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*The Adventurer and the Hunter. Simmel and Benjamin on Critique and Experience*¹

Abstract. A significant step in trying to understand the different philosophical and political orientations of Simmel and Benjamin consists in analysing the very concept of “critique” and “criticism” that is implicit in their thought and its relationship with the concept of experience. Even if Simmel and Benjamin share a common neo-Kantian background and they were both influenced by German romantic culture, the development of their thought follows very different paths. While Simmel moves from a reflection on the principle of “form”, which belongs to Kant, to the principle of “life” that is typical of Goethe, Benjamin – coming from a similar neo-Kantian background – moves toward a very eclectic form of “redemptive criticism” (rettende Kritik). A fruitful comparison therefore should consider that Simmel and Benjamin are unified by a common reference to the concept of experience and the theory of knowledge (Erkenntnistheorie) in relationship with the philosophy of history, or, to express it in Benjamin’s words, with the concept of history. This conceptual basis allows us to better perceive their fundamentally different philosophical and sociological approaches to modernity and their different judgement on the destiny of individuality in the modern context.

¹ This article is designed in continuity and as a follow-up to the previous article *The Blasé and the Flâneur. Simmel and Benjamin on Modern and Postmodern Forms of Individualization*, in «Simmel Studie, Vol. 23, Number 2, 2019, pp. 37-70 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075211ar> and anticipates themes contained in the book *Fragments of Metropolis. City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin* being published by Palgrave.

The decisive differences between philosophers have always consisted in nuances; what is most bitterly irreconcilable is that which is similar but which thrives on different centers

(T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*).

1. Premise

Often comparisons in social theory and philosophy are conducted within the ‘homogeneous empty time’ of an imaginary contemporaneity. Authors belonging to different historical and political contexts are envisioned to carry on a dialogue as their lives and thoughts were not influenced by specific events and contingencies. On the contrary, we must be aware of the different historical, philosophical and political constellations which Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin belonged to. They lived through different moments in European intellectual history, through diverse philosophical seasons, and hence sought to respond to disparate cultural and social urgencies. Simmel and Benjamin assume two representative standpoints on 20th-century thought regarding the relation between subjectivity and mass society, symbolically represented by the *metropolis* as its characteristic social and cultural manifestation. Their visions of modernity are largely the result of perspectives that are respectively *on the threshold* and *internal* to 20th-century philosophical and sociological discourse on modernity. Simmel’s standpoint *precedes* ‘the short 20th century’ (as defined by the English historian Hobsbawm, 1994), and hence his perceptions are significant for their *otherness* with respect to the period’s affairs and tragedies. Indeed, Simmel died in 1918 when the tragedy of the First World War (on which he initially had taken an activist stance for intervention, only then to be consumed by the dilemma between Nationalism and Europeanism; Fitzi, 2018) and the consequent cultural crisis marked a definitive turning point from the previous era. Benjamin’s perspective on modernity, on the other hand, was cultivated in complete awareness of the *one-way street* – echoing the

title of Benjamin's work (Benjamin, 1979 [1928]) – that European civilization was taking; unless some sort of “emergency brake”² was engaged it would inevitably lead to the catastrophes of fascism and the Second World War. The project for a ‘pre-history’ (*Urgeschichte*) of modernity that he embodied paradigmatically in ‘Paris, capital of the 19th century’ thus comes about in one of the absolutely ‘darkest’ times of the short century (Arendt, 1968), during which on the one hand there followed the inexorable rise of mass totalitarian regimes in Europe, and on the other, the degeneration of the hopes kindled by the October revolution into the catastrophe of Stalinism. The different historical settings for their reflections could not have avoided consequences for their political, sociological and philosophical orientation. The similarity between their perspectives is significant, yet at times deceptive³. Thanks to David Frisby's fundamental work of rediscovery, Simmel has been interpreted as belonging to the “Benjaminian” (and “Lukácsian”) categories: Frisby (Frisby, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1986, 2013), beginning with his choice of metaphors of the “*flâneur* sociologist” and “sociological impressionism”, reads (and criticizes) Simmel from the perspective of Lukács and Benjamin.

More recently Marian Mičko (Mičko, 2010), Nigel Dodd (Dodd, 2008; Dodd & Wajcman, 2016), and Stéphane Symons (Symons, 2017) tried directly to compare Simmel and Benjamin with respect to different aspects of their thought. Mičko gave a precise, well-founded historical insight into Benjamin's debt towards Simmel's characterization of modern experience, yet he tends to disregard the discrepancies between Simmel's and Benjamin's philosophical method and concept of individuality (Barbisan, 2016). In his essay,

² The reference here is to Benjamin's concept of history and his re-reading of the idea of revolution as an “emergency brake”: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake” (Benjamin, 2003 [1940]: 402).

³ Speaking of Benjamin as a “sociologist in the path of Simmel” (Martinez, n.d.) can be an example of this deception.

Dodd employs Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen* in the work of Simmel and Benjamin to examine affinities and contrasts between their methodologies (Dodd, 2008). Moreover, he examines their different analysis of the acceleration of city life and time-consciousness (Dodd & Wajcman, 2016). Symons offered a sophisticated and insightful reading of Simmel's and Benjamin's interpretations of particular artworks, neglecting (or leaving in the background) the philosophical basis of this comparison (Yakovenko, 2018). A further significant step in trying to understand the different philosophical orientations of Simmel and Benjamin consists in analysing the very concept of "critique" and "criticism" that is implicit in their thought and its relationship with the concept of experience. Even if Simmel and Benjamin share a common neo-Kantian background and they were both influenced by German romantic culture, the development of their thought follows very different paths. While Simmel moves from a reflection on the principle of "form", which belongs to Kant, to the principle of "life" that is typical of Goethe⁴, Benjamin – coming from a

