

## War, Culture and *Lebensreform*. Germany's way to itself? A few considerations on Simmel's war writings

Claudia Portioli

1918. Ways Out of the War  
Volume 22, Number 2, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058559ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058559ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)  
Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN  
1616-2552 (print)  
2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Portioli, C. (2018). War, Culture and *Lebensreform*. Germany's way to itself? A few considerations on Simmel's war writings. *Simmel Studies*, 22 (2), 99–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058559ar>

### Article abstract

*The paper explores Simmel's writings explicitly dedicated to the war and uses them as sources for investigating the underlying social and cultural context with which Simmel interacted. In particular, it takes into account possible links between Simmel's considerations on the relationship between war and the crises of modern culture and the multifaceted life-reform movements developed in pre-war Germany. The latter movements, which arose in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expressed a critical reaction to the negative characteristics of modern German society and a search for alternative lifestyles. The paper also investigates the sense of a few inconsistencies found when comparing specific passages that Simmel wrote on the same topics during the war. In the second part, the author considers how the development of Simmel's narrative on the war affects several key elements of his thought such as qualitative individualism, subjective culture, identity and/or the issue of a new order of values. The author suggests that all these elements become part of an intertwined tissue of arguments which delineate Simmel's attempt, as an individual, to react to a widespread cultural and spiritual distress.*

CLAUDIA PORTIOLI

*War, Culture and Lebensreform. Germany's way to itself?  
A few considerations on Simmel's war writings*

---

*Abstract. The paper explores Simmel's writings explicitly dedicated to the war and uses them as sources for investigating the underlying social and cultural context with which Simmel interacted. In particular, it takes into account possible links between Simmel's considerations on the relationship between war and the crises of modern culture and the multifaceted life-reform movements developed in pre-war Germany. The latter movements, which arose in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expressed a critical reaction to the negative characteristics of modern German society and a search for alternative lifestyles. The paper also investigates the sense of a few inconsistencies found when comparing specific passages that Simmel wrote on the same topics during the war. In the second part, the author considers how the development of Simmel's narrative on the war affects several key elements of his thought such as qualitative individualism, subjective culture, identity and/or the issue of a new order of values. The author suggests that all these elements become part of an intertwined tissue of arguments which delineate Simmel's attempt, as an individual, to react to a widespread cultural and spiritual distress.*

---

## **Introduction**

In my paper I will explore Simmel's writings explicitly dedicated to the war and use them as sources for investigating the underlying social and cultural context with which Simmel interacted. In particular, I will take into account possible links between Simmel's considerations on the relationship between war and the crises of modern culture and the multifaceted life-reform movements developed in pre-war Germany. The latter movements, which arose in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expressed a critical reaction to the negative characteristics of

modern German society and a search for alternative lifestyles. I will also investigate the sense of a few inconsistencies found when comparing specific passages that Simmel wrote on the same topics during the war. In the second part of my paper, I will consider how the development of Simmel's narrative on the war affects several key elements of his thought such as qualitative individualism, subjective culture, identity and/or the issue of a new order of values. I suggest that all these elements become part of an intertwined tissue of arguments which delineate Simmel's attempt, as an individual, to react to a widespread cultural and spiritual distress.

Thanks to the impressive and valuable work that has led to the completion of the German full edition of Simmel's writings, we now have access to a wide variety of material that Simmel wrote during World War I, most of which were unavailable to the scholars who worked on this topic in the 1990s. A thorough analysis of this wealth of material would exceed the scope of the present article. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight a few questions that emerge by comparing registers and arguments adopted by Simmel in different groups of writings of the war period.

In particular, I suggest to distinguish between five different groups of writings in which Simmel explicitly refers to the war and its effects. The first group includes four essays, previously published in various journals and collected by Simmel in 1917 under the title *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* (GSG 16: 7-58): "Deutschlands innere Wandlung" from 07.11.1914, "Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes" from 28.09.1916, "Die Krisis der Kultur" from 13.2.1916 and "Die Idee Europe" from 07.03.1915. A second group includes a series of journalistic statements of variable length, published between autumn 1914 and spring 1918, such as "Bergson und der Deutsche Zynismus" from 01.11.1914, "Beitrag zu: Kulturarbetet efter krigets" from 16.05.1915, but also "Man hat sich an den Schutz..." from 10.04.1918 (GSG 17: 121-123, 128-131, 146). The third group consists of anonymous

writings such as “Die Umwertung der Werte. Ein Wort zu Wohlabenden”, published in 05.03.1915, and “Nochmals: Deutschtum und Europäertum” of 13.04.1916 (GSG 17: 341-343, 344-346). The fourth group of war texts is represented by the articles not included in the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* of 1917, such as “Europa und Amerika” from 04.06.1915 and “Geld und Nahrung” of 10.06.1915 (GSG 13: 138-142, 117-122). The fifth and last group is constituted by the letters written by Simmel between 1914 and 1918 (GSG 23).

One should mention a last group of writings, which includes relevant theoretical works such as *Rembrandt* from 1916 (GSG 165: 305-515), *Grundfragen der Soziologie* of 1917 (GSG 16: 59-149) or *Lebensanschauung* from 1918 (GSG 16: 209-425). Although they do not address the theme of the war, these texts were partially written, re-elaborated and published during the war years. In some cases, Simmel’s writings explicitly dedicated to the war, enter in dialogue with that last group of writings. According to Fitzi, the text *Lebensanschauung* understood as Simmel’s last testament, represents a theoretical and ethical basis for re-building a new culture after the war through the work of future generations (Fitzi, 2002: 255-265). In particular, Fitzi suggests that Simmel’s reformulation of the notion of individual law in the version corresponding to the fourth chapter<sup>1</sup> of *Lebensanschauung* (1918) (GSG 16: 209-425), should be understood in light of “Die Idee Europa” from 1915. In particular, this interpretation illustrates the relationship between the war context and the different groups of texts written by Simmel during that time<sup>2</sup>. The late version of the essay “The individual law” also reveals a few aspects of Simmel’s position toward the war, especially when he speaks about the close relationship between the individual, his life experiences and the historical context, the state, the national forces and values (GSG

---

<sup>1</sup> The first version of this chapter is the essay “Das individuelle Gesetz. Ein Veruch über das Prinzip der Ethik” of 1913 (GSG 12: 417-470).

