

VINCENZO MELE

A Tribute to Alessandro Dal Lago

Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago passed away on March 26, 2022. Alessandro Dal Lago was on the editorial board of the *Simmel Studies* new series from the beginning and contributed to the development and consolidation of the journal. This is how he introduced himself on his blog: (<http://www.alessandrodallago.com>):

I was born in Rome, in 1947, to a Venetian-Trentine mother and a Roman father of ancient Albanian origins (so goes the family legend). I spent my early childhood in Tuscany, in a hill town in the province of Arezzo (see the picture on the left). From the age of 6 to 48 I lived in Milan, then Genoa, and now reside in Sicily. I spend a few months a year in Germany, a country whose language and great cultural offerings I appreciate. I graduated from Pavia in 1970 and, after a couple of years of teaching in high schools, I have always worked in the university: temp in Pavia, researcher in Milan (1982), associate professor in Bologna (1992), full professor in Genoa (1994). According to the abstruse classifications of the Ministry of Research and University, I am defined as a sociologist of cultural processes. At the University of Genoa, I was a department head, dean of the Faculty of Education and delegate of the rector. Since 2013 I have been happily retired. I taught for a few semesters in the United States (University of Pennsylvania, 1991, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007). I have lectured and participated in seminars at universities and cultural institutes in Italy and abroad (United States, Canada, France, England, Ireland, Croatia, Finland, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Morocco, Thailand, etc.). In the 1980s I was editor of “Alfabeta” and since 1980 of “aut aut”. I was editor of the “Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia”

(1997-2000) and co-director of “Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa” which I founded with P. P. Giglioli, M. Marzano and G. Fele. Since 2013 I have been a member of the scientific committee of “California Italian Studies”. I have published, as author, editor or co-author, more than forty volumes and over two hundred essays and articles. But I am also the author of a novel, a collection of short stories and several literary texts. Others are currently in the works. I have been contributing articles and editorials to *Il Manifesto* for about forty years.

Self-presentations, as the case of Simmel has taught us (Köhnke, 1996, pp. 149–153) are interesting as much for what they reveal as for (especially) what they omit. Here we do not find mentioned a single title of the more than 40 volumes he has published during his career on authors such as Georg Simmel, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Simon Weil, Pierre Bourdieu Erving Goffman, Max Weber, Wolfgang Ienaghi, Hanna Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, Roberto Saviano, and not a single topic of the more than two hundred essays and articles he has written on the metropolis, the social production of deviance, globalization, migrants, football fan rituals, the logics of contemporary art, modern warfare, digital populism, gambling, martial arts (and much more). What this presentation instead reveals to us is the irony of Alessandro Dal Lago (a sociologist of cultural processes “according to the abstruse classifications of the Ministry of Research and University”) and his desire to present himself in an eclectic and original way, as an “essayist”, despite having a respectable international scholarly resume. Dal Lago was a rupture figure in Italian sociology, which, in the continental European context, is probably the most fragile, having known only a late and controversial institutionalization and often being crushed by the idealism and historicism dominating Italian ideology (according to Norberto Bobbio’s well-known definition Bobbio, 1995). Where Italian sociologists were extremely timid and fearful of their status, Dal Lago like the classic elephant in the glassware shop amused himself by mocking them and their more emblazoned cousins, namely philosophers about whom he

wrote some rather amusing pamphlets, such as *I benpensanti. Contro i tutori dell'ordine filosofico* Genoa, Il Melangolo, Genoa 2014 (“The Right-Thinking People. Against the Guardians of the Philosophical Order”), and *Insofferenze. Saggi critici sulla cultura contemporanea*, Prospero Editore, Milano 2021 (“Intolerances. Critical Essays on Contemporary Culture”). As Pier Paolo Giglioli pointed out in his recollection in the journal “Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa” founded with him, he was undoubtedly a figure of rupture, a perpetual outsider but – as his institutional experiences remind us – also an *insider*, precisely in the constitutive and inevitable ambivalence of social processes (Giglioli, 2022).

It was precisely in this attitude that he could not fail to meet Georg Simmel, on whom he wrote for more than twenty years, producing a monograph that still remains a point of reference after so many years, and who – in our opinion – is the author who most influenced his way of being a sociologist. Indeed, Simmel is present in much of Dal Lago’s most important sociological research, such as *Descrizione di una battaglia. I rituali del calcio*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990 (“Description of a Battle. Soccer’s Rituals”), *Non persone. L’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2004 (engl. Trans *Non-persons. The exclusion of migrants in a global society*, Ipc Press, Milano 2009), *Fuori cornice. L’arte oltre l’arte* (“Out-of-frame. The Art Beyond the Art”, with Serena Giordano), Einaudi, Torino, 2008, until his latest research *Sangue nell’ottagono. Antropologia delle arti marziali miste*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2022 (“Blood in the Octagon. Anthropology of Mixed Martial Arts”), finished shortly before his death. Particularly in the book on the exclusion of migrants in global society – a forerunner of a central theme to the present day – Dal Lago performs a radical and documented ethnography based on the collection of media material and qualitative interviews on the phenomenon of migration to Italy and Europe, which in the 1990s in Italy was beginning to make its appearance in national and international political debate. “Non-persons” are the migrants who – according to Simmel’s famous conception of the ambivalence of the stranger – are neither fully citizens on the soil where they find

themselves nor in the place of origin from which they are forced to flee for a wide variety of reasons. This material dehumanization is clearly reflected on the symbolic side where these citizens are labeled with the pseudo-legal common sense term of “extra-community” which literally designates “citizens from outside the European community” but is in fact used to refer exclusively to citizens seeking employment from subordinate weights in the international, economic and political division of labor.