⁴ Levine's opinion (Levine, 2012) is that consideration of the full scope of the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe* demonstrates Simmel's continuous interlocution with the Goethean principle of "life" and the Kantian principle of "form/matter". What changed in Simmel's mind over time was how those two principles were construed and related. This would be contrary to the common perceptions of Simmel's work as divided into three stages of Darwinism, Kantianism, and Goethean/Bergsonian Life-Philosophy and also has conceptual consequences for his conception of sociology. In fact, he constructed the *Soziologie* as a series of exercises that focused on social forms generated by and necessarily accommodating the drives that engendered them. *Lebensanschauung*, in turn, tracked the emergence of cultural forms from the life process; it showed the inherent tension between created forms and ongoing life process and ways in which boundaries of forms were settled through self-reflective attentions in life and the admonitory pressures of death. However, this perception was notorious to Simmel's accurate sociological commentators like Lash (Lash, 2005). In contrast to Levine, we don't agree that Simmel found fruitful ways of synthesizing them. Moreover, Simmel – coherently with his relativistic view – never choose

similar neo-Kantian background – moves toward a very eclectic form of “redemptive criticism” (*rettende Kritik*). A fruitful comparison therefore should consider that Simmel and Benjamin are unified by a common reference to the concept of experience and the theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) in relationship with the philosophy of history, or, to express it in Benjamin’s words, with the concept of history. This conceptual basis allows us to better perceive their fundamentally different philosophical and sociological approaches to modernity and their different judgement on the destiny of individuality in the modern context.

2. The adventurer: Simmel’s concept of criticism between *Erkenntnistheorie* (or the principle of form) and *Lebensanschauung* (or the principle of life)

Simmel didn’t dedicate a specific book or essay to the concept of critique but he elaborates throughout his life on a relationship with Kant’s criticism⁵. Since the beginning of his intellectual path,

between one or the other but placed in a *relationship* (*Wechselwirkung*) their different conceptions, i.e. the mechanistic and vitalist.

⁵ In fact, Simmel’s intellectual career began with Kant. Kant’s theory of matter was the subject of his student dissertation, for which he was awarded the Royal Prize in 1880, and on the basis of which he was promoted to a doctoral degree. The first part of Simmel’s dissertation was published as Georg Simmel, *Das Wesen der Materie nach Kant’s Physischer Monadologie* (1881), in *GSG* 1: 9-41 (on this see Köhnke, 1996: 42-49). His following *Habilitation* analysed Kant’s theory of synthetic judgement, pure perception and pure will and was regarded by the examination committee as a better work than his initial study, on the origins of music (Landmann, 1958: 20; Köhnke, 1996: 51-77). Simmel’s first course as *Privatdozent* at Berlin University was on Kant’s ethics, and he continued teaching Kant for many years (Gassen & Landmann, n.d.: 345-9). Kant was a recurring theme in many of his publications, culminating in *Kant: Sixteen Lectures Delivered at Berlin University*, in the winter semester of 1902–3 and published as a book in 1904 (Georg Simmel, *Kant: Sechzehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Berliner Universität*, in *GSG* 9: 7-226). Kant was Simmel’s most published work: none of his other books enjoyed four editions during his lifetime. The second edition appeared in 1905, the third in 1913, and the fourth in 1918. In addition, Simmel was among the

Simmel embraces the idea of critique as “theory of knowledge” (*Erkenntnistheorie*) and experience⁶.

It is worth remembering that the term *Erkenntnistheorie* is in fact a term with particularly important connotations. Affirmed in Germany – as scrupulous studies have shown (Köhnke, 1981) – in the 1930s in the context of criticism of Hegel and, from the beginning, explicitly linked to the program of a re-foundation of philosophy under the sign of a revival of Kant, it then became the flagship of neo-Kantianism in its various currents and a sort of autonomous discipline (Köhnke, 1986: 58ff).

In the early 1880s, the time of Simmel’s first intellectual endeavours, the neo-Kantian project was hegemonic in the German universities. This cultural project was characterized by the attempt to find in Kant the foundations for restoring the unity of the world in the context of diversified modern civilization (Podoksik, 2016: 601). The most valuable aspect of Kant’s philosophy, the only one that can allow us to grasp coherence in the modern world, was his rejection of metaphysics. Kant’s philosophy was generally regarded as critical rather than metaphysical, since it mainly focused on how our experience works rather than on what may be hidden behind it. Having considered the “thing-in-itself” and the associated problems (subject/object dualism, disunity between the phenomenal and noumenal world), neo-Kantians generally concentrated on what they considered Kant’s most relevant philosophical idea: not that “the world is my representation [*die Welt ist meine Vorstellung*], but in

founders of the philosophical journal *LOGOS*, perceived as the platform of the south-western Baden neo-Kantian school (Podoksik, 2016: 599).

⁶ “For Simmel, Kant’s philosophy is mainly the philosophy of knowledge and experience. [...] It is this critical aspect which constitutes the philosophical essence of Kant’s ideas” (Podoksik, 2016: 604-605). In his precise and accomplished reconstruction of Simmel’s neo-Kantianism, Podoksik neglects Simmel’s theory and practice of a “third space” between art and philosophy as expressed in numerous essays and, above all, in his *Philosophy of Money*. However, this doesn’t detract from the validity of the article.

