

SIMONE CAVALLINI

**Johannes Röß, *Zwischen Freiheit und Entfremdung. Eine Sozialphilosophie des Geldes nach Simmel*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2023, 356 pages.**

Does money condemn us to alienation, or does it open up perspectives of freedom? Is a society that revolves around money unavoidably irrational, or does it represent the prerequisite for establishing rational ways of life? In his work “Between Freedom and Alienation: A Social Philosophy of Money according to Simmel” (German title: “Zwischen Freiheit und Entfremdung. Eine Sozialphilosophie des Geldes nach Simmel”), Johannes Röß intends to answer these highly relevant questions. Exercising an immanent critique of Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money*, Röß not only uses his thought as a fine diagnostic tool for the problems of a world characterized by money, but also leads it to unexpected and extremely interesting proposals.

The work is divided into 12 chapters. The introductory chapter 1 sets out Röß’s aim: To show how Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* can be used not only to provide a critique of modern society, but also to reconstruct the structure of a rational community based on modern monetary practices.

The structure and main theses of Simmel’s work are described in chapter 2. Interesting and coherently developed is Röß’s proposal to understand the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the a priori perspective on the psychological, sociological, and value-theoretical preconditions of monetary interactions, on the one hand, and the historical observation of the influence of these

interactions on the mind, on the other hand, as a fruitful characteristic of Simmel's philosophy. Röß's project is to use this characteristic to emphasize and analyze the tension between freedom and alienation as the fundamental tension of monetary socialization.

The first steps in this direction are made in chapters 3 and 4, in which the relational and collective nature of the validity of economic values, exchange, and money in Simmel's work is approached in its ambivalent nature – both as a contribution to the objectification and alienation of individuals that has historically arisen in modernity and as an a priori conditioned potential for their emancipation and the foundation of rational forms of life. Starting from this ambivalence, Röß synthesizes a convincing criterion of rationality for monetary orders that revolves around the characteristics of trust, promise, and claim, on the basis of which a critique of capitalist monetary institutions, monetary practices, and monetary orders can be developed.

Chapter 5 outlines the main features of this critique. As Röß puts it, on the basis of Simmel's work, money provides freedom of choice between different options and plays a key role in the transition from feudal forms of life of bondage to the modern forms of life of freedom, but this liberating potential is only effective when the criterion of rationality and the social prerequisites and collective dependencies of monetary freedom of choice in a monetary order are clear to all actors. Whether this is the case or not defines whether a monetary order is rationally structured or not.

In the following chapters, Röß demonstrates that this is not the case in the capitalist monetary order. Chapter 6 focuses on how money structures freedom in capitalist societies. In doing so, Röß draws the contours of a dialectic of monetary freedom, by virtue of which the freedom made possible by money goes hand in hand with the unfreedom of an increasingly oppressive logic of discipline and exploitation. The realization of the liberating potential of money, as the chapter shows, depends on how the social dependencies linked

with it are structured, on how open they are, and on whether money is understood in a fetishistic way as a means to freedom or whether the social relationship between individuals, which is connected to it, is understood as the fabric of this freedom and treated accordingly.

In chapter 7, Röß explores in greater depth how money is fetishized into this absolute means of freedom by showing that, in capitalist modernity, it favors an ethically inadequate conception of freedom, which is expressed in the everyday nature of monetary practices. Röß's ability to focus on the ethical dimension of the fetishization of money, which describes its practical consequences in terms of the alienation of individuals and social injustice, proves to be very insightful. Röß defines these consequences with Simmel as pathologies of money. The proximity to Simmel allows these pathologies to be understood not as an individually occurring or naturally determined matter but as something culturally and socially mediated, so that the connection between the instrumental, monetarily determined lifestyle and its social emergence can be focused on. The pathologies are thus recognized as something that is triggered by the capitalistically determined money culture and that expresses itself in an inappropriate understanding of freedom.

This point is considered in more detail in chapter 8. The inadequacy of this understanding of freedom lies in the fact that it does not focus (nor can it focus) on the positive freedom made possible by institutions and practices in addition to the negative freedom of choice brought about by money, because emphasizing negative freedom as arbitrary freedom implies the exclusion of other less trivial concepts of freedom. In this way, the progress of freedom made possible by money dialectically backfires into the regression of the trivialization of its understanding and, accordingly, the impossibility of its realization and the narrowing of society's ethical horizon, forming a paradox that Röß can show and analyze using the tools of Simmel's thought.

