition to Otthein Rammstedt, participated also Angela Rammstedt, Patrick Watier, Scott Lash, Olga Sabido Ramos, Ralph Buchenhorst, Silvia Delfino, Maristella Svampa, Luis Aznar, Vania Salles, Alejandra Oberti, Francisco Liernur, Hilda Herzer, Carla Rodríguez, Mariano Fressoli, Nicolás Casullo, Eduardo Grüner, Graciela Schuster, Valentina Salvi, Horacio González, Christian Ferrer and Esteban Vernik.

In subsequent years, under the good auspices of Professor Rammstedt, as a continuation of this event took place meetings in Mexico City, 2006; Medellín, 2011; and once again, Buenos Aires, 2015.

³ The editions in Spanish language, from *Grundfragen der Soziologie. Individuum und Gesellschaft (Cuestiones fundamentales de sociología. Individuo y sociedad*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 2002) and from *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel (Intuición de la vida. Cuatro capítulos de metafísica*, Buenos Aires, Altamira, 2002).

⁴ Vernik, Esteban & Mariano Fressoli (eds.) (2002) *El Coloquio Simmel de Buenos Aires*. Mimeo: Universidad de Buenos Aires.

considered “artistic styles” a way of expressing vital flows without reifying them, without rendering them static. He backed that up by arguing that, for Simmel, there is no telos that guides historical events, artistic or otherwise. Simmel, then, by no means adhered to the idea of a great historical evolution. Rammstedt claimed that Simmel—unlike Kant—held that no general law underlies the work of art. Its singularity stems, rather, from the artist’s individuality. Only the artist can say when the work is finished. The artist is the one, then, who regulates artistic activity. That is why, Rammstedt went on, Simmel’s aesthetic mostly takes shape in consecrated works on certain artists, some of those works actually finished—there are writings by Simmel on Goethe and Rembrandt, for instance—and others only planned—the ones on Shakespeare and Beethoven.

Rammstedt also argued that Adorno’s reading⁵ of Simmel’s essay “The Handle” was misguided. Rammstedt admits that Simmel begins that work with a seemingly trivial object—the handle—but that does not mean that he disregards more general social questions, as Adorno claims. A good look at Simmel’s work shows Adorno to be entirely mistaken. At stake in that essay on the handle, Rammstedt argued, is a methodological approach specific to aesthetics that consists of using a singular fact to problematize the most important and general questions, in other words, to question the totality on the basis of fragments. And, if we take a look at the context in which Simmel himself lived, we discover that that mode of thought was tightly bound to certain political-cultural movements that questioned *Kaiser* Wilhelm II on the basis of small facts rich in meaning. By questioning the aestheticizing nature of Simmel’s approach, Adorno failed to understand his methodology and his political experience. What may look like an aestheticization of the social, Rammstedt

⁵ Adorno, T.W. (2003) “El asa, la jarra y la experiencia temprana”, in *Notas sobre literatura*, Akal, Madrid, 2003.

concluded, is actually the starting point for a singular way of politicalizing art.

Thanks to his lively interventions over the course of the previous three days, by the time Rammstedt picked up the microphone to give his address at the close of the Colloquium the audience was full of expectations.

By appropriating Simmel's idea that "any crystallization of a concern tends to fossilize it", Rammstedt made clear his mission was to convey Simmel's legacy faithfully without sacrificing it, that is, without falling into a mere celebratory exegesis that would render Simmel's thinking inert, lacking in the vitality at its core. Rammstedt was, then, an author speaking of another author, recreating him, grappling with him from within his work while also keeping the necessary distance. And that distance is also temporal. Rammstedt—here and in the anecdote at the beginning of this memoir—invited us to look for the present in Simmel's writings from one century ago, to draw on and devise their applicability in order to further grapple with our contemporary world. That intention, Rammstedt warned on that occasion, runs headlong into an obstacle at the core of his lecture: most readings of Simmel have been partial and arbitrary insofar as they privilege his cultural writings and often read them in sociological terms. Many of those readings, Rammstedt went on, lose sight of the specificity of Simmel's sociological project and, as such, of a dimension of Simmel's contribution that would undoubtedly deepen a number of contemporary debates.