a more profound one: the world is my [activity of] representing [*die Welt ist mein Vorstellen*]” (Simmel, 1997 [1918]: 61). Our mind always grasps the world actively and the forms in which the world appears to our perception and understanding exist *a priori*. Like other neo-Kantians (Cohen, Natorp), Simmel was convinced that the idea of the synthetic a priori was the basis of the validity of Kant’s theory of knowledge, even if he criticized Kant’s specific doctrine of a priori categories (Ivi: 31-50). Simmel was convinced that this doctrine was unsatisfactory for the modern mind. There is no reason why the mind’s structure itself should be closed and limited and why the development of the world should not regard the forms of our knowledge as well. The concept of a priori should become more flexible and develops according to the progress of knowledge in various fields. However, for Simmel, Kant’s discovery that our experiences are conditioned by over-sensible assumptions that are almost innate to our spirit possesses a fecundity that has not been exhausted at all. Kant applied it only to the natural sciences, but the entire historical and psychological world is no less worthy of being investigated in its a priori assumptions. In the main fields of investigations of social and historical sciences Simmel tried to develop new a priori postulated of specific sorts of knowledge. In the initial chapter of his first important book *Über soziale Differenzierung* (“On Social Differentiation”), entitled *Zur Erkenntnistheorie der Socialwissenschaft* (“On Theory of Knowledge of Social Science”), Simmel clears the importance of his conception of critique based on the *a priori* stating that “there is no science whose content emerges from mere objective facts” (Simmel, 1989 [1890]: 117), moving definitively away from a crude positivist conception of knowledge as a reflection. Science is based on the giving of meaning (*Deutung*) to phenomena and the “forming” (*Formung*) of events, not on the mere recording of empirical evidences. Therefore, even sociology – an “eclectic science” because its material is provided by other sciences such as history, anthropology and psychology – presupposes and contains “always an interpretation and a donation of form to the facts according to categories and norms that for the science in question are a priori,

that is, they are transported into facts in themselves and for themselves isolated from the spirit that conceptualizes” (Ivi: 116). Simmel will keep firmly to the use of the concept of a priori in sociology until the “big” sociology of 1908, where in the Kantian excursus *How is Society Possible?* he spoke of the three a priori of social life (Simmel, 1992: 42-61).

In *Über eine Beziehung der Selectionstheorie zur Erkenntnistheorie*⁷ – a less quoted article published in 1885 in *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* edited by Natorp – Simmel suggested a synthesis between neo-Kantianism, evolutionism and pragmatism⁸. Regarding the origin of the a priori, Simmel suggests in this article that the validity of Kant’s doctrine doesn’t find its origin in abstract logical necessity but is rather the result of the evolutionary development of the human genre. The functioning of our experience today works as described by Kant because in the course of evolution these specific characteristics turned out to be the most useful for the existence of human beings. Therefore the truthfulness of our knowledge is based on its usefulness. Even if this radical evolutionary position will be abandoned by Simmel, the pragmatic (and relativistic) concept of truth will be central in the *Philosophy of Money*, either pragmatically or it is justified by the most fundamental fact that the points of view are useful representations for the vital interests of beings endowed with certain psychophysical organizations: “The truth is not originally useful because it is true, but the opposite. We attribute dignity of truth to those representations that act in us as real strength or movement, and that lead us to useful behaviour” (Simmel, 1989b [1900]: 102). Consequently, truths will in principle be as numerous as vital organizations and needs. Similar to Nietzsche, but more sceptical than him, Simmel abandons the notion of absolute truth in favour of truths related to certain psychophysical organizations.

⁷ GSG, 5: 62–74.

⁸ On Simmel’s relationship with pragmatist philosophy see (Kusch, 2019).

The third important book that shows Simmel's idea of "critique" as *Erkenntnistheorie* is *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Studie* (1892)⁹. From the very first edition of 1892 it is clear that Simmel's *Erkenntnistheorie* is intended to dissolve any possible metaphysics of history through the scientific determination of what is historical. With the Kantian turn of the second edition (of 1905, while that of 1907 remains almost unchanged) the realist instance of historical knowledge is attenuated in favour of a probabilistic-congressional instance. In the preface to the second edition, Simmel formulates the question "how is history possible?" in the wake of Kant's question "how is nature possible?" That is, how can one form "from the matter of immediately experienced reality, that theoretical construct which we call history?" What is the a priori that makes it formally possible? In answering these questions, Simmel seems to differ decisively from the debate of the time on the distinction between *Natur* and *Geisteswissenschaften* and to indicate a path that, if followed to the end, leads towards an epistemological approach that goes beyond the distinction between *Erklären* (explaining) and *Verstehen* (understanding). In the same years that Max Weber tries to establish in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* the conditions of objectivity of the social-historical sciences through the ideal types that are cognitive tools to identify appropriate cases among the historical phenomena, Simmel is mainly concerned to open up to historical knowledge a way of access to the individuality of spiritual processes that preserves the cognitive objectivity both from the psychological subjectivism of individual lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) and from the opaque abstractness of universal laws. Only a synthesis of the imagination completely analogous to aesthetic sensitivity allows the historian to grasp that unity of the individual soul which is the methodological

⁹ Among all Simmel's works, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* is the one that most reveals itself to be troubled and modified in its various drafts. The differences are radical between the first and second editions, respectively of 1892 and 1905, while those between the second and third editions of 1907 are modest and not broadly touching the overall layout of the work.

presupposition of intersubjective understanding and organization of historical knowledge. Art, like history, achieves its deepest essence in transforming the randomness of one's own lived experience into a universally valid happening, or more precisely because within it what is personal is immediately experienced as universally valid. In this book Simmel also makes clear his preference for Kant's *third* critique (*Critique of Judgment*) compared with the first and the second, as his lessons clearly show on Kant that he held at the University of Berlin in 1902–1903 (especially the thirteenth lesson)¹⁰ some years later. From the early years of his philosophical production, Simmel already seemed to give the aesthetic approach to reality a more “gnoseological overlay” (Vozza, 1988: 86) than merely conceptual knowledge capable of illuminating areas of reality that traditionally are not aesthetic, like the fundamental relationship of individual and society. Aesthetics assumes a privileged explicative function in many fields, in particular the interpretation of social and historical phenomena. Since the 1890s Simmel tried to practice this “aesthetic method” that in his 1896 essay he called “perspective and aesthetic representation”

¹⁰ It is possible to divide Simmel's approach to Kant into two periods (Podoksik, 2016: 600). In the first, he considered Kant not only as a great philosophical genius, but also as the creator of the only intellectual basis for resolving the contradictions of the modern era. In the second period, he became convinced that Kant's response to the problems of modernity was not fully satisfactory, although he continued to hold him in great esteem. This change in position can be dated probably between 1896 and 1902: many works are fundamental to attest to this turnaround. It is important to mention here at least the essay *Was ist uns Kant?* (1896), in which he outlined in detail his initial position on the philosopher of Königsberg and the lectures on Kant held at Berlin University (1902), in which he voiced his new attitude. Podoksik suggests that a precise date for the change of attitude toward Kant's philosophy can be 1899: two things happened in this year. First, Simmel stopped offering annual classes on Kant and from now on he would lecture on Kant occasionally. Second, in the same year he published the essay *Kant und Goethe*, in which for the first time he spoke about an alternative way – namely, Goethe's philosophy of life – to resolve the contradictions of modernity.

