

## Review of the Third International Symposium on Georg Simmel - Medellín, Colombia. November 2011

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Résumé de l'article

The University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia, was the scenario for holding what can be regarded now as a tradition in Latin America: an International Symposium on Georg Simmel. This review attempts to share the result of the third symposium outlining how simmelian categories were revisited and used as research keys for understanding the Latin American context. It is worth to mention that after the event not only the initiative of publishing the proceedings was achieved, but also the formalization of a Latin American simmelian studies network. This valuable experience of gathering around Simmel's work will return to its initial point when the Fourth Symposium will be hold in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on November 2015.

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## Review of the Third International Symposium on Georg Simmel - Medellín, Colombia. November 2011

In the Third International Symposium on Georg Simmel, Spanish-speaking scholars came together from different Latin American countries to present papers and provide interpretations of Georg Simmel's work. A first earlier Symposium took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2002 followed by a second Symposium held in Mexico City in 2006.

This Symposium sheds light, once again, on an ongoing process of theoretical assimilation and the practical application of Simmel's thought in Latin America. This initiative aims to consolidate current thinking on Simmel in Colombia in similar fashion to a previous event held in Argentina and Mexico, which was facilitated by outstanding interpreters.

Debate on models of sociological thought in Colombia is still in its infancy<sup>1</sup>, thus a fresh discussion of Simmel's work analyzing the problematic modernity of Latin America is all the more welcome, as was made abundantly clear during the event. This last Symposium took place in Medellín, at the University of Antioquia. Even if the campus was somewhat less active due to

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<sup>1</sup> The sociology department at Universidad de Antioquia which supported this symposium has been open for less than 50 years.

a student strike (against proposed cuts to the public funding for the university) we nonetheless enjoyed a large turnout of sociology students who benefitted from listening to the other specialists in the field of Simmel studies while having the opportunity to present their own papers.

This was the second occasion that Prof. Dr. Otthein Rammstedt, editor of Simmel's complete works, presented his insights to those interested in the Berlin sociologist in a Latin American country. During his keynote address, Professor Rammstedt read *Soziologie des späten Simmel*. Professor Rammstedt generously engaged in informal conversation with students after delivering his lecture. He took questions related to Simmel's methodology and exchanged points of view with scholars and conference attendees. Professor Rammstedt requested in advance that time should be reserved after his lecture to offer help to those who were unfamiliar with Simmel's output. This was arguably the most enjoyable moment for the audience.

Professor Rammstedt's lecture covered several of Simmel's insights including his ambitious proposal of three different fields of sociology; the need for a complete reappraisal of Simmel's sociological project; the significance of the individual-society dichotomy in Simmel's sociology; and the importance of being aware of Simmel's work at the end of his life, a diagnosis which illustrates Professor Rammstedt's idea of a late Simmel.

Frau Angela Rammstedt, our special guest, gave a lecture entitled *Drei Frauen an Simmels Seite*. Her presentation expounded on Simmel's contributions and reflections on feminism which had repercussions not only in a strictly Feminist context, but also on Philosophy and the Social Sciences. Rammstedt added a more personal intimate biographical note regarding the sociologist's intellectual relationship with three women (Gertrud Kinel, Gertrud Kantorowicz and Margarete Susman). Her contention was that these significant relationships greatly informed Simmel's reflections on aesthetics.

Latin American scholars contributed the following lectures. Dr. Olga Sabido Ramos (Mexico) presented *Fragmentos amorosos en la obra de Georg Simmel. Notas de investigación* (Love Fragments in Georg Simmel's Work: Research Notes) in which she unpicked the problem of love from two analytical perspectives: love as cultural structure and love as a form of socialization. Professor Sabido pointed out that as a cultural form love can be understood as a cultural construction which configures experience, shapes definitions of femininity and masculinity; she also traced how its meaning changes throughout history. In terms of forms of socialization, love makes reciprocal actions possible and enables the configuration of sociological units. She also drew our attention to the fact that amorous relationships are defined

not only by the number of individuals who take part, but also by the knowledge of others which always includes unknown aspects. It is precisely this mixture of knowing and not knowing which makes these relationships significant. Professor Sabido also went through the implications of money on intimate relationships so as to explore the current meaning of love.

Dr. Ramón Reséndiz García (Mexico) presented *Imágenes, configuraciones y estrategias analíticas. El dinero en el pensamiento de Georg Simmel* (Images, configurations and analytical strategies: Money in Georg Simmel's thought). He discussed *Philosophie des Geldes* in order to illustrate what, according to Simmel, value and money are, and also the individual and social consequences of monetary economy on modern life. Professor Reséndiz followed Simmel's line of thinking according to which money is the visible symbol of exchange, becoming in turn a mere function of exchange. He went on to speak about the impersonal character money has given society, the aim of money and how it has configured human being types: miserly, greedy, cynical, among others, which exemplify the intimate relation between being and having. In conclusion, money, according to professor Reséndiz, supports our ways of experiencing and knowing.