<sup>2</sup> See Fitzi 2018 (Introduction and chapter 5).

16: 409). All these elements appear to co-determine the decision of the subject in terms of individual moral conduct, as in the case of the antimilitarist who – Simmel argues – should feel a moral obligation to take part in the war despite his “subjective ethical conscience” (GSG 16: 409). According to Latzel (1997), this example seems to contradict the premises of the individual law by assigning a greater weight to the quantitative (“universal”) part of the individual than to the qualitative one (GSG 16: 108-112)

### **Possible directions of investigation**

Simmel’s attitude towards the war presents several ambivalences and changes throughout the years. In this regard, Fitzi (1997) stresses the importance of a diachronic analysis of Simmel’s writings during the different phases of World War I. He also emphasises the importance of expanding the analysis beyond the mere consideration of “Deutschlands innere Wandlung”, the speech that Simmel gave in Strasburg in November 1914 (Fitzi, 1997: 115-117). In order to understand the complexity, ambiguities and changes of Simmel’s position towards World War I, the other texts written between 1914 and 1918, letters included, should also be taken into account (Fitzi, 1997: 117). However, one should also consider the relationship between Simmel’s war writings and his works on modern society, written in the pre-war period. According to Watier (1992), Simmel’s attitude to the war is closely related to his analysis of the transformation of culture in modern society, which he developed in the *Philosophy of Money* (1900) (GSG 6). If Fitzi emphasises the influence of the war on the later development of Simmel’s philosophy of culture, Watier (1992) shows how the cultural crisis in modern society during the pre-war period affects the meaning that Simmel attributes to the war. In particular, Watier notes that the texts collected in *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* of 1917 cannot be considered as autonomous from the rest of his body of work. In this regard, Watier does not share Landmann’s view that the essays dedicated

to the war belong to a fourth, separate phase of Simmel's thought (Watier, 1992: 234).

### **A few ambivalences**

When one considers Simmel's main works in the field of philosophy of art, such as his analysis of the difference between the Classical-Romanic-Latin and Germanic styles in *Rembrandt* from 1916 (GSG 15: 305-515) or in "Germanischer und klassisch-romanischer Stil" from 1918 (GSG 13: 313-320), one can get the swinging impression that Simmel's preferences sometimes tends more towards the first style, whereas, in some other cases, towards the second. However, on the whole, Simmel maintains a balanced approach and carefully avoids any judgement of value. He explicitly notes, in the conclusion of *Rembrandt*, that the differences between the two styles do not imply any attribution of value or hostility (GSG 15: 514). He also adds that if, on the one hand, it is necessary to distinguish these two different art-styles, which somehow express two different attitudes towards the whole life, on the other hand, it is impossible to decide in favour of one of them (GSG 15: 515). However, things changes if we compare this position to Simmel's article "Rembrandt und die Schönheit" published on 25.12.1914 (GSG 13: 105-111). Before discussing the key point of this comparison, let us briefly summarise the publication history of these texts. The central part of this article corresponds to the paragraph "Schönheit und Vollendung" in *Rembrandt* (GSG 15: 413-421). Simmel states that the essential part of "Rembrandt und die Schönheit" was written before the outbreak of the war. However, we know from the editorial report (GSG 13: 406) that the introduction and conclusion of "Rembrandt und die Schönheit" were added after the beginning of the war. These two parts are not present in *Rembrandt*, whereas the conclusion of "Rembrandt und die Schönheit" reappears under the title "Durch alle Furchtbarkeit..." (GSG 16: 126-127) in a collective publication of 1915 (GSG 16: 469). Compared to "Rembrandt und die Schönheit", the text "Durch alle

Furchtbarkeit...” shows a slight difference in the last three lines of the same passage and is completed by an additional part.

With regard to the contents, it is interesting to note that, in “Rembrandt und die Schönheit”, the opposition between Germanic and Classical-Romanic styles becomes part of a narrative through which Simmel tries to defend Germans from the charge of being “barbaric”, a word which, since Roman times, had always been associated with “ugliness” of essence and action (GSG 13: 105). Simmel’s counter-argument is based on his analysis of the specific Germanic<sup>3</sup> notion of beauty, rooted in the deep core of individual life, as can be seen in Rembrandt’s art. According to Simmel, the beauty of Germanic art arises from within and shows both the depth of the Germanic soul and nature and the difficulty of accessing them. Furthermore, Simmel argues that this kind of beauty is not pre-determined by an external ideal or scheme. If compared to other forms of beauty, such as the classical one, the beauty of Germanic art expresses a higher degree of responsibility, because it is individual and not based on external models or ideal criteria.

In this respect, the core of the article on Rembrandt and beauty, written before World War I (GSG 13: 111), in which Simmel analyses different concepts of beauty, fulfils two different functions. As part of the text *Rembrandt* from 1916, it represents a meaningful piece of philosophy of art that passes no judgment of value and draws attention on the necessity of acknowledging different forms of beauty beside the classical and renaissance ideals<sup>4</sup>. On the contrary, in “Rembrandt und die Schönheit”, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Simmel’s idea of “Germanic” art refers not only to Germany, but to Nordic art in general. See, among others, Jonas-Weidemann (2006), pp. 63-97.