(*ästhetischen Betrachtung und Darstellung*) according to which “the typical is to be found in what is unique, that which follows a law in that which is fortuitous, the essence and the significance of things in the superficial and the transitory” (Simmel, 1992b: 199)¹¹. Although during the different phases of his thought Simmel maintained the (neo-Kantian) distinction between metaphysics, science and theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*)¹², his project for a ‘sociological aesthetics’ clearly emerges in the preface to his major work, *The Philosophy of Money*, in which he advocates an original

¹¹ This metaphysical conception of the “typical” clearly refers to Goethe’s *Urpheänomen*. In his 1913 monograph on Goethe, Simmel points out the philosophical significance of this conception: “We normally imagine the general law of objects as positioned somehow outside of the thing: partly objective, [...] independent of the accident of its material realization in time and space, partly subjective, [...] exclusively a matter of thought and not present to our sensual energies that can perceive only the particular, never the general. The concept of urphenomenon wants to overcome this separation: it is none other than the timeless law within a temporal observation; it is the general that reveals itself immediately in a particular form. Because such a thing exists, he [Goethe] can say: “The highest thing would be to grasp that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the fundamental law of chromatics. One would never search for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the theory” (Simmel, 1913: 57).

¹² In the *grosse Soziologie* of 1908 where Simmel was trying to investigate the a priori of the social world, he states that “every exact science intended for the direct understanding of facts ... is delimited from two philosophical domains ... The former is epistemology, that is, the metaphysics of the specialized fields under discussion. The latter refers actually to two problems that remain, however, justifiably unseparated in the actual thought process: dissatisfaction with the fragmentary character of specialized knowledge that leads to premature closure at fact checking and accumulation of evidence by supplementing the incompleteness with speculation; and this same practice even serves the parallel need to encompass the compatible and incompatible pieces in an overall unified picture. Next to this metaphysical function focused on the degree of knowledge, another one is directed towards a different dimension of existence, wherein lies the metaphysical meaning of its contents: we express it as meaning or purpose, as absolute substance under the relative appearances, also as value or religious meaning.”

“third position” between art and philosophy. Whereas philosophy tends to “the totality of being”, art has “the great advantage” of setting itself “a single, narrowly defined problem every time: a person, a landscape, a mood”.

Some years before the systematic work *Die Hauptproblemen der Philosophie* (1910), in the introductory lecture *Über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1904) Simmel gives a concise and precise insight into his idea of philosophy as *Weltanschauung* and how this is linked to the concept of art and lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Simmel intended here to react to the “exaggerations of historicism” which, by assigning to philosophers the task of a purely historical understanding, had ended up considering immersion in the actual problems of philosophy as aberrant. From a certain point of view, philosophy consists in its history, that is, in a gradual explanation of the possible philosophical attitudes of the soul. But on the other hand, every historical development of philosophizing is realized thanks to the liberation from the weight of history. In it, as in art, the element derived from tradition is relatively unimportant compared to the creative one. Therefore the speculative attitude of philosophy can be compared to that of the artist.

What is however the specific “nature” of philosophy as distinguished by the subjectivity of art and the objectivity of science? In history of philosophy – Simmel continues in his 1904 essay – we can find very different ways of philosophizing. The problems that every thinker circumscribes as relevant correspond to the solutions that he wants to give. If there is something however that unites them and justifies the use of the term unitary “philosophy”, it is to be recognized in the philosopher’s attitude to relate and react to the totality of the contents of life. Access to the totality for Simmel is – following Kant – possible only by the forming activity that the spirit exercises on the existing, abstracting respectively the content (in the case of mysticism) or the form (as in the case of Kant). In both cases knowledge of oneself is decisive for knowledge of the world. The unity of the ego or personality, which assures Kant of the possibility

of knowledge of the world, presents an analogy with “the spark” of Meister Eckardt’s mysticism, which opens to the soul the relationship with the absolute totality of the existing. This centrality of the subject and of self-knowledge, in which the two fundamental ways of philosophical understanding of totality converge, gives Simmel the cue to clarify what is meant by the subjectivity of philosophical theories in relation to the objectivity of science. The subjective character of the conceptions of the world (*Weltanschauungen*) depends on the fact that in them the intellect reacts to a very wide circle of elements, unlike what happens in the form of more determined knowledge, where the different personalities are more likely to agree in reacting to a smaller number of elements at stake. Science tends to reproduce the objectivity of things, philosophy instead the types of human spirituality. For this reason it is not a question of whether or not the affirmations of philosophy correspond to an object, but whether or not they are the adequate expression of the philosopher’s being or the type of humanity that lives in him. We are therefore dealing, says Simmel, with expressions of different personal attitudes toward the world. Philosophy can therefore be defined synthetically as “a temperament seen through an image of the world”, overturning the definition of art which would be “the image of the world seen through a temperament” (Simmel, 1995: 284).

To save himself from the accusation of irrationalism Simmel – as he often does – recurs on aesthetics and art theory. According to him, in fact, the characteristic of the philosophical work is the same as that of the work of art that draws on a particular layer of individuality that Simmel designates as the layer of typical spirituality. The “type” would cover that field of thoughts and sensations which do not reproduce any objectivity situated beyond the subject but which differ from purely subjective and individual ones and can therefore be participated in by others. The work of art derives from the very singular experience of the artist but possesses an aesthetic value or a universally recognized truth. Similarly, the great philosophical works are creations of heroic “geniuses”, fruit

of their conceptions of the life of highly original personalities that can be considered at the same time as the unfolding of a human universal. The notion of the “third”¹³ is also central for Simmel when he discusses the nature of philosophy; now it comes up in the guise of the concept of “type,” which is one of the building blocks of *Hauptprobleme* (Simmel, 1996 [1910]: 28ff.).