Lorena Cervantes Reyes (Mexico), in her presentation *De la condición originaria a la fisura. La experiencia de la modernidad en Georg Simmel* (From the Original Condition to the Fissure: the Experience of Modernity in Georg Simmel) proposed a theory of modernity based on this classic of sociology. As Cervantes made clear during her talk, according to the Berlin philosopher, modernity is marked by the experience of a fissure. An aimless yearning remains as a testimony of what was once an organic order from above, that is, modern man senses the existence of a time before his own fall. In part, a religious aspect arises from Simmel's conception of modernity as well as the preceding stage and the possible utopia, contrasting with the harshness with which they have reversed the order of the world. The most extreme example of this is the means of money which takes on great importance, resulting in the maximum objectification of all values. In spite of this critique, Simmel unceasingly expresses his hope that things might be otherwise, and salvation is possible.

Dr. Valentina Salvi (Argentina) read *Singularidad, individualidad, diferenciación: indagaciones sobre la configuración del individuo en la sociología de Simmel* (Singularity, Individuality and Differentiation: An inquiry into the individual configuration of Simmel's sociology) in which she illustrated how an individual expresses a modern paradox. On the one hand, society promotes individuality and this constitutes one of its values but, on the

other hand, it also restricts it. The individual is then structured by the strain between levelling and non-levelling forces - firstly from values of freedom and equality (18<sup>th</sup>-century individuality) and secondly from the display of intimacy (19<sup>th</sup>-century individuality). Professor Salvi pointed out how these values comprised a sublimation of competence and a division of labour which shows the individual in a dual condition: as both a social actor and as a value. According to Professor Salvi, individuality is not an enclosed entity; it is a relative and relational position.

Dr. Esteban Vernik (Argentina) then presented *Conflicto, tragedia y miseria de la cultura moderna: de la última edición de Simmel en Alemania a la primera en Suramérica* (Conflict, tragedy and misery of modern culture; from Simmel's last edition published in Germany to the first in South America), in which he gave an overview of Simmel's final years and dealt with two of his prevailing interests: his theory of culture and of alienation, which were illustrated during the 1918 conference, *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur*. Professor Vernik also shed light on the deep crisis which, according to Simmel could be traced back to European culture. Simmel suggests a possible way to reach utopia. Our speaker also focused on the importance of Simmel's work in Latin America as a result of Carlos Astrada's translation of the conference mentioned above<sup>2</sup>. According to Professor Vernik, Astrada, is an assiduous interpreter of Simmel's work and also stands for a Simmelian philosophical attitude. Astrada is the author of a significant work which makes him an important figure for our understanding of the reception of Simmel's thought in Latin America.

The members of the Colombian group which organized the symposium<sup>3</sup> also presented their insights on problems of philosophy, history, individuality, aesthetics, femininity and sociology. H. Augusto Botia Merchán presented: *El problema del tiempo en Simmel. La idea de presente en Laureano Gómez* (The problem of Time in Simmel: Laureano Gómez's idea of the present) in which he addressed various insights from the Simmelian philosophy of history and joined the concepts of life and time in order to analyze a particular segment in Colombian history, namely the Laureano Gomez presidential period. Moreover, he defined time as a function of relations of domination. Darly

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<sup>2</sup> *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur* was the second Simmel's text translated into Spanish. The first was *Shopenhauer und Nietzsche*, translated by José Pérez Bances.

<sup>3</sup> *Sociology of Culture and Modernity*, which is a research line of the group Literature Studies and Latin-American Intellectual Culture.

Cárdenas Noriega presented *Paisajes: dos aprehensiones desiguales*. (Landscapes: two unequal apprehensions), in which she analyzed the relation between female bodies and landscape on Rafael Saenz and Pedro Nel Gómez paintings in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Medellín, and how Debora Arango's paintings differ from the output of those painters despite the fact that they worked on the same topic. In order to grasp Arango's conception of art, Cárdenas went over Simmel's conception of work of art in order to show how art is beyond any ideological aim. Andrés Felipe Jurado Aguilar presented *Transformación urbana y configuración del espacio público: El caso del corredor urbano Carabobo en Medellín* (Urban transformation and public space configuration: the case of Carabobo pedestrian walkway in Medellín). As a result of field research, he distinguished between the planned city and the practiced city, that is the space which is configured by interactions among individuals, by showing the authorities' ideas and also the way inhabitants and pedestrians interact with this space in everyday life. Jurado addressed Simmel's concepts of social space, reciprocity, socialization and sociability.

Einer Mosquera Acevedo presented *Apriori simmeliano: Apuntes sobre la unidad social y la comprensión* (Simmelian apriori: Notes on social unity and understanding). This paper sought to trace the possibility of a Simmelian sociological hermeneutics based on Simmel's apriori, which are founded on the assumption that individuals configure society from reciprocal actions, knowledge of others and their awareness that they are a social unit.