<sup>4</sup> According to Fitzi, the monograph *Rembrandt* (1916) should be understood, in light of the war polemic, as an attempt to explain the specific nature of German *Kultur* and art by arguing that its “formless” character is just another expression of the relationship between form and life and not the expression of barbarity (Fitzi, 2002: 298).

same passage is used against the charge of barbarism addressed to Germany by its adversaries (GSG 13: 105). In this sense, the introduction and conclusion of “Rembrandt und die Schönheit” turns this text into a further implicit answer to Bergson’s<sup>5</sup> discourse of 08.08.1914 (GSG 17: 467), after the first explicit stance taken by Simmel in “Bergson und der deutsche ‘Zynismus’” on 01.09.1914 (GSG 17: 121-123).

### **War and culture: two different conceptions**

At the outbreak of World War I, the underlying debate between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* went through a shift of meaning, especially with regard to the second notion. As highlighted by Zanfi (2017: 97-104), Bergson does not use the notion of *Zivilisation* in a univocal way. For instance, in his pre-war works, Bergson shares with German philosophers such as Klages, Nietzsche, Scheler and Simmel a critical attitude toward *Zivilisation* understood as expression of the negative effects of industrialisation in terms of extreme specialisation and loss of general knowledge (Zanfi, 2017: 98). This consonance of arguments explains the success of Bergson’s early works in Germany as well as the conspicuous number of German translations of his writings during the pre-war period (Zanfi, 2017: 98-99). Moreover, Bergson’s notion of life was interpreted from the German philosophers as having a critical function towards the *Zivilisation* (Zanfi, 2017: 98-99). In his writings of the war period, on the contrary, Bergson associates German *Kultur* with barbarity and understands German *Kultur* as the extreme result of a kind of hyper-*Zivilisation*, in which industrial and scientific efficiency, devoid of moral foundation, serves the particularistic interests of Germany (Zanfi, 2017: 96). During the war, Bergson therefore considered the barbarity of German *Kultur* as an embodiment of

---

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of the relationship between Simmel’s and Bergson’s thought, see Fitzi (2002); on their stances on the war of 1914, see also Evard (2015).



the negative aspects of Germany's industrialisation process along with the tendency to materialism and to exteriority of life which characterised the development of Germany after its unification in 1870. Bergson therefore shares the idea of two kinds of Germany, which co-existed between 1870 and the outbreak of the World War I. The first kind is the Germany of freedom, philosophical depth, ethics and feeling of beauty. The second Germany is the result of the sudden industrialisation with its consequent superficiality. The latter, in his view, sacrificed the best qualities of the first in the name of economic and political absolutism (Zanfi, 2017: 102-104) and of German *Kultur*, now deprived of its previous values. Therefore, Bergson sees war and the responsibility of its outbreak as the extreme result of the negative aspects of German hyper-*Zivilisation* in terms of modernisation, as the instrumental efficiency of its weapons industrial system would show (Zanfi, 2017: 103). As Fitzi observes, during the war Bergson saw German *Kultur*, war and barbarity as being one and the same (Fitzi, 2002: 258, 260). At the same time, in France, *civilisation* became an ethical and positive ideal constituted by universal values which had to be defended in the name of humanity against the destructive instinct of its German counterpart (Zanfi, 2017: 102-105).

### **The *other* Germany, the *new man* and the life reform movements**

Starting from Bergson's views on German cultural trends in the post-unification period and from the shift in the meanings of *Kultur* at the outbreak of the war, I would like to draw attention to two elements. The first regards the two kinds of Germany that coexisted during the pre-war period; the second concerns the meaning of war in its relationship to culture. Analysing these aspects in Simmel's war writings could shed light on the development of his narrative concerning the meaning of war for German *Kultur* and on the reasons for his propaganda and *Aufklärung* (education) activities. Simmel's multifaceted position

towards the war, especially regarding its possible function for the renovation of culture and values, could also reveal aspects of the underlying needs and tendencies that were already expressed in some layers of German society. I am referring to the social and life reform movements – which mainly involved the middle class – of the decades before the outbreak of World War I (see Goodstein, 2017: 79). In this respect, I will consider Simmel's written reactions to the war as signs of a possible seismograph which records the interpretations produced by his interaction, as individual, with the changing reality of this period.

Going back to the “first” kind of Germany, it seems to correspond to the main characteristics of the society that Simmel analyses when he writes about the development and the tendencies of German modern life and culture in the pre-war period (GSG 6; GSG 18: 167-201), namely during the decades included between German political unification in 1870 and the outbreak of the World War I. At the beginning of the war, Simmel mentions some of these aspects in his speech on “Deutschlands innere Wandlung” (November 1914). Here he clearly expresses a negative judgment by evoking such elements as Germany's “Mammonism” (the cult of the money and of the monetary value of things) and materialism, its economic dissipation (GSG 16: 17-18, 24), the inversion between means and purposes, the multiplication of means, the quantitative growth of objective culture and the decrease of subjective culture (GSG 6: 620 ff.), individual enslavement to objects, the search for and appreciation of technical innovation for its own sake, and the excess of scientific and literary fields of work which only promote a meaningless specialisation. (GSG 16: 19-20).

According to Simmel, the inner shift from the Germany of hyper-modernisation and materialism to a new Germany is made possible by the war (GSG 16: 16-18), although, at the beginning of the war, the form that this new Germany will take is still unclear. In the second part of “Deutschlands innere Wandlung”, Simmel traces a kind of periodisation of Germany's recent history: 1) the

time before the unification of 1870; 2) the period between 1870 and 1914, which corresponds to the Wilhelminian, namely the *Gründerjahre* (foundational years) as Simmel writes (GSG 16: 24); and 3) and the period after the outbreak of the war in 1914 (GSG 16: 24-26). According to Simmel, the first period nurtured the still unexpressed forces and the potential roots of the future economic development; the second period enabled the rapid economic and technical growth of Germany, but also the above-mentioned negative trends and aspects of the modern life already mentioned. However - Simmel argues - this second period also paved the way to the following inner spiritual transformation of Germany. Lastly, the third period, which started in 1914, would represent the possibility of Germany's spiritual and moral accomplishment and the actualisation of the ideal of a new man (GSG 16: 27-28). Later in the same article, Simmel mentions a series of spiritual trends which, since 1880, also have been addressing the ideal of a new man, although in different ways and from fragmented perspectives (GSG 16: 26-27). Simmel's words seem to reflect the widespread discontent of a certain layer of German society (possibly the middle class), whose members tried to distance themselves from those aspects and tendencies of German life that accompanied the side effects of the fast industrial, economic, technical and urban development of the post-unification Germany. These spiritual currents to which he is referring probably correspond to the life reform and youth movements that were looking for alternative ways of life as a form of resistance to the negative elements of Germany's modernisation.