For both the philosopher and the artist – for whom Simmel uses the metaphor of adventurers – is at work “the inner objectivity of a personality that obeys only its own law” (Ivi: 29). The truth, the only accessible truth, is that which results from the challenge to represent the un-representable. The philosopher acts in the name of *adventure*, which is a combination of security and insecurity: as an “adventurer of the spirit” he makes the hopeless but not senseless attempt to translate into conceptual knowledge an attitude of the life of the soul. The *adventurer* of knowledge delves into the uncertain and manages to make every lived experience (*Erlebnis*) a whole; every fragment of knowledge becomes a light and a sign leading towards the centre of existence. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Simmel’s metaphor of the adventure. He will dedicate to it a famous essay in 1910, *Philosophie des Abenteuers* (Simmel, 1910), republished with small changes in the collection *Philosophische Kultur* (Simmel, 1996 [1911]: 168-185). The adventure is not the investigation of a sociological or psychological phenomenon among others: it is the metaphor of Simmel’s philosophy in relation to his critique of the Kantian theory of knowledge and experience. Adventure is described by Simmel as an extraneous experience in relation to ordinary life. “What we call an adventure”, says Simmel, “stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links, to that feeling that those counter-currents, turnings, and knots still, after all, spin forth a continuous thread” (Ivi: 168). The relevance of adventure in the philosophy of individual existence consists precisely in its mysterious necessity – quite similar to the “normativity of the work

¹³ On the notion of “the third” see also (Meyer, 2005).

of art”, to which Simmel dedicated another essay or to the concept of individual law – in the sensation that something accidental and extraneous to the ordinary course of life can conceal a meaning and a necessity that presents itself in the form of an enigma precisely because of the extraterritorial character of its happening. The adventure is a finite section of time, just as the picture – thanks to the delimitation of the frame – is a finite section of space. In adventure, man withdraws from history – hence his extraneousness to the concept of life proper to historicism – and fully lives the present with an energy and creativity that has the character of a work of art. According to Simmel, adventure is, in fact, foreign to the style of old age, because it would inevitably involve a tension of vital sentiment. Adventure is the metaphor of Simmel’s metaphysics as *Weltanschauung*. In Simmel’s mature phase, epistemology as *Erkenntnistheorie* is subordinated to the ontology of life of which adventure is a good metaphor. It is a subjective experience that tends to become objective. In the adventure “the typical” and the “unique”, what follows a law what is fortuitous, “the essence and the significance of things” and the “superficial and the transitory” – in other words the principle of *form* and the principle of *life* – finally coincides.

3. The Hunter: Benjamin’s theory of knowledge and experience

Benjamin takes his first steps in the same academic environment where Simmel was an influential and well-known intellectual, albeit with a notoriously unfortunate academic career that only made him a professor in 1918 (the same year of his death). Benjamin’s direct involvement with Simmel’s writings is well documented (Mićko, 2010: 23-50), and it is certain that he attended Simmel’s courses in Berlin (L. Ludwig, *Erinnerung an Simmel*, in Gassen & Landmann, 1958: 151; Eiland & Jennings, 2014: 49).

However, this is of relative importance to understand the *similitudes* (in Schopenhauer’s sense) of their thoughts. A solid basis for a comparison of their thought is offered by the unique way in

which Benjamin – similar to Simmel but with an unprecedented radicalism – both firstly absorbed and later reacted to the hegemony of neo-Kantianism¹⁴. More specifically, for the young Benjamin philosophy is of crucial importance as a “theory of knowledge” (*Erkenntnistheorie*) and – consequently – to elaborate a new concept of experience. In the important writing that testifies to his philosophical research for the future “On the Program of Future Philosophy” (1917), Benjamin stated that “philosophy always inquires about knowledge” (Benjamin, 1996 □ 1917□: 109) and, on this basis, he went so far as to declare that “all philosophy is thus theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*), but just that – a theory, critical and dogmatic, of all knowledge” (Ivi: 108). Like in Simmel’s early works, there is a considerable insistence on the *Erkenntnistheorie* theme that characterizes Benjamin’s programmatic statements, whether explicitly like the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*), which is the foreword to his study on “German Baroque Drama” (*Trauerspiel*) published in 1928, or implicitly in provisional titles, such as the “Konvolut N” of *Passagen-Werke: Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts* (dated after 1924). More than a particular philosophical discipline, therefore, *Erkenntnistheorie* was a way of understanding the task and destination of philosophy as a whole. As a way of understanding philosophy, however, in reality during the years of Benjamin’s writing, it turns out to be strongly discredited. A new urgency to find a more

¹⁴ Benjamin began his university studies in April 1912 at the Albert Ludwig University in Breisgau, one of the oldest and most renowned of German universities. He matriculated in the department of philology and in the summer semester attended a variety of lecture courses; he took several courses. Among them was “Introduction to Epistemology and Metaphysics” taught by the prominent neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert. In fact, Benjamin’s philosophical and aesthetic research of the following decade can be considered as significant moments of adherence and estrangement from the orbit of neo-Kantianism by Rickert and Hermann Cohen, professor of philosophy in Marburg (Eiland & Jennings, 2014: 32-33).

immediate access to reality, or in any case different from that indicated by the “abstract” analysis of concepts and principles of knowledge, now made philosophy substantially intolerant of the precautions of a discipline such as *Erkenntnistheorie* that were all aimed at identifying the conditions and assumptions of such access. All Benjamin’s writings, whether dedicated to literature, art history or the study of urban culture, may be read as a radical transformation of the concept of experience by Kant’s critical philosophy. In them Benjamin distanced himself from the tradition of academic neo-Kantianism in which he had been trained at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin, Munich and Bern¹⁵. The subsequent development of his thought may be understood in terms of such a ‘comprehension and recasting’ of Kant’s transcendental concept of experience into a speculative one (Caygill, 1998: 33-78)¹⁶.