The article we present here in English translation (Dal Lago, 1989)¹ – which also constitutes the first chapter of his monograph *Il conflitto della modernità. Il pensiero di Georg Simmel*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1994 (“The Conflict of Modernity. The Thought of Georg Simmel”) – gives the sense of his reading of the German philosopher and sociologist. The cipher of Dal Lago’s reading is expressed by the concepts of “tragedy of culture” and “crisis,” which still assume profound explanatory value in his opinion. By crisis Dal Lago means the end of the absolute claims of metaphysics – according to an interpretation that was already Wilhelm Dilthey’s – that is, the discovery of thought’s inability to embrace the totality of life and the consequent yielding of the field of philosophy in the face of the development of the natural and human sciences. Simmel is one of the first significant examples of overcoming the traditional language of philosophy and metaphysics thanks to the centrality that “metaphor” assumes in his thought, of which the *Philosophy of Money* is an excellent example. In fact, monetary relations are taken up here as a metaphor for the whole of modern culture, and this allows Simmel across disciplinary boundaries to discuss decisive aspects of modernity, such as the autonomization of scientific knowledge, changing lifestyles, etc. From this point of view Simmel becomes central to rediscovering the status of the sociological

¹ Article originally published in the *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, vol. XXX, n. 4, 1989, pp. 525-550. We would like to thank *Il Mulino* publisher for permission to republish the English translation, especially Giovanna Sarti (from the journals management) and Luigi Pellizzoni (current editor of the *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*)

discipline as such. It is not a matter of comparing Simmel with the other classics of sociological theory – making him wear the too narrow shoes of the sociologist – but rather of reading his philosophical and aesthetic contributions also from a sociological perspective. This perspective appears to Dal Lago to be not only the hermeneutically most respectful but the one that helps to broaden the often too narrow terrain of social theory. However, two points in particular of Dal Lago’s reading of Simmel seem to us worthy of discussion. The first concerns the “scientificity” of Simmel’s sociology, the second – related to it – the significance of Simmel’s relationalism. Consistent with his “weak” interpretation (Vattimo and Rovatti, 2012) of Simmel’s concept of truth Dal Lago believes that it is useless to derive the structural principles of his sociology and, above all, argues that Simmel does not propose a true social theory. Where Marx, Durkheim or Weber saw mainly “objectifications,” processes and institutions determined in both a historical and morphological sense, silhouetted against the background of everyday sociality (classes, classes, forms of solidarity, symbolic or ideological systems such as religion), Simmel sees above all an incessant movement of forms articulated around certain *a priori*. The vision of this society is very suggestive, although Dal Lago questions its ability to understand the actual dynamics. Simmel assumes interaction (or, rather, *Wechselwirkung*) as the objects of analysis, but this means understanding in principle forms of “association” (*Vergesellschaftung*) as very different from each other, such as friendship or enmity between individuals, to the authority exercised by a father of a family over his children to the sovereignty of a state over citizens in a given territory. These processes of interaction can hardly be reduced to a free play of reciprocity between individuals and actors, but it is necessary from time to time to identify the *contrainte* (Durkheim) that also influences them: there seems to be no determinism in Simmel’s metropolis. Not State, Bureaucracy, Capital, integrated system of production and consumption, as in Weber and Werner Sombart. “A certain methodological underestimation of this aspect (entirely understandable and justifiable, if we consider that at Simmel’s time

sociology was in its infancy) makes the brilliant observations and analyses of Sociology something less than a true theory of society” (Dal Lago, 1994, p. 190). Consequently, Dal Lago judges in a not entirely positive way Simmel’s “relationalism” or “relativism”, which he throughout his life considered the only possible principle for modern theory, when he states, “I believe that Simmel’s thought, despite its intentions, never quite gets rid of a suspicion of skepticism” (Dal Lago 1994, p. 93). Now, we know that an important trend in contemporary reading of Simmel insists precisely on Simmel’s valorization of *Grand Theory* (Fitzi, 2019, pp. 1–8). For example, in the pages of our journal we have hosted readings that tries to read Simmel’s contribution in this sense (Fitzi, Mele and Magatti, 2018). Conversely, Simmel’s “relationalism” – more than other aspects of his thought – is being addressed by a good deal of social theory, advocating this new form of “relational ontology” (Pyyhtinen, 2017; Dépelteau, 2018; Pyyhtinen and Beer, 2018). Who is right? There is enough material to host future debates in our magazine space.

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