Interestingly, some of these criticisms of German society were very close to aspects of modern society analysed by Simmel in his pre-war writing, such as *Philosophie des Geldes* (GSG 6), "Tendencies in German life and thought since 1870" (GSG 18: 167-201) and "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben" (GSG 7: 116-131). It has been argued that, just like Nietzsche's, Simmel's analysis of modern society and big cities also played an important role for the protagonists of the life reform and youth movements

(Sigwart, 2006: 74-78). Conversely, it would also be worth asking how and to what extent did the life reform and youth movements influence Simmel's thought. Simmel seems to share the life reform movements' critical position toward modern life, especially in some of his writings of the war period such as "Deutschlands innere Wandlung" (07.11.1914), "Die Krisis der Kultur" (13.02.1916), "Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes" (28.09.1916), or "Die Umwertung der Werte. Ein Wort an die Wohlhabenden..." of 05.03.1915 (GSG 17: 341-343).

What were the aspects of modern life to which the reformers reacted during the the Gründerjahre? Here are a few examples: the exhausting rhythm of big cities, favoured by the rapid progress of the transportation system; neurasthenia as a typical illness of modern times (Radkau, 2013; Sigwart, 2006: 74 f.); rapid industrialisation; possible health problems associated with changes in eating habits, which, according to the life reformers, affected in particular the wealthy classes; a German collective state of discomfort with the physical aspects of the body; and the ugliness of modern Germans, interpreted as a sign of the nation's decadence (Radkau, 2013: 3-6). The various life reform movements also criticised Germany's capitalism, consumerism, egoism, materialism, the rationalist and intellectualist trends of modern society, the mechanical relationship to nature and life (Merlio, 2013: 64-65), the violation of nature through machines (Sigwart, 2006: 78; Ghezzi, 2012: 179-181) and the fragmented and unilateral development of individual faculties and abilities.

The manifestations and directions of the life reform and youth movements were extremely multifaceted: from the cult of nature to clothing-reform, garden city movements (Neau, 2013: 2018 ff.), free body culture, women liberation, pedagogical reforms, new lifestyles, free love, dance reform, *Wandervogel* (migratory bird) movement, natural healing and remedies, vegetarianism, anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol campaigns, and new ways of conceiving religion (Neau, 2013:76; Kirchgraber, 2003: 28-33). Broadly speaking, the protagonists of these reform movements were

searching for an alternative modernity to that of post-unification Germany (Radkaw, 2013). Intellectual and cultural German circles were also looking for new lifestyles which had to be able to contrast the disorientation and relativism that seemed to be inevitable results of recent modernity (Martynkewicz, 2009; Di Stefano, 2013). Beyond the highlighted parallels, there are other points of contact between the Life reform movements and Simmel's analysis of the modernity<sup>6</sup>. For instance, Simmel attended the literary circle of the poet Stefan George, which was linked to the life reform movements (Oleman, 2011: 25-29); he also contributed – sometimes under a pseudonym – to the art magazine *Jugend* (GSG 17: 347-440). As Welthe suggests, Simmel's texts in the periodical *Jugend* could be read as a kind of hidden complaint about the high cost of modernisation (Welthe, 1998: 113-114)<sup>7</sup>. Finally, some biographical elements testify that both Simmel and his wife experienced some traits of the life styles introduced by the Life reform. According to Landmann, Simmel sympathized with all the new world view movements, he was also vegetarian for a while and went to university by bicycle, which, at the time, was still considered a nonconventional means of transportation (Landmann, 1958: 33; Köhnke, 1996: 467-468). His wife Gertrud Simmel was described as a Nordic type, wearing loose-fitting clothing-reform made of Japanese silk (Köhnke, 1996: 466-467).

---

<sup>6</sup> Köhnke (1996) highlights the importance of the historical and cultural context of Simmel's early works. In particular, he considers his direct and indirect involvement in different social, academic and ethical reform movements between 1880 and 1914. Köhnke also notes that some of the main issues raised by reform movements are also reflected in numerous writings by Simmel (ibid.: 284-301; 459 ff.).

<sup>7</sup> Rammstedt (1991) offers a different interpretation of Simmel's contribution to the art magazine *Jugend*: in 1897 Simmel considered abandoning his academic career to become a writer or even a poet, and started to experimenting with different forms of literary writing in that magazine until he realized that he was not a poet (Rammstedt 2006: 105-106).

However, beyond all these aspects, it seems to me that one of the most relevant points in common between Simmel's writings on the war and the life reform movements was the search for an alternative modernity in Germany, along with the expectation for the realisation of a new ideal of man. In Simmel's view (especially, but not exclusively, at the beginning of the conflict), the war represents a kind of filter that reduces the growing complexity of German modern life and prepares the transition from the modern German man to the new man (GSG 16: 24-28). In this regard, it is interesting to remember the distinction between the two types of men who - in the eyes of the protagonists of the different reform movements - characterised German people just before the outbreak of World War I. On the one hand, the disfigured and expressionless German big eater, drinker and smoker; on the other, the new man, young, slim, bright and reformed (Radkaw, 2013: 2).