In the essay “On the Program of Future Philosophy” he intended to rectify the “decisive mistakes of the Kantian epistemology”. Echoing Simmel’s *Lectures* on Kant, which Benjamin probably followed in Berlin, these mistakes are due to the “relatively empty Enlightenment concept of experience”, to the one-sidedly mathematical-mechanical concept of knowledge inspired by

¹⁵ Benjamin’s intention was, in the words of a letter to Gerhard Scholem, dated 22 October 1917, to “comprehend [Kant] with the utmost reverence, looking on the least letter as a *tradendum* to be transmitted (however much it is necessary to recast him afterwards).” (Adorno & Scholem, 1994: 97-98).

¹⁶ In a little juvenile essay published under a pseudonym in 1913 in the Berlin journal *Der Anfang*, entitled “Experience” (*Erfahrung*) – showing his lifelong concern with this theme – Benjamin attacks the philistine “bourgeois” notion of experience, understood as the outgrowing of youth, in the name of a higher, more immediate experience of the “inexperientable” (EW, 117). This importance of the not-yet cognitive experience will be testified by Benjamin’s enduring concern with dreams and waking, as well as with myth, surrealism, hashish, the world of childhood.

Newtonian physics¹⁷. This had as a consequence the “religious and historical blindness of the Enlightenment” that persisted in the modern era. Exactly like Simmel, who saw Kant and Goethe as two opposite and competing views of modernity, Benjamin was dissatisfied with the Kantian (and Aristotelian) distinction of intellectual knowledge and sensuous experience, invoking a “higher” concept of experience to be developed from the structure of knowledge.

These two axes – theory of knowledge and a new concept of experience – testify to the difference of Benjamin’s philosophical and sociological path. Simmel and Benjamin were equally dissatisfied by Kant’s concept of experience but they took two different ways to overcome this disunity in the modern age. Simmel explicitly in his 1906 essay *Kant and Goethe* and further in the 1913 monograph dedicated to Goethe was convinced that there was a need for another great synthesis which would incorporate aesthetics as a form of knowledge, balancing the scientific bias of the Kantian world view. This new synthesis can find its expression in the call “Back to Goethe”. Kant looked for a synthesis outside nature, or beyond it: in the synthetic intellectual activity of “T”; Goethe discovered unity in nature itself. When Simmel moved closer to the

¹⁷ Simmel’s critique of Kant’s concept of experience was inspired by Hermann Cohen’s influential book, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1885 (on Simmel’s original relationship with neo-Kantianism cf. Podoksik, 2016). Scholem and Benjamin attended Cohen’s lessons in Berlin and read *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*: “We were full of respect and indeed reverence for this figure; thus we approached our reading with great expectations ... But Cohen’s deductions and interpretations seemed highly questionable to us ... Benjamin complained about the ‘transcendental confusion’ of his presentation ... and termed the book ‘a philosophical vespiary’” (Scholem & Benjamin, 1982: 58-60, quot. in Eiland & Jennings, 2014: 102). Although Cohen’s rigid rationalism, dualism, and optimism seemed disputable for Benjamin, he would soon find many inspirations for the development of his own way to criticism from Cohen’s philosophical interpretation of biblical messianism in his *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919) (Eiland & Jennings, 2014: 102).

trend of “life-philosophy”, he adopted the term *Erlebnis* that had been introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey. As we have seen, adventure is the typical form of *Erlebnis* for Simmel.

Benjamin couldn't be satisfied with Simmel's metaphysics of life and the concept of experience as *Erlebnis* for several reasons that are sociological as well as philosophical. In his late essay *Experience and Poverty* (1933), Benjamin's starting point is actually the fable told by Simmel in the *adventure* essay about the old man on his deathbed who made his sons believe that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They didn't find any treasure, but they perceived that their father had passed on a valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. “Where has it all gone?”, asks Benjamin. “Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring?” His answer is lapidary:

Experience (*Erfahrung*) has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything but the experience that passes from mouth to ear. No, there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its centre, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body (SW I: 731-732).

Benjamin was convinced that modernity inaugurated the “atrophy of experience” (*Verkümmerung der Erfahrung*). Experience in the modern cultural (metropolitan) context is transformed from

Erfahrung to *Erlebnis*, from cumulated and passable “experience” to individual and fragmentary “lived experience”. According to Benjamin, *Erfahrung* belonged to traditional and community contexts and it is threatened by social and cultural events of the war, the urbanization, the technique. When one gives “experience” in the sense of *Erfahrung*, the contents of the individual past come into conjunction with those of the collective past through the continuity of tradition. “Experience” comes to configure itself as the possibility for man to draw spontaneously from his own past and to make it vital in the present. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, in the particular meaning that Benjamin gives to this term, is precisely the experience that is possible when the traditional and community context of the *Erfahrung* is shattered. It is not only the “lived experience” of the isolated metropolitan citizen, definitively uprooted from his past, but it is also the fruit of the social reality that he finds himself facing at every crossing of the street, made of sudden gestures, sudden shots, perceptive shocks. The *Erlebnis* that takes place in this context “sterilizes” the event, depriving it of its relationship with the past. It, therefore, comes to be the social foundation of modern allegorical sensitivity. The past becomes for the allegorist “dead possession”, “object of remembrance” (*das Andenken*), incapable of muttering correspondences to the present.

There are also philosophical reasons for Benjamin’s critique of philosophy of life and experience as *Erlebnis*. In a preparatory note to the *Tranerspiel* book we found this quotation (Benjamin, 1999: 462), expressing this closeness to Simmel but also the clear distancing.

In studying Simmel’s presentation of Goethe’s concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Tranerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin (*Ursprung*) – it is, in effect, the concept of Ur-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and

brought into the Jewish contexts of history (Benjamin, 1999: 462)¹⁸.