However, the abolition of the monetary institution would be a short-sighted solution, contrary to which Röß proposes a different,

theoretically finer and more differentiated path. In order to address this, Röβ first returns in chapter 9 to the question of the alienation of individuals from the institutions in society, as a result of which they cannot recognize them as their own product. In this way, Röβ defines the deformation of the understanding of freedom discussed in the previous chapter as a phenomenon of alienation. The specific understanding of alienation is here anything but one-sided: Röβ differentiates between weak forms of alienation that favor the increase of individual opportunities and strong forms of alienation that are associated with the independence of social dynamics from the purposes and needs of individuals and, accordingly, with their loss of power. This includes, for Röβ, the modern concept of freedom in the culture of money.

After focusing on this problem, Röβ dedicates chapter 10 to the search for a possible solution. This takes place within the framework of a political overcoming of alienation, which runs parallel to Simmel's idea of an overall social planning of the economy with the help of a socialist labor money, through which the economic valuation of labor products is removed from the anonymous and monetarily independent market forces and made dependent on collective and conscious planning. Consistent with Simmel, Röβ too undertakes this path critically in order to be able to distinguish regressive or possibly authoritarian from emancipatory forms of planning. However, in contrast to Simmel, who considers the risk of regression too high and leaves the socialist solution aside, Röβ is able to formulate more concrete proposals for liberating forms of planning in an innovative way. Instead of centralized planning, Röβ argues for the opening of spaces of decentralized socio-economic interaction that offer a way of dealing with divergent purposes that does not have an affinity with domination, thus embodying the freedom that is lost in capitalist market systems. The original approach that emerges from Röβ's immanent critique of Simmel's critique of the socialist solution is that of hybrid economies that combine market dynamics and democratic planning practices.

With the insights he gained in the previous chapters, Röß returns in chapter 11 to the main question of his work: Does money only trigger alienation, or does it actually possess a potential for freedom? To answer this question, Röß connects Simmel's theory of alienation with more modern positions in social philosophy (Castoriadis, Jaeggi), with the aim of developing a critical social philosophy of money to distinguish between alienating and non-alienating understandings of money and to analyze their relationship to freedom. By defining the main features of a rational, emancipatory theoretical and practical approach to money (as well as to the community it characterizes and to its forms of life), Röß takes a convincing and well-structured step beyond Simmel's rather hopeless theory of alienation. In this approach, the individual freedoms granted by the monetary economies can only be opened up cooperatively, that is, in which freedom is understood as social freedom.

In chapter 12, Röß answers the question of the main features of an institutional order in which such freedom can arise and in which the alienation potentials of the capitalist understanding of money can be transformed into emancipatory structures. Röß defines these in a democratic politicization and normative-solidary framing of monetary practices, in the model of a democratic market-socialism in which freedom is understood as social freedom – a perspective that Simmel would not have proposed, but which Röß derives from his immanent critique of Simmel's thought, proving how relevant Simmel's analysis of money is to these days.

"With Simmel, beyond Simmel" is the title of one of the sections of Röß's work. This could be considered the motto of the entire work and gives an idea of the different dimensions in which it has succeeded. First of all, using the method he has chosen to analyze Simmel's thought, the immanent critique of it that unfolds as its close reading, Röß provides a detailed account of this thought itself, its potentials, its limits, and its relationship to other important positions (Neo-Kantianism, Marxism, Hegel, left Hegelianism, modern social philosophy, etc.). The result is a clear, differentiated

picture of Simmel's philosophy, its complexity, and its relevance as a diagnostic and critical tool.

Building on his immanent critique, Röb can problematize and further develop this typical Simmel image by highlighting and pursuing the hint of a positive or normative potential in his thought, working on its internal tensions, leading to the elaboration of a theoretical proposal that Simmel did not express, but which is, in a certain sense, latently present in his work and gets explicitly expressed through Röb's interpretation. Simmel's tragical critique of alienation thus evolves into the productive definition of the main features of emancipatory forms of life. In this way, Röb goes with Simmel beyond Simmel.

This also means leaving the territory of pure theoretical consideration and making the transition to practice, since Röb's proposal of an understanding of freedom elaborated from Simmel's philosophy within the framework of a democratic market socialism and its institutional structures does not merely remain the possibility of a new theoretical development of Simmel's work, but it is critically reflected and clearly characterized, presenting itself as the model of a practicable position.

In this way, Röb develops a new reading of Simmel's thought and, at the same time, a strong, but not hopeless critique of capitalism, thus enriching different spheres of research with his work in a (and this is not at all secondary) very clear and fascinating way.