### **Simmel's narrative: war, Europe and Germany's way to itself**

“Die Idee Europa” of 07.05.1915 (GSG 16: 54-58) represents a shift in his stance on the war, (Fitzi, 1997: 126-127), a caesura which is reaffirmed with further arguments in Simmel's article “Europa und Amerika” from 04.06.1915 (GSG13: 138-142). In the first text, Simmel recognises that the loss of European values and of a unified, spiritual idea of Europe is the result of the war. He blames the blindness and criminal short-sightedness of a few Europeans for the outbreak of the conflict, and highlights that the hate between European countries has deeply divided the souls (GSG 16: 11). Furthermore, he disappointedly observes the permanence of manifestations of egoism inside of Germany (ibid.), which should have been eliminated through the war, as Simmel had expected at the beginning of the conflict.

“Europa und Amerika” – which caused Simmel to be charged with unpatriotic behaviour (GSG 13: 404; GSG 24: 428-429) – highlights, from a world-historical perspective, the suicide of Europe as the result of its inner particularism. According to

Simmel, the question of which European country will get Alsace or Tyrol is irrelevant compared to the danger constituted by America stepping into the conflict and contributing to its weapons supplies. At the end of the war, Simmel argues, America will be the only winner at Europe's deathbed (GSG 13: 139-141). In a letter to Herman Graf von Keyserling of 18.05.1918, Simmel underlines this risk and argues that America will play the role of *tertius gaudens* in the peace process (GSG 23: 953).

These arguments seem to indicate a decisive change in Simmel's position, as if he had distanced himself not only from the negative consequences of the war or from the way it had been led hitherto, but from the war as a whole. In reality, in other short writings, Simmel advocated for the necessity of pursuing the war until 1918. On the 02.09.1917, Simmel made an appeal for the German wealthy class to subscribe war loans, claiming that "the war must be waged and is waged for each and everyone of us [...] so that you and me can continue to exist" (GSG17:143). The appeal of the 10.04.1918 is addressed to everyone, as Germany is in desperate need of resources. Every single German, patriotic or not, should contribute to the war, since – as Simmel argues - only the short-sightedness of "many" prevents the population from seeing that "the meaning of the single contribution hides in the larger one [...]" (GSG 17: 146). Lastly, on the 07.04.1918, he argues again that subscribing a war loan is not a sacrifice, but a moral duty: German wealthy people should not let others pay in their place for a war that is being fought to save everyone's life (GSG 17: 145).

In light of these short writings from 1917 and 1918, the meaning of the mentioned caesura in Simmel's position on the war of 1915 does not appear to be so univocal and probably needs further considerations.

Before proposing a possible interpretation, I would like to draw attention to the internal structure of the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* that Simmel published in 1917. Bearing in mind the shift of 1915, one of the aspects that can strike the reader

is the fact that Simmel opens the collection with the speech that he gave in Strasburg on 07.11.1914 in which he openly defends the decision to undertake the war as an instrument for accomplishing the essence of Germany. Moreover, the four texts that compose the collection are not in a chronological order: “Deutschlands innere Wandlung”, from 07.11.1914, is followed by “Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes” from 28.09.1916, then by “Die Krisis der Kultur” from 13.02.1916, and the fourth text is “Die Idee Europa” from 07.03.1915. I suggest that this arrangement, along with Simmel’s short preface, can help us make explicit a relevant part of the narrative underlying Simmel’s writings on the war. With respect to this collection, if the question of the absence in it of the article “Europa und Amerika” of 1915 is legitimate, the index of the collection gives also rise to another legitimate question: why does Simmel republish “Deutschlands innere Wandlung” from 1914 in 1917, if the two mentioned articles of 1915 indicate a shift in his position towards the war that seemed to mark a break with the very idea of the necessity of the war? The first question regarding the absence of “Europa und Amerika” in the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* can be answered as follows: in 1915, after being charged with unpatriotic behaviour for some modes of expression in “Europa und Amerika” and a text published in the journal *Svenska Dagbladet*, Simmel was banned from using expressions which could have been interpreted as hostile to Germany<sup>8</sup>. In order to answer the second question, the internal logic of the collection has to be first reconstructed.

In the preface, Simmel writes that the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* of 1917 expresses his interpretations of the inner aspect of World destiny; the texts of this collection represent Simmel’s ideas about the future, based on the past and present (GSG 16: 9). The relationship between the title of the collection and its contents is also worth investigating. I am now going to try to reconstruct the internal logic which links the

---

<sup>8</sup> See GSG 23: 554; GSG 24: 428-429; GSG 16: 430; Fitzi, 2002: 299-301.



writings in the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen*. First of all, I believe that when Simmel speaks about spiritual decisions he is referring, among other aspects, to the necessity of seizing the opportunity of the war to redefine the spiritual identity of Germany. In Simmel's narrative, the war is the condition for taking this decision, because it helps to distinguish among the possible options by reducing them. According to him, Germans have the possibility of choosing and realising a spiritual Germany, which will be different from the Germany of the period 1870-1914 (GSG 16: pp. 13-14).

From 1914, Simmel seems to share more explicitly the life reformers' criticisms of German modernisation. For instance, Simmel no longer highlights the ambivalent character of modernisation, whereas his previous analysis also included "positive" aspects such as new possibilities for individual development and freedom. By adhering to an essentialist view of identity, in "Deutschlands innere Wandlung" (1914) Simmel comes to believe that the war will allow Germany to become aware of its inner nature and essence. This implies the necessity to abandon the counterproductive results of German modernisation and rapid industrialisation, as well as its large-scale monetary economy. The duty of Germany is to realise its own essence by finding the way to itself. This message is conveyed not only in the first text of the collection *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* of 1917, but also in other short texts such as "Vollendung und Aufgabe" from 10.10.1914 (GSG 17: 124-125) or "Werde was du bist" from 10.06.1915 (published about four months after *Die Idee Europa*). In "Werde was du bist", Simmel claims that situations of need, danger and struggle can help individuals find their own destiny. He also argues that Germans, who have long been ill, are now ready to be healed through the crisis of the war (GSG 13: 136-137). But what does constitute Germany's way to itself? How can it accomplish its spiritual identity? Simmel answers these questions through the arguments that he developed, mainly, but not exclusively, in the remaining three texts of the collection *Der*

*Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen*. In particular, he addresses issues such as the impoverishment of subjective culture, the search for a new form of individualism and Germany's relationship to Europe. Right at the beginning of "Die Krisis der Kultur", Simmel recalls his conception of culture as the way through which the soul accomplishes itself by a path which brings it out of itself to the encounter with the historic-spiritual forms of its time (science, art, state, profession etc.). At the end of its path, the soul returns to itself, transformed into something higher (GSG 16: 37).