This relationship of Benjamin to Simmel *through* Goethe doesn't have to be misunderstood. It may be considered an *elective affinity* between the “analogical reasoning” (Dodd, 2008) of the two thinkers only if we are able to see the philosophical differences. Benjamin's intention was to transfer the concept of “origin” (*Ursprung*) from the “pagan context of nature” to the Jewish-Christian context of “history”. Benjamin feared that the focus on “bare life” overlook precisely the historic dimension that creates and re-creates the conditions of life domination and culpability. There is no life *as such* in Benjamin's view. History has a “natural” dimension (the eternal always-the-same) but has an historical one (in Benjamin's view related to redemption) as well. For this he coined the term history-nature (*Natur-Geschichte*). The main reason both philosophical and historical for Benjamin's refusal of philosophy of life was that he thought the naturalistic, life-philosophical approach too “natural”, or in his own word, “mythical”.

Benjamin's recasting of Goethe's concept of *Origin* – as interpreted through Simmel – was trying to delineate a privileged sphere of experience in which classical ideas of time and space give way to a “spatiotemporal order” (cit.) involving the reverberation of the past in the present, underlying the concept of origin and that of “dialectical image”, the cornerstone of the late uncompleted work of the *Arcades Project*. Echoing Nietzsche's critique of nineteenth century historicism – as exposed in the essay *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* – Benjamin intended to develop a metaphysical conception of history and historiography that gives epistemological priority to the present. Instead of viewing history in the context of an infinite extension of time, a homogeneous continuum of events considered as causes and effects, Benjamin

¹⁸ This quotation from the *Arcades Project* actually comes from the preparatory notes to the *Trauerspiel*/book (*GS I*: 953-54). In these notes Benjamin added: “Only for this reason can it fulfil the concept of authenticity” (ivi: 954).

conceives of it as collected and concentrated in a particular moment, considered as the “origin” of the present. The historical-critical task is neither the search for progress nor the restitution of the past, but the excavation of this historical moment, the liberation of its hidden energies that reach the present. Because deeply rooted in every historical moment is a “weak messianic force” that expresses itself in the most neglected and threatened thoughts and works, and it is precisely these profound deformations that escape the eye of the conventional historiographer¹⁹.

It follows from this that the research on the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928) was not simply research on the concept of a literary and artistic genre, but on an historical *Urphänomen* that has its roots in the present. Through his research, Benjamin was also aiming to ‘illuminate’ the idea of German Baroque drama through ‘constellations’ of empirical materials, constituted mainly by quotations – not from just the best examples of dramas, but even from the less accomplished and neglected. ‘Juxtaposing the extremes’ was Benjamin’s guiding principle, which means discovering not only the similarity between opposites, but also the connecting links (“the inner logic”) between seemingly unrelated elements of a phenomenon. Far from being a merely mystical, dogmatic practice, Benjamin invented a new method, destined to attract Adorno’s attention: an “indirect method” (*Method ist Umweg*) to pursue a form of ‘unintentional truth’, constructing constellations out of empirical material phenomena – these were the cornerstones of Benjamin’s theory of knowledge. Benjamin’s conception of truth as a ‘constellation’

¹⁹ Benjamin’s theological concept of history was very distant to Simmel’s dissolution of every possible philosophy of history. In December 1917, Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem about Simmel’s essay *Das Problem der historischen Zeit* (1916) (“The Problem of Historical Time”) and adds a very aggressive remark: the essay is “an extremely wretched concoction that goes through contortions of reasoning, incomprehensibly uttering the silliest things” (Benjamin, 1994 [1917]: 106).

reveals an evident ‘elective affinity’ with Goethe’s concept of *Urphänomen* (primal phenomenon), developed especially in his writings on the ‘morphology of nature’.

‘Critique’ since Benjamin’s early dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919–1920) does not have a merely cognitive and epistemological meaning, but it confronts aesthetic concepts with their historical realizations and ‘negates’ them, – in other words both to cancel (or negate) their truth content and to preserve them at the same time. Benjamin acknowledged Friedrich Schlegel’s establishment of a philosophically-based oriented criticism of works of art, or, rather, a philosophy made to arise from the interpretation of literary works, based on a very particular understanding of the artwork as repository of essential truths²⁰. As Benjamin stated in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, art criticism is the ‘mortification’ of the work of art, thus meaning the destruction of its illusion, the excavation of its historical roots, and the exposition of the traces of its permanence in the afterlife (*Nachgeschichte*). He believed that art criticism doesn’t consist in judging or evaluating the work of art by means of some external criterion, but rather relying on elements it contains in itself. The critic’s opinion or judgment is irrelevant in this conception that draws from early German Romanticism, namely Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, who also considerably influenced Simmel’s conception of art and aesthetics. Art criticism for the Romantics is not so much a matter of judgment, but rather aims at the ‘completion’ of a work

²⁰ However, Benjamin maintains the Kantian distinction between truth and knowledge. A fragment entitled “Truth and Truths/Knowledge and Elements of Knowledge” – probably written in early 1921 – expresses this idea of art as a cognitive medium and thus a privileged site of philosophical investigation: “Truths, however, can be expressed neither systematically nor conceptually – much less with acts of knowledge in judgments – but only in art. Works of art are the proper site of truths ... These ultimate truths are not elements but genuine parts, pieces or fragments of the truth ... Knowledge and truth are never identical; there is no true knowledge and no known truth. Nevertheless, certain pieces of knowledge are indispensable for a presentation (*Darstellung*) of the truth” (SW, I: 278-279, quot. in Jennings, p. 130).