Rammstedt explained the premise for that assertion at the Colloquium: eighty percent of references to Simmel are from his texts on culture from a sociological perspective, while the core of his sociology has been largely forgotten. That assertion does not signal the need to privilege one segment of Simmel's work over another. On the contrary—and here Rammstedt insisted on the importance of the writings collected in *Philosophische Kultur*⁶—the

⁶ *GSG 11*.

idea is to evidence the subtle interconnections between both of Simmel's projects. Hence, Rammstedt's presentation looked to Simmel the sociologist to discern that part of his legacy that corresponds to the sciences of culture. While both branches of Simmel's production are tied to the social question, in his sociology forms of social relations are studied, whereas in the sciences of culture the object of study is human creations, the things we construct, the condensations of our spirit. In his sociology, Simmel always addresses social action in an attempt to explain rationally not only that action but also social suffering. His cultural writings, on the other hand, chiefly address the contradictions between the subjective spirit and the objective spirit.

Simmel—Rammstedt went on—believed it was important to construct a specific and unique object without reference to other fields, and in “Das Problem der Soziologie”⁷ (1894) he begins to devise that field by formulating a possible analytic differentiation between form and content. In other words, Simmel begins by distinguishing an action's motives and impulses from the action itself by means of an analytic abstraction. That separation shows that an array of contents can be encompassed by a single social form. Society, then, can be conceived as a growing set of interactions that shape more or less society. But on the basis of those interactions we can assert that the first form, the first interaction, already holds “society.” The object of sociology, then, is marked by interaction. This sociology attempts to come up with a rational explanation for social behavior, but its singular starting point in that endeavor is to understand the social condition not as an isolated or unilateral social action, but rather as fruit of a dialogic process, that is, of interaction.

Hence, Rammstedt showed us how, for Simmel, social action cannot be seen in causal terms. And in that Simmel differs from

⁷ *GSG* 5.

nineteenth-century sociology. There can be no causal explanation because action is always-already interaction and exchange of impressions. The prime example of this is, for Simmel, the reciprocal glance, which he deems the first moment of any interaction. It is then and there that the other is recognized as a “one’s self,” as someone immediately with us and whom we cannot consider just a representation. That particular conception of the self and the other, of the “I” and the “you,” of interaction as an immediate relation between two subjectivities is one of the pillars of Simmel’s sociology, an aspect that distinguishes it from other sociologies of the time. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the fundamental points of his sociological project.

What interests Rammstedt about this facet of Simmel is how sociology is presented as the ability to explain social behavior rationally, regardless of whether that behavior is itself rational or emotional. Insofar as social, behavior cannot be understood in isolation, as fruit solely of the decisions of an isolated individual. Social behavior can be explained only in terms of the relationship between the individual and the other, the individual and the group, or one group and another. The questions asked by Simmel’s sociology are, then: What happens if a third is added to a relationship between two? What happens in the joining of two groups? What are the consequences of those social forms for the construction of the personality? Those questions address variations in interactions—from the basic relationship between the “I” and the “you” to society seen as a set of interactions—and attempt to capture the social conditions at play in the social form. And here Rammstedt explained that social forms are not an ontological given. The forms hold a knowledge that subjects must acquire through socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*) to be able to act in society. That knowledge, that set of rules, is the outcome of a *social* production—it is only in those terms that it can be understood.

But Rammstedt also insisted that the core of sociology must be sociological knowledge, that is, anything sociological must begin with knowledge. And if Kant asked how nature is possible,

Simmel asks how society is possible. There is a clear difference, though, and that is that Kant asks his question regarding nature as a means to take distance from nature, whereas none of us can ever stand outside society. A long excursus in *die grosse Soziologie* (1908)⁸ deals with that question; and in *die kleine Soziologie* (1917)⁹ he argues that sociology depends on distance, that is, the attempt to grasp society as object depends on distance taken from it, an understanding enmeshed in aesthetics. Here, Simmel argues that society, the individual or the group, is—like aesthetic appreciation—a problem of distance. And hence the social forms of the entities we observe depend on distance, as if we were observing them through a telescope that homes in and pulls out.