However, it is in the second text of the collection ("Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes") that Germany's way to itself becomes clearer. According to its nature, Germany can become itself through a dialectical process which produces something higher and better through the comparison, assimilation and re-elaboration of foreign elements which are opposite to its essence. These aspects can belong to other nations, cultures or art forms, as in the case of the Italian Renaissance. (GSG 16: 33-35). Beyond the reference to Hegel's dialectics, Simmel's description of how Germany may accomplish its own essence is reminiscent of his notion of culture as the way of the soul to itself (see above)<sup>9</sup>. This definition of culture also explains how an individual can achieve and produce subjective culture. If the following interpretative hypothesis is valid, I also suggest that, in "Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes", Simmel is implicitly arguing that the accomplishment of German spiritual identity will give form not only to a new kind of individualism and to a new man, but it will also embody a new possibility of subjective culture.

The third text in the collection, "Die Krisis der Kultur" from 1916, plays a further role with respect to how Germany's way to itself has to be understood in Simmel's view. The article focuses, among other aspects, on recent cultural developments in the fields

---

<sup>9</sup> One of Simmel's classical formulations of this notion appears in the essay "Der Begriff und Tragödie der Kultur" (GSG 14: 385, 389).

of art (expressionism and futurism) and religion<sup>10</sup>. It also returns to the persisting gap between subjective and objective cultures which the war can contribute to reduce. The link with the accomplishment of Germany's identity emerges if we consider the trends and values of post-unification modernity as symptoms of the crisis of subjective culture that German new spiritual identity must avoid. If these latter elements of the article represent a kind of *pars destruens* corresponding to what Germany's spiritual identity does not have to become, "Die Krisis der Kultur" also identifies a few positive manifestations of a new form of individualism<sup>11</sup>, which seems to eliminate the distance between the part and the whole. It is the case of the soldier (the part) who, through his service, merges with the whole, now represented by the nation (GSG 16: 40-41). In this regard, Stebler and Watier (2018) highlight Simmel's distance from the accounts of the soldiers who personally experienced life in the trenches and who immediately became aware of the lies connected with the discourses on patriotism, sacrifice and death (Stebler and Watier 2018: 107).

Lastly, in the fourth article of *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen* (1917), "Die Idee Europa", Simmel adds one further element: Germany's possible connection to the destiny of Europe. Even though he is deeply concerned about the loss of a unitary idea of Europe, which he considers an undisputable result of the war, he does not distance himself from the war. Simmel's narrative focuses on the accomplishment of Germany's spiritual identity and the possibility of re-building a renewed spiritual culture, whereas the question of a possible way out of the war becomes secondary.

---

<sup>10</sup> On the meaning of this part for a new elaboration of Simmel's theory of culture connected with his late works *Lebensanschauung* and *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur*, see Fitzi (2002: 301 ff.).

<sup>11</sup> On the development of Simmel's notion of qualitative individualism in his texts on the war, see Schwertfeger (1999: 83-88).

In the last pages of “Die Idee Europa”, Simmel argues that the idea of Germany becomes the sole heir of the forces which tended toward the idea of Europe. He also observes that the European character is something which is already inside Germany: it is not added from outside (GSG 16: 58). In an article of 1915, in answering the question of a Swedish journal about the possible rebirth of a spiritual European community, Simmel evokes again the above-mentioned aspect by arguing that German’s nature consists in loving foreign peoples (GSG 17: 131). Therefore, the specificities of German individualism, the nature of which is based on its need for approaching and elaborating external and opposite elements, will give the idea of Europe new life through the way Germany is building its identity (ibid.). In this respect, it is worth mentioning that when Simmel arrived in Strasburg, he supported Stadler’s project of turning Alsace into a place of mediation and of transition between French and German cultures. Unfortunately, this project was cancelled by the outbreak of the war (Stebler and Watier, 2018: 102-103).

Lastly, when Simmel claims, in a letter to Hermann Graf von Keyserling (GSG 23: 954), that he sets great hopes in the future generation’s capacity to build a new culture, one may wonder whether he is referring to the young protagonists of the above-mentioned life reform and youth movements.

With respect to the delineated interpretative hypothesis, I suggest that from Simmel’s writings of the war period which deals with the topic of the war, emerges a narrative which holds together, in an intertwined net of arguments, the following issues and themes: the role of the war in reducing the gap between subjective and objective cultures; a criticism of materialism and Mammonism as negative consequences of the exceedingly rapid modernisation of German society under Keiser Wilhelm II, as highlighted by the criticisms of the life reform movements; the accomplishment of Germany’s spiritual identity; the search for a new man and the need of an alternative modernity capable of avoiding the side effects of the first form of modernity; the fact

that Germany's specific essence is strictly related to the possibility of a future new unitary idea of Europe through the spiritual contribution of Germany.

About one month before dying, Simmel mentioned in a letter of 17.08.1918 to Margarete von Bendemann, one of his best pupils, that a large part of the German population seemed to him to be on a path of self-destruction (GSG 23: 1004). He argued that only their determination to fight could save the German people from utter decline, and that any appeal to peace would strengthen their enemies' will to win (GSG 23: 1003).

