

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**Book review****Book review of *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations*, by Olli Pyyhtinen (Palgrave, 2018)****By Natàlia Cantó-Milà**

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Date of submission: December 2017**Published in:** January 2018**RECOMMENDED CITATION**

CANTÓ-MILÀ, Natàlia (2018). "Book review of *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations*, by Olli Pyyhtinen (Palgrave, 2018)" [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 21, pp. 75-76. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. <<http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i21.31xx>>



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"What sociologists usually take for granted as a cause, Simmel tries to explain as an effect." (Pyyhtinen, 2018, p. 4)

The Simmelian Legacy offers a wide and accurate overview of Simmel's intellectual heirs throughout the 20th century, an excellent account of the whole of Simmel's oeuvre and, furthermore, it proposes a contemporary rereading of this oeuvre that may awaken the interest of many sociologists and social theorists who are not particularly Simmel scholars. Thus, this book combines three great achievements: tracing Simmel's legacy in contemporary social thought and sociology (a task which has been only carried out in a fragmented way until now), highlighting Simmel's major achievements for philosophy and the social sciences, and proposing what elements of Simmel's thought remain the most interesting to explore as well as work and dialogue with.

Pyyhtinen's accuracy when presenting Simmel's works and their reception (especially in the German- and English-speaking academic worlds) is combined with the originality of the author's own view on Simmel's works. Hence, Pyyhtinen does not only

offer a standard introduction to, and elaboration on, Simmel's work and legacy, but also his own understanding of this work and legacy as well as his selection of Simmel's most relevant and long-lasting contributions to sociology, the social sciences and social philosophy.

Pyyhtinen's original and accurate view of Simmel's work and legacy becomes clear just after the introduction to the book, when Pyyhtinen focuses first on the methods and key principles. To my knowledge, no book on Simmel has ever started by highlighting his methodological approach and overarching theoretical and methodological principles. In fact, Simmel's work has wrongly been associated with a certain sort of "impressionism", as if his work – above all his essays – were full of rich and interesting ideas, which, however, are not sufficiently elaborated upon to be able to constitute a corpus of solid scientific and/or philosophical work. This is far from reality. Simmel's enchanting rhetoric in his writings does not mean that he did not have a solid work methodology or that there are no key principles transversal to his work, as Pyyhtinen argues in his book. Simmel's relationism, his elaboration of form/content and form/life and his way of dealing

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>Book review of *The Simmelian Legacy*

with relational constellations (which involve human beings but also other beings and objects) are clear methodological pillars upon which the body of his whole work rests, and which offer us a valid point of departure for our own works today. There is only one issue which I would like to raise at this point regarding Pyyhtinen's appraisal of Simmel's methods and principle. Pyyhtinen refers himself to "dialectics without reconciliation" (following Gassen & Landmann, 1958). It is indeed a catchy phrase, but Simmel's well-known "sowohl [...] als auch" has little to do with dialectics in its standard meaning. The fact that there is no synthesis ([...] and does synthesis have to mean reconciliation?) makes such a crucial difference that the use of the term "dialectics" or even "without reconciliation" makes little sense to me in order to describe Simmel's mode of thinking. This term (with all its possible nuances) introduces more confusion than clarity when we are attempting to understand Simmel's way of thinking and establishing relationships. The risk of associating the famous term "dialectics" with a thinker like Simmel could have blurring consequences for the reception of his thought.

Pyyhtinen's proposal for a contemporary reading of Simmel's works is articulated by the centrality he confers upon the relational dimension of Simmel's thought. Relationality becomes the lens through which we read Simmel interpreting the world for us: from social interactions to reciprocal actions and effects and from life to culture, forms and back again. All of these are relational (and they are interconnected through this very same relationality as well). Moreover, they show us how a relational approach to the social world which we inhabit can allow us to see and understand processes which appear as indecipherable otherwise. Therefore, for instance, Pyyhtinen pays special attention to Simmel's analysis of the "quantitative conditioning of the group", and delivers the most complete and brilliant analysis of the dyad and triad, even bringing Simmel's thought further and completing his thoughts by pointing out that, in fact, the dyad must already be a triad. It is, however, not the triad which Simmel had in mind in *Sociology*, which is quite human-centred:

"As he assumes that the third automatically takes a personified human form, Simmel fails to notice that already the relation in-between the associated two elements presents a third. In order for there to be two, there has to be a relation connecting them, yet as soon as it connects it becomes the middle term between the partners through which their reciprocal give-and-take must pass. [...] The only way two can be together is via a third and simultaneously excluding that third. Thus, the bivalent algebra of relations is always already trivalent. For the dyad, the third is its condition of possibility and impossibility" (Pyyhtinen, 2018, p. 91).

The figure of the third plays an important role in Pyyhtinen's analysis of Simmel's sociology of association. In fact, when he thinks of a special form of association – the "stranger", Pyyhtinen presents this "stranger" as a third:

For Simmel, the stranger highlights the borderline between the inside and outside of the group; the stranger is included only insofar as he/she is excluded. Simmel stresses that the stranger does not just stand outside a group but is rather 'an element of the group itself'; 'to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation, a specific form of interaction'. (Pyyhtinen, 2018, p. 13)

As I had understood the figure (or rather the "form") of the stranger in Simmel's works, the stranger is not a "third", but rather a social form that results from the relation that is woven between the core of society and its boundaries and threshold, thereby defining and fixing the form of the stranger at a distance from the core of society, as an insider who is characterized by their character as an outsider, an insider defined by his/her not-fully-belonging. If we take Pyyhtinen's excellent point about the third regarding the role of the relation as a third element to be taken into account, we could thus see that the stranger, the core of society and their relationship do build a sort of triad... but I would not see how this turns the "stranger" into a third as a social form. This is certainly not a direct critique of Pyyhtinen's point, but rather an issue which would certainly be worth considering and discussing in depth, just as so many other points have been raised by Pyyhtinen in his book – a great sign of its excellence.

Pyyhtinen's elaboration on Simmel's relational thinking is this book's greatest contribution. It is detailed, takes Simmel's whole oeuvre into account and does not miss the important and distinctive aspects of Simmel's works. It offers contemporary readers a current and relevant way of approaching Simmel's texts and, furthermore, delivers excellent clues to think these texts through even further than Simmel did.

FRISBY, David¹ (2014). *Sociological Impressionism. A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*. Routledge: London et al.

GASSEN, K.; LANDMANN, M. (1958). *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*. Duncker & Humblot: Berlin.

PYYHTINEN, Olli (2018). *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations*. Palgrave: London et al.

SIMMEL, Georg (1908, 2009). *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Brill: Leiden et al.

1. David Frisby's *Sociological Impressionism* (2014) has wrongly been understood as strengthening this point due to the book's (in my view, unfortunate) title.