Rammstedt affirmed, then, that for Simmel sociology constitutes a strict method with a specific object, namely forms of socialization. That said, he pointed out that the unity of the science of sociology lies not in one particular theory but rather in a shared attitude toward life and the world. And that attitude is characterized by a social location through which a set of individuals shares a series of historical issues, a common fate, and actively takes part in political and cultural currents geared to grappling with and transforming a historical situation. The task of sociology is, for Simmel, necessarily conditioned by the social problems of modernity, that is, by the problems of industrialization and the emergence of mass societies, by the problem of technology, and so forth. The sociologist's task, then, cannot be removed from that shared socio-historical context. The spirit of a time, its *Zeitgeist*, is what, in Simmel's view, must orient the science. And hence the social scientist's responsibility entails, among other things, grasping the historical process of her times as a set of socially shared problems.

That means, Rammstedt went on, that if sociology addresses the problems that come with industrial capitalism, the sciences of

⁸ *GSG 11*.

⁹ *GSG 16*.

culture address themes and objects always understood as individual expressions of modern social life. It deals, that is, with the things, opinions, and institutions, since “each and every detail of life holds the meaning of the whole”. Or, rather, as Simmel writes elsewhere, “at any point of the most indifferent and least ideal surface of life, a plumb line can be sunk into its most profound depths to reveal how the details bear the meaning of the whole.”¹⁰ This understanding enables Simmel to interpret even the most arbitrary stuff of daily life—a portrait, a handle, ruins, jewels, perfume, etc.—as expressions of the objective spirit. But Simmel also, of course, signals the appropriation of objective culture by the subjective spirit, and the relativity of the objective. We must, then, separate sociology from the sciences of culture, the latter of whose aim is to grasp what exists: the whole world is constituted by expressions or condensations of what man has made. Paintings, houses, antiques are all condensations of what man has made at a certain moment.

Rammstedt, then, pointed out that for Simmel sociology revolves around social behavior, action, and suffering, whereas the sciences of culture address things, the tangible. And that was quite novel at the time. There had not, prior, been a sociology of sufferings for sociologists, just as there had not been a philosophy of things for philosophers. But what Simmel begins to do is heed things and, from there, to address social conditions. What might be described as the science of culture is what Simmel started practicing in around 1900 as practical philosophy. To that he added his study of the philosophy of life, in which he conceives of the individual not as an object of knowledge but as an object of experience (*Erlebnis*). The other, in turn, is tied to experience and not to knowledge, and that leads Simmel, in the end, to replace the notion of the social actor with the notion of social suffering (*Leiden*): it is in life and suffering that society and individual collide. And that is why—as Rammstedt pointed out—the tasks of the

¹⁰ *GSG* 6.

sociologist must be grounded in life and in suffering tied to society. But that is the aspect that Simmel never fully develops, the portion of his project that—as he is somewhat aware—he never concludes. Be that as it may, Simmel does anticipate that the individual is only graspable through experience, and that is part of his legacy. Or, rather, the forgotten part of the scattered capital of that spiritual legacy that Simmel imagined “as money divided between many heirs.”

Otthein Rammstedt pointed out that that part of Simmel’s sociological bequest has fallen into oblivion. It resonates only in his science of culture, which is usually understood in sociological terms. And hence his cultural texts, rather than his sociological texts, are the ones heeded. Insofar as the legacy of his philosophy of culture is the dimension of his tradition most alive, there is a need to grasp and recreate the full magnitude of Simmel’s sociology. Once that has happened, we must resume the project of establishing the relationship of tension between social conditioning and social suffering, the experiences yielded by social structures. A suffering born of the very foundation of modern societies, of the structures based at once on inequality and compulsive homogenization.

For those of us lucky enough to attend that lecture in Buenos Aires, Rammstedt’s subtle words altered the understanding we had of Simmel’s work. Rammstedt himself left behind a body of work that, through reflections like the ones he made in 2002 that I have done my best to paraphrase here, will undoubtedly have an impact on more than one generation. Years later, Rammstedt brought to a finish the invaluable treasure that is *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*. He also helped shape an international brotherhood of heirs to Simmel’s thinking that will grow in all directions.

Rammstedt could have repeated the phrase from Dante that Simmel himself said in his final days: *Messo t’ho innazî; omai per te ti ciba...* [I’ve set the table, now it’s for you to feast...].