The sharp difference in approach and register between Simmel's writings on the war and his theoretical (sociological and philosophical) works may disorient the reader. What is the meaning of the ambivalences and contradictions highlighted above? One can wonder how and whether we can reconcile the inconsistencies which emerge from Simmel's texts on the war with the rest of his philosophical and sociological production. First of all, one should mention that this is not the first time that previously unknown writings of a founder of a discipline reveal apparently unacceptable discrepancies in his thought. The discovery of Isaac Newton's chest full of alchemical and private papers is a case in point (Rossi, 2011: 11-14), as at the time it seemed to threaten the integrity of the ideal model of modern physics. However, that event also contributed to understanding that the history of science does not proceed in a linear way and that the founder of modern physics was a much more complicated person than the positivistic or scientist image of Newton wanted us to believe (Rossi, 2011: 11-14).

Simmel, like Newton, was a man of his time, and the intent to force all of his texts into a rigidly coherent corpus, regardless of the historical contingencies in which they were written, may be misguided. I suggest that the value of those texts lies also in the fact that, if we consider them as historical and ethnological documents (Remotti, 2009: 261-264), they reveal not only how Simmel interacted, as an individual, with his cultural, historical and

social context, but also the concerns shared by a significant part of German society about recent historical transformations brought about by modernisation and about what they perceived as a profound crisis of values. The narrative that emerges from Simmel's writings on the war can help us understand why and how a part of German society of that time tried to make sense of a changing world by calling into question the complex relationship between modernisation, war and culture.

### **Bibliography**

- Cluet M.-Repussard C. (eds.) (2013). *Lebensreform*. Tübingen: Franke Verlag.
- Cotesta V. (2015). "I sociologi classici e la Grande guerra. Weber, Durkheim, Simmel e Scheler", in: Pacelli D. 2015, pp. 17-31.
- Di Stefano G. (2013). "Salon Deutschland", in: *Rivista di Storia delle Idee*, 2:1, pp. 285-295.
- Evard J.-L. (2015). "La philosophie de la vie part en guerre. Georg Simmel et Henri Bergson en 1914", in: G. Simmel – *Face à la guerre, écrits 1914-1916*. Paris: Editions Rue d'Ulm.
- Fitzi G. (1997). "Zwischen Patriotismus und Kulturphilosophie. Zur Deutung der Simmelschen Position im Ersten Weltkrieg", in: *Simmel Newsletter*, 2/1997, pp. 115-130.
- Fitzi G. (2002). *Soziale Erfahrung und Lebensphilosophie. Georg Simmels Beziehung zu Henri Bergson*. Konstanz: UKV.
- Fitzi G. (2005). "Patriotismus und europäisches Ideal. Das Dilemma des gemäßigten Intellektuellen während des Ersten Weltkriegs und seine aktuelle Bedeutung", in: *Simmel Studies*, 15 (1), pp. 39-61.
- Fitzi G. (2018). *The Challenge of Modernity: Simmel's Sociological Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Freitas R. F. (2016). "Sobre Simmel e a guerra: escritos na imprensa alemã", in: *Revista Famecos. Mídia, cultura e tecnologia*

- (online), v. 23, n. 3, setembro, outubro, novembro e dezembro de 2016.
- Ghezzi L. (2012). *Nostalgia e politiche della memoria: Austria, Germania e Italia nella "questione trentina e sudtirolese" (1870-1914)*, Tesi di Dottorato. Trento-Innsbruck.
- Giacometti S. (2003). "Introduzione", in: G. Simmel, *Sulla Guerra*. Roma: Armando, pp. 7-41.
- Goodstein E. (2017). *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hammer G. (2018). "Georg Simmel, Stefan George e a Grande Guerra", Paper held at the Colóquio Internacional "Georg Simmel metafísico – 'O significado eterno do temporal', 4th and 5th October 2018, Lisboa.
- Jonas S. and Weidemann F. (2006). *Simmel e l'espace : de la ville à la metropole*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Kin S. (2011). "Newton. The last of magician", in: *HUMANITIES*, January/February, vol. 32 (1); <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/januaryfebruary/feature/newton-the-last-magician>.
- Kirchgraber R. F. (2003). *Lebensreform und Künstlergruppierungen um 1900*, Dissertation. Zürich.
- Köhnke K.C. (1996). *Der junge Simmel in Theoriebeziehungen und soziale Bewegungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Krabbe W. R. (1974). *Gesellschaftsveränderung durch Lebensreform*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Landmann M. (1958). "Bausteine zur Biographie", in: K. Gassen, and M. Landmann (eds.), *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie*. Berlin: Dunker & Humblot.
- Latzel K. (1997). "'Wille zu Deutschland' und 'Individuelles Gestz' – zu Georg Simmels Argumentationsstruktur im Ersten Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich mit Max Raphael", in: *Simmel Newsletter*, vol. 7 (2), pp. 103-114.

- Martynkewicz W. (2009), *Salon Deutschland, Geist und Macht 1900-1945*, Berlin: Aufbau Verlag.
- Merlio G. (2013). “Die Reformbewegung zwischen Progressismus und Konservatorismus”, in: M. Cluet, and C. Repussard (eds.), *‘Lebensreform’*. Tübingen: Franke Verlag.
- Neau P. (2013). “Die deutsche Gartenstadtbewegung”, in: Cluet-Repussard 2013, pp. 211-224.
- Oleman U. (2011). “The George Circle: from *Kiintlergesellschaft* to *Lebensgemeinschaft*”, in: M.S. Lane, and M.A. Ruehl (eds.), *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*. Camden House, pp. 25-36.
- Pacelli D. (Ed.) (2015), *Le guerre e i sociologi. Dal primo conflitto totale alle crisi contemporanee*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Radkau J. (2013). “Alternative Moderne. Ins Freie, ins Licht!”, in: *ZEIT Geschichte*, Nr. 2/2013, [www.zeit.de/zeitgeschichte/2013/02/reformbewegung-artenative-moderne](http://www.zeit.de/zeitgeschichte/2013/02/reformbewegung-artenative-moderne).
- Rammstedt O. (1991). “On Simmel’s Aesthetics: Argumentation in the Journal *Jugend*. 1897-1906”, in: *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, pp. 125-144.
- Rammstedt O. (2006), “Il saggio in Georg Simmel. Un tentativo di avvicinamento”, in C. Portioli, and G. Fitzi (eds.), *Georg Simmel e l’estetica*. Milano: Mimesis, pp. 101-116.
- Remotti F. (2009). *Noi, primitivi*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Rossi P. (2011). *Newton e la rivoluzione scientifica*. Roma: Gruppo Editoriale L’Espresso.
- Rutigliano E. (2016). “All’ombra di Nietzsche: Max Weber tra Kultur e Zivilisation”, in: Id., *Mundus intelligibilis. Sociologia ed esperienza*. Milano: Mimesis, pp. 183-201.
- Schwertfeger (1999). *Das Individualitätskonzept Georg Simmels*. Heidelberg: Fest.
- Sigwart H.J. (2006). “In Corpore salus?”, in: Schabert-Riedl (eds.), *Die Menschen im Krieg im Frieden mit der Natur*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, pp. 65-95.