of art. Thus, while earlier generations considered art criticism as inferior to the work of art itself, the Romantics granted it a status equal or even superior to the criticized artwork. Moreover, from the epistemological point of view knowledge doesn't belong primarily to the subject – as by Kant and, conversely, by Simmel. Benjamin writes that, according to the Romantics, “all knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an ‘I’” (Benjamin, 1996: 145). Consequently, art criticism concerns not merely or primarily the consciousness of the observer, but rather considers a work of art as something that can become conscious of itself. This differentiates in a very decisive manner Benjamin from Simmel: the epistemological, aesthetic, cultural and normative importance of the subject. As Stephane Symons argues persuasively: “the category of the individual, of such importance to Simmel, is no longer of primary importance to Benjamin” (ivi, p. 96). This is true at every level: epistemological, aesthetic and normative. The centrality that the differentiating individual has in Simmel's conception of modernity is not to be found anymore in Benjamin's theory of modernity, from the epistemological point of view (the search for a priori in different sphere of experience), from the aesthetic (the importance of autonomous art) and from the normative (the quest for individuality will be gradually dismissed from Benjamin). Simmel generally limits himself to those periods and authors that idealistic aesthetics acknowledges as classical: Dante, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Goethe, George, Böcklin, Rodin. Even when he considers modern art – Rodin, naturalism, expressionism, *l'art pour l'art* – and the everyday creations of modern applied art (*Kunstgewerbe*), his orientation depends on a concept of aesthetic beauty in which essence appears to be what in his *Trauerspiel* study Benjamin defines as symbolic. Benjamin's interest, however, concerns – in Marcuse's terms – non-affirmative forms of art. While investigating the baroque *Trauerspiel* he found a counter-concept to the individual totality of the transfiguring artwork in the allegorical. Allegory expresses an experience of

negativity – an experience of suffering, suppression, the unreconciled and the unfortunate.

As has been persuasively stated (Lijester, 2012), Benjamin's conception of critique is a form of immanent critique that in his later work (namely the *Arcades Project*) will be re-functioned for a social and political critique of capitalism as a mythical historical-natural formation²¹. Benjamin's concept of critique is *immanent* in the sense that it takes the foundation of the critique from the object itself. Benjamin's intention in the *Arcades Project* was to create a physiognomic representation 'out of the facts' with the complete elimination of theory (what Goethe attempted in his morphological writings), and this time of a very material reality: urban commodity culture. Benjamin's historical *flânerie* through 19th-century Paris' cultural ruins should not therefore be assimilated with a form of "serendipity" or intuitionism. In his metropolitan writings in general (on Naples, Moscow, Berlin), and particularly in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin proffers a fascinating method for interpreting city culture: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show ... the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them" (Benjamin, 1999: 460). What we have is a physiognomy of the urban context, whose principal protagonist is to be found in the *flâneur*. Just as the *flâneur's* stroll is a meandering without any precise destination – abandoning himself to the labyrinth of the city, following its lures and hidden attractions –, so the same can be said of the construction of Benjamin's urban texts. This method – inaugurated in the form of *Trauerspiel* book "constellations" of quotations – was precisely as a realization of his *Program for a Future Philosophy*, whereas he icastically states "experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of

²¹ Habermas, in a famous article, opposed Benjamin's *rettende Kritik* to *bewusstmachende Kritik*, as typical of Marcuse and critical theory. Benjamin's *rettende Kritik* for Habermas is mainly conservative and doesn't have a political value.

knowledge” (SW 1, p 106). Nevertheless, he explicitly criticized the conception of ‘lived experience’ (*Erlebnis*): in the modern setting, such experience is in some way impossible to attain freely as a whole. Rather than ‘adventure’ as the paradigm for knowledge and experience, Benjamin prefers the metaphor of the “clue”. In the materials of the *Arcades Project* we find these fragments that in all probability are inspired by Simmel:

With the trace (*Spur*), a new dimension accrues to “immediate experience”. It is no longer tied to the expectation of “adventure”; the one who undergoes an experience can follow the trace that leads there. (...) In this way there comes into play the peculiar configuration by dint of which long experience appears translated into the language of (?) immediate experience. Experiences can, in fact, prove invaluable to one who follows a trace – but experiences of a particular sort. The hunt is the one type of work in which they function intrinsically. And the hunt is, as work, very primitive (Benjamin, 1999: 801).

Benjamin therefore prefers the metaphor of the hunter over that of the adventurer. The hunter is similar to other metaphors of the knowing subject that we can find throughout Benjamin’s work. The hunter has affinities with the *Griibler* in German baroque drama – and in Baudelaire’s poetry – who finds himself in dealing with ruins of the past. There are many metaphors in Benjamin’s late work that expresses in a similar way the same relationship between (critical) knowledge and experience: the archaeologist, the flaneur, the gambler, the collector. They all have in common the “poverty of experience” and nevertheless a “weak” hope of reaching a momentary, fleeting image of truth and happiness.

We are not dealing with a simple stylistic choice; instead it is quite clear that he intends to distinguish his own concept of experience from Simmel’s. The *hunter*, in contrast to the *adventurer*, seems to put his trust in a form of rationality that is based upon recognizing, picking up and saving “trails”, whereas in an adventure the cognitive

process seems to depend entirely on intuition and chance. Hunting is an activity based on a practical form of “cumulative”, transmissible knowledge, which can lead to a form, albeit precarious, of historical truth. It foresees a path (even though virtually endless) that intentionally tends towards the search for truth, whereas the search for knowledge-seeking “adventures” may – in the eyes of those who do not participate in them – seem devoid of rationality and the *télos* of truth. Moreover, hunting is a good metaphor of a form of experience in times of “poverty” and “atrophy”. The adventurer, on the contrary, is an a-historical type. He lives in the present, without targeting a different future in any way. The hunter and the adventurer represent two different exit strategies from the crisis of historicism. The former makes his life as a work of art, transforms a fragmentary life experience (*Erlebnis*) in a whole; the latter knows that there is no true life in the false one, but tries to hunt messianic moments that are approaching it.

In other words, while his approach is in other ways similar, Benjamin levels veiled criticism at Simmel’s concept of the adventure and *Erlebnis*, not only as both a theory of knowledge and a conception of subjectivity, but in more general terms regarding the differences in their respective representations of experiencing modernity.

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