Germán Alexander Porras Vanegas presented *Individualisierung, individualismus, individualität*. He examined the relationship between the individual and society as proposed by Simmel, outlined continuities and discontinuities in his conception of the individual and also developments regarding action and the notion of law. Jorge Mario Pabón Jaramillo presented *The colombian film(es). Apuntes para una sociología del cine colombiano* (The Colombian film(es): Notes for a Colombian film sociology) Pabón suggested the possibility of analyzing forms of socialization in Colombia based on Colombian city films (specifically the film *La sociedad del semáforo*) by evoking Simmel's conception of art work as an unity which contains and expresses what is normally hidden. Thus, film is rather an object than a metaphor which expresses tendencies, processes and even a whole nation's way of thinking. Dr. Juan Guillermo Gómez García presented *Notas para una interpretación de Problemas de Filosofía de la Historia* (Notes for an interpretation of The Problems of The Philosophy of History), in which he readdressed the 19<sup>th</sup>-century dispute among the different postures existing in the social sciences by their objectives and methods. Professor Gomez outlined

important elements of the Simmelian philosophy of history and explained the pivotal role played by Simmel in this discussion.

Other lectures included *Georg Simmel, pensador de la sociabilidad y de la cotidianidad* (Georg Simmel, a thinker about everyday-life and sociability), presented by Dr. John Jairo Serna, Professor from the Universidad Católica de Oriente (Catholic Western University). This speaker pointed out, after a brief diagnosis of modern life, the relevance of the Simmelian concept of sociability as a pure form of socialization, which Simmel also used in *Grundfragen der Soziologie* to illustrate the difference between ways of socialization and the content of these. David Esquivel Tangarife, an undergraduate sociologist from the University of Antioquia, read *El urbanismo como modo de vida: el caso de la Ciudadela Nuevo Occidente a la luz de Georg Simmel* (Urbanism as a way of life: The case of Ciudadela Nuevo Occidente), focusing on authorities and managers in Medellín, and the idea of social urbanism. In his paper Tangarife aimed to describe the rational way to conceive space so as to compare it to free ways of relations and conceptions of the space in question by considering Simmel's insights on struggle, secrecy, subordination and how money becomes an overarching objective.

This Symposium was also the scenario for presenting the book *Georg Simmel y la modernidad* (Simmel and modernity), which gathers the papers of scholars and students presented in November 2008 during a seminar, which took place at The National University of Colombia in Bogotá (Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá). Clemencia Tejeiro, a Professor at the National University and editor of the book, spoke about the influence of Georg Simmel and the effect of his insights as a key to understanding the complex situation in Colombia and Latin America.

As mentioned above, the Symposium attracted a great number of sociology students. Andrés Mauricio Soto and Juan Camilo Medina read *Sociología del rumor* (The Sociology of rumour) emphasizing how rumour, due to its fleeting nature, is a form of urban socialization. They outlined the role of rumour in the attachment process in Medellín in history and how it has been used either to rule or penalize. Juan David Sandoval read *El intercambio: forma de socialización en un espacio popular* (Trade: Socialization form in a popular space). By observing a popular mall in Medellín, he illustrated how individuals configure that space through particular relations and trades. Reciprocal actions impose the order of men and goods. Julian Granda and Elizabeth Gutierrez read *Una acción efectiva: sustrato de la intelectualidad simmeliana: lectura desde las comidas rápidas* (An effective action: Foundation of Simmelian rationality in terms of fast food). They took another

example of a mall, located in Niquia, a municipality nearby. They noted the changes in the practices of food consumption. Owing to the pace of modern life, individuals were constrained to move on the same terms as commercial relations – necessarily rushed and fleeting in nature – and this effect was also notably marked in the domain of food preparation and consumption. Ana Lucía Escobar read *Metrópolis y vida mental: Elementos para una sociología del ruido en Medellín* (Metropolis and Mental life: Elements for a sociology of noise in Medellín). She outlined the difference between noise as both a disassociative and associative form of socialization. The first type calls to mind the blasé attitude while the second form makes one think of a sort of particular cultural appropriation of space. Thus, urbanites not only relate by rejecting one another but also by giving themselves up to a significant experience which is the case of audio stimulus.

The Symposium ended with an evaluation by University of Antioquia Professors Germán Porras and Gilberto Díaz Aldana, who proposed various points to be discussed with national and international scholars. They all outlined the importance of organizing a Latin American simmelian studies network. It is a call for continuing to propose scenarios, hopefully beyond Latin America, for sharing perspectives and developments on the reception of work by Simmel. It was also remarked that these three days of lectures and exchanges reflected the growing interest of Latin American scholars in Georg Simmel's work and the quest to adopt a truly Simmelian point of view which, not only goes from the surface to the core of the phenomena, but is also able to set out new creations. Now, the ongoing and future initiative is to publish proceedings from the Third International Symposium.