- Simmel G. (1989[1892]). *Aufsätze 1887 bis 1890. Über sociale Differenzierung. Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe (from now on GSG), GSG 2, (eds.) Heinz-Jürgen Dahme. Frankfurt am Mein (from now on FfM): Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1992). *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1894-1900*, GSG 5, (eds.) Heinz-Jürgen Dahme and David P. Frisby. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1989). *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG 6, (eds.) David P. Frisby and Klaus Christian Köhnke. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1995). *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908 I*, GSG 7, (eds.) Rüdiger Kramme, Angela and Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1993):. *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908 II*, GSG 8, (eds.) Alessandro Cavalli and Volkhard Krech. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1995). *Philosophie der Mode (1905). Die Religion (1906/1912). Kant und Goethe (1906/1916). Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, GSG 10, (eds.) Michael Behr, Volkhard Krech and Gert Schmidt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1992). *Soziologie*, GSG 11, (ed.) Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>
- Simmel G. (2001). *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909-1918 I*, GSG 12, (eds.) Rüdiger Kramme and Angela Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2000). *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909-1918 II*, GSG 13, (ed.) Klaus Latzel. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1996) *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie. Philosophische Kultur*, GSG 14, (eds.) Rüdiger Kramme and Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2003). *Goethe. Deutschlands innere Wandlung. Das Problem der historischen Zeit. Rembrandt*, GSG 1 5, (eds.) Uta

- Kösser, Hans-Martin Kruckis and Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (1999[1917-1918]). *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. Grundfragen der Soziologie. Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur. Vom Wesen des historischen Verstehens. Lebensanschauung*, GSG 16, (eds.) Gregor Fitzi and Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2004). *Miszellen, Glossen, Stellungnahmen, Umfrageantworten, Leserbriefe, Diskussionsbeiträge 1889-1917. Anonyme und Pseudonyme Veröffentlichungen 1888-1917. Beiträge aus der Jugend 1897-1916*, GSG 17, (eds.) Klaus Christian Köhnke, Cornelia Jaenichen and Ernst Schullerus. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2008). *Englischsprachige Veröffentlichungen 1893-1910*, GSG 18, (ed.) David Frisby. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2002). *Französisch- und italienischsprachige Veröffentlichungen 1894-1903. Mélanges de philosophie relativiste: Contribution à la culture philosophique*, GSG 19, (eds.) Christian Papilloud, Angela Rammstedt and Patrick Watier. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2004). *Postume Veröffentlichungen. Ungedrucktes. Schulpädagogik*, GSG 20, (eds.) Torge Karlsruhen and Otthein Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2010). *Kolleghefte und Mitschriften*, GSG 21, (eds.) Angela Rammstedt and Cecile Rol. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2005). *Briefe 1880-1911*, GSG 22, (ed.) Klaus Christian Köhnke. FfM: Suhrkamp.<sup>[1][2]</sup>
- Simmel, G. (2008). *Briefe 1912-1918. Jugendbriefe*, GSG 23, (eds.) Otthein and Angela Rammstedt. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel G. (2015). *Nachträge, Dokumente, Gesamtbibliographie, Übersichten, Indices*, GSG 24, (eds.) Otthein Rammstedt, Angela Rammstedt and Erwin Schullerus. FfM: Suhrkamp.
- Stambolis B. (2011). "Jugendbewegung", in: *Ego. Europäische Geschichte Online*, 16 March 2011.

- Stebler K., Watier, P. (2018). “Simmel. La guerre et l’Europe disparue”, in: *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, 59, pp. 102-109.
- Watier P. (1992). “G. Simmel, l’individualité, la communauté et la guerre”, in: O. Rammstedt-P. Watier (eds.), *G. Simmel et les sciences humaines*, 14-15 septembre 1988. Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, pp. 221-239.
- Watier P. (2015). “La concezione della guerra nelle opere di Georg Simmel”, in: D. Pacelli (Ed.), *Le guerre e i sociologi. Dal primo conflitto totale alle crisi contemporanee*. Milano: Franco Angeli, pp. 50-66.
- Wedemeyer B. (2001), “‘Zurück zur deutschen Natur.’ Theorie und Praxis der völkischen Lebensreformbewegung im Spannungsfeld von ‘Natur’, ‘Kultur’ und ‘Zivilisation’”, in: R.W. Brednich., A. Schneider, and U. Werner (eds.), *Natur-Kultur. Volkskundische Perspektiven auf Mensch und Umwelt*. Münster. New York: München, Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 385-394.
- Wehlte C. (1998). “Nachwort”, in: Simmel G., *Momentbilder sub specie aeternitatis. Philosophische Miniaturen*. Heidelberg: Manutius Verlag, pp. 105-127.
- Zanfi C. (2017). “Civiltà e barbarie nei discorsi di guerra di Bergson. Dallo scontro franco-tedesco a una nuova idea di Civilisation”, in: *Atti del convegno. La Grande Guerra. La scienza, le idee, gli uomini*. Roma: Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze detta dei XL., pp. 93-107.